

How We Got Where We're Going & Now That We're Here

By Allie_quixotic

May 22, 2019, 7:26am

Brian's POV

The sun filters through my closed eyes. I'm not ready to wake up. I'm not ready to face this day. I roll over into something warm, something soft...Justin. I reach for him and pull him closer. He makes a soft noise in the back of his throat as I bury my face between his shoulder blades. His skin is so soft. I can never get enough. I run my hand up his thigh, over his hip, before flattening my hand and splaying my fingers across his stomach. He's still half asleep but that's okay because so am I. He pushes back into me slightly, letting me know what he wants without ever saying a word. I slide my hand down his stomach...down, down, so slowly. He moans in anticipation, in want. I lightly run my fingers over his cock and smile against his back as he struggles for more contact. Always more. Never enough. I kiss his back, my tongue flicking across his smooth pale skin. So good. So sweet. So Justin. He grabs my hand and wraps my fingers around his hard cock.

I kiss my way to his neck, to that spot just behind his ear and whisper, "You're being very impatient this morning."

He moans again and I open my eyes to see that his are still closed. I let him guide my hand up and down his cock. He's so wet, so hard, so ready. I kiss his neck, nipping and sucking in just the right spot. The spot I know drives him crazy with want and need. "Brian." He moans my name, and it makes my cock harder than it was three seconds ago.

When I remove my hand from his cock, he whimpers at the loss, begging me with that little sigh to put my hand back. "Roll over." He complies, always eager. He wants it as much as I do. I straddle his thighs, running my hands all over that silky pale flesh and I can't stop the thoughts of mine, this, him, everything is mine, belongs to me, no one else. Mine. I kiss every inch of skin my fingers touch. There is nothing like the taste of him. Nothing. I pull back my hands, still roaming over his skin because they can get enough, can't nearly get enough, never, ever enough. God, he's so fucking beautiful. I wonder if he knows how fucking beautiful he is. The sun is touching his skin too, making it glow. Bright, beautiful, sunshine.

He pushes his hips up from the bed. He has no patience for this. I return my lips to his back, kissing and sliding down where he wants me. Right now I am almost inclined to do exactly what he wants. I flick my tongue at the top of his ass, swirling it around the edge of his crack. Teasing. "Brian." He moans, purrs, begs in those two syllables.

I spread his cheeks with my hands, sucking and licking my way down his crack until I'm there, right there where he wants me to be. Where I want to be. I kiss his tight little hole and he moans, longer, louder. He loves this. I love this. I swipe my tongue over it. Wetting it. Tasting it. Tasting him. I pull my mouth away and blow a warm breath and watch as it clinches before I place my mouth over it. My tongue circles around it before finally, finally I push it into him. So warm. So tight. So mine. He tries to push back, push up, but I move my hands to hold his hips. Stay. No words, but he hears me. He groans, moans. There is nothing like the sounds he makes when I am doing this. It makes my dick rock hard and dripping. I could get off on the sounds he makes without even touching myself.

I fuck him with slow steady strokes of my tongue. He wants to come just like this, and for a second I want him to. I pull my tongue out, kissing his hole again that is so wet and so ready for me that lube would seem redundant. I slide my hands up his body, moving with them, until I am over him, covering him, but denying us both the feel of my body pressing down on his. I kiss his neck, my hands now fully entangled in the softness of his hair. I can't take much more of this. It's overwhelming. His body is overpowering. I press the head of my cock against his hole. He makes a move to bring me in but I pull back and press my body down on his. Letting him know how it's going to go, how it's going to be, who's running the show.

He moans as I cover his body with mine. My hands slide down his arms, pushing them out so they are spread on the bed. I push my fingers between his. He grips my hands, our platinum bands sliding against each other, pressing into our fingers. He wants it. Wants me. Wants this. I want it too. I push into him slowly. Letting him open up to me, making room for me in his warm, tight, little ass. I groan because I still feel overwhelmed by the feel of his body surrounding mine with nothing between us. It takes everything I have not to sink into him fast and hard. Everything. I inch my way in so slowly it might be killing me, killing him, until I am in all the way. I hold still. He's trembling beneath me, around me, because he is so full, so full of me. I kiss his neck in that spot he loves. Wanting to stay right here, just like this. Wanting to forget everything but this moment and him. My hips have other ideas and they start to move. I move in and out of him in long smooth strokes. Our bodies pressing together. Slick with sweat, our bodies to slide together without friction.

My lips attach themselves to his pulse point. His moans vibrate against my lips. Our hands grip each other as though if we let go we would float away. His breathing quickens, as does mine. We are so close. We are right there. I angle myself so that each slow entry passes his prostate. He moans and pushes his face into his pillow. He comes right there, just like that and as he clinches around me, I push deep into him and come harder than I have in that last few weeks. We lay there for a few minutes pressed together, my now softening cock in his tight ass. I know we could fall back asleep just like this, and we do.

May 22, 2019, 12:16pm

Justin's POV

I wake up feeling empty and cold. The fullness and warmth of the morning is missing. I push my face off the pillow and open my eyes. He isn't here. I roll over, feeling my dried come on my stomach as I stretch. I push myself back down on the bed and close my eyes. I feel him standing over me. When I open my eyes and look up at him, a soft smile spreads across his face. God, he's so beautiful when he smiles. He reaches for my hands and pulls me up against his naked body.

"Good..." He looks over at the clock. "Afternoon."

I laugh against his chest. "It was a pretty good morning too." This morning was fucking amazing. "It was amazing."

He kisses my neck and pulls me to follow him into the bathroom. Standing under the hot water, he washes my hair, massaging my scalp. I close my eyes and moan. "That feel good?"

"Yeah." I am almost past coherent thought when he touches me like this.

He guides me under the spray, rinsing the shampoo out of my hair. He runs his hands all over me like he can't stop touching me. I don't want him to stop. Not ever. He runs the bar of soap over my chest before guiding me back under the spray to wash the suds from my body. I run my hands up his hard muscular arms, over his shoulders, and rest them on the sides of his neck. I pull him down, pressing our lips together. I push my tongue over his lips, sweeping it over his teeth, pushing it in, lapping at the roof of his mouth.

He moves his lips across my cheek and when his lips are pressed to my ear he whispers, "What time's the flight again?" His hot breath gives me chills even though the water is near scalding.

His hands slide down my sides, coming to rest on my hips. I can barely concentrate. "What?" I mumble because he is kissing my neck, right there in that spot that he fucking knows drives me insane.

He laughs and pulls back, cupping my face with his hand. "The flight? Was it four or five?"

I grin. "You are getting old."

He playfully slaps my ass. "I am not getting *old*."

I chuckle. "You're way off Brian. The flight's at seven-thirty."

He doesn't say anything else and neither do I, because all I want to do is kiss him. It's like

we're fucking teenagers or something, making out in the shower until the water starts to run cold, forcing us out. He dries my hair with his towel. It's one of those little things he's always done that I pretend annoys me and makes me feel like a kid, but secretly I love it. He knows it. I know it. We don't argue about it anymore.

He moves to the sink, looking in the mirror while I finish drying off. "You want to go get something to eat?"

I hang the towel back on the rack by the shower and stand beside him at the sink. "Sure."

"We could go to Pete's."

I run my hand along his shoulder as I pass him to leave the bathroom. "We could, but that's kinda out of the way, isn't it?" I hear him opening his anti-aging cream, and really the man may be forty-eight but I swear to god he doesn't look it. I pause, maybe that shit works after all. I enter the walk-in closet and flip on the light. "What are you wearing?" I call out.

He comes up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me to him. "You."

I laugh and cover his arms with mine. "Brian." I accidentally on purpose moan his name because his cock is hard and pressed against my ass. If he is getting older, his dick hasn't gotten the memo and probably never will. "Clothes." I try again.

He kisses my neck and pulls me closer. "No." Grasping hands, we untangle and he pulls me back to the bed. We have time, plenty of time.

I am on my back looking up at him, our hands clasped together and pressing into the mattress. It's just this thing we've done since we made it official, we hold hands while we fuck. We don't talk about it. We don't put any meaning into it. It's just something we...do. I reach up with my free hand and caress his face. Kissing my palm he begins to move faster. I gasp as the head of his cock rubs over my prostate. Smiling, he leans down to kiss me. Harder and faster, his cock in my ass, his tongue in my mouth, our hands gripping each other tighter and tighter until I arch my back, coming. I know as soon as my ass clinches around him he'll come too. We are almost always in sync. Brian lets out a deep breath and lays half on me and half on the mattress. I bring our joined hands up to my mouth and I kiss the ring on his finger. We could lay here, fall asleep again, but we really can't this time because we really do have shit to do today.

Nudging his shoulder with my nose I say, "We gotta get up."

"It is inevitable." He murmurs against my neck. I bite his shoulder. "Fuck, okay, okay." He pushes himself up enough to look at me. I smile. "Fucker."

"Come on, we need another shower." He rolls his eyes. "Do you want to go out smelling

like sex?"

He smirks. "Never stopped me before." He leans in closer, running his tongue along my bottom lip.

I chuckle. "Oh yeah."

He kisses me again and pulls out and away. I moan. "Come on Sunshine." He gets off the bed, pulling me with him, our hands still clasped. "Shower, dress, eat, and then..." He groans.

"Then we fly to Toronto to see Gus graduate."

"That makes me feel so-" I start to laugh as he drags me back into the bathroom. "Don't even fucking say it."

I kiss his shoulder. "Wouldn't even dream of it...old man."

May 22, 2019, 10:07pm

Gus' POV

Okay, so like in three days I'm gonna graduate high school. Holy fuck! Everyone and their brother is flying in just to see me walk across the stage for, like, one minute. I told my moms not to invite everyone. It wasn't a big deal...except that it is. I've been through some shit so, yeah, I guess to my family, which is like bigger than anyone's I know, it's a big fucking deal. Christ, even Dad and Justin are going to be here. I think they came back from Fiji or Europe or some fucking place just to see me graduate. Oh god, maybe I'll throw up.

I pace around my bedroom, biting my thumbnail. Dad and Justin are gonna be here before everyone else. They said they were coming early because they had to tell me something. Christ, I hope they aren't like...breaking up or some shit. Can you break up if you technically aren't together? Well, I'm gonna try not to be pessimistic about it, even though I am a pessimist so it's hard to try to spin it any other way. I mean...what can it be that they can't tell everyone at the same time?

I hear a knock at my door but I ignore it. I don't want to talk to anyone because I think I might be freaking out about Dad and Justin. Nineteen years in September. That's how long they've sorta kinda been together. They can't be calling it quits after almost nineteen years...can they? Fuck, my mom is walking in and all I can think is thank god I have pants on. She sits on the edge of my bed and watches me pace. I wish I had a fucking cigarette but my moms don't even know I smoke. Dad does...he doesn't even care. Besides, I'm eighteen, I can do what I want...right?

I glance over at her. She has her blond hair pulled back from her face. She looks kinda tired, but she worked late at the gallery last night, so I guess that's why. She's watching me and waiting. I hate when she does that. Ma would just grab me by the shoulders, stop my pacing, and ask me what the fuck is wrong. Not Mom, that's not how she does shit. I look toward the door. She fucking closed it which means she won't leave until I talk. Fuck, doesn't like someone have to get JR ready for school tomorrow or pack her lunch or, I don't know help her dye her hair what-the-fuck-ever color she's gonna dye it this week? My sister is a freak. I huff. Like I have any room to talk, but whatever, I'm not talking about me.

"What do you think they want?" Fuck! See what I mean? She waits, I get sick of it, and I talk. I hate that she can do that.

"What did your dad say?"

I turn to face her and throw my hands into the air. "Just that they needed to talk to me." I lower my hands and twist them together.

She gets up, grabs my hands, and pulls them apart. "Honey, you have to calm down."

I pull away from her. "Calm down? Calm down?" Okay, I'm yelling, but fuck, calm down? Why is everyone always telling me to calm down?

She reaches for me again and pulls me toward the bed. I am such a baby because I need her to do this. I need to be held. I feel like a fucking five year old, and if I didn't need her to do it I'd pull away from her. "What did your dad say, Gus?"

I wrap my arms around her because, I don't know, she's my mom or whatever. "Just that he and Justin need to talk to me alone and that...I don't know, something about they wanted to tell me something."

She strokes my hair and I'm just going to pretend I don't love that. I can feel my heart rate slowing down. Maybe that's why she's holding me, so she can tell when it does. Fucking mothers think they know everything. "Maybe," she says really slowly, "they got you that new car you've been wanting."

I pull back from her and look her right in the eye. "Mom, that's totally stupid. Why would they bring a car here when I'm gonna be there in like, I don't know, a few weeks?" I move out of her arms and stand up. "Besides they're flying in and...and..." I run my hand through my hair. "And I won't even *need* a car in New York."

Okay, I see her frown, not because of the whole 'getting me a car' bullshit but because I said New York. My moms totally flipped when I told them that. I mean, its been like my plan since I was fifteen. I wanted to live with Dad and go to school in New York. They've known about this since fucking forever and every time I mention it...well its like they never heard me say it before. So, what? They're worried. I get it, fine, but that...forget it.

I'm not talking about it. I already told them and Dad I was going to New York. You have no idea what kinda shit I had to put up with to make it actually happen. I am my father's son though, and pretty much in the end told everyone this was what I was doing, like it or not, and fuck off. I have issues...but enough about me.

"Gus-"

I hold up my hand and grab a shirt from my closet. "I gotta get going, Mom. They're probably here already or, I don't know." I put on my shirt. "Did Dad call?"

She gets up and grabs my hands again. I swear I want to pull away, I swear that I do, but I don't, because my Mom makes me feel like I'm five and you know, five wasn't a bad year. "Gus, listen to me okay? It's not bad."

I yank my hands from her and go in search of my shoes. "You don't know." I push my feet into my sneakers. "How do you know?"

"If it was bad...well...they wouldn't be coming together."

God I hate that. Some people are just like too reasonable for their own good. She has a point and I fucking hate that too. "That doesn't really mean anything. They could just be like, putting on a front or something."

I reach for my wallet, my cell phone, my keys, and look around to see what else I need. She comes up to me again and pulls me to her. Fucking five years old, I swear. "Your father doesn't lie."

Oh...yeah...right. Sometimes I forget that. My phone rings and I pull away from her again. Five year old fade out, eighteen year old fade in. I am about to answer it when my mom takes it out of my hand. "Hey!"

She smiles and I glare. It's my fucking phone. She ignores me. "Brian." Great, now I can't even talk to him, I have to like listen to a one sided conversation. "You're here...Don't be an ass...yes." She looks over at me. "Yes." What the fuck?

"Mom, seriously give me my phone."

She sighs. "Your son would like a word." Argghh so fucking proper.

I yank it out of her hand and press it to my ear in time to hear my Dad say, "Well that is why I called him."

"Dad?" Okay, so my voice sounds all panicky or something. I gotta control that better. "Are you here?"

I hear him light a cigarette. "Yes, we're here."

"Okay good, I'll be there in like," I look at my watch. "Fifteen minutes."

"Gus?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful." I seriously want to roll my eyes. Okay, so I do roll my eyes, it's not like he can fucking see me. "Don't roll your eyes. We'll see you when you get here."

I hate when he does that. I hang up the phone and look over at my mom. "I gotta go."

"Gus please just-"

I'm basically out the door so I yell over my shoulder. "I know, be careful!"

Jesus fucking Christ! That guy ran into me, not the other way around. Besides, that was like...two years ago or whatever. Fuck, I'm so not getting into it but I am getting into my car. Yeah, I'm the cool kid at school because Dad bought me a 2017 Toyota Atora. Hey, I know, it's a bad ass car, but it isn't as cool as my 2016 BMW 751 was. I wonder if Dad is still paying for that...fuck NOT, so NOT thinking about it.

Right...in the car, deep breaths and all that shit. I put it in gear and back out of the driveway. The sooner I get there the sooner this can be over and done with, and then I can graduate and move to New York and...

Oh fuck, if they are breaking up am I still going to be able to live with Dad in New York? Okay Gus, get a grip...just get there and you know, handle whateverthefuck it is.

"You don't marry someone you can live with, you marry the person who you cannot live without."
- Anonymous -

May 22, 2019, 10:13pm
Justin's POV

I lie back on the bed and watch Brian's brows furrow when he hangs up the phone. He lights a cigarette and stares out the window.

"Brian?" He turns to me and I stretch, causing my shirt to expose some of my stomach. "Have I ever mentioned that I love sex on another bed?"

Stubbing out his cigarette, Brian walks over to the bed. He looks down at me and then climbs over me so that he's straddling my hips. His fingers push under my shirt, rubbing circular patterns on my skin. "Really?"

I nod and smile. "Of course, I also love sex on our bed, and the floor, and the kitchen cou-" Before I can finish my sentence his lips cover mine. His tongue dips into my mouth and strokes across mine. He pulls back from me but he isn't smiling. "Gus okay?" I ask, reaching up to tuck his hair behind his ear.

"Well, you know what a drama princess he can be." He leans down and kisses me again, softly on the lips as his fingers curl into my hair. I told him we should have told Gus about the marriage. Maybe we should have at least had him there as a witness but Brian didn't want anyone there that we knew. *"This is just for you and me,"* he told me. I didn't mind per se, although my Mom is probably going to be upset, and I don't even want to think about how Debbie will take it. Everyone else is just going to think that Brian has finally lost his mind.

After our first failed attempt at getting married, I never brought it up again and neither did he. We both knew we loved each other, that this thing we had, no matter the obstacles, was interwoven into each of us. When gay marriage was legalized in January 2016, thanks to a straight woman no less, we watched as every fag we knew lined up to say I do. We sort of just looked at each other and shook our heads. Brian has never been one to follow the crowd, and come to think of it, neither have I. I think we both figured that the law wouldn't even last, because that's how it's always been--one week it's legal, the next it's not. It's been that way for over ten years, why would anyone think this time was different? Three years later, the law is still intact without much protest. Three years later, almost nineteen years after we met, and here we are, some place I never thought we'd be. Fucking married.

The thing is, I never brought it up, never even mentioned it one time. We were doing our thing by finding a way to be together within the non-parameters of our non-defined, non-

conventional relationship.

April 16, 2019 8:25pm

Justin's POV

We are sitting on the couch, my head in Brian's lap, his fingers unconsciously running through my hair, watching some old movie on TV. I should be at my studio working on the paintings for my next show. He should probably be in his office going over the copy for the Baker Sweet's account that he's trying to land. We both should be working, but here we are watching this old movie, just relaxing. It's nice, and we've been so busy lately that we haven't really had time to just do this. I drape my arm over his thighs and pull myself more into his lap. He doesn't stop stroking my hair, and as I press my face into his thigh I feel myself drifting off to sleep.

"I'm ready." He says, like we're in the middle of a conversation.

I roll my head in his lap to look up at him. "What?" My voice is low and sleepy sounding.

Cupping my face he looks down at me. "I'm ready."

"For what?" I have no idea what he's talking about.

"To get married."

I sit up quickly and feel the blood rush to my head. "What?"

He shrugs and leans back, his eyes never leaving mine, which is how I can tell he's serious. "I want to."

"Why? I mean," I push my hair out of my face. I swear if he didn't love it this length I would cut it a lot shorter. "Brian, why do you want to get married?"

"Don't you want to?"

I'm at a loss for words, really. I haven't thought about getting married in years. Yeah, okay, I held on to that idea for about a year after we cancelled our wedding in 2005, but after being in New York, and Brian being in Pittsburgh, it just wasn't something I thought about anymore. The truth is that even though we don't have a marriage license or rings, or any of the other conventional bullshit, our lives both personally and professionally are so entangled that it's hard to tell where he stops and I start and vice versa.

"Well don't you?"

"I-" What am I suppose to say exactly? What we have is working. What if getting married fucks everything up?

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me toward him until our foreheads are pressed together. "What are you thinking?" His voice is soft and I can hear the worry in his tone, like he's waiting for me to turn him down.

"I'm thinking," I say slowly, closing my eyes because our faces are so close that it makes me dizzy to look at him. "I don't want to fuck this up."

Cupping my neck he pushes me back. I open my eyes. "Fuck what up?"

"This." I say. "You and me."

"You think getting married will fuck us up?" He pokes his tongue in his cheek.

I huff out a half-laugh. "What made you even think about this?"

"I have no fucking idea."

"You didn't even drive me out to the country this time. No house? No sales pitch on how much you love me?"

He laughs and I smile. "Nope." He says. I bite my lip, afraid to even bring up the word that is lying heavy on my tongue, pressing against my teeth. Brian brushes my hair off my forehead.

"Tell me what you're trying so hard not to say."

I almost laugh. You don't spend basically eighteen years around someone and expect them not to know what you're thinking or feeling. "It's just that, you know, marriage is-" I look away and bite my lip. "It's-" Fuck!

"Just you and me."

I look back at him, trying to decide if he means what I think he does. "Are you sure you're ready for that, Brian? I mean-"

He presses his fingers to my lips. "It's just been you for a while now, Sunshine."

I know that's true, somewhere in me, I know that. He hasn't tricked since, god, I can't even remember when the last time was. The option's been there though, for both of us, and marriage, well, marriage is different. At least it should be.

Getting up from the couch, I move to stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows of our loft. I gaze out to the New York City landscape glittering below, above, and all around. This was one of the selling points, one reason why we bought this place. The view is fucking amazing. I press my hand to the glass for no particular reason. It's only slightly

cool to the touch. "I don't want you to feel trapped." My words temporarily fog up a spot on the glass.

Brian's arms wrap around my waist and I lean into him. "Justin," He says into my ear, his voice soft and low, his breath warm against my skin. "We own this loft together. We've lived together for nine years, shit, we are bound so tight legally that's it's fucking insane." He strokes my stomach. "But this way, if something happens to either one of us, the law will protect what we have. No one could contest it."

"Is that why you want to do it?" My voice squeaks even though I didn't mean for it to. Turning me around, he places his hands on either side of my face. "That's not my only reason."

Somehow he doesn't have to say anything more. Leaning in, he kisses me and I kiss him back. I don't know what his other reasons are. Is it because he just turned forty-eight? Is it because he finally wants to be monogamous? Is it because he loves me? It's probably all those reasons, and more that I can't think of right now because his hands have moved under my shirt.

Kissing his way down to my neck he says, "You're it for me, Justin. You're all I want. All I need."

After that, how could I say no?

May 22, 2019 10:33pm
Justin's POV

"Hey." His voice pulls me from my thoughts. "Where'd you go?"

"Just thinking." I don't say anything else. I reach up and kiss him, pushing my hands underneath his shirt because I love the feel of his skin against my fingers. When he presses his body down on mine, deepening our kiss, I feel his semi-hard cock against my thigh. We're about one minute from getting naked when there is a knock on the door. We part, both laughing.

Pressing his forehead to mine, he sighs. Huffing out a laugh I push him back. "Go let your son in."

Getting up from the bed, he pulls me up with him. Before he walks to the door he stops to light a cigarette, and I straighten out my clothes. As a general rule Brian Kinney doesn't do nervous, but I can tell that he's nervous about this. Telling everyone else, except maybe my mother, won't be a big deal for him, but telling Gus, well, that's a whole different thing.

*"Real loss only occurs when you lose something that you love more than yourself."
- Anonymous -*

May 22, 2019 10:16pm

Gus' POV

I fucking hate driving at night. I haven't technically driven at night for two years. Of course, my parents don't know this. Hey, if driving to the empty lot a block away and sitting there for about thirty minutes gets them off my back, then so be it. If I was smart, which I claim to be, I would have told Dad I'd see him tomorrow morning, but there is no way in hell I can wait until then. Whatever he has to tell me I need to know now, now, *now*.

Shit! Okay, breathe, that car did not almost hit me. This driving at night thing really isn't a big deal. It's not. It's fine. Really. It's okay...or not. I have to pull over because I can't fucking breathe. Why couldn't Dad just come to the house? No, he has to stay at the most expensive hotel that's all the fucking way across town. Fuck! I pull off the road, flip on the hazard lights, and just try to fucking breathe. I have to get a grip because if Dad sees me like this, there is no way in hell he'll let me live with him in New York. Oh fuck. I press my head to the steering wheel. What if they tell me they're moving? Can't breathe. Gotta breathe. Can't breathe. Gotta breathe. Gotta chill the fuck out.

It takes me a minute or two, but I finally calm down enough to pull back into traffic. Okay, so it's late and there really isn't that much traffic, but it's enough to freak me out a little. I really didn't use to be this much of a freak. Driving never bothered me before... but shit happened. Shit I had no control over, not that it didn't suck complete ass because it fucking did...suck ass.

January 1, 2017 1:49am

Gus' POV

I look over at Ashley leaning against the porch, his thick brown hair falling over his forehead in a way I find fucking sexy as hell. One of his hands is wrapped around a beer bottle, the other's scratching his stomach as he tries to get away from the conversation Holly Rogers has roped him into. He's looking at me, pleading with his dark brown eyes to get the fuck over there and save him. I just laugh and he flips me off. Holly is oblivious to all this and keeps right on talking. Taking a swig of my water (there's nothing like being the designated driver at a breeder party,) I think about the first time I told Dad about Ashley. I swear he queued out for an hour on the phone, afraid that I'd joined the rank of breeders marching around seeking out pussy on a daily basis. I thought it was funny so I let him think Ash was a chick for at least a week. It was the funniest

thing ever. I don't remember how I told him Ash was a guy. Come to think of it, maybe it was Justin or my moms that finally broke the news to him. He was relieved to say the least. His son was a fag. I think he almost thanked god when he found out.

Draining the last of the lukewarm water, I decide that it might be time to rescue Ash from the evil that is Holly. It's funny how the girl can't get a fucking clue. No, he will not be your boyfriend. No, he will not eat your pussy. No, he will not let you suck his dick. No, he will not be pounding your ass into the mattress later tonight, although I will be pounding his. Smirking, I set down the empty water bottle on the railing and make my way over to him. I only kinda sorta push Holly aside.

"Hey."

He glares at me. "You're a fucking asshole."

I smirk. "Funny thing about assholes..."

He pushes me back and grins. "Shut the fuck up."

Holly stands there, completely oblivious as I drape my arm over his shoulder because he's a short motherfucker. He might even be shorter than Justin, and that's saying something. "Let's get the fuck out of here." I say.

He leans over and whispers in my ear. "We're the only queers in Breederville."

I laugh and guide him down the stairs toward the car, Holly completely forgotten. This many breeders around is enough to make any fag's dick soft. When we get to my 2016 BMW 751(not that I'm bragging because I'm totally not), which I had to park two fucking blocks away, I push Ash against it. So maybe it's not enough to make *my* dick soft, but whatever. I lean forward and suck his bottom lip into my mouth before pursuing a kiss. He has these really soft lips and his tongue, Jesus, he knows how to use it. I push my hands into his thick brown hair and pull him deeper into the kiss. As I'm fucking his mouth with my tongue, he reaches for the button of my jeans. I break the kiss. Our hot breath is visible in the cold night.

"If we don't get in the car I'm gonna fuck you right here." I say.

Ash looks down the street then back at me. "So fuck me right here then."

I press my forehead to his and laugh. "Get your ass in the car."

Caressing my cheek, he says softly, "such a fucking tease."

We hurry into the car and I start thinking of the shortest way to get to his house, because his parents are out of town at some bullshit charity event. We're about a mile from his house when it happens. It feels like slow motion, but I know it's all a matter of seconds. I

hear the twisted sound of metal on metal. The sick crunch of it all. I look over at Ash for a split second before the car starts to roll.

May 22, 2019 10:29pm

Gus' POV

I never saw that car. I never saw it coming, neither of us did. I don't remember how it felt. I only remember the sounds and that look of complete terror on Ash's face. If I'd known that would be the last time I'd ever kiss Ash I would have enjoyed it more. I would have fucked him right there on Breeder Street, pressed up against my cobalt blue BMW. I would have told him he was my best fucking friend and that I...I fucking loved him.

I pull into the hotel parking garage and park. I wipe my face with the bottom of my t-shirt because I know I'm crying like a fucking baby. I can't see Dad looking like a pussy ass faggot. I have to just push these thoughts away, because if I don't I'm gonna fucking lose it and I can't. I can't lose it right now. This is why I don't fucking drive at night. It's just too fucking painful.

May 22, 2019 10:33pm

Brian's POV

Opening the suite door, I grin at my boy who looks more and more like me each time I see him. It creeps me the fuck out. "Hey, Sonnyboy," I say as I grab him by the neck, guiding him into the room.

"Hey Dad." He looks over at Justin, whose face is still slightly flushed with lust. "Hey Justin."

Kicking the door closed, I notice a slight shake in Gus' voice. "You alright, Sonnyboy?"

Turning back to look at me he shrugs. "I'm fine."

I catch Justin's eye and he shakes his head. I take a deep drag of my cigarette and look back at Gus. "How was the drive over?"

Flopping down on the sofa he says, "I didn't get hit by any drunk drivers."

I cringe. "Gus."

Rolling his eyes he glares at me. "Whatever, can we just get this over with?"

Justin sits down in the chair across from Gus, watching me as he waits. He knows this is

my news to tell. I'm in the process of stubbing out my cigarette when suddenly Gus jumps up from the couch. "Jesus fucking Christ!" I'm trapped in a bent over position, my fingers pushing the cigarette into the ashtray. Turning my head, I look over at Gus, whose mouth is gaping open. "You fucking did it!"

Slowly I stand up right. I smirk, because I always knew the boy was a fucking genius. Crossing my arms over my chest, I nod.

"Holy Christ." Gus paces back and forth, his hands clutched together.

The behavior is oddly familiar, and Justin must sense it too because he's up in front of Gus, pulling his hands apart and just holding him still in the middle of the room. "Calm-"

Before Justin can finish talking Gus yanks his hands from him. "I swear to God if you tell me to calm down I'll...I'll..."

Enough bullshit. "Gus, sit your ass down."

He turns to face me. "No way. I can't believe you fucking got married. When? Who knows? What. The. Fuck. Dad?"

I look over at Justin, who is slowly making his way toward the door. Walking over to Gus, I grab him by the shoulders. "Sit the fuck down." I gently push him back down on the sofa before walking over to Justin.

"You don't have to leave." I say.

He shrugs. "I know."

"Give us a few minutes. He's just queening out."

Smiling he says, "Imagine that, a Kinney queening out. I didn't know it was possible."

Growling I wrap my hand around his neck and kiss him quickly on the lips. "Five minutes."

He smiles, pulls my hand from his neck, and kisses my palm before dropping it. He doesn't say anything else, just grabs his cigarettes and the room key and leaves. I stare at the closed door for a minute before I move to sit down next to Gus, who is on the verge of a panic attack. It's not a guess. I know what they look like, even if I haven't seen one in years.

"Gus." He looks over at me, his eyes wide. "Do you need your medicine?"

Turning from me, he props his elbows on his knees and clutches at his hair. "No, just give me a minute. I don't have them anyway. I just need a fucking minute to process."

I reach for my cigarettes, taking my time pulling one from the pack and lighting it. He looks over at me and I roll my eyes before handing it to him and lighting another for myself. After a few drags I say, "It's not a big deal."

He narrows his eyes. "Not a big deal? You and Justin get married and it's not a big deal?" He stands up and takes a drag of his cigarette. "What happened to 'we don't need to get fucking married' and all that other bullshit about dickless fags and Stepford husbands?"

I shrug. "It doesn't change anything."

He scoffs. "Right, so that's why you didn't tell anyone you were doing it?" He looks at me for confirmation. I just stare at him. "When did you do it anyway?"

"Last month."

"Last month!" He almost drops his cigarette.

"Watch what the fuck your doing." I point at his cigarette, which he quickly stubs out.

"Last month." He mumbles and starts that fucking pacing again, such a fucking drama princess.

I get up, put out my cigarette, grab him by the shoulders, and look him right in the eyes. "It doesn't change anything, you got it? It doesn't mean that suddenly Justin's going to be some queer version of domestication, staying home cooking dinner and cleaning the house."

"Yeah, but it's like...you said you'd never get married."

"I changed my mind." I shrug.

He looks at me for a minute as if he's trying to figure me out. Good luck with that Sonnyboy. We both turn when the suite door opens and Justin walks in. He tosses his cigarettes on the table and sits down on the couch without saying a word. Gus pulls away from me and sits down in the chair. It seems he's mellowed for now, so I sit down beside Justin, draping my arm over his shoulders.

"Okay." Gus looks up at us and smiles for the first time since he walked into the room. "Tell me exactly how all this happened."

Justin and I look at each other and sigh. It's such a long fucking story. I wonder if we have the time.

*"Hate leaves ugly scars, love leaves beautiful ones."
- Mignon McLaughlin -*

April 17, 2019 2:48am

Justin's POV

I can't sleep. I know Brian's not sleeping either. We are just lying here on the bed, worn out because we just went three rounds in a row. The lights from the city illuminate our room in soft golds and blues. It reminds me of the lights above the bed in the old loft. We never close the drapes. In fact, I don't even know why we have drapes on the windows in the first place. I have no idea why I'm even thinking about this right now. Maybe it's because I'm trying not to think about the fact that Brian Kinney just said he's ready to marry me, or that we might actually fucking go through with it this time. I hear him light a cigarette. I guess he's not really trying to pretend to be asleep like I am.

"We should get tested." Obviously I'm not doing a good job of pretending. Of course, I was never really good at that in the first place.

"Yeah." I say because I can't really think about anything except what that means. Getting tested. Fucking raw...fucking *raw*. My eyes snap open and I roll my head to look at him. He's casually smoking his cigarette and looking up at the ceiling as if it's the most interesting thing ever invented.

"Let's do it Sunday." He's words come out in puffs of smoke.

"Get tested?" I ask, furrowing my brow.

He turns his head to me. "Married."

Sitting up in bed, I look down at him as if he's lost his mind, because I think he may have actually lost-his-mind. "You want to get married on Sunday? As in this Sunday?" I ask incredulously.

He shrugs and looks away from me. "Yeah, why not?"

I scoff. "Why not? Why not? Brian, do you know what day Sunday is?"

He takes a long drag of his cigarette and exhales before finally looking up at me. "Yes."

I look towards the windows but I don't see anything. Sunday. My mind races trying to process the concept he's laying on me. I don't want to say it. I don't want to even think about it. Sunday is eighteen fucking years to the date that I got bashed. If we get married then, our anniversary will be on the same day as *that* anniversary. That's just fucking

weird and I don't know...I look down at him, trying to figure out what the fuck he's thinking.

"Why Sunday?" I force the words out of my mouth.

Brian stubs out his cigarette and reaches for me. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls me to his chest. I can hear the low steady drum of his heartbeat against my ear. Moving down a little I drape my arms over his waist, my fingers stroking his side as his fingers move into my hair.

"Well..." He says slowly.

"That was a fucking horrible day Brian." I mumble into his chest.

"It wasn't all horrible." He says quietly.

"No." I pause. "But I don't remember the good parts."

Silence fills the room with only our breathing to mar it. The resonance of his heartbeat lulls me toward sleep. My eyes start to close because I'm drifting...

Brian's POV

He's falling asleep and I think about just letting this all go. I don't even know why I said it. What the fuck was I thinking? I know what I was thinking, but I don't know that I can explain it. It's not like I want to erase that day. I can't do that even if I want to. That fucking day is embedded in us. Even if we wanted to extract it, we couldn't. That day is a twisted oxymoron in my head. Yes, it was a fucking shitty day, but before it turned into a nightmare it was, god help me, a beautiful, ridiculously romantic moment in time. I stopped running that day. I stopped fighting him. I stopped fighting myself. He doesn't remember that part, which is probably why the events that happened later that same year transpired.

"Justin."

"Mmm?"

"I want to...on Sunday."

His arm tightens around my waist. "Why?" He says softly. "Tell me why."

I run my hand through his soft blond hair. "I don't know if I can explain it." I say, because I really don't think I can.

"Try."

I wrap my arms around him, pulling him closer to me, wondering if I can possibly get the words out of my mouth. "It was a fucking horrific day. You almost fucking died..." There is a catch in my throat because time and distance and fucking years can't make me forget fucking baseball bats, bloody scarves, or him slipping away one drop of blood at a time.

I try to rein my emotions, try to ignore Justin's body tensing in my arms, try to remember why I fucking thought this was a good idea. What the fuck am I doing? I refuse to close my eyes, because I know what images wait for me behind closed lids. Instead I push on. "It was fucking tragic, but it made me realize-"

Fuck! Why can't this be easy? Why, after eighteen years, is it still a fucking hardship for me to tell the person I love that I love him? That when I danced with him in that room full of eighteen year olds that I claimed him, that I wanted him, that I knew, I fucking *knew* he was it, and that it fucking scared the shit out of me. That when I was holding his hand in that ambulance, his blood sticky and warm between our hands, all I could think was that he would never know, if he died he would never fucking know and god please, please don't take him away because he should fucking *know*.

His leg slides over my hips until he is lying on top of me. His fingers wipe the moisture away from my cheeks that I didn't even feel until he touched me. "Brian?"

Where it comes from I don't know. Somewhere from deep inside it just comes out of me, and I feel powerless to stop the words that rush to escape my lips before my mind catches them and closes the gate. "That day something was taken away from you, away from me, and for a long time after I wanted you to fucking remember the good part, the best day of your life part. Justin, there was just so much going on that night and I-"

His fingers reach out and cover my lips. "Why are you telling me all this Brian? It's in the past. It's over and done with. We can't change it." He looks away and back at me. "We can't fix it by getting married on Sunday." He says quietly.

I kiss his fingers before removing them from my lips. "I know."

"Then why do you want to get married on Sunday?"

"Because that day, that one almost perfect fucking night, made me realize that...I...loved you." In my head it had made sense. In my head it had made perfect fucking sense, but as soon as the words are out I want to take them back.

His hands rest on my cheeks. "That's a pretty big secret you've been keeping." I don't know what else to say. I don't know that I can say anything. He searches my eyes and for once I don't hide. I let him see me, open and exposed like I've never felt before, but it's been eighteen years, we're about to fucking get married, so why hide...from him?

Leaning down, he kisses me softly on the lips, chin, jaw, until his lips are pressed against my ear. His breath is hot and damp as he whispers, "Sunday it is."

May 23, 2019 12:06am

Gus' POV

I get home and go straight to my room, praying I don't run into anyone because I don't think I can fucking deal right now. When I'm in my room, the door closed, I kick off my shoes and strip off my clothes. I take my medicine, the anti-depressant I've been on practically since I was out the sliding glass doors of the hospital, and the sleeping pill I've been on for about three months. I wouldn't even have to take that one if parents didn't notice shit like their kid not sleeping. I pretended to throw a fit when it was first mentioned. I didn't need the fucking things. I was sleeping just fine. I told my moms to fuck off, I told Dr. Rabaud to go to hell, and for good measure I told JR to leave me the fuck alone. In truth, I was grateful. I couldn't sleep, because when I did it was just nightmare after nightmare of twisted metal, blood, and Ash's terrified face.

Lying back on my bed, I flip off the lamp. Waiting for the drugs to kick in, I stare up at my ceiling...not that I can even fucking see it because my room is pitch black. I can't stand to have any light coming into my room when I'm attempting to go to sleep. When I visit Dad and Justin in New York that's my biggest pet peeve, they have all these fucking windows, and even when all the lights are off in the loft, the lights from the city shine in. Dad and Justin fucking love that, but not me. They have these heavy fucking drapes on all the windows but they never close them. I think the ones in my room there are the only ones that ever get used. Why the fuck am I thinking about drapes and light and dark?

Rolling over, I press my face into the mattress and try to wrap my tired mind around the fact that my fucking father is fucking married. The man who said a fucking million times, "*We're queer. We don't need marriage.*" is *married*. It isn't that anyone, including me, didn't expect him to be with Justin for a long time. Hell they'd made it this long, but marriage and my Dad just do not belong in the same sentence. I roll onto my back and stare into the darkness. Suddenly I think that maybe I don't know my Dad as well as I think I do. Over the years I've spent practically every summer with him. He's been here countless times, but what if all those times I just saw what he wanted me to see, that it wasn't really him at all? My mind races trying to catalogue every fact and truth I know about him, trying to find where I might have misjudged. I come up empty.

Flipping onto my stomach, I pull the covers up. I didn't realize how fucking tired I am...or maybe it's just my meds kicking in. Whatever it is, I close my eyes and seek out the dark place in my mind, the place where *he* is, and there isn't a look of terror on his face, just the look that he gave me at that party so long ago because I kept him waiting.

*"Life is a series of collisions with the future; it is not the sum of what we have been, but what we yearn to be."
- Jose Ortega y Gasset -*

June 4, 2016 3:48pm

Gus' POV

Ash and I are sitting on the swing on my back porch. I'm looking at the backyard through the LCD screen of my Sony 246X digital camera, trying to find something remotely interesting to capture. There isn't anything interesting, though, because it's just my boring backyard that I've seen hundred of times, so I turn in the swing, focusing the camera on Ash.

Raising an eyebrow, I look up at him. "What's wrong with you?"

Jerking his head up, he stares at me like he forgot I was even here. "I did something stupid."

"Fucked a girl?"

"Don't be an asshole."

"But it's so much fun."

Sighing, he gets up and leans against the railing, facing me. Rolling my eyes I put my camera aside. "What did you do?"

"It wasn't planned or anything." He huffs and looks away. When he looks back at me I raise an eyebrow, waiting to see what he's going on about. "I told my mom."

I open my mouth to say something but then stop. "Wait." I get up and take a step toward him. "You told your mom you're gay? What'd you do, blurt it out over your bowl of Fruit Loops?"

"I don't eat Fruit Loops."

"Sorry, I forgot. Was it over your bowl of oatmeal then?" Ash is like this big health food nut. I swear he's worse than my Dad. I don't know how Justin puts up with it, but I find it annoying as hell.

"Can you just stop being an ass for, like, one second?"

Pulling out my pack of cigarettes, I quickly light one. "Look, just tell me what you said."

He runs a hand through his hair but it falls right back in his eyes. "It's really not a big deal, Gus." He flops down on the swing, grabbing my camera right before it tumbles to the ground.

"Jesus, that breaks and my Dad will have my ass."

"Sorry." He mumbles while fiddling with the camera.

I take a drag of my cigarette and say, "If it isn't a big deal you wouldn't be queening out over it."

He doesn't say anything, so I flick my cigarette into the bushes and sit down next to him. "Out with it already."

"Well my mom was talking about this summer and I wasn't really listening, you know," he looks at me, furrowing his brow. "Until she said something about sending me off to see my aunt and uncle in California."

"What?"

"I know. So I told her, 'Mom you already said I could go to New York this summer with Gus', and she was like, 'No I didn't.'"

"That's fucking bullshit." Ash and I had been planning our trip to New York for the better part of the year. It took that long just to convince my Dad to put up with two teenagers for a month. It's longer than I usually stay, and I had to promise my Dad we'd amuse ourselves because he and Justin were both going to be pretty busy.

"I know, that's what I told her, and then she said..."

When he closes his eyes, I take my camera away from him, set it aside, and grab his hand. "Just say it."

His eyes remain closed. "She said, 'There is no way we agreed to let you spend a queer summer in New York with the fag next door and his fag parents'."

"Jesus." I mumble, pulling him closer to me so that I can wrap my arm around his shoulders.

He runs his hand over my stomach as he rests his head against my chest. "Well I got pissed, you know, because I didn't like her saying that about you, and your dads are cool, and she doesn't even *know* them." He curls his fingers around my side and presses tighter against me before he continues. "So I yelled at her, told her that she was being ignorant, and why shouldn't I spend a queer summer in New York since I'm as queer as you."

"Ash." I kiss the top of his head. "You are such a fucking drama queen." His laugh is soft and warm against my chest. "How could she not know you're gay with a performance like that?"

"I have no idea."

"Fuck 'em Ash."

"My parents aren't like yours, Gus. They're not gonna just let me go to New York without their permission."

Pulling from his embrace, I get up, grab my camera, and turn to face him. "Fuck it. Take the ticket for California, and when they drop you off at the airport exchange it for a flight to New York." Ash's mouth gaps open and I laugh, bringing my camera up.

"Hold that pose. I want to capture the complete look of terror on your face."

"What?" His voice cracks and his image flickers. When I pull my camera away he's gone, the house is gone, the porch is gone, and all that's left is darkness. Then I see it, the two beams of light hurtling towards me and there's nothing I can do, because no matter what I try it's still gonna come, it's still gonna happen, and Ash is still gonna die.

May 24, 2019 4:11am

Gus' POV

I wake up in a cold sweat, clinging to my pillow, trying to hold in the sobs that want to break free of my body. I'm so tired of crying. So tired of missing him. I wipe my face in the pillow and give up on going back to sleep. Today is going to be for shit. Everyone is going to be here and I'll have to be pre-accident-sorry your boyfriend died-Gus. I reach for my cigarettes, open my window, crawl out on the little section of roof that hangs over the downstairs window, and sit down. I tap out a cigarette and light it.

I look out over the houses that surround ours, and if I want I could pick out Ash's old house. I don't though, because he doesn't live there anymore, his parents don't live there anymore. They moved to California a month after they put him in the ground. I take a deep drag of my cigarette and let my mind wander to how his funeral must have been. I wasn't there. Not that I didn't want to be, but as a general rule hospitals don't release comatose patients so they can attend their dead boyfriend's funeral.

I finish my cigarette and think about going back inside. Maybe I should work on my fucking Valedictorian speech. Fuck. Like I don't have enough going on. I didn't want to do it. I fucking begged and begged trying to get out of it. It fucking blows having a lawyer for a mom just like it blows to have parents that ride your ass to make good grades and take AP honor classes. I'm smart, and if I'm honest about it, I'm glad that they pushed

me, because if they hadn't I probably wouldn't have gotten into the School of Visual Arts.

Fuck. Today family out the ass and tomorrow talking out of my ass. I can't wait until the shit is all over so I can get the fuck out of Toronto and, I don't know, get on with my life or some shit.

May 24, 2019 6:15pm

Justin's POV

We're standing on Linz and Mel's front porch. We can hear the voices inside, sounding like a crowd of hundreds when it's really only about a dozen or so people. I look over at Brian, trying to get a read on exactly what he's feeling. Telling Gus went better than we thought it would. In fact, Gus figuring it out for himself saved us the awkwardness of trying to explain it to him. Sure, he freaked out, but by the end of the night he seemed okay with it. Of course Brian and I know looks can be deceiving, he is a Kinney by blood after all. Looking back at the door, I have to admit that I'm a little nervous about what's going to happen when we announce that we're married. I know nobody believed it would ever happen. Hell, up until last month I believed the same fucking thing.

"You ready?" Brian asks.

I nod, and when he knocks on the door I reach for his hand. It won't be a big deal, I tell myself. We've been together so long now that it shouldn't shock anyone. I want to believe that. I really do. I take a deep breath as the door opens and JR greets us with a smile that is more Michael than Melanie. She's shorter than I remember. Her long black hair has bright crimson red highlights. Narrowing her coal black eyes she says, "You guys are late." Before Brian or I can respond she turns and yells, "Brian and Justin are *finally* here!" She walks into the living room and we follow, closing the door behind us. Everyone just throws 'hey's and hi's' our way before returning to their conversations.

"I'm getting a drink." Brian says. "Want anything?" I just nod my head no. He releases my hand and walks to the kitchen.

May 24, 2019 6:15pm

Gus' POV

I'm sitting at the kitchen table trying my best to be anti-social, even though sooner or later I know I have to fucking go out there and listen to everyone ooh and ah about how fucking proud they are of me. It's not even a big deal. It's just graduation. Anyone can graduate from fucking high school. I'm thinking about going outside for a cigarette when Dad strolls into the kitchen.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" he asks as he heads for the liquor cabinet.

"Avoiding the inevitable," I say.

"Yeah, well you should get your ass in there. That's what everyone is here for." He pulls out a bottle of whiskey and makes a face at it. I guess it's not the kind he usually drinks or whatever, but it doesn't stop him from pouring some of it in a glass.

I'm about to get up when he comes and sits down in the chair across from me. "You write your speech?"

I want to tell him sure, yeah its all typed up and ready to go, but instead I shrug and say, "I'm thinking of winging it."

He taps his ring on the glass. "You should be prepared."

Rolling my eyes I say, "Dad, I fucking aced communications *and* speech. It'll be fine." I'm about to get up and head outside when I notice that it's gotten really quiet in the living room.

"Fuck." Dad stands up, walks toward the living room, and says over his shoulder, "Write your fucking speech."

I roll my eyes and push myself out of the chair. I can only imagine that whatever is about to go on in the living room will have nothing to do with me. So fuck it. I turn and walk out to the porch, immediately lighting a cigarette. Fuck it if my moms see me. It's not that I don't care about what's going on in there, but honestly it's just going to be everyone talking all at once about how Dad doesn't believe in marriage and why didn't they tell anyone. I know because that's what I asked. That's what I wanted to know. I've had longer to think about it, though. Is the fact that Dad got married shocking? Hell yes. There is no way around that. I heard him say the same thing for eighteen years of my life about gay marriage, so yeah, it's kinda a big fucking deal. Am I surprised that when he finally decided he wanted to get married it was to Justin? Fuck no, and really no one else should be surprised either.

May 24, 2019 6:16pm

Justin's POV

I move over to the chair in the corner and sit down, deciding for now not to engage in any of the conversations going on. It's hard to pick up any anyway. It's just an endless stream of words running over each other. It hasn't been that long since we've seen everyone. We were in Pittsburgh in March, Brian to check on Babylon and Kinnetik, and I had a business meeting with one of the galleries there. I don't usually show my work in

Pittsburgh but every once in a while I try to remember that's where I got my start and that's where I came from, even if I am glad I don't live there anymore. Looking around, everyone seems to look the same, only older.

I'm sitting there surveying everything and nothing when my mom approaches me. "Hi sweetheart." I stand and she pulls me into a hug, which I return.

Stepping back, she smiles at me and I smile back. "Hey Mom." I look over her shoulder. "Where's Tucker?" My mom and Tucker got married seven years ago. I have long since put any bad feelings about him to bed. He loves my mom and treats her like a fucking queen. It's hard not to like the guy, if only for that.

"Oh, he had to teach today, but he's going to be here later tonight." She reaches for my hands. "How are you honey?"

The seventeen year old that still lives inside me wants to blurt out that I'm fucking great because Brian and I finally got married, but I suppress him. "I'm good."

She drags me to the couch and pulls me down beside her. "Tell me what you've been up to. I haven't seen you in months!"

"Yeah Sunshine, where have you been hiding out?" Debbie, who is sitting next to my mom, asks.

Chuckling, I say, "I haven't been hiding. I've been busy."

"Weren't you and Brian just in Paris?" Ted asks from across the room. When I look over at him I notice that everyone is watching me. Where the fuck is Brian? It doesn't take that long to get a drink. I run my hand through my hair and smile.

"Oh my, honey!" Emmett saunters over to me and lifts my hand. "What a beautiful ring." He glances from the ring to me. "Where did you get it?"

"Um." My face feels like it's on fire and I want nothing more than to jerk my hand from Emmett.

"I gave it to him." Everyone, including me, turns as Brian strolls into the room. He squeezes himself between me and the arm of the couch before taking a sip of his drink. "Got myself one too," he says, lodging his tongue into the side of his cheek, holding up his finger and wiggling it.

Everyone gets really quiet and just stares at us. Emmett drops my hand before sitting down on the coffee table in front of the couch, looking from me to Brian. Michael has his mouth open, my mom has her hands over her lips, Debbie has her hand pressed against her chest, while Ted, Blake, Hunter, and Ben are sort of staring at us with wide eyes. Even Carl is looking at us like we just whipped out our dicks.

"Jesus Christ, don't tell us you two finally got married." Debbie's voice cuts through the silence like a hot knife through butter.

May 24, 2019 6:18pm

Gus' POV

The back porch door flies open and I think about discarding my cigarette, but I decide fuck it and take a drag before turning to see who's joined me out here. Fuck, JR.

"What the fuck are you doing out here?" I ask her.

"What the fuck are you?" She snaps back, closing the door and leaning against it. "You should be in there or something. Everyone is going off on your Dad and Justin." She tilts her head to the side. "You already know."

"Not that it's any of your fucking business, but they told me two days ago."

Walking over, she takes the cigarette from between my fingers and takes a drag. "How'd you take it?"

"Give me that." I take it back from her and scowl. I look over her head toward the house. "Is everyone freaking out?"

"Totally. The rings are really what's freaking people out."

I scoff. "Why? When people get married they exchange rings, its part and parcel."

"Yeah well, Auntie Em asked about the ring Justin was wearing and he just got really red in the face. Then your Dad walked in, saying he got it for him and that he had one too. Then it got like real quiet for a minute and then it was like the room exploded!" She giggles and I roll my eyes. "Right before I came out here Auntie Em asked if they had anything engraved on their rings, because you know what a romantic he is, anyway so your Dad snapped that it wasn't any of his fucking business."

"That's when you left?"

"Yeah, because your Dad just kept getting more and more pissed off and Justin looked like he was too, a little bit."

I take the last drag of my cigarette, flick it in the bushes, and look down at her. "What the fuck does it matter if they have rings, or if they have shit engraved on them?"

Crossing her arms, she rolls her eyes. "Duh, because it's *your* Dad."

Oh, yeah, right. I reach out and tug a strand of her hair. "I like it." I say.

She smiles. "I wanted to do it all in red, you know for your graduation, but Ma said no way in hell."

Laughing, I drape my arm around her shoulders. Yeah she can be a pain in the ass, annoying as fucking hell, but she's my little sister. My little sister who wanted to dye her hair crimson red because that's the color of my graduation robe. She's an aggravating little twerp, but the truth is I'm gonna miss her. "Come on." I say. "We better get back in there."

May 24, 2019 6:31pm

Brian's POV

The longer it goes on the more pissed I get. It's not that I didn't know they were going to bombard us with questions, but these aren't the questions I was expecting. Shit about rings and what we have engraved on them, like that's anyone's fucking business.

"Brian Kinney says I do." Debbie shakes her head smiling.

Justin laughs. "It was more like, what the fuck with a little shrug." I glare at him. He leans over kisses my ear and whispers, "You okay?" I cup the back of his neck, stroke his hair, and nod.

"Did you guys go on a honeymoon?" JR asks. I glance over to see her and Gus enter the room.

Justin looks up at me. I look at him and raise an eyebrow. He laughs and then turns to JR.

"Yeah, we went to Paris."

"Wait." Mother Taylor looks over at us. "You've been in Paris for a month." She turns to Justin.

"I thought you said you were there on business."

He shrugs. "We were."

"Pleasure too." I add.

"When exactly did you get married?" Michael asks, his brow furrowing.

I smirk. "Last month."

The room erupts and I hear Justin moan. It's fucking funny if you ask me. It's not like I

never asked him to marry me before, the only difference is that this time we actually did it. It's funny how after all these years people still like to think of me as some played out Peter Pan, fucking around and getting home at four in the morning smelling like sweat, sex, smoke, and liquor. Or that Justin's still that seventeen year old kid that's just hanging around painting pretty pictures while I support him.

If they only fucking knew. I look over at Gus, who seems more than happy that the conversation isn't about him. I lift my glass, tipping it toward him in a mock toast before draining the last of the cheap whiskey. He just rolls his eyes.

“Those who danced were thought to be quite insane by those who could not hear the music.”

~ Angela Monet ~

May 25, 2019 7:08am

Justin's POV

A hot wet mouth pressing where my neck curves into my shoulder wakes me up. Any part of Brian touching me is really the best way to wake up. Sometimes it's his mouth pressing over mine his tongue lapping at my lips until I'm coherent enough to participate. Sometimes it's his warm hand wrapping around my cock moving in smooth gentle stokes. When Brian is in a less patient mood I wake up when he slips a lubed finger in my ass. I'm not sure if he can tell I'm awake by the automatic response of my body or by the way my breathing changes when his mouth finds my nipple and his hand finds my cock. I arch my back against his mouth and move my hips with the rhythm of his hand. His tongue leaves a trail of warm spit as he licks and kisses his way down my body. When his mouth takes the place of his hand I grip handfuls of his hair. He runs his tongue down the underside of my cock and back up before taking the head into his mouth. If there is one thing that Brian is a master of, and he's a master of a lot of things, it's this.

“Brian.” I moan.

He alternates between swirling his tongue around the head of my cock and tonguing the slit. Oh god, there is nothing like being buried to the balls in Brian's mouth. As he swallows around my cock I twist his hair harder. It probably hurts but he probably kind of likes it. I could come like that my cock moving in and out of his mouth but I don't want to. If there is one thing we've learned over the years it's holding our climaxes back. When we have the patience for it, the time to do it, we come so hard that it feels as if our hearts stop and our breathing will never regulate.

I pull him up catching the smile on his face that reaches his eyes before pulling his mouth to mine. Sometimes when we kiss I feel as if Brian is trying to swallow me whole as if he's trying to suck every single thing out of me and into himself. Those are the kisses where I'm glad to be laying in bed because they make me feel dizzy and completely boneless. His hands tangle in my hair as my fingers make half-moon indentions on his shoulders. Sometimes I wonder if I will wake up one day and he won't want me anymore. Sometimes I wonder the same thing about myself. That sooner or later the heat, hunger, fire, and electricity that crackles between us will flicker and fade. It hasn't and at this point I'm starting to think it never will.

One of his hands leaves my hair, I don't hear him open the lube, but I know that's what he's doing. I arch my back rubbing the head of my cock against his muscular stomach.

He knows what I'm doing, he knows what I'm asking for, and I know he's going to give it to me. I feel the lube slicked head of his cock pressing against my hole and I push against him.

"Fuck me." I demand.

Its one fluid movement, he pushes into me as our hands and lips meet, and he does exactly what I want. I arch my back so that each thrust of his body rubs the tip of my cock against his stomach. His balls slap my ass and I vaguely hear the headboard of the bed tapping against the wall. I'd find it funny if Brian wasn't buried in my ass and stroking my prostate with every quick hard thrust. We pause somewhere in the middle bodies pressing together, my cock wet and dripping between us, his throbbing cock deep in my ass, our hands clasped together, his other hand in my hair, my other hand gripping his bicep, and our kisses slowing so that our tongues dance rather than wrestle. Then the moment passes and it's hard, hot, and fast. The room is filled with the sounds of our quickening breath, Brian's balls slapping my ass, the tapping of the headboard against the wall, and our grunts, groans, and moans.

We don't talk during sex usually unless we're in the mood for dirty talk or light bondage. He doesn't whisper in my ear how fucking tight my ass still is after all these years. I know it by the sound he makes when he enters me time and again. I don't tell him how fucking beautiful he is or that no one has ever fucked me like this and no one ever will. He already knows that when I'm writhing beneath him meeting him thrust for thrust. We don't say I love you when we come because our eyes lock and we both just fucking *know*.

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May 25, 2019 9:45am

Gus' POV

I'm sitting in the living room mindlessly flipping from one channel to the next. Five hundred plus channels and not a fucking thing to watch. It's not like I'm a big TV watcher to begin with. There are hundreds of other things I choose to do instead of wasting my life watching the latest teen drama or the 'reality' of some coked-out-insert-celebrity-name-here documentary. I stop flipping when the latest Mercedes commercial flashes on the screen. Dad's company did that. Its slick, it's hot, and it makes me want to run out and sacrifice virgins if that's what it takes to get a Mercedes S800. No one ever says my Dad isn't good at his job. Fuck good. The man is an advertising genius. Even if you didn't know him, if you just happen to pass him on the street, you'd know whatever he did he did it well because of the way he walks like there are hundred dollar bills peeling off the back of his Armani suit and he doesn't even care because there's more where they came from. He exudes money. He reeks of it.

I yawn and stretch out on the couch thinking about my Dad and money and going to New York and how much I don't want to give a fucking speech tonight and how I haven't even written a single thing down because I don't know what the fuck to say because out of the hundred other kids graduating with me none of them had been hit by a drunk driver on New Year's when they were sixteen. None of them had almost died. I'm being an egotistical asshole. Yeah okay they didn't almost die, they didn't survive the accident that killed their best friend/boyfriend, but I doubt that any of the rest of them escaped four years with absolutely no drama. Well, if I'm honest with myself, I don't give a fuck about anyone else's drama, especially not anyone I go to school with.

Ash and I had other friends, a few other gay kids, a couple of straight guys who knew that we weren't out to convert them, and a very quiet fag hag. Since the accident I just never felt like being around them so I wasn't. They tried, they were persistent, but you tell someone no long enough and sooner or later they stop asking if you want to go to a movie or hang out at so and so's house because they got the latest kill-everything-in sight video game for the PS10. Melody is the only one that I still talk to. My quiet little fag hag. She doesn't even talk much. She's just there in that quiet way of hers holding my hand, or wiping the tears from my cheeks when we're sitting in my backyard and I remember when Ash had said something or another or that time we kissed under the tree when it was raining or whenever I thought of anything at all.

Melody never asks me what it was like. She doesn't want to know. She doesn't need to know. She never asks if I miss Ash because she misses him too. We stuck together talking softly at lunch about the AP Chemistry homework we hadn't quite finished or walking to the park when the weather was nice. I wonder how it will be when I'm in New York and Melody is at Stanford.

"You're up early." I turn to see Ma leaning against the door frame a cup of coffee in her hands. Her short brown hair is kinda sticking up all over the place. It's kinda nice to see her a little rumpled because usually she's all business suits, stiletto pumps, and lawyer resolve. She walks over to the couch and I move my legs to make room for her as she sits down. "Couldn't sleep?" She looks over at me with that fucking knowing look so I just shrug. What's the point of answering when she already knows? "Well I'm glad you're up."

I sit up and eye her suspiciously. "Why?"

She sits her mug on the coffee table, takes the remote from me, and turns off the TV. When she turns to face me I see something in her eyes that look that says she getting ready to make an opening argument to convince me that whatever she's about to say is for my own good. "Grace is going to be there tonight."

I jump up from the couch. "No fucking way." I move around the coffee table and start pacing. Grace. Ash's fucking twin sister. Fuck that. No fucking way. Not going to fucking happen. I haven't seen her since I was in the hospital. I yelled at her, told her to get the fuck out, told her that I never wanted to see her again. They had to sedate me.

She just stood there and watched with tears running down her face. I remember when the drugs made everything fuzzy thinking that if I squinted and tilted my head it could be Ash standing there. When she moved to California with her parents she started sending letters. At first they came once every couple of days, then once a week, and finally once a month. I never answered them. I never even fucking opened them. They're all stuffed in this box I have in my closet and every time I get one I just add it to the pile. She didn't do anything to me. She didn't have to. It just fucking hurts to look at her. She has his face, his lips, his eyes.

"Gus calm the fuck down before you give yourself a fucking panic attack." Ma doesn't do things like Mom. Mom holds me close and soothes me with soft words and even softer hands in my hair. Ma just demands for it to stop and if that doesn't work she grabs me by the shoulders and holds me still which is what she's doing now.

"I don't want to see her. If she's coming I don't want to fucking see her."

"She's coming to the house afterward."

I pull myself from her grasp and yell so loud that each word scrapes my throat raw. "I don't want to fucking see her!"

"Well she wants to see you and you're going to see her. You're going to get your act together and act your fucking age. She never did shit to you. She wants to be here." *Ladies and gentlemen of the jury in closing my son will do exactly what I say.* I know it's pointless but I fight back anyway.

"And what about what I want or doesn't that matter?" I ask exasperated.

"Gus of course it matters. I'm not saying it doesn't."

"Of course you are Ma. 'You will be nice. You will see her.' Whatthefuckever." I try to walk around her but she grabs my arm.

"She has just as much right to be there as you do."

I yank my arm away and run upstairs without answering her.

May 25, 2019 10:36am

Justin's POV

We're sitting at the table next to the window in our suite drinking coffee and reading The New York Times we had brought up with breakfast. It's pretty much par for the course of how we usually spend our mornings before he rushes off to work and I rush off to my

studio, the only difference is the location. Setting aside the Arts and Leisure section I lift my mug and take a sip of my Irish Cream flavored coffee.

“Yesterday wasn’t so bad.” I say. He scoffs at me from behind the Business section of the paper. “It could have been a lot worse.” Folding down a corner of the paper he looks over at me. “Well,” I shrug. “It could have been.”

“We haven’t heard the last of it.” He replies before disappearing back behind the paper.

That’s probably true. Lindsey and Mel were suspiciously quiet throughout the whole ordeal. I wrote Mel’s silence off as indifference and Lindsey’s quiet composure as country club manners.

“I suppose not.”

He folds the paper and sets it aside. “Lindsey’s pissed.”

“She didn’t say anything.”

“That’s how I know.”

“Why would she be pissed? My Mom didn’t even seem to be that upset about it.”

He scoffs and takes a sip of his coffee. “They were just minding their manners in front of everyone Sunshine. They’ll corner us alone and let us have it.”

“Mmm.” He’s probably right about that too. Draining the last of his coffee Brian gets up and walks to the nightstand to pick up his wallet and cell phone. “Going somewhere?”

“Yeah, I’m going to head over there. See Gus.” He turns to me and shrugs. “Get the bullshit out of the way before tonight.”

“Want me to come with you?”

“No. You should probably call your Mommy.”

Sitting my mug back on the table I sigh. “You’re probably right.”

“Of course I am.” He relies smugly.

I slump in my chair at the prospect of facing my Mom. I know she’s more upset then she lead on and I just don’t know if I feel like dealing with it.

“Hey.” I look over at Brian standing next to the bed. “Come here.”

I push myself out of the chair and stroll over to him. He wraps his arms around me and pulls me to his chest. "It'll be fine. Lindsey will queen out for whatever reason. Your Mom will make you feel guilty for getting married without her being there. Eventually it will all blow over."

"I know." I press my cheek to his chest and breathe in his expensive cologne.

Pulling back from me he lifts my left hand and presses it to his chest. I look up at him. He smiles tapping my ring with his index finger and I smile back. I wrap my other hand around the back of his neck pulling him down into a kiss.

When we break apart we are both smiling and it's kind of funny that I feel like a fucking newlywed around a man that I've known for eighteen years.

* * * * *

May 25, 2019 11:23am

Brian's POV

"Just tell me why you're so pissed." I can feel the headache forming behind my eyes.

"I'm not pissed Brian." Lindsey opens the dryer to remove a shirt.

"You're fucking pissed." I lean against the washer wondering why the fuck we're having this conversation in the fucking basement.

She tosses the shirt into the basket on top of the dryer and turns to me hands on her hips. "I'm...upset." She brushes a stray hair back from her face and picks the shirt back up folding it before she returns it to the basket.

"Well why are you upset." I really want her to get to the point and I really want her to fucking stop pulling shit out of the dryer.

She turns to me folding a pair of socks. "Don't you think that we wanted to be there? Don't you think that we wanted to share that experience with the two of you."

"Well we didn't want to share it."

She tosses the socks into the basket. "You didn't. What about Justin?"

"What about him?"

She shakes her head. “Did he just go along with it to please you or was he afraid if he said one word about it that you wouldn’t go though with it? That he didn’t at least want his Mother there or Debbie or any of us?”

I try to hold back my anger but it seeps out of my pores. “Justin isn’t a fucking kid anymore. He’s fucking thirty-five years old and believe me he’s not afraid to tell me shit.” She opens her mouth to say something but I hold up my hand to cut her off. “If Justin wanted everyone there they would have been. If he wanted to invite every person we’ve ever met then I wouldn’t have said a fucking word. If he wanted some big fancy wedding that would grace the front page of the Business section of the New York fucking Times then he would have gotten it.”

“Brian.” Her voice is soft and full of retraction.

“I don’t have to explain shit to you Lindsey. We did what we wanted to just like we always do. We don’t live by your rules or anyone else’s.”

She reaches out her hand to touch me but I step back. “I’m sorry. I-” She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “I just would have liked to be there to share it with you both.”

“It was just for us.”

“I know.” She places her hands on the sides of my face and I let her. She smiles and then kisses my cheek. “Congratulations Mr. Taylor-Kinney.”

“Oh Jesus Christ.” I pull away from her. “I’m going up to see my son.”

Her laughter follows me up the stairs.

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May 25, 2019 12:05pm

Justin’s POV

I’m sitting across from my Mom in this tiny little café picking at the salad I ordered. She’s looking at me waiting for me to start I guess but I’m pretty much waiting to see what she’s going to say.

She sits her fork down and wipes the edges of her mouth with the corner of her napkin. “Honey,” I groan and she laughs. “You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

I stab a crouton and it breaks in half under the pressure of my fork. “No but I can guess.”

“I just wish I could have been there that’s all.”

I set my fork down and look up at her. “I know.”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone?” I shrug. “Is it because of Brian?”

I try not to roll my eyes. “Don’t you think if I wanted everyone there they would have been?”

“Maybe you just didn’t want to rock the boat.” She reaches for her wine glass and takes a sip.

“Rock the boat?”

She sets down her glass looking a little flustered. “I mean, it’s just...” She looks away and then back at me.

“Wait.” I hold up my hand. “Are you saying that I didn’t challenge Brian on people being there because if I did he wouldn’t go through with it?” When she doesn’t say anything I know that’s exactly what she thinks. I’m kind of irritated and kind of upset so I push. “Is that what you thought?”

She takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

I shake my head. “That is such bullshit Mom. We made a mutual decision. We didn’t want anyone there. We wanted it just for us. We didn’t need anyone’s approval or blessing or opinion.” I take a deep breath and look her right in the eyes. “And if I wanted to have every-fucking-body there I could have. If I wanted a big fancy wedding on top of the tallest roof in Manhattan surrounded by Golden Gardenias it would have happened.” She seems stunned and I want to smile but I don’t. Instead I reach for her hand. “Mom there is nothing that Brian would deny me if it’s what I truly wanted.” Brian would never say that out loud but it was pure gospel from the Brian Kinney Manual.

“Because he loves you?”

I want to scream because really at this point how can it even be a question? “Because we love each other.” I simply reply back. It’s not catty or cunty because it’s just the truth.

I release her hand, pick up my fork, and ask her about Tucker and Molly.

~ Fake it 'til you make it ~

May 25, 2019 9:47pm

Gus' POV

I'm standing out on the back porch lighting a cigarette escaping the pats on the back and the "Gus we're so proud of you" from the people inside the house. I take a deep drag looking out into the backyard. The moon is three-quarters full so it's bright enough out here to see almost everything. It's like a dull daylight. It looks surreal and the photographer in me, the artist, itches to take a picture of it because it's kinda how I'm feeling at this moment. Earlier, when I was up on stage giving my speech, I felt panic and fear certain that I was going to puke all over the podium. There were a thousand eyes focused on me, a thousand ears listening to what I was saying, it was fucking intense. Everyone was listening to me, my voice echoing over them, as I spouted off bullshit about how "our lives are just beginning" and all the other crap people expect to hear during a graduation speech. It's all bullshit. The truth is our lives aren't starting here, they're not even ending here, they're just going on but no one wants to hear that. Everyone wants to feel like they accomplished something and that it just gets better from here. That all the bullshit of youth will be swept under the fucking rug because all the sudden switching our tassels from the right to the left means we are now adults.

Draping my arms over the railing I flick the ash from my cigarette thinking about what I'd be doing if Ashley were here. I'd probably be at some lame graduation party getting wasted just to keep from getting bored. Maybe fucking Ash in one of the bedrooms in whothefuckever's house. I wish I could be like all the other kids I graduated with out there having fun because this would be the last time we might ever see each other again. I'm not like them though and I stopped pretending I was when I woke up from the coma and was told my boyfriend had died.

I jump when I feel a hand on my lower back. I turn around ready to tell whoever the fuck it is to just back off when I see Melody smiling up at me. She looks fucking beautiful with her auburn hair pulled back from her face, the green in her dress brightening her eyes and making her pale freckled skin look ethereal.

"Smoking is really bad for you." She says softly.

Turning from her I take a drag of my cigarette. "You always say that."

"And I always mean it." Her voice, like her personality, is soft, quiet, and calm.

"It should have been him up there tonight." I frown. "He would have said the right things."

Stepping up beside me she wraps her arm around my lower back. “You said the right things Gus.”

I flick my cigarette into the bushes. “It was bullshit.”

She wraps her other arm around me in a sideways hug. “It wasn’t.” I can feel her warm breath through my shirt when she says, “I saw Grace inside.”

Panic flares up in me. I want to pace and scream but Melody tightens her grip on me. She’s small, fucking tiny, and if I wanted to I could push her off of me only I don’t. “I don’t want to see her.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know why she’s here.”

“You do.”

“It’s bullshit. It doesn’t change anything.”

Releasing me from her hold she moves between the railing and me resting her small hands on my shoulders. “Look at me.” I peer down into her soft green eyes. “She’s not here to hurt you.”

I pull her to me wrapping my arms around her slender frame. In a lot of ways Melody understands me, the person inside who is still fucked up, broken, alone, afraid, doubtful. Sometimes I feel like she’s the only person that knows I woke up from that coma a different person, that the Gus everyone knew and loved was just fucking gone. I honestly don’t know what I would have done without her. She possesses this inner strength that I just don’t have.

I blink away my tears as I kiss the top of her head gripping her tighter. “I’m gonna fucking miss you.”

I feel the wetness of her tears soaking through my shirt. “I love you too.” She whispers.

* * * * *

May 25, 2019 9:49pm

Brian’s POV

I sip my whiskey watching him from across the room laughing at something Debbie is telling him. Christ, he's fucking beautiful. Even though he's no longer as lithe as he used to be, and his features now only hold the fading last traces of his youth. He looks over at me quirking an eyebrow, I smile at him lifting my glass in mock salute, and he laughs kissing Deb's cheek before making his way over to me. Thirty-five years old and he's still a walking wet dream.

When he reaches me he grabs the glass from my hand and takes a sip. When he swallows his nose scrunches up in a way that I refuse to admit is fucking adorable. "What the fuck is this?"

"It's not Irish Whiskey."

"You mean to tell me that Mel and Linz don't have a bottle of Jameson's stashed in the back of their liquor cabinet?"

"Fraid not."

"That's just sad."

I take the glass from him and set it down on the table behind me before pulling him to me. "It really is."

He rubs his nose on my chest. "We got invited to breakfast tomorrow."

I push him back a little. "Oh?" I ask raising my eyebrow.

He shrugs. "It was Deb. You know she doesn't take no for an answer."

"And here I thought I was going to get to fuck you in that nice big hotel bed until we had to leave."

He laughs leaning up toward me. "You can fuck me as many times as you want when we go back there tonight."

I'm about to kiss him when Linz clears her throat. "Um guys?"

I feel her hand on my elbow so I look over at her. "What?"

She's flustered by my irritation but forces a smile. "Can I talk to you in the kitchen?"

I'm immediately suspicious but we follow her. When we enter the kitchen she busies herself with platters of food. Her back is to us and I feel the nervous energy radiating off of her. I lean against the counter pulling Justin against me wrapping my arms around his waist.

With her back still to us she says, “Wasn’t Gus’ speech good?”

“It was bullshit.”

She whirls around to face me. “It wasn’t bullshit Brian. He worked really hard on that speech. It took a lot for him to get up there tonight.”

I scoff about to tell her that our son was talking out of his ass but Justin presses back against me so I hold back.

She turns away from us moving a bowl from one side of the counter to another. “He’s not completely better.” She says finally. I raise an eyebrow even though she can’t see me. Grabbing a dish towel off the counter she turns to me wringing it in her hands. “He started...we didn’t tell you because...”

“Lindsey what the fuck are you talking about?”

She holds my eyes with hers although I can tell she wants to look away. “He’s taking Restoril®. He’s been on it for three months.” She says in one hurried breath.

“What?” I ask slowly.

She wrings the towel in her hands. “It’s a sleep medication.”

I push Justin away from me. “I know what the fuck it is.”

“Brian.” Justin places his hand on my arm but I shrug it off.

“Excuse me.” We all turn toward a tall slender girl with layered brown hair standing in the doorway. She looks at each of us in turn. “Sorry for interrupting I thought Gus might be in here.”

“He and Melody are out on the back porch.” Lindsey tells the girl softly.

“Oh okay. Thanks Mrs. Peterson.” The girl smiles as she walks around us and out the back door.

I turn back to Linz. “He wasn’t sleeping Brian. He wouldn’t sleep. He was awake for days at a time and we were worried.”

“Three months? Why didn’t you fucking tell me?”

“He asked us not to Brian.”

“Since when does our son decide what I should and should not know?” I feel Justin’s hand on my shoulder and this time I don’t shrug it off.

“He thought...he didn’t want you to think that he wasn’t okay.”

I cross my arms. “You think we don’t know? You think I can’t tell when he calls me that he’s still trying to fucking deal? That when he comes to stay with us that we can’t see it?” I grab Justin’s hand off my shoulder and lace our fingers together. “We could be fucking experts.”

“What?” She looks at us confused. How easily people forget, I think to myself.

“We’ve been there Linz.” Justin says softly. “We know.”

She tilts her head to the side. “You’ve been there.” She repeats and then I see it on her face. “Oh.”

“Why didn’t he want us to know?” Justin asks.

“He though you wouldn’t let him live with you if you knew.”

“That is such fucking bullshit.” I try to stay calm but really that is fucking bullshit. I know Gus knows about the bashing but this makes me think he has no clue about the rest. How everything he’s going through is nothing that I haven’t seen or Justin hasn’t felt before.

“I think out of everyone that he’d be the least worried about what we think.” Justin shrugs. “Unless of course you and Mel never told him that I’ve been where he’s at.”

I look over at Justin and have the urge to fucking kiss the shit out of him at that second.

“I...we...” I tear my eyes from Justin and glare at Linz. She sighs. “We really never talked about it Justin to be honest with you. He knows, about...the...”

“Bashing.” Justin finishes for her.

“Right.”

“Just not the bullshit.” I swear if I didn’t love him before I’d love him right fucking now.

She wrings the towel in her hands. “It’s not like we really knew what you were going through sweetie. I mean, Brian and you...well...”

“You didn’t know? That’s bullshit Linz and you know it. Everyone fucking knew.” Justin leans up and kisses my cheek.

When he removes his hand from mine I ask, “Where are you going?”

He just shakes his head and walks toward the living room. I watch him go then glare at Linz.

"I'm..." Her face is bright red. "I didn't mean..."

"You didn't think it would still matter because it's been eighteen years?"

"I just didn't think."

"No, you didn't." I lean back against the counter. "Why couldn't he sleep?"

"He wouldn't tell us."

I shake my head. "So you just took him to the fucking doctor and put him on another fucking pill?"

"Brian."

"That's fucking bullshit." I step toward her. "You know what else is bullshit?" She shakes her head. "Keeping this shit from us. Yeah, we can fucking guess what's going on but we don't *know*. We aren't here all the time."

"He just doesn't want to talk about it."

I almost laugh. "*Now* that I understand."

She tries to say something else but I just don't want to hear it. I need a fucking cigarette. I shove open the back door so hard that it smacks the side of the house with a loud bang. Gus, the girl who came in the kitchen and what's her name Mandy or Megan jump at the sound and turn towards me.

Lighting my cigarette I glare at Gus. "I need to fucking talk to you."

He looks at the girl standing in front of him. "Well as fun as it's been you heard him." I take note of the anger in his voice. He leans toward the girl beside him and kisses her cheek. "I'll see you later okay?" He says softly. She just nods before going back inside the house.

"Gus."

"Look Grace I told you I don't know why you're here and I just can't fucking deal with it right this second." He waves his hand toward me.

She looks over her shoulder at me and sighs before turning back to face Gus. "I'll be inside."

Once she's gone Gus lights a cigarette of his own and asks, "Why are you so pissed?"

I take a deep drag of my cigarette. "Let's start with you telling me what the fuck that was all about and then we can move on to the fact that you've been having trouble sleeping."

"Fuck, she told you."

"You should have fucking told me."

"It's not a big deal." I glare at him. "I couldn't sleep." He throws up his hands.

I take the last drag of my cigarette and flick it over into the bushes. I step up to him with my face in front of his. "I'm just going to say this once, if you are going to be living with us you can't keep shit like that from us. Don't think we don't know that you aren't over it--"

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

I lean back and smirk at him. "I know more than you think." I cross my arms. "Start talking."

*"A man never stands as tall as when he kneels to help a child."
~ Knights of Pythagoras ~*

May 25, 2019 10:01pm

Gus' POV

There are times when Dad gets this look in his eyes that screams "playtime is over." That's how he's looking at me right now. It's not that I intentionally kept things from him, okay so maybe I did but it's easy to do when he's not around all the time. I was five when we moved to Canada. At the time we moved Dad's company was barely a year old. He worked insane hours to make it the success it is today. I never blamed him for not being there. He was busy and he had a life of his own. Still he made it up to see me at least once a month. When I turned thirteen all my parents agreed that I was old enough to fly alone and that's when I started spending part of my summers with him and Justin in New York. Since the accident I haven't gone up there although he and Justin have been here. So yeah, it wasn't hard to keep him from knowing that I'm fucked up. It's not even impossible to keep things from my Moms. They want me to be better so sometimes they pretend that I am. Ma usually just demands it like she did earlier today, "Get your act together Gus." I've heard that mantra from her over and over again since it happened. Maybe I haven't had time to grieve or maybe no one understands that I need to, I don't know. All I really know is that Dad is staring at me and he's waiting. Most people don't know this but my Dad is a fucking patient person. He'll wait out here with me all night if that's what it takes.

I don't know what to tell him or even what he wants to hear so I start small. "That girl, Grace, she's Ash's twin sister."

He stands up a little straighter and crosses his arms. His eyes don't leave mine. "Okay." He says.

I shrug. "I didn't want her to be here but Ma told me she was going to be and that I had to basically make nice with her." Okay so here it is. I know my Ma and Dad don't really like each other so maybe I'm using this information to get back at Ma for letting Grace be here and for making me see her.

"Well what does she want?"

I shrug again. "To talk to me, to see me...I don't really fucking know."

"Why don't you want to see her?"

I look away and then back at him. I don't know if I can tell him, if I should tell him. Sure I queened out when Ma demanded I see Grace but I never said why I didn't want to. He's watching me and he's waiting and I know he's going to be able to tell if I

lie to any degree. I turn away from him and grip the railing. “She fucking looks just like him.”

I hear him make a sound behind me that could be an ah or something to that effect. I hear him sit down on the swing and light a cigarette. “Gus come sit with me.”

I look over my shoulder at him for a minute before finally moving to sit down beside him. I think about lighting my own cigarette but I don’t. We just sit there for awhile. I don’t say anything and he seems content to smoke his cigarette. When he finishes it he flicks it toward the bushes and leans back in the swing draping his arms over the back of it. “You’re having nightmares.” It’s not a question.

I whip my head toward him. “How the fuck do you know that? Just because I’m on some fucking med-”

When he turns to look at me the words die in my throat. I can’t even begin to describe the expression on his face or the look in his eyes. He looks away from me. “Sonnyboy, we are going to have a talk.” I just stare at him because I have no idea what the fuck is going on. He’s deadly serious though, that I can fucking tell. He’s quiet for so long that I want to ask him what he’s going to say but I just wait because that seems like the right thing to do. He takes a deep breath and closes his eyes as if what he’s about to say will cause him pain. “You know about Justin right?”

Immediately I want to start freaking out because all these thoughts start flying through my brain like Justin’s leaving, Justin’s sick, something is wrong with Justin and whatever it is it’s fucking bad because Dad looks like someone just opened his chest with a dull knife and removed his heart...slowly.

“Oh my god what’s wrong with him?” My voice is high and tight but I can’t help it because the panic I feel inside works its way out.

He opens his eyes but still doesn’t look at me. “Nothing...now.” He says slowly. I furrow my brow because I really don’t have any idea what he’s talking about. “You know about him being bashed?” He asks.

Oh...okay. I slump against the swing and look out into the yard. “Yeah, I know.”

“He was the same age you are now-”

“Dad, I’m not sure what-”

“Just listen Sonnyboy.” I shut my mouth but I’m still confused because I have no idea what Justin being bashed has to do with anything. It’s not a secret. It’s really a part of our family history. I think it might have been one of the first things I learned about Justin. My Dad went to his prom, they danced, then some homophobic asshole tried to kill Justin.

“Did you know he was in a coma for two weeks?”

I turn to look at him. “He was?” No one ever told me that. In fact besides the basics, I realize that I don’t really know that much about the bashing.

“Yeah, he was.” He lights another cigarette keeping his eyes on some unknown spot in the backyard. I watch him though because his voice sounds different and I think maybe he looks a little different too, older. “Rehab for a month after that.” He takes a drag of his cigarette. “He was in the hospital a long fucking time.” He closes his eyes again and opens them slowly. “It took a long time for him to get better.”

“Why?” I ask without meaning to mostly because I suddenly want to know everything and mostly because no one has ever really told me anything about this.

“For many reasons. It fucked up his hand for one. He had to learn how to fucking reuse it, how to fucking draw again. It gives him shit even today.” He takes a drag of his cigarette. “He woke up from that coma a different person.”

My breath catches in my throat. My mind races because that’s exactly how it was for me. I woke up and I just didn’t feel the same. Things didn’t look the same. I wasn’t the same.

“It wasn’t just his hand.” He shakes his head. “He had fucking nightmares, panic attacks, and this fear. He was never afraid before.” He turns to look at me then. “He was the bravest fucker I knew and then he just wasn’t.”

“Dad I-”

“I’m telling you this because no one else has.” He turns from me taking a drag of his cigarette before flicking it into the bushes. After a moment he looks at me. “And to tell you that we know, Justin and I know what you’re going through. He’s been there and I’ve seen it so you don’t have to pretend with us.”

I’ve never seen my Dad like this so serious and a tone in his voice that is laced with a sadness that I’ve never heard from him. “But he got better.” I say because Justin seems fine to me.

“Eventually. He was on a shitload of pills for a while.” Yeah I can fucking relate to that I think to myself. He shakes his head and looks away from me. “Had to fucking learn how to walk down the fucking street alone without being afraid someone was going to come after him.”

“I can’t drive at night without freaking out.” I tell him. I don’t know why I say it maybe it’s because now I know he’ll understand. I didn’t think anyone could really understand before.

He turns back to face me. “Have you told anyone that? Your Moms? The doctor?”

“Why would I? They’d just put me on another fucking medicine.”

He drapes his arm over my shoulders and I lean into him. Dad and I have never really had the kind of relationship where we hug a lot. I’m not sure why since he doesn’t really seem to have an issue with affection. Maybe it’s me or maybe it’s that we have never been around each other as much as we should have been. It doesn’t matter because when he puts his arms around me, like he is right now, it just makes me feel safer, protected.

I take a deep breath inhaling a mix of his and Justin’s expensive colognes, whiskey, and the musk of cigarette smoke. The smells of my Dad. “How long did it take for him to get better?” I ask because I want to know how long I have to go. How long will I continue to feel this way? When will it get better and be okay?

He pulls me a little tighter against him. “A long fucking time. Sometimes it all still affects him.” He pauses. “It takes a long time Gus. You’ll never be completely over it but you’ll learn how to cope.”

“Did it affect you?”

He doesn’t say anything for a long time and I wonder if I asked something I shouldn’t have. Maybe it was a stupid question because I should be smart enough to know that it did just by the sound of his voice. Finally he says, “More than I was willing to admit.” His grip on my shoulder tightens. “He almost died...not just in that fucking parking garage, not just in the ambulance on the way to the hospital...it was three days before anyone knew if he’d even fucking make it at all.” The pain in his voice is so sharp that it cuts me from the inside out.

“I didn’t know.” I say softly.

“I know.” He takes a deep breath. “It was the same with you...waiting to see if you’d make it. It was fucking terrifying.”

I wrap my arms around him and press my face to his chest as tears well up in my eyes. “It sucks.”

Wrapping his arms around me he pulls me tighter to him and for the first time I feel like a child in my Dad’s arms. He strokes my hair away from my face and I wonder if my Mom told him that sometimes I need this.

“It’ll get better Sonnyboy. It’ll get better.”

May 25, 2019 12:23am

Gus' POV

I leave Dad out on the back porch and go in search of Justin. Something just tells me that Dad needs him right now. I've never had a conversation like that with my Dad before. He's never been so open to me. I realize he's never let me see that some shit in his life has left him with deep wounds and even deeper scars that sometimes still bleed. It's fucked up but it made me feel closer to him.

As we were talking I wondered why no one ever really told me about what happened to Justin and Dad after the bashing. I guess no one else could know or if they did...well there was no way they would know what Dad told me. We talked for a long time. He told me things and I told him things. It made me feel connected to him in a way I've never felt before. It's like over the last four days I've come to realize that my Dad isn't the person I always thought he was. I've gained a new perspective on the man and a whole new respect for him.

It's later than I thought when I enter the house, after midnight already. I didn't realize we were out there for so long. I walk into the living room leaning against the wall. There's really not anyone left in the house, Ma, Mom, and Justin are sitting on the couch talking, JR is half asleep in one of the chairs, and Grace is sitting there sorta just listening. Justin looks up to see me and smiles but it fades quickly. Maybe he can see it on my face, whatever it is, because he gets up and approaches me.

"You okay?" He asks in this really soft voice like maybe he knows I'm not.

I nod and tell him. "Fine, but I think Dad needs you."

He doesn't respond just sort of nods his head like he figured that was what I was going to say. When he passes me on the way to the back door he squeezes my shoulder. It isn't much but I take it for what it is...comfort, support, and knowing even without saying what went on between me and Dad.

When he's gone I turn to see my Moms looking at me. "You alright sweetie?" Mom asks with a smile on her face but worry in her eyes.

I should be mad at her for telling Dad about the sleeping pills but I'm too tired and too drained right now and besides that I have one more thing to do before I can put this day to rest.

Pushing myself off the wall I walk towards where Grace is sitting. "I'm fine." I tell Mom stopping next to Grace. I look down at her and she looks up at me. It takes

everything I have not to look away. “Can I talk to you?” I jerk my head toward the front door. “Out there.”

I know Mom and Ma are looking at me probably waiting for me to explode or scream or something but I ignore them and walk outside waiting for Grace to join me. I still don’t want to talk to her or look at her or really fucking see her but Dad said I should just listen to what she has to say. “It can’t hurt to hear her out.” He told me. Maybe not or maybe it will hurt more but he’s right I should just get it over with.

I cross my arms and avoid looking her in the eye. “Well?”

“I just wanted to...see you.”

“Why?”

“I needed to remember him.”

I meet her eyes. “By seeing me and going to my fucking graduation?”

She shrugs. “I don’t expect you to understand Gus. It’s how I chose to remember him. I wanted to see what would have been his graduation too.” She takes a step closer but I take a step back from her. “I wanted to see you because he loved you and...” She bites her lip. “You loved him and I just wanted to remember that he was loved.”

I don’t know what to say to that so I don’t say anything. What could I say? It doesn’t make sense to me. We both just sort of stand there. I can feel her eyes on me while I look everywhere but at her.

“You never answered any of my letters.” Her voice is so quiet I can barely hear it.

“I never opened them.” I tell her.

“Right.” She takes a deep breath. “I...I wasn’t trying to hurt you by coming tonight I just wanted to see you and remember things about him that maybe I’d forgotten.” I glance at her and see a tear snake it’s way down her cheek. “I’ll go now.” She says finally.

I just nod my head. She walks down the stairs to her car and I walk back inside. I listened to what she had to say and for tonight that’s the best I can do.

* * * * *

May 26, 2019 1:13am

Justin's POV

He's quiet on the way to the hotel. He holds my hand from the time we leave the rental car until we enter our suite. We get ready for bed in silence. I can guess what he and Gus talked about tonight. I know he's trying to get his emotions in order and I know he needs to do that in silence. I am more than happy to provide that solace. We slide between the cool sheets and turn out the lights. I remain on my side of the bed until he pulls me to him wrapping his arms around me. I move within his arms so that I'm more comfortable and also so I can wrap my arms around him. He pulls me tighter against his chest his breath hot against the top of my head.

"Justin?"

"Mmm?"

He takes a deep breath. "I love you and I'm fucking glad you're here."

He doesn't mean in this hotel room, in this bed, in Toronto with him, he means here as in this world, this life. He's glad that I fucking lived. I kiss his chest and say, "There's no where else I'd rather be Brian." I'd trade heaven in any day if it meant I could be wrapped in his arms just like this. "And I love you too."

“Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling in at night. I miss you like hell.”
~ Edna St. Vincent Millay ~

June 09, 2019 2:21pm

Gus’ POV

The day is overcast and humid. It’s supposed to rain at least that’s what they’ve been saying. I’m standing at the gate wondering if I can do this. I don’t know if I can but I know I have to. I push the gate open and it squeaks...loudly. It’s creepy but I suppose that’s only because it’s the gate to a cemetery. I’ve never been to a cemetery in my life but just seeing all these headstones and knowing that underneath the grass and dirt are hundreds of coffins that hold decomposed bodies, well it’s just fucking creepy. I only have a vague idea of where to go. Melody explained where exactly it is. She offered to come with me but I told her I had to do this by myself.

I walk slowly on the sidewalk that runs through the middle of the cemetery scuffing my shoes as I venture further and further into the “Land of Corpses.” I don’t know how to describe what I’m feeling but it isn’t peace. Frankly I feel fucking uneasy. That’s what I get for thinking about what is actually under all this dirt. I remember Melody telling me Ashley’s grave is located in the far left back corner of the cemetery underneath a canopy of Beech trees. The closer I get the tighter my chest feels. I can feel it coming, the panic. It’s all about breathing or so everyone says. Justin told me not that long ago that, “Yeah the breathing works sometimes and sometimes it just doesn’t do shit. Sometimes the panic is so great that breathing is the last thing you think about.”

Halfway to the back part of the cemetery I turn down a smaller path to the left. When I near the end of the pathway I turn walking through the green grass near the wrought iron fencing toward his grave. As I approach it, close enough so I can see his name etched on the marble slab, I start grasping for breath and my heart starts hammering in my chest. I reach out gripping one of the bars of the fence as I fall to my knees because it’s suddenly just too fucking much, just too fucking *real*.

I think I must look pretty fucking stupid right now down on my knees, my head pressed against the wrought iron bars, my hand shaking from the tightness of my grip on the metal, my eyes shut tight, and my breath quick and shallow. My forehead scrapes against the rough metal bar in time with my breaths that rock my body back and forth. I know I have to get control of this, I have to stop it, but my mind and body don’t seem to want to agree to the same terms. It’s too fucking real and at the same time it doesn’t seem real at all. Why did I even come here? Why am I doing this to myself? *Because he deserves it*, my mind answers back. That thought is so sharp that it stings throughout my entire body.

Slowly I open my eyes and there it is right in front of me his fucking headstone.

ASHLEY NOEL PARKER
NOV.15, 2000 – JAN. 01, 2017
BELOVED SON

My body begins to convulse as sobs rack my body. I reach out gripping another bar with my other hand and hold on because it feels as if each sob is being ripped from my body. I've cried because I miss him, I've cried because he's not here, but I don't think I've ever allowed myself to cry because he was fucking dead. Just fucking gone. Nothing but bones in a box under almost two year's worth of dirt. Even in my dreams, in my memories, in my fucking thoughts he's never really dead...he's just...missing.

Releasing the bars I crawl on my hands and knees across the grass not caring about stupid shit like grass stains on my new jeans until I am face to face with his headstone. Once I'm over where his body is buried I lay down, my face pressed into the grass, and all I smell is fucking dirt. Dirt, not death. I reach out gripping at the grass just so I have something to hold onto because right now I'm fucking falling apart, because now it's real...it's fucking *real*. He isn't just gone, he's fucking *dead*.

* * * * *

I feel a drop of rain on my forehead but I don't move to wipe it away. I don't know how long I've been laying here but I know it's been at least an hour. I stopped crying a while ago but just don't have the willpower to get up. Laying my cheek against the ground I notice that my hand is moving over the grass as if my touch can reach into the afterlife and caress him. Maybe I haven't gotten up because I'm not finished here. I didn't come here to fall apart, to shatter and break I came here to...because I needed to...I came here for him, for me.

"Ash..." The word scrapes against my sore throat and comes out raspy and rough. "It's Gus." I feel fucking stupid talking to the air, laying on the ground, fucking petting the grass but right now I really don't fucking care if I feel stupid or look stupid. I came here for this, to tell him things, to let him know...so stupid or not I begin to talk. "I should have come sooner." I close my eyes. "But you understand don't you? It wasn't because I don't miss you." I take a deep breath. "Do you know how fucking pathetic I feel right now? If you were here...but you're not." I press my body closer to the ground. "There are all these things I want to say to you but I'm thinking what fucking good will it do? It's not like you can hear me. Maybe it's for me...of course you're probably not surprised since you always thought I was a selfish asshole anyway." I smile but it fades quickly. "I'm going to New York tomorrow just like we always planned. It's not gonna be the same without you." Another rain drop hits my arms but I ignore it. "I fucking miss you." If I had tears left to cry I'd be crying right now. "And I'm fucking sorry you're gone and I...I'm sorry I never told you..." A few drops of rain turn into a steady sprinkle. I can feel each large drop soaking through the back of my shirt. "How much you meant to me. How you were the best friend I ever fucking had, maybe ever will have

and that I...fucking loved you.” I stop and wonder when I started using past tense.
“Love you still.” I correct.

I stop talking. It’s not like there isn’t more I can say but suddenly it feels like I’ve said all I need to. Opening my eyes I pull myself up to my knees as the rain starts come down harder. Pushing back my wet hair I stare at his headstone blinking away the rain that catches in my eyelashes. Reaching out I trace his name with my finger surprised at how warm the marble feels and how smooth the etched letters are. I don’t know why but I lean forward and kiss the rain slicked surface and mumble into the hardness, “I’ll never forget you.”

"He that will enjoy the brightness of sunshine, must quit the coolness of the shade."
~ Samuel Johnson ~

June 10, 2019 11:15am

Justin's POV

LaGuardia Airport is filled with a multitude of sights and sounds. Men and women in high class business suits walk around carrying their briefcases with cell phones pressed against their ears. Children laugh, play, cry, or scream as their parents try to pacify them. Young couples, older couples, and singles filter into lounges, shops, waiting areas, and any empty space available. Whether coming or going we are all doing the same thing, waiting. Airports are basically all the same, a bubble that exist within the world but is not really a part of it. It is a place where time drips by one agonizing second at a time or is delayed for one reason or another. Inside we are in a constant state of waiting. The artist in me should be soaking it all in seeking out inspiration in any form knowing that there are a number of possibilities that could come from just watching. In reality, however, I fucking hate airports, this one in particular.

Brian and I are sitting at a small table in the Coffee Beanery. The aroma alone strangles the senses because it's so strong. I look over at Brian who has his cell phone pressed to his ear. I watch his facial features rapidly go from complacent to irritation to anger as he listens to the person on the other end of the line.

"The graphics were supposed to be done by 8am. I don't want to hear your excuses Dan, you're in charge of the fucking Art Department so whether it was Amy or Kyle or whothefuckever that fucked up it's all going to come back on you. It's your job to make sure they do *their* jobs." He reaches for his sugar loaded black coffee. "Listen to me Dan. Are you listening? Get it fucking done today because if I have to come into the office to take care of it myself you are going to be looking for another job." He flips his phone shut and re-clips it on his belt.

"Everything alright?"

"Fucking Art Department." He mumbles into his coffee before taking a sip.

"Are you going in?"

"If I have to go in someone's getting fired."

"Mmm." I know better than anyone that he'll go in regardless. That's just how he is. If something gets fucked up he doesn't trust anyone to fix it right unless he's there to glare them into submission.

Taking a sip of my Caff  Latte I drum my fingers on the slick surface of the table.

Brian places his hand over mine. "Stop." He squeezes my fingers before he releases them and takes another drink of coffee. "You didn't have to come." He says as he sets his cup on the table.

"And miss seeing Gus' face when we give him his present? No fucking way." I furrow my brow. "What if he doesn't like it?"

"He'll like it."

"Yeah, but what if he doesn't?"

Brian rolls his eyes. "You should have fucking stayed at home or you could have waited at the studio." My irritation from waiting in the fucking airport plus Brian's irritation at a fuck up at Kinnetik equals a lethal combination.

I glare at him. "Fuck off."

Throwing his hands up he says, "That's a good idea." He grabs my hand and pulls me out of the coffee shop basically dragging me toward the men's room.

"Brian we don't have time for this."

He looks over his shoulder at me. "There's always time for fucking Sunshine. Besides the fucking flight's delayed."

I look over my shoulder toward the flight information. "What?"

When we enter the men's room he drags me to the stall furthest from the door. Once we are inside he presses me against the wall his mouth hot and heavy on mine. I can't help but feel a little nostalgic as his hands work their way down my body and his tongue fucks my mouth. It reminds me of how many times I've been pressed against a stall in this bathroom, how many times I've stained the walls with my come, how many times I've been fucked hard and fast right here. Before Brian moved to New York there was a span of five years of hard quick fucks in the men's bathroom at LaGuardia because we couldn't seem to wait until we reached my place.

His mouth is sucking on my neck as his hands work the button of my jeans. I grip his hair and move his mouth back up to mine shoving my tongue over his lips. Pulling his hands from my hair he turns me around to face the wall. His mouth returns to my neck as he pushes my pants down over my ass. He sticks two of his fingers in my mouth I suck and lick at them to make them wet. His other hand pushes my shirt up his fingers dancing over the skin of my chest and stomach before resting on my hip. As I suck on his fingers I press my bare ass against his hard cock groaning my disappointment that it's still covered by the material of his pants. His lips move up my neck marking me with open mouth kisses. Reaching back I tug at his belt but can't really reach to undo it. He laughs against my neck as he moves his hand from my hips to release his cock from his

Armani slacks. When his fingers are coated with my spit he removes them from my mouth circling them around my hole until finally pushing one finger in followed quickly by the other.

I press my cheek against the cool wall enjoying the sensation of his fingers. “Brian.” I beg.

He nips at my ear and whispers. “Patience.”

His lips move down my neck sucking and kissing my skin leaving wet marks that send chills through my body when his mouth moves and the cool air dries the moistness on my skin. After what seems like forever he finally removes his fingers and replaces them with his cock. I moan in pleasure, in gratitude, and he huffs a laugh into my hair. As he begins to thrust in and out of me I grip the top of the stall wall as his hands push under my shirt. I buck back against him letting him know that I want it faster, harder, now, now, now. His hands leave my skin and cover my hands as his thrusts get more forceful. I throw my head back against his shoulders unable to quiet the sounds that escape my open mouth. He slides his right hand down my arm, over my shoulder, down my back, around my waist, until finally he wraps it around my cock and begins to stroke me in the same quick rhythm as his thrust.

It doesn’t take long and when we come it’s within seconds of each other our heads thrown back as sighs of relief escape our mouths. He wraps his arms around my waist and kisses my temple as I relax into him.

“Better now?” He asks.

“Mmm....much.”

* * * * *

June 10, 2019 11:31am

Brian’s POV

We straighten our clothes as we leave the men’s room not escaping a few curious glances from the men using the urinals. I just raise my eyebrows in passing but say nothing.

When we get back to the Coffee Beanery I can already tell that fucking Justin in the bathroom was definitely the right thing to do. I told him to stay at home or the studio but he insisted on coming with me to get Gus. I really, really tried to talk him out of it because he gets wound so tight at airports. As we sit down at a different table I look over at him and he smiles at me. There that’s what I like to see. His eyes leave mine as he looks over my shoulder and a frown quickly replaces it.

“What?” I ask.

“I hate airports.”

“Stop being a drama princess. I told you-”

“I didn’t have to come, I know.” He sighs. “Sorry.”

“Forget it. Airports always make you cranky. Why do you think I always fucked you in the men’s room as soon as I got off the plane?”

“And this whole time I thought it was because you couldn’t wait to fuck me.”

I laugh. “That too.” He smiles over at me. Unable to resist I cup the back of his neck and kiss him.

“Jesus don’t you two get enough?” I hear Gus ask from behind me.

Laughing I pull away from Justin and reply tongue in cheek, “There is no such thing as enough Sonnyboy.”

Without removing my hand from Justin I turn to look at Gus taking in his appearance his light brown hair is sticking up like he just rolled out of bed, his eyes are red, and there are large dark circle under them. His clothes are wrinkled as if he just picked them up off the floor and put them on. “You look like shit.” I tell him as Justin and I stand up.

He rolls his eyes. “Gee thanks Dad.” I cock an eyebrow at him. “The flight sucked ass.” He glares at a lady that walks by with a screaming kid.

“Ah.”

As we start walking toward the exit, because I’m ready to get the fuck out of there, Justin looks over at Gus and then at me. I just shake my head at him. The airport isn’t exactly the place to confront a kid who’s prone to queening out faster than Justin.

Glancing at the bag over Gus’ shoulder I ask, “Is that all you have?”

“Yeah, did my stuff come from Toronto yet?”

Justin laughs. “Yup there’s a shitload of boxes in your room.”

“What you and Dad just shoved them in there?”

We exit the airport and while I’m getting the cab I hear Justin tell him. “Actually we made the delivery guy do it.”

After putting Gus’ bag in the trunk of the taxi we all climb in. It takes a little over an hour to get downtown because of noon-time rush. When we pull up outside the three-

story building, located about five city blocks from our loft in TriBeCa, Gus turns to look at Justin. “Why are we at your studio?”

He smiles and nudges me to get out. For someone who’s been worrying his ass off about if Gus will like his graduation present Justin certainly seems excited. All I’ve heard for weeks is, “What if he doesn’t like it. An Artist’s space is personal. He might just want to pick his own place.” I just kept telling Justin to calm the fuck down. If Gus didn’t like it we’d figure something out or he could use whatever the school has available. That comment earned me a glare.

I pay the driver as we exit the car. Gus retrieves his bag from the trunk and the taxi drives away. Justin heads inside as Gus and I stand there looking up at the building.

January 12, 2013 2:59pm

Brian’s POV

“What the fuck are we doing here?” I ask pulling my coat tighter around my body because it’s fucking freezing.

I look over at Justin whose nose is bright pink and his lips look a little blue. He turns to me and grabs my arm and gestures to the building with the other. “This is it.” He tells me.

I raise an eyebrow. “This is it?”

He nods. “I want it.”

“Justin...” I look up at the building, it doesn’t look that bad but I could tell it would need a lot of fucking work, and that was just the outside of it. The location, even I had to admit, is good but even with that....I gesture toward the building with a gloved hand. “It’s a fucking mess.”

He turns from me and looks at the building. “It’s perfect Brian and the light...” He tugs at my coat pulling me toward the door. “You have to see the inside.”

He walks up the steps, reaches into his coat pocket, and pulls out a set of keys to unlock the front door. I follow him up and stop him before he can put the key in the lock. He looks up at me. “You have keys? Did you already buy it?” I can feel the anger rising inside me. It’s not like he doesn’t have the money to make his own purchases, he has more than enough money, but we decided not that long ago that things, like buying fucking buildings for example, would be something we decided together since combining our incomes late last year.

He sucks his lower lip into his mouth. “Fuck Justin we had a fucking agreement about shit like this.”

“I know.” He mumbles. I shake my head and walk down the steps back to the sidewalk. “Brian.”

He’s standing on the stoop facing me when I turn to him. “Why’d you even ask me to come see it if you already fucking bought the thing?”

“I...” He looks away from me and starts clicking his thumbnail between his teeth.

Rolling my eyes I walk up the steps and cup his face. “Look if you like it I want you to have it but we agreed. You can’t just go out and buy shit like this. It’s not like a new TV. It’s a fucking building Justin.” I rub my gloved thumb along his lower lip. His brow is furrowed and I can feel him trembling from the cold.

“I’m sorry Brian. I know we agreed but when I saw the inside I just-”

“Loved it.”

“Yeah.” He smiles but it fades quickly.

“What?”

“It’s not cheap.”

I turn my head to the left and then to the right taking in the neighborhood. “I’m not surprised considering the location.” I push him back a little to get his attention. “It’s fucking freezing out here.”

That’s all it takes to bring the smile back to his face and I know that I’m so fucked. I think I may have been fucked since the night I took him home with me because when he smiles at me like that there is nothing that I can deny him.

* * * * *

June 10, 2019 12:43pm

Brian’s POV

I look up at the building. It had been nothing more than an abandoned office building. It was much smaller than the buildings surrounding it being only three stories. Each floor is 800 sq. ft. that had once been divided into office and cubicle spaces. As is we paid nearly 750,000 dollars for it mostly because of the location. The renovations alone cost us over one million dollars but it really had paid off in the end. The top floor was the most expensive as far as renovations went due to Justin’s obsessiveness about his personal

space and his preference for natural light. The small square windows were all replaced with floor to ceiling windows. The entire ceiling, and the most expensive of any of the renovations in the room, is all glass. It's like being in a fucking solarium and in the summers when the heat penetrates the glass it's like a fucking greenhouse.

The second floor until recently had been left empty. The first floor was a little project we invested in about a year ago, the TK Gallery. It's all white walls, hardwood flooring, track lighting, and clean lines. It was a risky investment to set up the gallery because there are already so many in the area but Justin was determined that it wouldn't be like the others. Mostly the work shown here belongs to juniors and seniors from School of Visual Arts or Graduate students from the New York Academy of Art or artists that had just started pounding the pavement trying to catch a break. We didn't cater to artists that had already established themselves within the art world of New York.

I look over at Gus watching him as his eyes take in the front of the building. "Dad?" He looks over at me and I raise an eyebrow. "You opened a gallery?"

I shrug. "Technically Justin and I opened a gallery."

His mouth hangs open. "When?"

"Last year."

"What are we doing here?"

Draping my arm around him I lead him up the steps and into the building. "Graduation present Sonnyboy."

Once inside a tiny petite woman with soft green eyes, short curly silver hair, and a bright smile greets us. "Brian I was just telling Justin that I wasn't expecting you today." She looks at me then at Gus. "And who is this handsome young man?"

"This is my son Gus. Gus this is Madeline Connley she manages the gallery."

Smiling she shakes the hand Gus extends to her. "Please call me Maddie. Madeline makes me sound like a little old lady." She winks at me and laughs.

"Hi Maddie." Gus smiles at her.

"He looks just like you Brian."

"So I've been told." I look past Madeline my eyes searching the open room for Justin. "Did Justin go upstairs?"

"Oh no, he's in the back. Grady brought some pieces for his show."

I meet her eyes cocking my eyebrow. “*His* show?”

“Yes. Didn’t Justin tell you? He offered Grady a solo show. It opens next month. It’s all very exciting.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Justin offered him a solo show? We don’t do solo shows.” I tell her.

Not one to be easily flustered Madeline smiles at me. “Justin organized the whole thing.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Right.” Dropping my hand I met her eyes. “Can you get him for me?”

The smile never leaves her face. “Sure.” She turns to Gus. “It was really nice meeting you.” She winks at him before turning to walk toward the back of the room.

Grady O’Toole is this twenty-three year old graduate student from the New York Academy of Art. When he was a senior at SVA he was included in several shows at the gallery but never as a solo artist. When we decided to open our own gallery Justin made it clear that this wasn’t going to be like all the other galleries in New York hoping to find the next big thing so that we could become famous for discovering them.

“No solo shows Brian. This is going to be a place for these kids in school or kids like me when I first came here just trying to get noticed. This will be their stepping stone so to speak, a way for other galleries to take notice of them so that they can get bigger shows, solo shows there. We’re not about promoting the next big thing but rather promoting the possibility of the next big thing.”

That’s what he said. I remember thinking during that speech that if he would have been in advertising he would have been a force to be reckoned with. He didn’t have to convince me though because I agreed. We agreed. Sure I let Justin handle most of what went on as far as the gallery was concerned but I was still consulted on big projects or special events. I sure as hell should have been consulted about a solo show especially for this Grady asshole.

Personally I never liked the kid. Sure his shit was alright from what I’ve seen but overall he really wasn’t that fucking special. I know, even though Justin doesn’t tell me, that Grady is here all the fucking time. I’m not fooled by this guy’s antics. He’s not just hanging around here for the art, or because he thinks the gallery is fucking great, it’s more like he has a perpetual hard-on for Justin. Admiration is one thing but hanging around hoping to get more than wall space is another. I bet Grady creamed in his fucking pants when Justin offered him a solo show. Fuck.

“Dad are you alright?”

I want to tell him no, I'm not fucking alright. My incompetent Art Department fucked up the graphics for the Outer Ware presentation that is tomorrow at ten fucking A.M. Some little piss ant has a fucking hard on for Justin, who is either fucking oblivious or just doesn't fucking care. I've got a headache that's pounding behind my eyes and the day is hardly over.

But of course I don't say any of that. "Fine."

I rub the bridge of my nose willing my headache to go the fuck away.

"Hey."

Removing my fingers from my nose I look at Justin who's smiling big and wide. "Where the fuck did you go?"

His smile fades. "I was looking at the art for the next show."

"Grady's solo show?" I spit out.

"Yes." He says slowly.

"What the fuck happened to 'we don't do solo shows.'"

Crossing his arms he shrugs. "I changed my mind." He tilts his head. "Are you pissed?"

"Why would I be pissed?"

"Brian."

Turning to Gus I take his bag from him and set it against the wall. "Come on Sonnyboy let's get the show on the road."

He looks from me to Justin. "Dad..."

"Do you want your present or not?" I ask him.

He looks at Justin again. "Sure I do Dad."

Draping my arm around him I lead him through the side door to the stairs. "Then what the hell are we waiting for?"

"The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt."

~ Frederick Buechner ~

June 10, 2019 12:58pm

Gus' POV

Dad keeps his arm over my shoulders as we walk up the stairs. I can feel the tension in his body. I look over my shoulder at Justin as he follows us up, his head is down and he's doing that annoying thing where he clicks his thumbnail between his front teeth. I'm trying really hard not to freak out about the fact that they seem to be in the middle of an argument. It's not like I've never seen them fight. In fact the first time I'd been allowed to fly by myself to New York they were in the middle of a fight. I remembered being so excited and I wanted to tell them all about it when I got off the plane but all my excitement dissipated when I saw them. I remember that cab ride to the loft took forever and was the most uncomfortable I'd ever been around them. My Dad was yelling into his cell phone the entire ride while Justin stared out the window biting on his thumbnail. The whole time they didn't say one thing to each other. When we got to the loft it was like they were talking to each other through me. I fucking hated it and I remember thinking that I wanted to go home if that was how it was going to be.

I remember it wasn't even ten o'clock when I went to my room just because I couldn't stand to be around them one second longer. It was like they were waiting for me to leave them alone because as soon as my door shut they started yelling at each other. It was pretty fucking bad. Yeah, they had arguments around me before but I'd never seen or heard them scream at each other. My Moms scream at each other all the time so you'd think I'd be used to it but Dad and Justin don't have fights like that. Their fights are pretty quiet now that I think about it. Anyway so I remember sitting on my bed listening to them, because it was hard not to, and wanting to go home. I remember almost everything that was said because frankly at thirteen the conversation had pretty much scared me. The content of the argument had scared me.

"You're supposed to be taking the week off." Justin said.

"I am."

"The fuck you are. You've been on the phone to the office everyday several times a day."

"I'm just checking in. It's my fucking company. I can't just leave it to run itself for days at a time."

"The fuck you can't."

"It's business Justin, my business."

"The doctor said-" This was the part I didn't like. This is where I really started listening to them. I walked over to my door and pressed my ear against it. It's not like I needed to do that but I did it anyway.

“I know what the fuck the doctor said.”

“Well if you know...Where the fuck are you going?”

“To work.”

“The fuck you are.”

“If I stay in this house for one more second I’m going to lose my fucking mind.”

“I didn’t know it was such a hardship to stay at home with me.”

“Not every fucking thing is about you.” There was a long pause. “Justin.” I could hear the apology in Dad’s voice when he said Justin’s name.

“I know you can’t stand to be at home. I know you feel like if you aren’t there to watch over everyone at Kinnetik that things will get fucked but I’m not going to apologize for worrying about you Brian. So go to work if that’s what you feel like you need to do.”

“Justin, I’m fine. It was just stress.”

“Yeah well it made you sick didn’t it?” I had to press my ear harder against the door to hear what Justin said next. “It put you in the fucking hospital.” I could hear Justin start to cry after that and then I couldn’t hear anything else. It freaked me out that Dad had been in the hospital and no one had known. I wanted to go out there and demand for them to tell me what was going on but I didn’t. I waited until the morning and I flat out asked, “Dad what the fuck?” Then they told me all this shit about Dad having chest pains but that it was from his blood pressure being too high because he was so stressed out. I thought he had a heart attack or something but they told me he didn’t. At the time I really didn’t understand it, now of course, I do and that’s what I’m thinking about as we walk up the stairs.

When we reach the second floor landing Dad guides me down the hall toward a set of double doors. Dropping his arm from my shoulder he turns to Justin. “You got the key?”

I stare from one to the other and try not to freak out that Justin hands him the key while avoiding making contact with Dad’s fingers. They both turn to look at me and Dad hands me the key as he jerks his head toward the door. Taking the key I look at it and turn it over and over in my hand.

“Well what are you waiting for?”

I look up at Dad and can see that he’s not really here with me. He’s somewhere else and I don’t like it. “Dad, Justin...I think you should go talk or whatever.”

They both look at me like a dick just grew out of my ear. “Gus just open the fucking door.”

I shake my head and stare at the floor. “Look this is supposed to be a surprise right? Something I should be excited about but...” I shrug. “I just think you should go finish whatever argument you’re having because I want to be excited about this and I can’t if I’m too fucking worried about you two.” I bite my lip and look up at them. They look at each other and then back at me. Sometimes I feel really old, like right now telling Justin and Dad to take a time out and just do what they have to do, makes me feel older than them.

Dad holds out his hand to Justin who takes it without a second’s hesitation. Looking over at me Dad says, “You can go in if you want.” He nods to the room.

“I’ll wait.” Whatever it is, and I have a good guess that it’s a photography studio, I want them to be with me when I see it for the first time.

Dad nods. “We’ll be back. Go downstairs. Madeline usually has the fridge stocked with all kinds of junk food.” He eyes Justin who smiles. I feel some of the unease moving out of my body. I nod and watch as they walk up the stairs toward Justin’s studio.

* * * * *

June 10, 2019 1:05pm

Justin’s POV

“Your son is smart.” I say trying to break the tension I feel radiating from Brian as we ascend the stairs toward my studio. He doesn’t answer me. I didn’t expect him to. He’s pissed at me or disappointed I can’t really tell which. I know it was a stupid thing to do. I knew as soon as he found out about me offering Grady a solo show that he was going to flip out about it. It wasn’t like I planned it. I didn’t. As stupid as it sounds it just fucking happened. I know how he thinks though. I know what he’s thinking about right now and it hurts that he has so little confidence in me, in us.

When we reach my studio I let go of his hand, disengage the alarm, and pull out my keys to unlock the door. I walk in before him surveying the disaster that is my studio. It’s bright, just like I like it, and a little too warm so I walk over and turn on the cooling fans. Yes, I love natural light but in the summer it can really fuck with my paints. I should think about installing some kind of window treatments. They have those glass panels you can buy now where you can control how much light is let in. That could be a good investment. Maybe something I can talk to Brian about.

I toss my keys on the counter in what could be the kitchen if it wasn’t covered in paint and overflowing with paint supplies. Taking a deep breath I turn to face him. “It’s stupid.” I blurt out because there is no use pretending that I don’t know what we’re

arguing about. “How it happened was stupid.” He closes the door and walks toward me stopping about three feet from me crossing his arms over his chest. He doesn’t say anything just raises his eyebrow waiting for me to continue. “I was in the gallery, Grady was there-” He makes a disapproving sound through his nose. I ignore it. “He was asking me about his latest piece, what I thought or whatever.” Brian rolls his eyes and I try not to get pissed. “Anyway Maddie walks in holding the paper asking if I read the article about the gallery.” His eyebrows shoot up. “Exactly, I asked her ‘what article?’ and she shoved the paper into my hands.”

I turn from him and start pacing. “It was a fucking stupid article talking about how TK Gallery couldn’t get respectable shows because we are too busy catering to the art schools. It went on to say that the reason we picked from the art school pool was because we weren’t reputable enough not to. We didn’t even have the clout to pull off a solo show. That the work shown here was mediocre at best. That, and I quote, ‘Justin Taylor may be one of the most talented artists of modern times but when it comes to running his own gallery he’s truly an amateur.’” I stop pacing and face him. He’s scowling but I know it’s not directed at me. “I was fucking pissed off Brian. I was just so fucking angry.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it?”

I throw my hands up. “I came home that day pissed off and you were all worked up about something that happened at Kinnetik and...” I bite my lip. “I just didn’t want to add to your stress so I didn’t say anything.”

“So how did the solo show come about?”

I sigh. “I was pissed like I told you. Grady was there, his work is good, I offered him a solo show and didn’t even think about it.”

“Because you were pissed off.”

“Yes.” I sigh the word.

“When did all this happen?”

I shift my eyes away from him. “Last week.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “Last week?”

“Look I didn’t want to add to your stress Brian. We were trying to get Gus’ studio done and you were having issues with the GoTo account and I just didn’t want to add another thing on top of everything else.” It was true. I was stressing out myself at the time. I always worry about how much Brian has to deal with and so for purely selfish reasons I kept this from him. He takes medicine for his blood pressure and he doesn’t get as stressed as he used to but it doesn’t stop me from worrying about him.

He approaches me and cups my face between his hands. "You're such a fucking asshole." He says quietly. He runs his thumb across my bottom lip, which he knows makes me fucking hard. "I'm fine." I try to say something but he presses his thumb over my lips. "Listen to me. Are you listening?" I nod my head. "I'm fine. You can't keep shit like this from me. I know you worry about how much I'm dealing with but you just have to stop. If you had just told me about the article we could have figured out what to do, if anything. You shouldn't go back on your own ideas because some asshole takes a bite out of you."

I kiss his thumb before I reach up and remove it from my lips. "You're pissed at me."

He shakes his head. "Disappointed." I'd rather he be pissed.

"We can cancel the show." I sigh. "You're right I shouldn't have let it get to me." I lace my fingers between his. "And I should have told you about it."

He runs his free hand across my cheek and into my hair. "Yes, you should have told me." He curls my hair around his fingers and presses his forehead to mine. "You don't have to cancel the show but I think you should add another artist. We can't bend our own guidelines just because someone doesn't like what we're doing."

He's right. "You're right."

He kisses me softly moving his lips from my mouth and along my jaw until they are pressed to my ear. "Aren't I always?"

No, he isn't always right but he's pressing his body closer to mine and his lips are sucking on my neck and I'm inclined to say he is.

June 10, 2019 1:05pm

Gus' POV

I'm not gonna freak out. I'm not gonna freak out. I'm pacing back and forth twisting my hands together which hurts because the key that my Dad handed me is pressed between them. I'm trying to breathe, to calm down, to overall get a fucking grip. I just want my Dad and Justin to come back down here and I don't know be over whatever the fuck is wrong. It's fucking insane how much I'm suddenly worrying about them. I mean, where the fuck did that come from? I didn't worry before...fuck.

"Hey." I turn around so quickly toward the voice that I almost fall. "Whoa there." This guy reaches out to steady me but I jump back.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Shit I sound like Grandma Deb. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you not to sneak up on people?”

He runs his hand through his chocolate brown hair. “Sorry I didn’t mean to scare you.”

His eyes are a weird color. Amber...golden yellow...like...a tiger’s eye. “I wasn’t scared.” I say. I look him over. He’s not bad looking, dressed in faded jeans and a paint splattered green shirt. He’s tall, kinda muscular but not really, tanned skin...well not really tanned more like golden...like his eyes which really I can’t stop looking at because they’re so different. “Who the fuck are you?” I ask finally.

He holds out his hand. “Grady O’Toole.” The solo show guy. Right. I eye his hand but don’t take it. “And you are?” He’s still holding out his hand waiting for me to shake it I guess.

I reach out and shake it really fast, it’s rough, his skin I mean. “Gus.” My last name is really too long to even say so I just go with the one that matters right now. “Kinney.” Which really isn’t my last name at all...it’s more like my middle name but whateverthefuck.

“Kinney?” He tilts his head to the side. “No shit?”

“Is that a problem?” I don’t know why but I feel like I have to be on the defensive with this guy. Maybe it’s the way Dad said his name earlier when he found out about the solo show thing. Maybe that’s what Dad and Justin are fighting about.

He shrugs and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “No.” He looks around and then back at me. “Have you seen Justin?”

I want to tell him that it’s Mr. Taylor-Kinney to him but I don’t. “He’s upstairs.”

“Oh okay great.” He turns and starts walking toward the stairs.

I quickly move to stand in front of him blocking his way. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

He scowls at me. “Upstairs.” He tells me like I just got off the short bus.

“No you’re not.” He scoffs and starts to move around me. I stop him by placing my hand on the middle of his chest. “I said no you’re not.”

He knocks my hand away from him. “Listen kid, I need to talk to Justin so why don’t you just move the fuck out of the way.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “First of all I’m not a kid.” He looks me up and down. “And secondly,” I continue ignoring his roaming eyes. “He’s up there with my Dad.” I

pause. “On second thought why don’t you go ahead.” I move aside and sweep my arm across the air like I’m one of those bimbos from the Price is Right. “I’m sure my Dad won’t mind.” I say in my sweetest voice. Okay so I’m being a cunt. Maybe for no good reason other than I don’t think my Dad likes this guy.

He looks passed me at the stairs before meeting my eyes. That’s when I see it. That little bit of fear my Dad can put into people, that little look that means that this guy is intimidated by my Dad. I cross my arms and raise my eyebrow. “Well?”

I want to laugh from the look on his face. I want to laugh because for the first time in months I almost feel like my old self. Ash would be so...I frown at that thought. Fuck. I walk around Grady toward the end of the hall where the double doors are. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I feel it coming from no where...from just that little thought...that little moment. I push my face into the corner of the wall wanting to just fucking disappear, wanting something I can’t have, something that is out of my reach. It’s hard to explain what happens, how it feels, but it comes. It’s been worse since I went to his grave. I shouldn’t have done that. I wasn’t ready. I was on edge the rest of that day. I couldn’t sleep because every time I closed my eyes I was assaulted with images of his bloody body twisted in the metal of the car, his face permanently fixed in that wide eyed look of terror, his coffin being lowered into the ground, images of me laying on top of his grave while blood seeps through each blade of grass soaking my clothes, my skin, the smell of dirt mixing with the metallic smell of his blood.

I feel the bile rise in my throat.

“Hey are you alright?”

I slide down to the ground on my knees trying to breathe, wanting to tell this guy to get the fuck away from me, wanting my Dad or Justin or someone who isn’t this guy to help me. I feel the tears wet on my face and I want to stop them but I can’t.

“Get the fuck away from him.” Dad...Dad is here. “What the fuck are you doing up here?” He’s pissed.

“I...I...”

“Grady just go downstairs.” Justin tells him.

“Hey Sonnyboy.” Dad says softly. I turn to see him kneeling next to me. He looks worried. I feel even worse for making him worry.

“Sorry.” I mumble.

He looks over his shoulder. “Justin can you go get a bottle of water from Madeline?”

I don't see Justin but I hear him leaving. I can't look anywhere but at my Dad's face. "Is..." I swallow over the lump in my throat. "Is that guy gone?"

He furrows his eyebrows. "Did he do something to you?"

I shake my head. "It wasn't him, not really."

"Gus." His voice is stern.

I shake my head again. "It wasn't him. I just..." I look away and look back staring into my Dad's hazel eyes that are so much like my own. "I went to Ash's grave yesterday." I whisper.

"You did." His voice gets softer. "I thought you weren't ready for that."

I shake my head again and press my body into the corner, not to get away from him but just to have the feel of something solid behind me. "I wasn't."

"Brian." Justin's voice is soft and low. Dad turns to him and takes the bottle of water he offers.

Turning back to me Dad hands me the bottle. I quickly open it and take a long drink. "Ready to stand up Sonnyboy?" He holds out his hand to me and I take it. I hear his knees pop and a moan escape his lips as we stand.

I start laughing, I mean really laughing. He glares at me in this totally non threatening way and I just laugh harder. I take a breath and look at him his arms are crossed and he's trying to look pissed but he's not doing a very good job at it. Justin just looks amused. "Sorry Dad."

He rolls his eyes. "Whatever." He steps towards me and I stop laughing. Brushing my hair from my forehead he asks in a whispered tone, "Better now."

"Yeah...sorry for freaking out."

Dad drapes his arm over my shoulders and pulls me against him in this sideways like hug. "Don't apologize."

Justin reaches down and picks up the key from the floor which I must have dropped at some point. He walks over to us holding the key out to me. I trade my bottle of water for it and look him in the eyes. They look really blue today. "Remember what we told you Gus." He says in that soft tone of his before smiling at me.

"I know." I shrug. "I'm just not...I mean at home..."

Justin shakes his head. “You don’t have to hide it or be ashamed of it. It’s something that you really can’t control. It’s going to happen.”

I kinda want to cry again knowing that at some point he’s gone through what I am. It’s sobering to think that. It’s also a little weird knowing that they’d rather me tell them about these things than hide them. It’s not like my Moms wanted me to just be better or to hide things from them, but I did anyway because they couldn’t understand. My Dad and Justin...they do.

I look from Justin to my Dad feeling this weird connection to them that I’ve never had before, that I thought I never would have with anyone in my family. It’s strangely comforting.

Dad shakes my shoulders to get my attention. “Are you ready to see your present?”

I look at him and smile, or least I hope I’m smiling, and say, “Yeah, I am.”

*“Some people change their ways when they see the light; others when they feel the heat”
~ Caroline Schoeder ~*

June 11, 2019 1:16am

Justin's POV

Brian is in the office down the hall and I'm in the kitchen cleaning because I can't think of anything else to do. I have to do something to keep my hands busy. I thought about going to my studio but that's the last place I want to be right now. After we showed Gus his studio, which he loved, we came back to the loft, ordered some pizza, and watched some really old movie on TV. Gus went to his room about nine o'clock and when I went to check on him an hour later he was sound asleep in his bed. I wasn't surprised. He looked exhausted from the moment he got off the plane and I know that despite sleeping issues an attack can pretty much wipe a person out.

I feel restless. I feel...like I'm on edge without any reason to be. Maybe it's from seeing Gus today, pressed up against the wall panicking, looking scared, and just so fucking alone. It felt too familiar, too raw, too fucking real. I keep telling myself that this isn't about me, it's about Gus, it's about helping Gus, and that it was eighteen years ago and it shouldn't matter anymore. It shouldn't bother me. I shouldn't even be thinking about it. But it does and I do.

I can feel the tightness in the fingers of my right hand as I scrub the sink. I ignore it. It's all in my head. Mind over matter. If I tell myself it's nothing it will just go away. I try. It doesn't work. My fingers curl around the rag involuntarily. It fucking hurts. I bite my lip to keep from screaming. I don't want to admit it but the older I get the more my hand acts up. God forbid Brian find that out like he needs another thing to worry about.

I remove the rag from my fingers with my left hand and shake out my right one. Not like that helps although sometimes it does. *It's nothing* I tell myself. *It's all in my mind* but I feel the pain clenching my fingers in a vice grip. I try to ignore it. *Stop making it about you, it's not* I chastise myself. It's just the stress from today, the airport, fighting with Brian, thinking about how I'm going to tell Grady I'm adding another artist to the show, plus the whole thing with Gus. It's all just stress. That's all.

I turn on the water faucet and rinse out the sink. I think about cleaning it again but five times seems a little excessive. Turning off the faucet I ring out the rag and start wiping down the countertops. Maybe I should clean out the refrigerator. I haven't done that in a while. It probably needs it. I fold the rag into a square and place it on the sink next to the dish soap. Yeah, the refrigerator definitely needs to be cleaned out.

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June 11, 2019 1:20am

Brian's POV

He doesn't know I'm watching but I am. It takes everything I have not to walk in there when I see him shaking out his hand. He must have wiped down every surface in the kitchen at least a dozen times. It's all a little too fucking familiar. When I see him heading towards the refrigerator I decide it's time to make my presence known.

"Stop." I tell him.

He jumps a little at the sound of my voice. "I didn't hear you come in."

I lean against the counter crossing my arms. "I know." His right hand is clutching the refrigerator handle as he stares into the stainless steel surface as if it holds the answers to all of life's problems. "Come here." I tell him.

He doesn't move just shakes his head no. I go to him wrapping my arms around his waist pulling him to my bare chest. He's shaking.

"I'm fine." He mumbles.

I hate it when he lies. "No, you're not."

"It's just been a long day." I agree. It's been an incredibly long, incredibly tedious day.

I kiss his neck as I run my hand up his side over his arm and pry his fingers from the refrigerator handle. He moans a little when I do it. I feel this stiffness in his fingers. Turning him around I begin to massage his hand pressing my thumbs along his palm up each of his fingers trying to work out the cramp that has seized them. I look up and see him grimacing so I stop. "That hurt?"

He nods dropping his chin to his chest. "Yeah, but keep doing it." I continue with the massage working each digit until I feel him relaxing to my ministrations. "It's nothing." He mumbles.

I reach up and tilt his head until his eyes meet mine. "It's not nothing." He leans into my hand as I stroke his cheek. "You need to take a Flexeril®."

He pulls away from me and moves toward the sink shaking his head. "I'm fine. It's just stress."

I watch him closely and choose my words carefully. "Would you let me get away without taking my medicine?"

"I didn't even paint today." He says instead of answering me.

“No.” I say slowly. “But you were sketching before we went to the airport and you’ve been in here cleaning the kitchen for over an hour.” I walk over to the sink and still his hands. “Stop it.”

He looks up at me. His eyes are deep blue tonight. “It’s just...seeing Gus like that today...”

I pull him to me wrapping my arms around his waist. His hands are wet and cold when they touch the skin of my lower back. Kissing his temple I whisper, “I know.”

I do know. I know exactly what he means. Seeing Gus like that made me remember seeing Justin like that. It made eighteen years just disappear, fade away, as if all this time had never transpired. The only difference is that it isn’t Justin this time and we aren’t flying blind trying to figure out what the fuck to do. We’ve been there, worked it out, and made it through. It doesn’t mean we’ve forgotten though. Knowing what to expect and how to handle it doesn’t make it any easier to deal with because despite our best intentions it transports us both back to a time we’d rather forget.

His hands stroke my back giving me chills as the cool air dries the wetness. “I don’t want Gus to think he can’t tell us when something’s wrong.” He pulls back from me so he can look me in the eyes. “I don’t want him to have to hide anything because he’s afraid I’m gonna freak out.”

“Are you afraid you’re going to freak out?”

He looks away from me. “I don’t know. I just...today...it just...” He looks up at me. “It was like being back there, you know?” Yeah, I do know. I caress his face and he leans into my touch. “I’m sorry about earlier.”

“I overreacted.” I did.

He shakes his head and kisses the palm of my hand. “No, you didn’t.” He looks up at me and I know what he’s going to say and I let him because I need to hear it. Sometimes I think he knows when I do. “I love you.”

I stroke his cheek before cupping the back of his neck to bring his lips to mine. It’s a soft kiss that says I love you too because even now, even after all this time, those three words are sometimes still too hard for me to vocalize.

I suck his bottom lip into my mouth as I move the hand that’s not in his hair under his shirt. A soft moan escapes his lips as my fingers stroke his side. Releasing his lip I press my forehead to his. “Let’s go to bed.”

“Okay.”

I take his left hand in mine leading him out of the kitchen turning the light off on the way. We stop by Gus' room. He's still asleep which is good because he looked fucking exhausted. I close his door and we continue down the hall to our bedroom. We enter the room closing the door behind us, which we wouldn't normally do, but now that Gus is here we really have no choice. Justin lets go of my hand and moves around to his side of the bed as I move around to mine. We discard our clothes, turn off the bedside lamps, and meet under the 1500 count sheets.

I pull him to me until his body is covering mine. My hands stroke his back while his hands caress my face. He kisses my chin and I tilt my head back so he can kiss my neck. God it feels good, his kisses, his hands, his body. He slides down my body his lips leaving wet marks as he goes. He's disappearing under the sheets. I don't like that so I toss them off of us. The cold air clashes with our heated bodies. His mouth never stops moving. He pauses to swirl his tongue around my navel before finally, finally sliding those warm lips over the head of my cock. I arch my back and push my fingers into his hair. He sucks gently on the head of my cock, gripping the base with his left hand while his right one cups my balls. When he runs his tongue along my slit I grip his hair hard.

"Fuck."

I pull him up kissing him deeply tasting myself. I move my mouth along his jaw line down his neck sucking on his earlobe. His hands are everywhere. My hands are everywhere.

"Brian." He moans against my neck.

I bring his mouth back to mine running my tongue over his bottom lip before sucking on it. He loves that. I reach for the lube because I have to be inside him now.

"Let me." He takes it from me and I watch as he coats his fingers with it. Leaning back he circles his hole with his fingers. I love when he does that. It's so fucking hot. When he pushes a finger into himself he throws back his head and gasps.

"Jesus Justin." So fucking hot.

My cock is dripping as I watch him insert another finger stretching himself for me. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever fucking seen. I start to stroke myself in time with the rhythm he's working his fingers into himself. He grunts when he sees what I'm doing but I don't stop because I can't. Removing his fingers he pulls my hand off my cock and takes it in his hand so he can guide it into himself. I grip his hips as he slowly lowers himself on my cock. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He's always so fucking tight. I arch up into him when I feel his ass on my thighs and my cock all the way inside him. It's tight, white, heat and nothing has ever felt so fucking good. Leaning forward he circles one of my nipples with his tongue before sucking on it. He places his hands flat on the mattress on either side of me lifting himself up and then back down in one long slow stroke. Fuck. I look up and his eyes meet mine in the city light darkness of our room.

“Just like that.” I tell him.

He nods and does it again even fucking slower. I reach for him bringing his mouth to mine my tongue stroking his. His mouth is hot, his ass is hot, he’s pure fucking heat. He breaks from the kiss grasping for air. I slide my hands along his thighs as he continues to stroke me slowly with his ass. I reach for his cock and rub my thumb over the dripping head. He gasps and closes his eyes.

“Open your eyes.” I tell him as I begin to stroke his cock.

He opens his eyes and even in this half-dark I can see how fucking blue they are. Everything is there in his eyes. They’ve been dark blue all fucking day. I want to close my eyes because the sensation of my cock in his ass, my hand on his cock, and just fucking watching him are almost too much but I don’t. He leans forward pressing his chest to mine forcing me to release his cock. He never stops moving. His cock rubs across my stomach leaving a slick trail of pre-come. I hold his face between my hands just watching him.

“Brian.” He wants to close his eyes, I can tell.

Throwing back his head he quickens the pace. Reaching between us I grab his cock again stroking and squeezing it in time with the pace he’s setting. We are sweaty. Our bodies drip heat. He pushes his body up placing his hands on my chest. He’s not playing games. He’s ready. He thrusts himself down hard. I bite my lip to keep from screaming. He does it again and I just fucking let go.

I meet each thrust angling myself to get him off. He gets louder and louder with each pass my cock makes over his prostate.

“Come for me Justin.” I grunt.

I thrust into him once, twice and feel him explode between us. When he comes his ass clenches around my cock and rips my orgasm right out of me.

When he collapses on top of me I wrap my arms around him. He’s all fire. It’s all through me, all around me the bright hot heat of this fucking beautiful piece of Sunshine that melts me from the inside out every single fucking time.

*“There is a great difference between knowing and understanding: you can know a lot about something and not really understand it”
~ Charles F. Kettering ~*

June 11, 2019 8:25am

Gus’ POV

*O Canada! Our home and native land!
True patriot love in all thy sons command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!*

What the fuck? Groaning I roll over shoving my face into the pillow while O’ Canada plays on. Fucking JR. Crawling across my queen size bed, thank you Dad, I pick up my cell phone from the bedside table. Without looking at the caller ID I flip it open and mumble, “You’re so gonna get it.”

“Sweetie?” She sounds way too fucking cheerful.

“Mom.” I mumble into the phone.

“Were you asleep?” She sounds worried.

Yawning I roll over onto my back. I stretch out across the bed and rub the sleep from my eyes. It’s way to fucking bright in here. I was so tired last night that I forgot to close the drapes. Squinting against the sun I ask, “What time is it?”

“Almost 8:30.” 8:30? Christ I haven’t slept this late in months. “Are you alright?” Fuck. It’s fucking insane that my Mom thinks me sleeping later than 5am is cause for concern.

As I roll away from the windows I close my eyes. “I’m fine Mom.”

“You usually don’t sleep this late.” I hate when she does that. I hate when she asks a question without like asking a question.

“Guess I was tired.” I answer like the good little son that I am. I love this bed. It’s so fucking comfortable that I seriously think about not getting up. I wish I could be one of those people, you know, just for one day. For once I’d like to stay in bed and just sleep or chill or do nothing but I can’t do that because my mind never rests for that long. Hell, I can’t even believe I slept this late without taking any medication or having a fucking nightmare.

Opening my eyes I sigh as I toss the covers aside and sit up on the edge of the bed. “Fuck I forgot to call yesterday when I got in.”

“Yes you did but thankfully your Dad called us last night. He said you had a busy day.”

I flop back onto the bed. “Yeah.” I squint against the brightness as I look up at the ceiling. “Did you know about the studio?”

Her laugh makes me homesick. “Yes. Do you like it?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Pushing myself off the bed I walk over to close the fucking drapes before picking up my bag and tossing it on the bed.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” I can hear the amusement in her voice.

I unzip my bag and pull out a pair an old pair of Levis and a faded red t-shirt. “I love it Mom. I don’t think I’ll have to buy anything like the entire time I’m here.” I’m exaggerating but they did stock my studio, MY STUDIO, with all the fucking supplies or equipment I could ever use, want, or need.

She laughs. “That’s your Father.”

Setting my clothes aside I toss the bag back on the floor. “Actually Justin is the one who set up it up.” Apparently he’s friends with one of the photography professors at SVA. Now that I think about it that could come in handy when I start classes there in September. Not that I would use that to my advantage because I so wouldn’t. Besides that Justin didn’t tell me the guy’s name.

“Well I’m glad you like it sweetie.”

“It’s great.” It *is* great. I knew they’d get me something awesome for graduation but I really had no idea they were going to give me a studio much less the whole second fucking floor of the building.

“So everything’s...okay?” She asks quietly.

I sit down on the edge of the bed. What does she want me to say? Sure Mom everything is fucking perfect, oh except that I totally freaked out in front of a complete stranger yesterday not even two hours after getting off the plane. Yeah, everything is fucking fabulous.

I don’t say any of that though. “Everything’s fine Mom.” That’s what she wants to hear anyway.

“Gus.”

“Mom, really I’m fine stop worrying.”

“Okay I’ll let you go. You call us if you need anything, okay?” The soothing tone in her voice makes me want to fly back to Toronto, crawl in her lap, and let her stroke my hair in that comforting way she does.

“I will Mom.” I say softly.

“I love you Gus.” Her voice trembles.

I blink back my tears and clear my throat. “You too.”

“Bye.” I can hear the tears in her voice so I say bye to her quickly before we both start crying.

Flipping the phone closed I toss it on the bed. Grabbing my clothes I stumble across the hall to the bathroom. I don’t feel functional if I don’t shower first thing in the morning. After a long hot shower I dry off and get dressed. I toss my dirty clothes on the floor of my room before making my way down the hall to the kitchen. The loft is quiet, well as quiet as any place can be in New York City. Even though the loft is located on the top floor of this building that doesn’t stop the variety of sounds coming from the streets. I like the way the sounds break up the silence of the loft. When I first started staying here as a kid I could never get used to the noise but as I got older it all just faded into the background.

When I reach the kitchen I lean against the doorframe watching as Justin pours a cup of coffee. I’m immediately assaulted by the smell. “Jesus was the cleaning lady here already?” I push myself away from the doorframe and head for the fridge.

Justin looks over at me frowning. “No, why?”

I open the fridge moving aside the milk so I can grab the carton of orange juice. “It smells like someone used like five bottles of Clorox in here.” I close the fridge and hold out the carton to him. “Is this any good?”

He glances up at me as he stirs a ridiculous amount of cream into his coffee. “Yeah, I just bought it yesterday.” He taps the spoon against the rim of the mug and takes a sip of his coffee. “That’s the kind you like right?”

I pull a glass from the cabinet and look at the container. Tropicana, No Pulp. “Yeah.” I fill the glass to the top, take a drink, and refill it. “Thanks.”

“No problem. There’s some cereal in the pantry if you’re hungry.”

Putting the juice back in the fridge I shrug. “I’m not really a breakfast person.”

Nodding he walks over to the kitchen table and sits down. Grinning he reaches for the top section of the paper that’s stacked in a neat pile on the middle of the table. I take

another drink of my juice, god I fucking love this shit, and join him. He moves his coffee aside and spreads the paper out in front of him. I take another drink of my juice and just kinda of watch him while he reads the paper. I look him over, paint splattered grey t-shirt, old jeans, definitely dressed for the studio. He keeps doing this annoying thing where he blows his hair out of his face. I think it's too long but then again what do I know?

Setting down my half empty glass I ask him, "What time did Dad leave?"

"Six." He answers without looking up from the paper.

"Jesus. Why so early?" I grab the paper from the center of the table.

"He says it's his quiet time." He shrugs. "He can get a lot done when no one is there to interrupt him."

I guess that makes sense. I remove The Comics section from the rest of the paper and spread it open on the table. Yeah, I read the comics. I blame it all on Uncle Mikey. I'm not into all the cutesy shit in here but I fucking love Spiderman and it's like a requirement that I read Rage. Okay, it's not a requirement but I love it and I missed what happened yesterday. Yeah, Rage is a fucking syndicated comic gracing the pages along reruns of Garfield every day of the week. It's just like the comic book, you know minus the hot sex...which I kinda skip over anyway because it's just too fucking weird.

"Who's the guy who draws this now?" I ask Justin.

"Mmm?" He leans over to see what I'm looking at. "Oh. Wayne Moylan." He frowns. "He never gets Rage's facial features right."

He goes back to reading as I look down at the comic. It looks okay to me but then again I didn't create it so I guess I can't really see the difference. I remember when Uncle Mikey and Justin were talking about the comic getting published in the paper a few years ago. Justin wanted nothing to do with it at first saying it would be "*so watered down what would be the fucking point?*" I guess there was a point because eventually he agreed to it and Rage the comic strip was born. He did all the drawing on it for the first year but something happened and he just stopped.

I look over at Justin, watching as he reads the paper, occasionally taking sips of his coffee. It's weird but I suddenly realize for a man that's been in my life since the night I was born I really don't know that much about him. "Why'd you stop?" I blurt out. Seriously it's something I've always wanted to know.

He looks up at me. "Stop what?"

"Drawing on the comic strip." I drink the rest of my juice watching him over the rim of the glass.

He shrugs and goes back to reading his paper. Was that his answer? Scratching the back of his head he looks back up at me. "I couldn't keep up." I furrow my brow because at first I don't get what that means but then the entire conversation I had with Dad on graduation night comes flooding back to me.

"Oh." What else could I say really?

He folds the Arts & Leisure section of paper and tosses it to the middle of the table. I feel like I just pissed him off or something. Draining the last of his coffee he stands up. "I'm going to head over to the studio, you want to come?"

I shake my head. "Nah, I'm gonna stay here and unpack." I watch as he goes into the kitchen and sets his cup in the sink. I want to tell him I'm sorry for bringing up the comic strip thing. I didn't mean to upset him or make him think about something that he can no longer do because of...his injury. I want to...I don't know take it back or whatever but I don't really know how to say it without sounding like a complete ass.

Standing up I walk over to him. "Justin..." He looks up at me. "I didn't mean...I'm..."

He shakes his head and smiles. "It's okay." I want to believe him but I can see in his eyes that it isn't. I don't blame him. I imagine he feels how I felt when the doctors used to tell me that I'd always walk with a limp or that I wouldn't be able to do the same things I did before because of the severity of my leg injury from the accident. Of course my leg did get better and most people don't know I was almost a fucking cripple. Justin's hand got better too but Dad said it still gives him shit. I tilt my head and look at him.

"It's fine Gus." He places a hand on my shoulder. "I'm going to get ready. Are you going to be okay here by yourself?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not a little kid anymore. I'll be fine."

He squeezes my shoulder before walking away. I can tell that it's still bothering him, about the comic strip or I don't know not being able to draw for the comic strip. It's like no matter how many years pass since the bashing he always has that physical reminder of it. Seriously it's like I'm seeing my Dad and Justin in this whole new way. It's like...all this time I thought of them in a certain way. They lived a certain way, related to each other in a certain way, and related to me in a certain way. It's like everything I thought I knew about them isn't everything there is to know. It feels like the rose colored glasses I wore as a child have been ripped off and all that's left to see is the truth.

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June 11, 2019 8:38am

Justin's POV

I walk out of the loft telling Gus to call if he needs anything and if he comes to the studio to let me know. I love walking in New York especially at this time of day when most people are already slaving away in their high-rise offices. I make this trek every morning and every night. It's my quiet time.

The comic strip. Shit. I haven't thought about that in years, at least not seriously. Yeah, I still make money from it because I'm fucking co-owner/creator of Rage but the comic strip is just something I refuse to give any real thought to. Hell, I didn't even want to do it in the first place. A gay comic as balls to the wall as Rage in local papers across the U.S. next to the latest Peeps and Pops? Thanks but no thanks. I told Michael it was a fucking dumb idea. He practically creamed his pants at the offer. He probably *did* cream his pants. He was all for it, of course he was. I didn't want anything to do with it. In the end I sold out. In the end it was all about the bottom line. In the end Rage the Comic Strip circa 2013 paid for the building that now houses my studio, Gus's studio, and the TK Gallery. I made a business decision and hated it from the time I signed my name on the dotted line to now. I knew what would happen if we went through with it and I was right. Rage gets to kiss JT every fifth Sunday of the month and no, that's not a mathematical error on my part.

I agreed and drew the fucking thing for a year disgusted by every goddamn contrived plot line. Michael probably still cuts every single one that's published out of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and keeps them in an air tight container. I stopped drawing it not because I hated it but because I couldn't keep up with the demand. It nearly handicapped me. I was popping a Flexeril® almost every fucking hour. God I was such an asshole that year. Between getting my studio the way I wanted it and everything else that was going on I'm surprised Brian didn't leave *me*.

Eventually Brian and I had a huge fight about it. Of course we did. He asked if the fucking comic strip was worth never being able to paint again. Of course it wasn't. Nothing to me is worth that. I became a silent partner on the comic strip. Michael and I hired Wayne "Mo" Moylan. He's a local comic artist housed out of Pittsburgh and the most logical choice. It didn't mean he was the best.

Brian usually throws out The Comic section when he brings the paper in every morning. I hate looking at it because I always see something wrong or something I could do better. Even if I hate it, even if it almost cost me my art, it's still half mine. I try not to think about it and Brian tries not to remind me hence throwing it in the trash each morning. Maybe this morning he forgot or maybe he knew Gus reads it or maybe I'm just being a drama queen and need to get the fuck over myself.

“What you need to know about the past is that no matter what has happened, it has all worked together to bring you to this very moment.”

~ Author Unknown ~

June 11, 2019 11:19am

Gus’ POV

It takes me a little over an hour to unpack my shit and put it away. When I’m done the room looks a little more like mine and a little less like the guest bedroom. I flop down on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Now that I’m settled in I kinda don’t know what to do with myself. I could hang around the loft and wait for Justin or Dad to get home. Fuck that. I get up and put on an old pair of Vans. Reaching for my wallet I stuff it into my back pocket before grabbing my cell phone. Walking over to the dresser I pick up my Sony Pix 125 that Grandma Deb and Grandpa Carl gave me for graduation and head out. I lock and alarm the loft as I leave because god forbid I hear another lecture about that. Dad is like totally anal about setting the alarm whenever anyone leaves which I guess I can understand considering all the valuable shit they have in there.

I take the elevator down to the ground floor, grunt a hello to Shelby the doorman, and head for my studio. I still can’t get over that, my *studio*. I feel like a fucking tourist walking around New York carrying a camera. I just figured I’d take it with me in case I see something interesting and come on this is New York I probably *will* see something. I walk close to the buildings mostly because I don’t trust New York City drivers. It’s not that I’m scared of cars. I’m not. I just don’t see the need to walk close to any that are moving if I don’t have to.

I love the area of downtown that my Dad and Justin live in. It’s not as shiny as say Midtown or the Upper East Side but it’s definitely more interesting. The stores in this area are upscale but not as much as the stores uptown. There are also a few galleries here and a few family owned shops.

I pass by Carmelo’s. It’s this little bakery not far from the loft. I love it. They make the best cinnamon raisin bread. The summer I spent in New York with Ash we’d get up early every morning and get something from Carmelo’s before deciding which part of town we were going to. God, we went fucking everywhere that summer, Chelsea, SoHo, Midtown, The Village, the Upper East and West Side, Chinatown, Queens, Brooklyn, Long Island, you name it we went there. I wanted to show him everything not just the space my Dad and Justin occupied in TriBeCa. I smile. That summer was the best time I ever had in the city. It was so fucking fun. That was when Ash and I made plans to move here after graduation...

“We’ll get a shitty apartment in Queen’s and-”

I look over at him as we walk toward the loft. "Ash my Dad will never let me live in Queens."

He jumps in front of me stopping our forward motion. I've never seen him so excited. "Okay, we'll get a shitty apartment in The Village and-"

I laugh and shake my head. "Ash my Dad would never let me live in a shitty apartment anywhere."

He throws out his arms. "Then we'll get a big ass incredibly expensive loft apartment on Madison Avenue." His smile is so fucking big. "No, wait I got it...how about we just live at Trump Tower and be done with it." He wraps his arms around my waist. "Would your Dad go for that?"

Draping my arms over his shoulders I lean forward to kiss him just so he'll shut up. I push my hands into his soft brown hair as I deepen the kiss practically begging with my mouth for him to share his happiness with me. His hands push under my shirt and-

A car skids to a stop its tires screeching along the asphalt in an all too familiar sound. My thoughts are jarred out of me as I jump sideways away from the noise. My shoulder collides with a brick wall. I fall so hard on my knees that my teeth snap against each other. Fuck that hurt. A few people pass me but no one stops to see if I'm okay. Not that I expected anyone too. Slowly I push myself up to my feet thanking god I had the presence of mind not to drop my \$1500 digital camera. I feel stunned for a second but then my breath hitches. Clutching my camera tight in my hand I start to run. I rush by people not caring if I accidentally run into them. I'm not running because I'm scared. I'm *not* scared. I'm running because I feel it coming. It's like a lion after a forty day fast and I'm the first wildebeest it's seen in days. I take the building steps two at a time, fling open the door, and practically knock Maddie over when I run into the gallery.

"Jesus." I pant. "I'm...so...fucking...sorry." I don't just mean for almost knocking her on her ass either. I'm sorry for a lot of things.

I notice her hand on me. I guess she must have grabbed me to keep from falling. She squeezes my arm, her touch is soft, and smiles as she lets me go. "It's alright."

Stepping back from her I push myself against the wall as I try to get a handle on my breathing.

"Are you okay?" She's not smiling anymore. She reaches out to touch me, hug me, steady me, I don't know but I push her hand away.

"Fi...ne." I manage to get out.

"Do you need me to get Justin?" She looks toward the stairs.

I shake my head no. What I need is to just fucking breathe. To fucking get a grip. To calm the fuck down. I just need a fucking second, that's all.

"I'm getting Justin." She takes a step toward the stairs but I reach out and grab her arm to stop her.

"I'm...fi..fine. Just...give...me...a...min...minute." Fuck. I'm fucking crying. "I... I'm...fuck...fucking...fi...fine." Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

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June 11, 2019 11:41am

Justin's POV

I want to throw something. I want to throw everything. I want to be pissed. I *am* pissed. I shake out my hand and look at the painting I was working on. It's fucking ruined. It was supposed to be a dot, a small detail. Now it's a thick red jagged line cutting vertically down the center of the piece. Fuck. I should have taken a break. I knew I should have but I was in the zone. Everything was just fucking flowing and now-

"Fuck!" I yank the painting off the easel and fling it across the room. It makes a wet smack against the hardwood floor and leaves a thick trail of blue and black as it skids to a stop. "Fuck!"

My cell phone ringing is the only thing that stops me from throwing my easel across the room with it. Ignoring the paint on my hands I walk to the counter and pick up my phone. "Hello?"

"Justin, its Maddie."

"Is Grady here?" I asked her to call me when he got to the gallery. He wasn't scheduled to be here but the thing about Grady is that he's *always* here. I still have no idea how I'm going to tell him I'm adding another artist to his show. I look across the room at the canvas I threw to the floor. Right now I really don't give a shit about Grady or his show if I'm being honest with myself.

"Justin?" Her voice pulls me from my thoughts. "I think you should get down here." There is something in her voice that I've never heard before...concern...worry...fear?

"What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. It's...Gus. He's-"

“I’ll be right there.” I toss my phone to the counter not caring that it bounces off the surface and hits the floor. I don’t think about anything but getting down to Gus. I don’t know what happened. It doesn’t matter what happened. I run down the stairs and round the corner to see Gus sitting down with his back pressed to the wall and his arms locked around his knees sobbing as he rocks back and forth.

I walk toward him but Maddie grabs my arm. “He doesn’t want to be touched.”

I shake off her hand and kneel in front of Gus. People used to think the same thing about me. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be touched it was really more about who I would allow to touch me. Oh I wanted to be held and soothed but not by just anyone. “Gus.” I say softly. His red rimmed eyes meet mine. I don’t say anything as he unfurls himself practically jumping into my arms. His hands grab fistfuls of my shirt as he presses his tear streaked face to my chest. It’s awkward because he’s taller than me but it doesn’t stop me from wrapping my arms around him and holding him.

I feel a tight knot form in my chest. My mind flashes back to being curled in a ball in the corner of the loft feeling scared and alone waiting for Brian to get back from work or checking the mail or wherever the fuck he’d gone. I would just shake and cry and fucking wait. Then he would be there, kneeling in front of me, and I’d throw myself into his arms. He never said a word. He never said it was going to be okay or any of the other soothing bullshit that most people would say. That wasn’t his style. He would simply hold me until it was over. That’s all I ever wanted or needed.

I can’t help but wonder what Gus needs. Does he need the words? Does he just need to be held? It’s all so similar and yet not. I tighten my hold on him and wonder if I’m enough, if this is enough. I can’t help but think how Brian would have been if I had-

Fuck that. I clear my thoughts or at least I try to. I try not to compare and contrast this moment to moments from my past but it’s like that jagged red line on my painting. When I go back upstairs and flip the painting over it will still be there albeit not as sharp, not as prominent, not as fucking bright but it will still be *there*.

I feel Gus’ breathing returning to normal. His sobs turn into hiccups. He takes a deep ragged breath and releases his grip on the back of my shirt. Slowly he pulls back and looks me in the eyes. He’s sorry. I can see it. He wants to apologize. “Don’t.” I shake my head.

He wipes his tear streaked face with the back of his hand. “Fuck.” He mumbles.

I stand up and hold my hand out to him. He hesitates for a second before picking up his camera with one hand and grabbing mine with the other. When he’s standing he lets go of my hand and starts messing around with his camera. “Do you want to talk about it?”

His head snaps up. “What?”

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask again. I remember when it used to happen to me Brian would never demand to know what was wrong or what had happened. He would just grab my hand pull me over to the couch and ask if I wanted to talk about it. Sometimes I did and sometimes I didn’t. Most of the time, I would just lay down with my head in his lap until I fell asleep.

Gus lowers his head inspecting the camera in his hands. “It’s stupid.”

I place a hand under his chin and lift his head until his eyes meet mine. “No, it’s not.”

He looks at me for a long time. His eyes search mine for what I don’t know. Finally he says, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I move my hand from his chin to his shoulder. “Okay.”

He raises an eyebrow and Jesus does that ever make him look like Brian. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” I’m not going to force him to tell me anything. I know that’s what he thinks I should be doing and he’s wondering why I’m not.

“Are you going to tell Dad?”

I shake my head. “I’ll leave that up to you.”

His mouth hangs open. “You won’t tell him?”

“Gus, do you think your Dad ran to my Mom every time I had an attack or a nightmare?” He shrugs. “No, he didn’t. I don’t know how your Moms did things but if you want to tell your Dad okay and if not that’s okay too.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Okay...okay.” He takes a deep breath and looks over my shoulder. I follow his gaze to see Maddie standing behind us. I forgot she was even here. “Sorry I almost knocked you over.”

She smiles at him. “Don’t you worry about it hon.”

He turns back to look at me. “I think I’m gonna go up to my studio for a while.”

I squeeze his shoulder and drop my hand. “Sure. I’ll be around if you need anything.”

He nods, turns, and starts up the stairs. Maddie comes to stand beside me as we watch him go. “What was that?” She asks me softly.

I almost tell her, *that was me, eighteen years ago.*

June 11, 2019 4:46pm

Gus' POV

It took me about thirty minutes to recover from earlier. I'm sure I made a lasting impression on Maddie although when I went down for a soda an hour ago she didn't seem to be bothered at all that I freaked out right in front of her. I didn't say so at the time but I was fucking glad Justin was there. Even though I told Maddie not to call him I'm glad that she did. He didn't even say anything while it was happening. It was kinda weird. Usually if I'm with Mom and it happens she holds me and tells me everything is going to be okay. Ma always asks me what happened to set it off. They don't say so but I know if Mom is around when one happens she tells Ma and vice versa.

I don't know if I'm going to tell Dad but I guess I should. It's just weird how Justin handled the whole thing. I mean...how did he know to do that? I mean, I don't need the words but it's not like I ever told anyone that. It's just like he fucking *knew* what I needed without me having to tell him. It's hard not to compare it with how things happened at home because it's like two totally different reactions. Even yesterday Dad didn't ask what had caused me to freak out. He didn't tell me it would be okay. He just handed me a bottle of water and asked if I was better when it was over. Is this how it was for them when Justin was going through this same thing? It has to be, right? How else would they know what to do?

I've been in my studio since it happened. Justin came by a while ago just to see if I was still here. He didn't even mention my freak out. After I calmed down I took a few pictures around my studio just so I could mess around in the darkroom. In fact, I'm on my knees right now with my head stuck in a cabinet looking for developer. Not many people actually use a darkroom these days with all the technology that's available but I like it. There is just something about the process that I find interesting and fucking awesome. Anyone can press a button download a digital picture, and print it. Not everyone can actually develop their own pictures. Well maybe they can but most people are too fucking lazy to bother. Besides that I'm an artist and it's all about the process anyway.

"Shit this place is nice."

I jump at the sound of the voice and hit my head on the cabinet. "Fuck!" Christ how many times can I hurt myself today? Rubbing the top of my head I stand up to see who the fuck is here. Oh, it's him, the guy from yesterday, Grady or whateverthefuck. He looks...nice. He's wearing grey dress pants and a buttoned down white shirt which is a step up from the ensemble he wore yesterday.

I glare at him. "Is it like your thing to sneak up on people?"

He shrugs and walks further into the room. "I saw the door open and-"

“You thought you’d just come on in.”

He turns to me. “I was looking for Justin actually.” What the fuck was with this guy?

“Yeah well,” I throw my hands up. “He’s not here.”

“I can see that.” He sweeps his eyes over me and I raise an eyebrow. What the fuck? “You okay?” He asks.

“Dazzling. Why wouldn’t I be?” I pick up my camera off the counter and start messing with it mostly just to keep my hands busy.

He shrugs. “You kinda freaked out yesterday, that’s all.”

What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? Oh yeah I did but it wasn’t a big deal, really, happens all the fucking time. In fact, it happened again a few hours ago. So see, like I said no big deal. He walks over to the other side of the counter, slides his hands over the smooth surface, and looks up at me. Fuck his eyes are just...like I kinda want to take a picture of them because they are just so fucking different...not bad different just different.

He leans on the counter. “So you’re a photographer?”

Hello state the obvious much? “No, I’m a sculptor actually.” I reply rolling my eyes.

He shakes his head. “God you’re a fucking smart ass. I’m just trying to have a conversation with you.”

I set my camera down and cross my arms over my chest. “Yeah well who says I want to have a conversation with *you*?”

His laugh is kinda soft and deep. “You sound just like Brian.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You would.”

“Hey you don’t know shit about me.”

He leans back and smiles. “Hence the need for a conversation.”

“Fuck of-”

*From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.*

*God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee!*

Laughing he asks, “What the fuck is that?”

I glare at him as I pull my cell phone from the pocket of my jeans. Flipping it open I press it to my ear and growl. “JR you are so going to get it the next time I see you.”

“Hello to you too *big* brother.”

“Did you set every number to play that song?”

She giggles. “No just the ones from us.” She stops laughing. “Just to, you know, remind you of home.”

Its official my sister is a freak. “Where are you?”

“Don’t be dense. You know I’m at my Dad’s.” I should have remembered that. In the summers she usually goes to Uncle Mikey’s around the same time I go to my Dad’s. I lean against the counter watching as Grady walks around the room checking shit out. I cover the mouthpiece of my phone. “Do you mind?”

He looks over his shoulder at me and grins. “Not really.”

Asshole. “Gus, hello? Who are you talking to?” JR demands.

“No one.” I tell her.

“Oh well I just called to say hi and that umm...you know, I miss you or whatever.” She huffs into the phone.

I smile. “Yeah? How much?”

She doesn’t even hesitate. “As much as Captain Astro missed Galaxy Lad in issue 206 when he was kidnapped by Volumous and taken to the planet Zoltolf.”

Did I mention my sister is a freak? “Wow.”

She sighs into the phone. “Yeah...do you miss me?”

“Sure.” I tell her.

“How much?” I can hear the smile in her voice. This is our thing. It’s totally lame. If she pissed at me I ask her how much and she whips out some comic knowledge to let me

know. Angry, sad, scared, whatever we are feeling towards each other, this is how we express it. Yeah, okay I'm a freak too.

I turn and lean back against the counter. "Hmm it's hard to top issue 206." I pause like I'm really thinking about it. "As much as JT missed Rage in issue 51 when Rage was kidnapped and held hostage by Ice-Tina's son, Hoarfrost."

"Oh my god! JT went crazy for like three issues when that was going on!" She practically screams.

"I know."

"Fuck my Dad's calling for me."

"You better go then."

"Alright." She pauses. "You're okay though, right?"

"I'm fine JR."

"Alright well, I love you okay bye." She says it all in one breath and hangs up.

"You to." I say even though she can't hear me.

"You read Rage?" I jump at the sound of his voice and turn around. I fucking forgot he was even here.

Flipping my phone closed I set it on the counter. "Christ you *are* nosy."

He smiles. "I prefer the term observant." Then he fucking winks at me. Christ.

I cross my arms. "Don't you have some place to be?"

One corner of his mouth lifts up in a way I refuse to admit is sexy. "You're right I do. Check you later kid."

He's almost out the door when I tell him. "I'm not a kid."

He pauses and looks me over. What the fuck is up with that? "No." He says. "I guess you're not." Then he leaves. What. The. Fuck?

* * * * *

June 11, 2019 5:01pm

Justin's POV

I click my thumbnail between my teeth as I stare at the painting. I think it's finished. I pick up the paint brush that I use only for my signature and finish off the piece. Standing back I look it over once more. Yeah, it's finished. Who knew that accidental art could be highly representational? I turn from the painting and clean my brush. It completely captured how pissed off I was when I threw it across the room. When I came back upstairs my plan was to just pick it up and throw the fucking thing away but then I looked at it. Then I sat it back on the easel and looked at it some more. Drying off my brush I return it to its place among my other fine point paint brushes.

I'm wiping my hands when someone knocks on the door. I toss away the rag and pull the screen closed so that my paintings can't be seen from the doorway. It never used to be an issue having my paintings out all over the place, because it used to be the only one that came into my studio was Brian. Since starting the gallery it's usually more beneficial to me to have potential artists or Maddie meet me up here.

As I walk to the door I glance at the clock on the wall. Christ, is that the time? I open the door half expecting to see Gus telling me he's ready to go or that he's hungry but I'm not surprised to see Grady instead.

"Hey." I greet him moving aside so he can come in. Judging by his outfit I'm guessing he just came from his part-time job at the SoHo Grand Hotel.

He moves around me. "Hey. Maddie said you wanted to see me."

I close the door and walk over to the table in the corner waiting for him to join me before I say anything. As he sits down he tells me, "I'm working on this piece right now that I think will be really great for the show."

"Yeah about that..." Fuck. I have no idea what to tell him. Honestly I've been so preoccupied today that I haven't even thought about how I was going to tell him this. I scratch the back of my head. "Look, I really don't know how to say this so I'm just going to say it." Christ, where was Brian when I needed him? He'd have no problem doing this. He'd say, "*We're adding another artist to your show, deal with it.*" I take a deep breath and look at Grady's expectant face trying not to feel like an asshole. "You know I think your art is great."

"Yeah?" He furrows his brow.

"But it looks like I'm going to have to add another artist to the show."

"What? Why?" I hear the confusion and hurt in his voice.

"I should have never offered it to you in the first place. I let my emotions get the better of me and-"

He stands up. "This is complete bullshit." His hurt is replaced by the anger I was expecting.

"Look, I'm sorry for getting your hopes up--"

"You promised."

I nod. "Yes I did but--"

He walks away from me. "I can't believe this." He turns placing his hands on his hips. "Did you know I got offered a solo show at the Edward Scholard Gallery in SoHo?" No, I didn't know that. "I turned them down because I was already doing a solo show *here*."

I stand up. "Well that was a mistake on your part. You should take every show you're offered." I wanted to tell him that's lesson 101 in the Starving Artist's Handbook: Never ever turn down a chance to showcase your art.

"I didn't have enough pieces for *both* shows."

"That's bullshit and you know it." I've never let anyone pull a guilt trip on me and I'm not starting now.

"We had a deal."

"Look I don't want to be an asshole about this--"

He scoffs. "It's a little late for that."

"But," I continue ignoring his jab. "You haven't signed an agreement yet with the TK Gallery and let this be a learning experience--"

"What not to trust anyone?"

"No, that nothing is for certain until you have it in writing."

"Sure Justin, I'll just chalk it up to a lesson learned." He rolls his eyes. "So how many pieces will I have to cut?"

"Half." He shakes his head. "Grady I really am sorry about all of this."

"Yeah well can I have *that* in writing?" He turns to leave muttering asshole under his breath as he slams out the door.

Well...that didn't go so bad. Sure I feel like the world's biggest asshole but it's my own fucking fault. He'll be pissed for a while. Hell maybe a great painting will come out of it. I look over at the screened in area of my studio. That always seems to work for me.

"Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."

~ A.A. Milne ~

June 14, 2019 3:23am

Brian's POV

I hear him gasp. My eyes snap open just as he bolts upright in bed. His breathing is fast and shallow. "Hey." I reach out for him but he jerks away from me. I knew better than to do that but it's three in the morning and I forgot. I sit up in bed watching as he leans forward pressing his head to his covered knees. The lights from the city shine on his bare back that is glistening with sweat. I reach behind me pulling the headboard up as I lean back. I know all I can do is watch and wait.

He shakes his head back and forth. "Fuck Brian." He laughs but it's unpleasant. "Fuck." His hands clasp behind his head as he presses himself down harder on his knees.

I feel powerless but then again this has always made me feel powerless. It's been a long time. In fact, I can't even remember the last time he woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare. It doesn't take much deduction on my part to know why he had one tonight. He's been under a lot of stress the last couple of days. This thing with Gus, Christ, it's affecting him more than either of us thought it would. He had that shit with Grady and his hand has been giving him problems. He told me he had an anger outburst when his hand cramped and it fucked up the painting he was working on at the time.

"I haven't felt that angry in a really long time." He told me.

I watch as he slowly uncurls himself and sits up straight. He takes a deep breath and finally turns to me. I raise an eyebrow and he shakes his head as he crawls over to me until he is lying as close as he can to me without being on top of me. He lays his head against my thigh and drapes his arm across my legs. My hand automatically starts stroking his hair. We lay like that for a while until he says, "I haven't had one of those in a long time."

I curl a lock of his hair around my finger. "Yeah."

He runs his hand over my thigh. "I don't even remember it. It was just this feeling you know?" His hand stills on my leg. "It's like seeing Gus like that...it's like being back there and-" He takes a deep breath. "I'm projecting and I fucking hate that."

"It's just been a stressful week." I tell him.

He sits up and looks at me. "Don't do that."

“Do what?”

“You know what.” He throws back the covers and moves to his side of the bed.

“I really don’t.” I can feel the anger coming off of him in waves.

“Don’t make excuses for me.” He stands up and pulls on a pair of sweats.

“Where are you going?” I ask him as he starts walking to the door.

“Kitchen.” He throws out over his shoulder as he leaves the room closing the door behind him.

I stare at the door trying to figure what the fuck just happened. I reach for a cigarette and light it. This shit is fucking with his head. Gus has only been here for four days and had two panic attack both of which Justin witnessed. I’m not stupid. I know he sees and feels the same things I do. Gus told me the panic attack he had at the gallery was pretty bad but that Justin was there. I know how Justin works. After eighteen years it would be impossible not to know almost every thing he thinks, feels, wants, or needs. I know that when he saw Gus that day that he saw himself. I know he saw what I would see everyday when I came home from work. I know he felt those memories crawling under his skin itching him from the inside out. Yes, he’s projecting but I don’t see how he couldn’t. It’s so fucking similar except this time he’s riding on my side of the fence.

The truth is that Justin’s attacks, his nightmares, his overall experience was much worse. Yes, Gus is hurting and he’s a mess but it’s only a sample of where Justin has been. I can see the similarities but I can feel the differences. Gus doesn’t carry around inside him a cold rage. Gus carries around a deep fucking loss, a hurt so palpable that I can almost taste his loneliness. On the very basic level of things Gus isn’t angry he’s fucking sad. Gus isn’t going to start running around wearing pink and toting a fucking gun seeking revenge on the person who ran into him. At least he better fucking not. It’s not like he can anyway since that bastard is in prison for vehicular manslaughter.

I stub out my cigarette as I get out of bed. I reach for the pair of jeans I discarded earlier and pull them on. I know what he’s doing. I know it like I know him. This is one of the reasons why I told him we should have a small studio for him at the loft. We have an extra bedroom for guests that we hardly use. When he gets like this, and it’s usually only when he’s stressed out, he gets restless. He could walk to his studio but I know he won’t, not at this time of day.

I walk out of the bedroom and down the hall. I can smell the cleaning solution already. I enter the kitchen and find exactly what I expected. He’s leaning over the sink blowing his hair out of his face as he scrubs it clean. The fucker is already clean.

“Justin.” He doesn’t even look up at me. I walk over to him grab him by the shoulder and turn him around. “Stop this.” I move my hands over his shoulders and up his neck until I’m cupping his face. “Just stop.”

He tries to pull back but I hold him in place. The wet rag in his hands drips water on the floor between us. “I feel...” He looks away from me. “It’s...” He sighs and I pull him to me feeling the cold rag on my back when he wraps his arms around my waist. “It seems so ridiculous doesn’t it?”

I stroke his hair with my right hand. “It’s not.”

“It’s not like I forgot. It’s not like it’s ever really gone.” He pulls away from me and looks me in the eyes. “What if I can’t do this Brian?”

“Do what?”

“Help Gus. What if it just gets to be too fucking much?”

I take the rag from his hand and toss it in the sink. I take his left hand in mine lacing out fingers together and lead him out of the kitchen and into the living room. I sit down on the couch and in a move that’s old but familiar he lays down with his head in my lap. I stroke his hair and try to think of what I can say to tell him how strong he is. That he can help Gus because he’s been there and that what he is feeling now is just residual effects from a time better forgotten. I want to tell him anything and everything I can think to ease his worry but like always the words get lodged in my throat.

He sighs. “I’m just overacting.” He wraps his arms around my legs. “I know that...it seems shitty to say but from what I’ve seen so far he has a milder case, as far as panic attacks go.” He sits up and looks at me. “He’s not angry.” I watch him watching me. “You already knew that.” It’s not a question.

“He’s scared and he’s-

“Lonely.” I nod. He moves closer to me and caresses my cheek. “He doesn’t have what I had.” I kiss the palm of his hand.

“No.” I tell him. “But he has us.”

I cup the back of his neck and pull his mouth to mine sweeping my tongue over his bottom lip before sucking it into my mouth. As he straddles my lap I kiss him full on pushing my tongue into his mouth. His arms drape over my shoulders as his hands weave into my hair. I kiss his cheek, his jaw, that spot behind his ear.

I move forward on the couch and cup his ass with both of my hands. “Wrap your legs around me.” I tell him.

When he does I stand up. He laughs into my neck. “I can walk.”

I head towards the bedroom my hands gripping his ass. "I know you can." I tell him. I lean him back against the wall and kiss him again, deeper, hungrier, because I want to be in him right now. Without taking my lips from him I walk into the bedroom kicking the door closed behind us.

When I approach the bed he pulls his mouth from mine. "Don't you dare toss me on the bed." He mumbles into my neck. I laugh and toss him to the middle of the bed. He bounces a few times and starts laughing. "Asshole." Sometimes he's way too easy.

I crawl on the bed, over him, kissing my way up his body until my mouth is back on his. His hands grip my hair as his tongue pushes deeper in my mouth. I press my body down on his my hands stroking his arms, his face, any part they can reach. We're in the middle of the kiss when I feel the change in him. His kiss gets softer, his hands stroke my back in a light caress, his body relaxes into the bed, and I know exactly what he wants.

I places kisses all over his face changing my tempo to suit his rhythm. "Tell me." I whisper in his ear. If he wants it like this I want to hear it. I rest my forehead on his, our lips are so close that every breath he exhales is the breath I inhale.

His hands cup my face and he pushes me back so he can look into my eyes. I wait. "I want it slow." He pecks me on the lips. "Make it last."

I nod and kiss him on the lips. My tongue glides into his mouth savoring the taste. I move my body off of his. Breaking our kiss I move him onto his side pressing my chest to his back and moving my right arm under his head. I reach for the lube and coat my cock with it. I toss the lube to the floor and use my left hand to position the head of my cock at his hole. I kiss his shoulder and neck as I guide myself in. He rolls his head back on my arm and I kiss him. I slide my hand up his leg, over his side, and around to his stomach. I press slowly into him. It's so fucking hot and smooth. It's everything.

"Brian." My name flows off his tongue in a whispered moan. I'm all the way inside him. I know what he wants. I hold myself still inside him as I run my hand up his side and down his arm until my fingers weave between his and curl into his palm. When his fingers squeeze down on mine I begin to move my hips. My strokes are long, deep, slow, and smooth. I kiss his neck, his shoulder, tasting every part of him my lips can reach. I breathe in his scent that is a mixture of everything he is and the part of me that he carries around with him.

I give him what he needs right now. He's feeling too emotional. It flows through his body with every beat of his heart. When he leans his head back I taste the salt of his tears. I move, kiss, and caress him in every way I know he likes. My body caresses him saying, *"I'm here. It's okay. I understand."* Each stoke saying, *"I love you. I love you. I love you."* I soak up every single ounce of love he has for me and return it to him tenfold.

Afterward I stay inside him because I know he's not ready to break the connection. I hold him close to me planting soft lazy kisses on his neck. I feel him relax against me as his breathing gets deeper. I press my lips to his ear and whisper to him, "You can do it Justin." He doesn't ask what I'm talking about because he knows. He can help Gus, we both can, and we both will.

*“Problems arise in that one has to find a balance between what people need from you
and what you need for yourself”*

~ Jessye Norman ~

June 16, 2019 6:15am

Justin’s POV

I’ve been awake for a while listening to the little wheeze that Brian makes when he’s in a deep sleep and I’ve been thinking. Which Brian would say is a dangerous thing, but sometimes it’s not, sometimes it’s a fucking necessity. Anyway I’ve been thinking about Gus and about how I’ve been feeling lately. I’ve had two nameless, faceless, colorless nightmares that skipped on the visuals but bled pure fear. The first one was brought on by stress and from seeing Gus panicking, which made me think of myself being like that at one time. The second was the result of Gus screaming out in the middle of the night and remembering a time I used to wake up like that almost every night for a year.

It’s not really fair that these feelings keep bubbling to the surface but it’s also not like I can stop them. I feel the bed move when Brian rolls onto his side. His hand slides over my stomach. It’s so fucking warm against my cool skin that I break out in goose bumps. I look at his face, slack with sleep and think that no matter how old he gets he’ll always be beautiful to me. He’s been worried lately about Gus and about me too. I know that’s not good, for him. I’m a grown man, a fucking adult, and he shouldn’t be worried about me, but he is and in some respects he always will be. I guess the same could be said about me. I worry about him all the fucking time.

I study his face and can’t help but wonder what would have happened to him if I hadn’t made it. That thought is almost too big to contemplate. It’s not like I’ve never thought about it before, but usually I push it aside, ignoring my mind’s desire to peruse it. I’m inclined right now though to give into it a little because of Gus. I wonder if Brian loved me then and if so, did I know? Sure when I was seventeen I liked to tell anyone and everyone, including Brian, that he loved me, but did he? Would he be a mess like Gus is now? Sure, he’d feel guilty. He’s always felt guilty for what happened no matter how many times I told him it wasn’t his fault. So yes, he’d probably give into his guilt, drink vast amounts of alcohol, do exorbitant amounts of drugs, and fuck his way through the rest of gay Pittsburgh, but what would that mean? Would that mean that he loved me, that he missed me, or that he was just so fucking sorry I died?

These thoughts cause an ache so deep in me that I almost want to wake Brian up to ask him, did he love me, would he have missed me, but I don’t. Instead I slide out from beneath his arm and get dressed. If I’m going to help Gus, if I’m going to be there for him, then there is something I have to do.

* * * * *

June 16, 2019 6:25am

Gus' POV

I'm in the kitchen turning on the coffee machine for Dad and Justin when I see a piece of paper on the counter. I pick it up and read it.

*Brian,
Went to the studio, there's something I have to do.
Later,
J.*

I set the note down and look at the clock on the microwave. He's never left for the studio this early since I've been here. In fact, I know that on the weekends Dad doesn't work that Justin doesn't go to the studio at all. I furrow my brow and walk over to the fridge. It's just another thing to add to the list of the shit I've been noticing. They think I'm stupid, or blind, or deaf, but I'm not. I pull the carton of orange juice from the fridge and pour the last of it into a glass. I know something is going on with Justin. It only took me a few days to realize that the cleaning lady only comes once a week, on Mondays, and that Justin's been the one drowning the kitchen in bottles of Clorox at night. I've heard him twice wake up from what I assume to be nightmares of his own. Maybe it has nothing to do with me being here but I have a feeling it does.

I throw the empty carton of juice in the trash and sit down at the table. I drink half the glass before I set it down and grab the Comic section from the paper. I read Spiderman & Rage before getting up and throwing it in the trash. That's another thing, not a new thing, just a thing that I saw Dad do the other morning. It looked like something he just automatically does. I didn't ask why but I wanted to, and maybe I would have if Justin hadn't walked in. I return to the table and sit down. I'm just finishing the last of my juice when I hear Dad in the kitchen. Setting down my glass I turn to look at him just as he's adding a shitload of sugar to his coffee. It's almost funny that he has this strict diet and yet his morning coffee is almost pure sugar. He grabs his mug and walks over to the table yawning a hello.

"Did you see the note?" I ask him as he sits down.

Dragging the paper over to him he looks at me. "What note?"

"The one by the coffee machine that said Justin was at the studio."

He shakes his head and starts flipping through the paper. He does it three times, the crease in his forehead deepening each time.

"I already threw it out." He looks up and raises an eyebrow at me. "The Comics."

“Oh?”

I shrug. “I saw you do it the other morning.” He takes a sip of his coffee but doesn’t say anything. “Why do you, do it I mean?” I want to know. Does it really bother Justin that much that he can’t even look at it?

Dad sets his coffee cup down and leans back in his chair. He looks away from me and I figure he’s not going to answer me at all. Finally he looks over at me and shrugs. “It bothers him.”

I can’t help it, suddenly I just feel so angry, at him and at Justin. “So should I pack my shit now or just wait until you throw me out too?” I get up from the table and put my glass in the sink.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

I turn to face him. “Do you think I’m stupid? That I can’t see? That I don’t fucking know?”

He furrows his brow. “Know what?”

“That *I* bother him. That when he looks at me he remembers what happened to him.”

He stands up and walks over to me. “You’re right.” I step back from him feeling as if he’s slapped me in the face. “It reminds him, both of us, of a time we’d rather forget, but that doesn’t mean that...” He shakes his head. “That we’re going to fucking throw you out.”

The anger suddenly leaves my body and I slump against the counter. “I don’t mean to.” I stare at the floor.

“We know.” He places his hands on my shoulders and I look up at him. “We’re all in this together. Justin’s just got to find the balance and he will.”

“I just feel like...” I bite my lip. “That I’m not worth all this trouble.”

“Hey,” He shakes me. “Don’t fucking say that. You’re worth it. You’ve been through something that no one your age should ever have to fucking go through. You lost someone you cared about. That’s not something you can just snap your fingers and be over.”

I feel something inside me crack and break. “I just want them to stop.” I choke out. “That’s all I want.” I feel pathetic and stupid and embarrassed but I can’t stop the words that come. Dad pulls me to his chest and I cling to him. “I just want to be okay. I want everything to be okay but I fucking miss him everyday, all fucking day. I can’t stop

thinking about him. About it and it just fucking...hurts...it...hurts...so fucking...bad.” And then I can’t say anything else.

Dad holds me a little tighter and says, “I know Sonnyboy, I know.” I cry harder.

* * * * *

June 16, 2019 6:47am

Justin’s POV

I enter my studio and set my coffee, keys, and cell phone on the counter. I usually don’t come to my studio on the weekends unless Brian has to work. It’s nice here, though, on Sundays. The gallery is closed and there’s no chance for an interruption. I reach for my cell phone and turn it off. No interruptions. I toe off my shoes, take off my socks, remove my shirt, and walk over to the stereo turning the volume low. I like the noise but don’t need the distraction. I walk over to the easel I use for large pieces and move it where the morning light is shining into the room. I walk over to the corner of the room, where I had a closet built to house supplies, and open the door. Flipping on the light I walk to the back and remove a 60 x 48 canvas. It’s big, some people would say too big, but not for this. Carrying out the canvas I set it up on the easel, adjusting the side arms and tightening the knobs to hold the canvas in place. Grabbing a box from the floor, I return to the supply closet and gather paints, brushes, pallet knives, and a can of turpentine. I leave the room and shut the door behind me. Once I set everything up just the way I want it I pick up a large brush and stare at the blank canvas. Taking a deep breath I load the end of the paintbrush with paint and I just let myself go.

It’s been hard on me seeing Gus having panic attacks and hearing him waking up from nightmares. It’s been incredibly difficult for me to separate what he’s going through from what I went through. Both situations are similar hues in the same spectrum, but still different colors. I’ve said before that this isn’t about me, and it isn’t. I’m fine. I’ve moved passed it. It took so much to get from the place I was to the place I am. I made many bad decisions and mistakes along the way, true, but I fucking made it.

The truth is that this, these feelings, will never leave me. It’s never going to be forgotten. How do I forget that once a long time ago someone hated me so much they wanted me dead? No one could forget that. The thing is that I have to stop being angry about it. I’ve carried this rage in me from being bashed for so fucking long. It doesn’t always come out but it’s always fucking there. I’m angry about how unfair it all was, how that night at prom was taken from me, how Chris fucking Hobbs got off with a slap on the wrist. Yes, I held a gun to his head and *made* him fucking apologize. Sure it felt good at the time; I made him feel like he made me feel every time I thought about it-or him-but the adrenaline faded and what was I left with really? His apology only left me

feeling empty and cold. Holding a gun on him, I realized later, had to be one of the stupidest things I ever did, and in truth it made me no better than him. I wanted to be satisfied that I'd finally gotten something from him, some kind of fucking remorse for trying to kill me, but I made him do it. I. Made. Him. Who knows how things would have turned out if Hobbs had come to me himself and asked for forgiveness?

At any rate, it's time to let it go, not forget, just fucking let it go. Look at the life I have now. I'm fucking married to the first man I ever loved. We have a fucking beautiful life together. We have everything we could possibly ever want or need. Most importantly we have each other. I can survive anything this life has to throw at me as long as I have that.

It's time to stop projecting all these remnants of my past. It's time to stop using Gus' pain and internalizing it as my own. Brian is right, I can help Gus. I can be there for him. I can share with him how it was for me. I can be there if he wants to talk about it, but most importantly I can love him. All I have to do is let this anger that lives in me go. It happened. I can't go back and fix it or change it. I have to just stop being angry, stop feeling sorry for myself, and just understand that being bashed and having that experience is a part of who I am. Who knows how my life would have turned out had it not happened? Maybe the experience made me stronger, more determined, and made me who I am today. Made me this man that wouldn't settle for less than what he wanted, who achieved his goals, who finally married the man he loved, who finally has the life he always wanted.

June 16, 2019 3:47pm

Gus' POV

I'm at the park with Dad and I've been watching a homeless man digging through the garbage for the last twenty minutes. He looks to be about fifty. His face is worn and weathered. He's wearing stone washed jeans, which I know went out of style before I was even born, and an army surplus jacket he probably got from Goodwill. He's been digging through the trash around the area where Dad and I are sitting. I've seen him pull out several soda bottles, light four cigarette butts, and I can't be sure but I think I saw him eating something he pulled out off a paper bag he found in one of the trashcans. When he starts digging through the trashcan closest to us I aim my camera at him and take a picture. Then I switch to my digital camera and take another one.

I take a few more random pictures with my digital camera. I even take one of Dad when the homeless man approaches him and asks for a cigarette. Dad gives him the rest of his pack and a hundred dollar bill. I watch the homeless man walk away. "You know he's probably just going to use that to buy drugs or alcohol right?"

He turns to me. "Christ, you sound just like Justin."

I smile at that. “Well...that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

He laughs. “No. I guess it’s not.”

He opens a new pack of cigarettes, taps one out, and lights it. I set down my camera and light a cigarette of my own. We haven’t really talked about my breakdown in the kitchen this morning. That’s what it was, a breakdown. It’s not like I really thought that Dad and Justin would kick me out of the loft but at that moment it’s all I could think about. It’s just that suddenly I felt like that comic strip, that I was making things hard for Justin just by existing, and that just like the comic strip Dad would throw me away. Like they say, out of sight out of mind. I know my Dad would never do that. It was just the accumulation of things, my panic attacks, my nightmares, seeing Justin reacting to all of that, and Dad worrying about both of us. Yeah, I noticed that too.

I’m not sure exactly why we’re at the park. After my breakdown we read the paper and then just sort of migrated to the living room to watch TV. I kept seeing Dad eye the clock and I figured he was waiting for Justin to get back. I could tell he was irritated and bored. We were in the middle of watching some lame ass movie when he suddenly stood up and said, “Fuck this. Let’s go to the park.” And here we are.

“Before your Moms moved to Canada I used to go to the park with you and your Mom every Saturday.”

I look over at him. “No shit?” I’d never heard that before.

“It wasn’t much. Most of the time it was just you in the stroller and me and your Mom walking.”

“I didn’t play?” I take a drag of my cigarette.

He laughs. “You usually were asleep so your Mom and I would just sit there and talk.”

I look back at the homeless man who’s still digging through the garbage. “What would you talk about?”

“Nothing. Everything.” He laughs. “Usually we talked about what an asshole I was.”

I look back over at him wondering why he’s telling me this because really, Dad’s not one for nostalgia or reminiscing. “Oh?”

“Everyone thought I was an asshole back then.”

“Except for Justin.” I tell him smiling.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Especially Justin.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Really?” That’s hard to believe.

“Hell yes.”

I flick my cigarette and look back down at my digital camera, flipping through the pictures I’ve taken. “Why were you an asshole?”

“I was a different man then.”

“Well...if you were such an asshole why did he put up with you?” I ask mostly just to humor him. I’m not really sure I want to know.

I hear him take a drag of his cigarette and exhale before he answers. “He didn’t always.” I look over at him. He shrugs. “But the little fucker kept coming back.” Laughing he takes another drag of his cigarette.

“Why?” I ask even though I’m pretty sure I know the answer.

He turns his head and looks at me. “He loved me.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Why are you telling me all this Dad?”

He looks away and shrugs. “I have no fucking idea.”

Maybe it’s like when I was a kid living in Pittsburgh and he used to talk to Mom when they took me to the park. Maybe if I’d been old enough he would have talked to me like he’s doing right now. I look away from him and watch as a man and a woman carrying a baby walk by us. I bite my lip. “When...when did you know you loved him?” I glance over at Dad.

He puts out his cigarette and turns to face me. He’s not smiling. He’s completely serious. “When I almost lost him.”

I furrow my brow. “When he left you?”

Shaking his head he says, “No. When he almost...died on the way to the hospital the night he was bashed.”

I look away from him and squint up at the bright sky. “Yeah, that’s when I knew too.”

He doesn’t ask me what I mean because I guess he knows. Dad was lucky. Justin survived, he lived, and Dad got to tell Justin, to show him what he meant to him. I never got that. I never would. I feel the tears on my face but I don’t wipe them away. Dad drapes his arm over my shoulders and pulls me to him. “He knew Sonnyboy.”

God, I hope he did.

* * * * *

June 16, 2019 5:48pm

Justin's POV

I step back from the canvas, tilt my head to the side, and smile. I'm exactly where I should be, doing exactly what I want to do, and living my life on my terms. My eyes scan the painting from top to bottom. Eighteen years of anger, sadness, frustration, and pain has finally been extracted. Sure little pieces of these feelings have made it into my work, but no one piece has ever been a totality of everything I ever felt about being bashed. Well here it is now, everything laid bare on a 60 x 48 canvas.

I toss my brush onto the table and take another step back from the painting. It's hard to look at but at the same time I feel I've never painted anything so fucking beautiful.

I hear a knock at the door and turn to see Brian walk in. I wipe my hands and walk over to him smiling. "What are you doing here?"

He looks me over and then grabs me kissing me deep and hard. I want to tell him that he's getting paint all over his clothes but somehow I don't think he cares. He sucks my tongue into his mouth and fuck that's hot. It's a hungry kiss that reminds me of the kisses we'd share when he'd come visit me in New York. Kisses that said, *god I fucking missed you every minute of every fucking day*. When he finally breaks the kiss I'm nothing more than a boneless body in his arms.

It takes me more than a minute to put words in order so I can speak. "Miss me?"

He laughs and strokes my hair. "You left without even giving me a blow job this morning."

I laugh and pull back from him. "I'm really very sorry, if that's any consolation."

"It isn't." He says poking his tongue into his cheek.

I push my hands under his shirt and stroke his stomach. "I'll make it up to you tonight." I kiss him on the neck. "Where's Gus?"

"Mmm, downstairs with dinner."

"Oh god, I love you."

He laughs and pushes me away from him a little. "What have you been working on all day?"

I smile at him and take his hand. "Come on, I'll show you." I lead him over to the easel, which I've had to move several times throughout the day to keep it in the right light. My arms ache from it because the fucker is heavy. When we get to the easel I lean my head on Brian's shoulder. "What do you think?"

I feel him take a deep breath. "Shit, Justin."

I nod my head against his shoulder. "I know."

He leans forward. "It's fucking..." I look up at him. "Christ."

"That's it." I tell him. He looks down at me. "That's all of it." We both look back at the painting.

He squeezes my hand and says, "It's fucking everything."

Right at that second I love him just a little bit more. "I had to do it. If I was going to be able to help Gus, to be there for him, I had to get rid of all that."

I lift my head and he turns me to him. "He figured it out, that something was going on."

I furrow my brow. "Shit. What did you tell him?"

He smiles at me as he brushes the hair back from my face. "I told him that you would figure it out and once you did it would be fine."

"I had to find the balance."

He smiles a little wider. "I know." He turns, pulling me with him so that he can wrap his arms around me. He holds me in front of him and I lean back against him. We both just look at the painting. "It's...exquisite... but at the same time it's..."

I lay my hands over his arms around my waist. "Hard to look at?"

"Yes."

"Then it's done." I move myself out of his arms, reach for my signature brush, and sign my name. I put the brush away, move back into his arms, and kiss him. When I pull back he smiles at me and I smile right back. "You mentioned food."

He laughs and I kiss him again pulling him over to the bathroom. "Where are we going?"

"I need to get cleaned up." He raises an eyebrow. "I need you to wash my back."

He scoffs. “You’ve been gone all day I’m going to do more than wash your back.”

I laugh. “God, I hope so.”

The Painting ~ "Everything"



“A picture is the expression of an impression.”

~ Ernst Haas ~

June 19, 2019 9:17am

Justin's POV

Gus and I are walking to the building together like we've done for the last three mornings. I watch Gus out of the corner of my eye flinching every time a car roars passed us. His head is down and he's clutching his hands together so tightly that his knuckles are white. His breathing is quick and shallow, but he keeps walking. He takes a few deep breaths in and out just like they teach you to do when you feel a panic attack coming. That whole breathing thing never really worked for me, but it seems to be helping him. He takes one last deep breath, unclenches his hands, and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his shoulder bag. He taps one out and lights it before returning the pack to his bag.

“You're making me nervous.” He says as he takes a drag of his cigarette. “I'm fine.”

“Okay.” I tell him even though we both know he's lying.

“They don't happen all the time.”

“I know.”

“Sometimes I can stop them.”

“You're really lucky.”

“Oh yeah?” He scoffs. “How's that?”

I shrug. “I could never stop mine.” I don't know if I should tell him that or not. Part of me feels I shouldn't, that some things are better off not knowing even if it is the truth. “When I was still in the hospital they would try to teach me all these techniques.”

I look over at him and he nods. “Yeah me too.”

“Some of them were completely ridiculous.” I laugh. “The best one was ‘try counting backward from one-thousand’.”

“What good would that do?” I see he’s completely serious and that he really wants to know.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s supposed to give you something else to think about.” I shrug. “I just didn’t...” I shake my head. “For me it didn’t matter what techniques they offered up, none of them worked or helped.”

“They didn’t?” I see the concern on his face.

As we reach the front of the building, I turn to face him. “No two people are the same Gus. What works for you might not work for someone else and vice versa.”

“I guess that makes sense.” There is no conviction behind his voice. He looks away from me and takes a drag of his cigarette.

I decide to try a different tactic. “After I was bashed...” He looks at me like he almost can’t believe I’m mentioning it. Have I ever talked to him about it before? I guess I haven’t really. I continue. “I was afraid of practically everything.” He watches me intently as he smokes his cigarette. “I didn’t really want anyone to touch me. I couldn’t walk down the street by myself without freaking out.”

He scans the traffic on the street. “Yeah.” He looks back at me. “How did you get over that?”

Bingo. I scratch the back of my head. “It was a really long and tedious process. For the longest time I couldn’t go anywhere unless your Dad was with me. Then one day we both felt that I was ready to try it alone. He left the loft, and I was supposed to meet up with him on Liberty Avenue. I didn’t think I could do it. I certainly didn’t know if I was ready, but I did it.” I smile at the memory of seeing Brian standing there with his arms open waiting for me. “The panic attacks and nightmares got better after that but it wasn’t like I woke up one day and said, ‘wow I feel completely better.’ It just doesn’t work like that.” I watch as he flicks his cigarette to the street. “Sometimes,” I say slowly, waiting for his eyes to meet mine. “It still bothers me.”

“Yeah.” He says scuffing his shoe against the pavement.

Stepping closer to him I place my hands on his shoulders. His eyes meet mine. “Everyone heals on their own time table Gus. What one person might get over in weeks, another person might not get over for years.” He nods. “I’m not saying that what happened to me or to you doesn’t suck, because it does. All we can do is move forward one day at a time, one step at a time.” I smile. “All you can do is hold on until the scenery changes.” Thank you Deb. I smile and squeeze his shoulders before dropping my hands.

I’m heading up the stairs when he calls me. “Justin?”

Turning around I look down at him. One corner of his mouth lifts up to form a crooked

grin. “Thanks.”

I smile. “Anytime Gus.”

He joins me as we walk up the rest of the steps and into the building. I don’t know if what I told him will help but I hope so. I remember Deb giving me a similar speech, but I might have been too angry at the world at the time to appreciate its value. Wouldn’t Deb find it funny that I had actually listened to her? I look over at Gus. He isn’t angry, so maybe, just maybe what I said will matter. I can only hope.

When we are inside I spot Maddie across the room, completely focused on the clipboard in her hands. It’s going to be a busy day today. We have a small show this weekend that we need to set up for. Sometime today Jas Montgomery, a junior at SVA, is coming by to see about co-headlining the now defunct ‘solo show’. Grady hasn’t been around in a few days, but I called him to come over to sign his contract for the show in July. Unfortunately for me there won’t be much time to paint today.

Maddie looks up from her clipboard, smiling as she walks over to us. “Good morning.” Her smile falters some, never a good sign. “Thank god you’re here.”

I furrow my brow. “What’s wrong?”

“You know Nikki Coleman?” I nod my head. She’s a pretty new talent. “She dropped out. We’re going to have an empty wall.”

“What? Why?” Shit. Empty wall space at an opening is never good.

“She said she didn’t have enough pieces ready.”

I know that’s bullshit. She has the pieces but she’s a fucking perfectionist. So what she meant was that she didn’t have enough perfect pieces for the show. “Fuck.” Maddie gives me a look. She hates when I swear. I start racking my brain trying to think of what the hell to do. Who can I get to fill the wall space on such short notice? It would have to be someone who already has some pieces complete. Fuck.

“Why don’t you just ask that Grady guy if he will fill in?” I turn to Gus raising an eyebrow. He shrugs. “You dropped him from that solo show thing right? So he’d have something to put up wouldn’t he?”

I turn to Maddie. The smile she’d lost earlier is back on her face. “That’s not a bad idea.”

No, it’s not. Actually it’s a fucking great idea. Grady already has some of his pieces stored here. It will definitely work as long as Grady goes for it, which considering how things went, he might not. It at least is worth a try. Turning to Gus I smile. “Thanks.”

He pokes his tongue in his cheek. “Anytime.”

I'm about to tell him how much he looks like Brian when the gallery door opens. Maddie shoves her clipboard into my hands and approaches Jas. Maddie has known Jas since he moved to New York. She kind of took him under her wing when he lost his student housing. He is a lucky kid, I'll say that much. Maddie kisses him on the cheek and leads him over to us. I see that look in her eyes. Oh no. She's looking right at Gus as they walk over. Jas is a good kid, smart, and pretty talented. He's shorter than me by about an inch. He's not exactly skinny, probably due to Maddie's home cooking. His reddish brown hair is cut short and styled spiky. I notice Gus give him the once over but he doesn't look impressed.

"Hey Justin." Jas smiles over at me before looking over at Gus. "Who's this?"

"This is Brian's son, Gus. Gus, this is Jas, he's a Computer Graphics major at SVA." Jas holds out his hand and Gus quickly shakes it, mumbling a hello.

Jas gives Gus the once over and I cringe. Not that Jas is a bad guy, but I just don't think Gus is ready for...well, that. "Nice to meet you." Jas turns to me. "I didn't know Brian had a son."

I'm about to answer when Gus snarls. "Yeah well, he does."

Noticing the shift in Gus' mood I tell Maddie, "Can you take Jas to the office? I'll be there in a minute."

She quickly looks from me to Gus and nods. "Sure hon. Come on Jas." She smiles at Gus, her expression seeming to be an apology of sorts, before she and Jas walk back to the office.

When they are gone I turn to Gus. "What was that all about?"

"I don't like having guys paraded around in front of me."

"She didn't mean anything by it."

He shrugs. "I'm sure she didn't." He starts walking toward the stairs when he stops and turns back to me. "And I wouldn't mind you know."

Not clear on what he means I ask, "Mind what?"

"If you tell people that I'm your son too." He shrugs. "I kinda am anyway. Just...you know, don't expect me to call you Dad or anything. That would just be fucking weird." He turns back and disappears up the stairs.

Holy. Fucking. Shit. I wasn't expecting that, at all. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, but I am. I mean, I've always thought of Gus as Brian's son. It's not that I don't love him as a

son, I do, but I guess I've never been comfortable with thinking of myself that way. I always thought that if Gus sees me that way one day, okay, but I was never going to force it on him. Even when Brian and I got married I didn't think, okay now Gus is my son too. I always wanted that decision to be Gus'. I look over to the stairs, smile, and shake my head. I've had some really awesome things happen to me in my life but that ranks right up there with the night I met Brian. Fucking amazing.

June 19, 2019 9:47am

Gus' POV

I walk into my studio feeling a mixture of emotions. I know Maddie didn't mean anything by the whole Jas thing, but really if she wants to fix me up with someone at least make him interesting. I was bored before the guy even opened his mouth, and really he isn't much to look at. I drop my bag on the counter as I walk to the corner of the room. I'm working on a contrast shot of some boxes. I turn on the lamps and position them. I start thinking of what Justin was saying earlier, about how everyone heals differently. That makes a lot of sense. When he started his little speech I didn't really want to listen to him, but then he mentioned being bashed. Besides that, he has this tone of voice he uses when he's saying something he thinks is really important. I couldn't help but listen to him. What he was saying made sense, it really did. He's not the first person to tell me that. Actually that scenery changing thing sounds like something Grandma Deb said to me right after the accident. Maybe Justin got that same speech from Grandma Deb when he got hurt.

I stack the boxes and arrange them in a way I think might be aesthetically pleasing, but in a desolate kind of way. That's the look I'm going for. The feeling I want to invoke. Stepping back from the boxes I tilt my head. In all honestly it's really comforting to have someone that's sorta been where I'm at. Justin knows that walking to and from the loft everyday has been kinda taxing on me. He didn't ask me flat out or demand that I tell him. He just knew and now I know why. He's been there. I'm kind of surprised that he was shocked about the whole calling me his son thing. I walk over to my bag and get out my camera. Sure I've always called him Justin, but I've always seen him as kind of a Dad, and he's always treated me as kind of a son. I mean, hello, he is married to Dad now, doesn't that make it like official anyway? Still, it wasn't that hard just to tell him I didn't mind it. Maybe that's what he's been waiting for this whole time, my okay.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. Setting down my camera I walk over to the door and open it. Grady. I look him over. He's wearing dark blue jeans and a pale green t-shirt that complements his skin tone. I raise an eyebrow. "You knocked." I turn from him. "I'm surprised."

Much like I expected he follows me into the studio. “Yeah, thought I’d try it out for once.”

Picking up my camera from the counter, I walk back over to the corner where I was setting up my shot. “What are you doing here?” I set my camera on the floor as I kneel down to adjust the bottom box.

“I came to thank you.”

I scoff. “For what?”

“For suggesting me as the filler for the show this weekend.”

Picking up my camera from the floor I stand up. “Oh, that.” Stepping back from the boxes I tilt my head. Something is still off.

“Yeah that.”

I shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

I feel him behind me, close but not too close. “It’s a big deal to me.”

I shrug again and look at him over my shoulder. “It was shitty, the whole solo show thing.” I set my camera on the table next to me to adjust the top box. I step back. It still doesn’t look right.

“Yeah it was kinda shitty.”

Turning around, I see my camera in his hands. I walk over to him and take it from him. I try to ignore the sizzle of heat that flows through my body when our fingers brush against each other. “Next time get it in writing.” Without meaning to my voice comes out low and husky.

He smiles at me, his voice taking on the same tone as mine. “So I’ve been told.” He looks down at his hands then back up at me. “Listen do you...” He runs a hand through his brown hair. “Want to go for coffee or something?”

I raise my eyebrow. “I don’t drink coffee.”

“Well I did say or something. There’s a café down the street...”

Turning away from him, I bring my camera up and look at the boxes through the lens. “Like a date?” I scoff.

I focus my camera and snap a picture. The fucking composition or something is still off.

“No. Not a date. More like...a thank you.”

I aim the camera again and snap another picture. “You said thank you, that’s good enough for me.”

I feel him move from behind me. I’m not sure what he’s doing but he’s not leaving. I focus the camera again and watch through the lens as the light shifts on the boxes. That’s better. I snap a quick picture. Moving my camera aside, I watch as he walks toward another light. “Wait.” He looks over at me. “Not that one, the one on your left.” He points to the lamp. “Yeah, that one.” I move two steps to the side and bring my camera up again. I watch the light shift again and snap a picture. “Perfect.” The light lands just right evoking just the right feeling. It’s a fucking perfect shot. It’s a perfect balance of contrast for a black and white photograph. I snap a few more shots before putting my camera down. He’s watching me. Those cat like eyes study my every move. It’s kinda unnerving and kinda hot.

“Okay.” I tell him.

“Okay?” He raises his brows.

I shrug. “Why the fuck not.”

June 19, 2019 10:41am

Brian’s POV

I lean forward in my chair as I click on the speakerphone. “So how are things in fabulous Pittsburgh Theodore?”

He chuckles. “Great. We landed PittSteal this morning.”

“Impressive.”

“Fifteen million dollar account. I’d say so.”

Reaching for a marker, I cross through a design on the ad-copy in front of me. “Did you get those reports that Cynthia sent over?”

There’s a shuffling of papers in the background. “Yup, got them right here. I’ll crunch the numbers and get it back over to you this afternoon.”

Recapping the marker, I lean back in my chair. With the business end taken care of I ask,

“So how’s the wife?”

He chuckles, because unlike Michael, he doesn’t take the snark personally. Of course, given past issues I can see why Michael can’t appreciate it. “He’s doing great. We’re breaking ground on the center tomorrow.”

“You finally settled on a location?” Ted and Blake have been looking for property to set up their own counseling center. Ted is going to be taking care of the business end of the deal while Blake will be managing the operation.

“Yes, finally.” They’ve been looking for a place for over a year. “We decided on that old warehouse on Liberty and 5th.”

“Shit, I think that place was abandoned before I moved here Theodore.”

“Lucky for us. Jennifer got us a great deal.” I smile at that. Mother Taylor can do anything she sets her mind to, but she fucking shines when it comes to real estate dealings. Ted clears his throat. I roll my eyes and wait. “How’s married life treating you Bri?”

“Fabulous.” I reply tongue in cheek.

He chuckles. “Of course. And Gus, how’s he doing?”

Frowning slightly I tell him, “He’s adjusting.”

“Totally understandable.”

There’s a tap on my office door. I look over just as Cynthia pokes her head in. “Justin line two.” She mouths.

“Gotta go Theodore. Get me those reports and,” I roll my eyes. “Tell everyone I said hello.”

Ted chuckles again. “Will do Bri and tell Justin I said hello.”

Smartass. I turn off the speakerphone, reach for my Bluetooth earpiece, and put it on before pressing line two. “Hiya Honey.”

Justin laughs. “Good day at the office dear?”

I turn in my chair toward the window. “It’s far too early to tell. You?”

“Pretty good so far. Jas agreed to the July show.” That’s good news. He’s been worrying about that. “There was a snag this morning with this weekend’s show. Nikki dropped out.”

“No perfect pieces?”

“Probably. She told Maddie she didn’t have enough for the show.”

I roll my eyes. Why couldn’t people just be honest? “Which means she didn’t have enough perfect pieces ready to show.”

When he laughs I smile automatically. “Exactly-but Gus saved the day.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Yup. He suggested Grady.”

I raise my eyebrow higher. “He did?”

“Yeah, which if you think about it, is the perfect solution considering the whole ‘sorry you aren’t getting a solo show after all’ thing.”

I purse my lips. “I suppose.”

He sighs into the phone. “It’s better than having a blank wall Brian.”

True, I guess. It doesn’t mean that I have to like the guy for being...handy. “How was Gus this morning?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Well he almost had a panic attack on the way to the building but he managed to breathe through it.” That’s good. Justin could never quite manage that. If Gus is controlling them somewhat that is definitely a good sign.

“And.” Fuck I can practically feel his sunshine smile through the phone.

“And?”

“He said he wouldn’t mind if I called him my son.”

“Well we are married now Sunshine.”

“I know, but you know how I feel about the whole thing Brian.”

“Yes, I know.” For at least the last ten years I’ve seen Justin as Gus’ second father, but Justin never seemed comfortable with that title. He was always saying, “I’m fine being Justin to him. If one day he sees me as a second Dad, then you know that will be really great, but he has to be the one to decide that, not me.”

“Anyway, I just called to tell you that. I know you have a meeting in a few minutes and I

have to get back inside to help Maddie.”

“Okay.” I pause. “I’m glad Gus said that.”

“Me too.” He’s smiling again. His excitement filters through the phone, making me feel warmer than the sunlight coming in through the window.

“See you tonight.”

“Later.”

I remove the earpiece as I turn myself around to my desk. I smile to myself, thinking about how happy Justin is right now. Gus telling him that is a really big deal. Everyone else wouldn’t even blink an eye at the revelation because they already see Justin as Gus’ second father. Justin has never allowed himself to entertain that idea. Well, now he can, and it only took eighteen years.

June 19, 2019 11:01am

Gus’ POV

We’re sitting in this cheesy little café that reminds me of Liberty Diner, minus all the rainbow paraphernalia. Looking across the table I watch as Grady stirs cream into his coffee. I light a cigarette, suddenly unsure of why the hell I agreed to this. He taps the spoon against the rim of his cup before setting it aside.

He takes a sip then looks over at me. “So you just moved here?” Taking another sip of his coffee he watches me over the rim of the cup.

“Yeah, I’m starting at SVA in the fall.”

He sets his cup on the table. “It’s a good school.” He shrugs. “I graduated from there last spring.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed?” Taking a drag of my cigarette I watch him.

Laughing he replies, “Somehow I get the feeling that it would take a lot to impress you.”

I shrug. “You’d be right.” I take a drag of my cigarette. “What else you got?”

“To impress you with?”

Leaning back in my chair I exhale smoke. “Yeah.”

Shrugging, he takes another drink of his coffee like he’s seriously thinking about it. “I’m a grad student at The New York Academy of Art.” I lift my eyebrow. “I have my own place in SoHo.”

Leaning forward on the table, I notice the chocolate brown flecks in his eyes. “What else?”

He laughs. “There really isn’t much else.”

Putting out my cigarette, I lean back against the chair. “You value yourself by the things you have?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

I think about it for a minute. It’s a good point and it’s true. “I guess.”

He takes another drink of his coffee. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Tell me anything.”

“What is this, twenty questions to get to know you better?”

“Sure let’s go with that...” He pauses. “Favorite color?”

I scoff. “That’s fucking lame. Couldn’t you think of something better than that?”

He smiles at me. “Let’s start with that.”

Rolling my eyes I light another cigarette. “Brown.”

“Brown?” He asks incredulously. “No one’s favorite color is brown.”

I watch him as I take a drag of my cigarette. “Mine is.” I exhale. “Next.” I think this might be one of the stupidest conversations I’ve ever had in my life.

“Shouldn’t I have to answer that same question?”

I shrug. “Whatever. Your game, your rules.” I raise an eyebrow and wait. “Well?”

“Green.”

I look down at his shirt and back up at him. “Original.”

“Some people think so.” Right, whatever. He picks up his cup and finishes off his coffee. “Now ask me something.” There’s a gleam in his eyes like he’s really fucking enjoying this.

“This is fucking stupid.”

He sets his cup down. “Fine, we’ll just sit here and stare at each other.” He leans back in the chair and crosses his arms over his chest.

Rolling my eyes, I ask an equally lame question. “How long have you been in New York?” I use a tone of voice that says I’m only doing this to humor him.

“All my life. My parents live on Long Island.”

He asks more lame questions and I follow suit, playing his game. Favorite Band: I go old school with Nine Inch Nails, he also goes old school with Nirvana. Where were you born: Pittsburgh, Los Angeles. Do you have any siblings: one sister, only child. Do you work: no, yes at the SoHo Grand Hotel as a front desk clerk. When did you get into art: Junior High, first grade (smile and laugh). What do your parents do: Mom manages an art gallery in Toronto, Ma is a lawyer, and you know what my Dads do. Mom’s a troubled youth counselor, and Dad’s an accountant. One of my uncles is a counselor and his husband is an accountant. No shit? Moving on. Right...wait you have four parents? Yes and seven grandparents...well nine actually but I only see four of them and six uncles. Shit. Tell me about it. Favorite Car: BMW 751, Mercedes S800. Oh yeah? Yeah.

He’s on his third cup of coffee as I light my eighth cigarette. He leans back in his chair. “When did he break up with you?”

I choke on the smoke in my lungs. “What?”

“Was it when you moved to New York?”

My pulse quickens. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Leaning forward he rests his elbows on the table. “In case you don’t know it you project this huge fucking sadness. It’s like it comes off of you in waves.” He shrugs. “I just figured-”

I put out my cigarette. “You don’t know shit.” I stand up and then I fucking bolt.

Fuck him. Just fuck him. Who the fuck does he think he is? What the fuck does he know? Project sadness? What the fuck? What right did he have anyway asking something like that? I’m not paying attention to anything around me. My only goal is to get as far away from Grady O’Toole as I can. He thinks he can ask some lame ass questions and then

drop some big fucking bomb on me? Fuck. That.

I step off the curb. A horn honks. Rubber grids against asphalt. A car approaches.

I turn my head and see a taxi heading right for me. I freeze.

"There are things that we don't want to happen but have to accept, things we don't want to know but have to learn, and people we can't live without but have to let go."

~ Author Unknown ~

June 19, 2019 12:38pm

Gus' POV

I can't breathe. I can't think. I can't move. Ice runs through my veins. My heart pounds in my chest. Cold beads of sweat slither down my back. It feels the same, but different. I'm not in motion this time. I'm perfectly still, a frozen figure standing in the middle of a busy street. There is no laughter, no anticipation of being inside of him. There's no sexual banter as I drive along the city streets, no hand rubbing my thigh. No kisses. There is nothing but the pounding of my own heart in my chest. Wait...Ash? Ash, calling my name. Screaming it. It can't be Ash. He's not here. He's gone. He's...

"Gus!" Ash...not Ash. Someone else. Someone different.

An yellow ocher blur of metal and speed barrels toward me. I should move. I want to move. I don't because I can't. The heat from the sun bounces off my skin but doesn't penetrate it. My mind slows to barely functioning. Random thoughts shoot through it like bullets from an automatic machine gun: will this hurt, will I suffer, *move*, what happens to a person when they die, nothing but bones under dirt, nothing left but a name etched in stone, *move*, nothing but memories in the minds of all the people my life has touched, who will cry, who will be damaged beyond control, *move*, who will my death destroy like his death destroyed me, my parents, *move*, my family, my everything, my sister, *move*, JR, she can't be without me, not like this, who will morn me like I've mourned him, who loves me that much, *move*, what does death smell like, metal, blood, *move*, smoke, fire, *move*, burned flesh, *move*, bone, *move*, dirt, *move*, death, *move*, *move*, *move*, *move*, death, dying, dead.

Solid warmth slithers around my waist and tightens around me like a Boa Constrictor. My feet leave the ground and I think this is it. This is it. My eyes close and my breathing stops. I feel a solid wall of heat behind me, the pounding of a heart against my back. No pain. No nothing. A sharp breeze and then...

"Watch where the fuck you're walking asshole." A blare of a horn and angry words my mind hears but doesn't process.

"Breathe." A soft calm whisper against my ear. "Breathe." Hot, warm breath against my skin. "Breathe."

I open my mouth and gasp. I suck in air. My lungs are greedy for it. Alive. Not dead. Breath, air, warmth, not dead, not even hurt. Alive. The world spins and tilts like I'm on a cheap carnival ride after having six hot dogs and a bag of cotton candy. I close my eyes only to find darkness so thick I can smell it. It's like the air before a storm, thick, heavy, hard to breathe in.

"Just breathe." The words follow me into the darkness. They race to catch up to me. "Breathe." The word catches me, wraps itself around me, and holds on tight. I suck in deep breaths. "That's it." I'm pulled back. Lowered down. Warmth encases me like a blanket on a cold night. I'm shaking or crying, I'm not sure which. Maybe both. "It's okay." Soft lips breathe whispered words on my skin. Warm words. Calm words. The right words. "You're safe now." Words that wrap themselves around me, seep into my skin, and melt the ice in my veins. Beautiful, calming words I never realized I needed or wanted. "I'm here." The last of the coldness drains from my body and I burn.

June 19, 2019 12:52pm

Gus' POV

My eyes snap open. My heart pounds in my chest. As if I've just outrun a nightmare that felt too real to be a dream. It takes me a second to get my bearings. People pass by me like I'm not there. Cars weave in and out of each other on the street like a river of yellow with flecks of browns, reds, blacks, and blues. Noise of the city is all around me, loud and obnoxious. I replay what happened in my head. Anger, fear, panic, all in a matter of second entrapped me someplace between where I was and where I am. I feel languid, muddled, and listless as if my mind has not yet woken up from a deep sleep. I feel him behind me, all around me. His arms are circled around my waist, and his legs are pressed against the outside of mine. My face is wet, my throat is sore, my mouth is dry, and my eyes feel puffy and swollen. Heat rises to my face because I'm embarrassed that he's seen this. The worst of it. The worst of me. It shouldn't matter. I don't know him. He doesn't know me. It matters in a way in which I never thought it could. I feel stupid and pathetic. I want it to be his fault, but it isn't. He didn't know. He had no way of knowing. I panicked at his question. It wasn't anger that drove me from him, not really. It was fear, sadness, and a loneliness that has buried itself in my skin like a piece of shrapnel.

I struggle to clear my head, to gain some control over my thoughts. Words weave themselves through my brain trying to form a sentence, any sentence, to explain this to him. I try to find the words, I grasp at them, but they slip through my fingers. A clear thought forms, not of what to say, but of what happened, *he saved me*.

"Go, let me." The words scrape against my throat, raw, rough, and disjointed.

"No." His word is unyielding and cogent.

I run my tongue over my dry lips and twist my body in his arms. I search for my voice, the one that can demand him to do as I ask. "Let me go." His arms tighten, then loosen, then tighten again as if he's fighting an internal battle with himself. "Grady." *Just let me go.* My mind begs what my voice will not. *Please let me go.* Another minute passes before his arms drop from my waist in a move so quick it leaves me unsettled. I place my hands on his thighs and push myself to my feet. Everything tilts to the left. I close my eyes but that only makes it worse so I open them. I feel the warmth of his hand on my lower back. It's the only thing that keeps me from falling.

I take a deep breath as if I haven't breathed properly in hours. I move away from his touch and turn to face him. I search those eyes, deep gold with flecks of brown, trying to decipher what I see there. Stepping back I tell him, "I'm fine."

His brow furrows and the look of concern in his eyes is replaced by anger. "You are so fucking far from fine it's not even funny." His face twists from anger, to shock at his own words, to regret, and finally to something softer, something warmer. "Were you trying to get yourself killed?" There is no heat behind the question. It's not an accusation, because I feel the fear in his voice.

"No." My mind won't allow me to throw a sarcastic comment at him. It's never been like this. Usually after a panic attack I feel erratic and flustered. Right now I feel calm, fatigued, and unprotected. Everything in me is motionless.

He runs a hand through his hair and looks away from me. He takes a deep breath before his eyes come back to mine. "I'm sorry." I don't want that. I don't need that. I shake my head. He doesn't have to do that. He didn't know. He just didn't *know*. "What happened in the café?"

I shake my head. "Forget it."

"How can I...you almost?"

I step toward him. My inhibitions are gone. My defenses temporarily disengaged. I place my fingers on his lips. "Don't." In that one word I beg him to stop. I don't want to talk about it now, not here. I need... "I want to get back...to the gallery." I remove my fingers from his lips and shove my hands into my pockets. I turn and start walking back toward the building. It isn't long before he falls in step beside me, taking the outer side of the sidewalk closest to the street. It's impossible to hear silence on a busy street like this one, but I can feel it just like I feel his eyes on me. I ignore both. Whether he can sense that I don't want to talk or not, I don't know, but he doesn't say anything as we walk back and for that I'm grateful.

June 19, 2019 1:15pm

Justin's POV

I'm in the middle of hanging a painting when I see Gus and Grady walk into the gallery. I didn't even know Gus left. My brow furrows as I take in Gus' body language. Something is off, way off. I set the painting against the wall and walk over to him. He doesn't say anything, just looks me right in the eyes. Working on instinct alone I open my arms. He steps forward wrapping his arms around my waist. His hands clutch the fabric of my shirt. He's shaking...not crying, just shaking. I lift my head up just enough to see Grady over Gus' shoulder. What the fuck happened? I try to read Grady's body language; he's slumping, yet tense, his body a contradiction in motion.

Gus takes a deep breath and steps back from me. He doesn't say anything, just looks at me for a moment, then turns and walks upstairs. I notice that he glances at Grady quickly as he goes, as if asking him for something, or maybe even giving his permission for something. When Gus is gone I turn back to Grady. "What the fuck happened?"

He runs a hand through his hair and leans back against the wall as though he might fall down otherwise. He stares straight ahead for a minute before looking at me. "He almost got hit by a car."

My eyes widen. "What?" The word cracks from the pitch of my voice.

He shakes his head. "We were at that Café down the street. You know the one with the really good coffee?" I nod even though he isn't looking at me. "We were talking about nothing really and..." He closes his eyes. "And I guess I said something wrong or I don't know. He just got this look in his eyes and he ran out of the café before I could even process what happened." He opens his eyes and takes a deep breath. "I dropped some money on the table and followed him. When I got to the corner he was just there, standing in the middle of the street." He swallows hard. "He wasn't moving and this taxi wasn't stopping so I...ran out there and grabbed him."

Holy fuck. *Fuck*. "What happened after that?" I sound rational but I'm anything but, on the inside I'm a chaotic storm of emotion.

He shakes his head. "I've never seen anything like that in my life. I've never heard anything like that ever. He was so still when he was in the middle of the street, and when I pulled him back it was like I unplugged him. He was shaking and crying and..." He shakes his head again. "Screaming." He turns to look at me. "Screaming, Justin, at the top of his lungs. I don't even think he knows he was doing that." He looks away from me. "He just kept screaming and screaming until his voice gave out."

I take a minute and wrap my mind around what Grady's telling me. Gus obviously had a panic attack-but not just that. The way Grady described how Gus was acting almost sounds like he was reliving... "When he was screaming was he saying anything?"

He slowly lifts his eyes to meet mine. “Yes.” It’s almost a whisper.

I step closer to him. “Don’t make me dig it out of you, tell me what he said.” Grady presses back against the wall, almost as if he is threatened by me. I change the tone of my voice. “What did he say?”

He looks over my shoulder. “He just kept saying, don’t die, don’t you fucking die on me, don’t go, don’t die.” He swallows back the emotion that creeps into his voice. He looks back at me, holding my gaze. “He said, I fucking love you Ash, don’t you dare fucking die.”

I look down as Grady crosses his arms over his chest. There are dark red marks on his forearms, small cuts, and half-moon shaped indentions that will soon turn into bruises. “He did that?” I look back up at him.

He looks down at his arms, uncrosses them, and drops them to his sides. “He wouldn’t let me go.”

I look toward the stairs wondering what I should do. Should I go up to him? Does he want to be alone? I look back at Grady. “Are you okay?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know.” His eyes meet mine. “Will he be okay?”

I answer with the truth because it’s all I have. “I don’t know.”

June 19, 2019 1:26pm

Brian’s POV

“...it says no apologies, no regrets. Give into your des-” Cynthia charges into the conference room without knocking. She scans the room almost frantically until her eyes find me. My stomach contorts into a knot that gets tighter as she approaches. “What’s wrong?” I ignore everyone in the room as if they’ve suddenly disappeared.

She stops a few feet from me. “Justin-he’s on the phone-he-”

I don’t wait for her to finish. I race out of the conference room and rush into my office. I forgo walking around my desk and reach for the phone. “Justin?” Nothing. I shake my head and press the blinking light on the phone. “Justin?”

“Brian.” He sighs my name, almost in relief. “I know you’re in a meeting-” His voice is off. The knot in my stomach constricts.

“What happened? What’s wrong? Are you okay? Gus?” I fire questions at him without taking a breath.

“Gus.” The tightness moves into my chest. “I think you should come here.”

I walk around my desk, reach for my briefcase, and throw it on the table. “The gallery?”

“Yes.” His voice is tight and low.

“Is he hurt?” I shove papers into my briefcase, not even sure what I’m putting in there. I check my pockets: keys, cell phone, PDA.

“He almost got hit by a car.”

I freeze. All rationality leaves me. My grip tightens on the phone. “Christ.”

“Just get here Brian.”

“On my way.” I hang up the phone, grab my briefcase, and leave my office. Cynthia is in the hallway. She falls in step with me as I make my way down the hall. The exit feels miles away. “I’m leaving.” I tell her as my mind switches to autopilot. “Get Jones to cover the rest of the meeting. Make my apologies to the clients. Cancel the rest of my day. If you can’t cancel get someone to cover-you, Jones, or Mac.”

She touches my arm. “I’ll take care of it Brian.” She pauses. “Is everything alright?”

I pass the elevators and shrug off her hand. When I push open the door to the stairwell, our eyes meet. “I don’t know.” I just don’t fucking know.

January 1, 2017 (Time Unknown)

Gus’ POV

My eyes flutter open. I move. A sharp pain courses through me. It’s dark. I don’t know where I am. I smell-

“Gus?” A raspy voice, low and breathless, calls out to me.

I turn my head toward it. Ash. I can barely make out his face, but I know it’s him. Images assault my brain as the event replays itself behind my eyes. I try to move but I’m locked in place, held captive by my seatbelt. I yank at it, frantically trying to free myself from its hold. It takes a second for common sense to find me. I stop yanking and press the release button. It disengages and I’m free. I twist toward Ash. My body protests my every move. I ignore the sharp stabs of pain, not giving in to my mind’s plea to stay perfectly still. My

only thought is to get to him. I reach out and curl my fingers around his forearm. A warm sticky substance coats it. His skin is cold.

“Ash?” Tears roll down my face uninhibited. I grip his arm as tight as I can. “Ashley.”

“It’s dark.” He whispers. “So cold.”

Panic seizes me and coils itself around me like a vice. The strong smell of gasoline drifts into the car. I lift my head and stare out the passenger window as the car that hit us goes up in flames. Smoke fills the inside of the car. It’s heavy and thick. I don’t have time. We don’t have time. We have to get out now. Now, now, now. Adrenaline courses through my veins. I release Ash’s arm to undo his seatbelt. I twist my body around and jerk at the handle of my door. It doesn’t budge. Panic settles under my skin and boils to the surface as a cold sweat. I pull at the handle with one hand and push at the door with the other. Finally, it opens. A blast of the cold night air rushes into the cab of the car. I suck in my breath from the shock of the cold against my damp skin.

I turn in the seat back to him. “Ash we gotta get out of here.”

“I can’t.”

I shake my head unwilling to hear that. He can. He will even if I have to drag him out of here myself. I grab his arm. The light of the fire illuminates him. He’s covered in blood. The impact has manipulated his body in a way that’s not natural. A bone protrudes from his leg. I swallow the bile that rises in my throat. I twist my body forcing my legs out the door while pulling him with me. I release him for just a minute as I stand. I stumble forward. A sharp pain races up my leg and I fall hard to the ground. A cry escapes my lips as my face comes in contact with the asphalt. I taste blood in my mouth. I allow myself a moment to breathe past the ache that throbs through my body, giving myself over to the pain as it holds me captive in its embrace...a moment of tasting blood, and inhaling the repugnant smell of tar. I hear him cough behind me and suddenly feeling no pain. The adrenaline that was expelled out of me when I fell returns full force. I push myself up. My knees won’t bend, so I’m forced to drag my body across the asphalt. Ash’s hand dangles out the door, limp and, oh god, lifeless. I claw my way toward him. My hands bleed and burn as I drag myself over to him across tiny shards of glass. I reach the car and grab hold of the door to pull myself up to my knees. Pain haunts my every move. Leaning forward, I grip his hand and bring my face close to his.

His eyes are closed but he must feel me. “Gus.” His voice is fading. “Let me go.”

I shake my head and grip his hand tighter. “No way. No fucking way.”

His eyes open. Those aren’t his eyes. His eyes are bright and brown like the color of dark roasted coffee beans. These eyes are dull, like the color of the faded leather jacket that hangs in my closet at home. I touch his cheek. My fingers make clear paths to his flesh beneath the blood.

“Just let me go.” Fading. Fading fast.

Tears spring to my eyes and slide down my cheeks in silent mourning. Sobs escape my lips as I hold onto him. I pull myself up enough to wrap my arms around him. “No.”

“Gus, please let me go.” His voice is low. I strain to hear it.

I bury my head into his matted hair. “Don’t die. Don’t you fucking die on me. Don’t go. Don’t die.” I kiss his face, his lips. I taste his blood in my mouth mixing with my own. “I fucking love you Ash.” I sob into his neck. “Don’t you dare fucking die on me.”

I feel him move his hands and push at me. I look into his eyes. They’re clear just the way I’ve always remembered them. He looks at me. He sees me. “I know.” He shoves me back with a strength I didn’t think he had. My legs fold under me as I fall back against the pavement. My back smacks to the ground, the air in my lungs escapes, and my neck snaps as my head hits the asphalt. My eyes close momentarily but I force them back open. I try to push myself up, wanting only to get back to him. I’m leaning on my elbows when my car is engulfed in flames. I scream. “No! No! No!” I fall back against the pavement. My mind shuts down. The smell of his burning flesh chases me into the darkness.

June 19, 2019 2:07 pm

Brian’s POV

I curse at the traffic. I yell at the taxi driver. Forty-one minutes after Justin called me, I finally arrive at the gallery. I throw money at the driver, a fifty, a hundred, I don’t know, and get out. I take the steps two at a time. The moment the door swings open, my eyes are scanning the room for Justin. I see him kneeling in front of Grady, who is sitting on the floor with his arms wrapped around his knees. When my briefcase hits the floor they both turn their faces toward me. Justin comes over to me and I hold open my arms to him. His hands slide around my waist as I bring him to my chest.

“What happened?” I ask softly in a voice that came out much calmer than I thought it would.

He shakes his head against my chest and pulls away. Taking my hand he leads me over to Grady, who is now standing. When we get to him Justin says, “Tell him everything.”

As I listen to Grady recount the event my emotions race from anger, to fear, to some unknown mixture of both. When he stops talking I look down at Justin. His eyes meet mine and we think the same thing, *he remembers*.

After the accident, after Gus woke up from the coma, he was plagued by amnesia, just as Justin had been. His memory of the event had been locked away in some part of his mind. Possibly, like Justin, it had been lost forever. He remembered driving toward Ashley's house after the party but couldn't remember what happened after the cars collided. The doctors thought he might have been unconscious the entire time but the police report confirmed that wasn't possible. Gus had gotten out of the car sometime before it caught fire. If he'd been unconscious he wouldn't be here right now. The fucker that hit them hadn't been wearing a seatbelt and got ejected out of his car, escaping with nothing more than some lacerations and a broken arm.

When Gus woke up from the coma, the doctors asked him repeatedly what he remembered. They asked him everyday for a week, sometimes several times a day, until Gus finally said, in a voice that was calm when it should have been filled with frustration and anger, "I don't remember. Stop asking me."

"Where is he?" I ask Justin.

He squeezes my hand. "Upstairs." He looks away, then back at me. "I just thought he might need you."

I squeeze his hand back, release it, and kiss his temple. I turn to Grady, giving him the once over. He pushes himself up against the wall as if he's afraid I'm going to attack him, or yell at him, or berate him. "Thanks." I don't wait for his reaction or for any words he might have to say. I turn toward the stairs and take them two at a time.

I take a deep breath before pushing open the door to his studio. My eyes scan the room for him. When I don't see him I walk further into the room. My eyes land on the sliver of red light that's coming out from under the darkroom door. I approach it cautiously and knock, not knowing if he's developing film or just hiding in there.

"Sonnyboy?"

"Dad?" His voice is small, mirroring that of a child, a scared child.

"I'm coming in." My hand rests on the knob waiting for him to tell me okay, or wait, or something. When he doesn't say anything I open the door. After my eyes adjust to the dimness of the red-lit room I see him, curled into a ball in the corner. He's crying and shaking. I approach him slowly. His eyes are shut tight and his face is contorted in pain that seems to come from something buried deep inside him. I lower myself until I'm sitting in front of him and I reach out, but stop myself before touching him. I'm not sure if that's what he wants so I drop my hand to my lap. "Sonnyboy." I say softly, my voice barely a whisper.

His eyes open and he looks up at me. "Dad." He uncurls himself and slides his head into my lap as his arms circle around my waist. "Daddy." I blink back my own tears as I stroke his hair. Gus hasn't called me Daddy since he was eight years old. He balls my suit

jacket in his fists. He cries harder, pressing his face into my leg. His tears soak through the fabric of my dress pants, and I can feel the coolness on my skin. I stroke his hair back from his face and rub his back with my other hand. "I remem...remember Daddy. I rem...remember ever...everything." His words hiccup out of his mouth, soaked in tears. "I tried. I...re...really...tired. I tried to save him. I...tried...to...pu...pull him out." A tear escapes my eyes but I don't wipe it away. "I had him. I al...almost had...him...out..." His sobs halt his words momentarily. "I...told...to...told him not to...die. I told...h...him...that I...l...loved...him." I pull him closer to me, bending my body over his in an awkward hug. "He... he save...saved me. He...pushed me away." His voice gets louder. "He said...he knew...Daddy...then he...pushed...pushed me...away...and saved me." His sobs shake my body. Tears roll down my face, drip off my chin, and drop onto the back of his shirt. I feel his pain all the way to the core of my body. I feel his loss and it gets mixed in with my own what if's and could-have-beens. He cries for minutes but it feels like hours. His tears are like the wick of a slow burning candle. Finally he takes a deep ragged breath and whispers. "He's dead." And I know it's the first time he's ever said it out loud.

“There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief...and unspeakable love.”

~ Washington Irving ~

June 20, 2019 1:15am

Justin's POV

Brian holds my face between his hands, his thumbs move back and forth over my cheeks. I feel every beat of his heart through his cock in my ass. Leaning down, he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth. My hands slide up and down his back, which is covered with a light sheen of sweat. There are vast amounts of ways to have sex. There's getting off just to get off. There's fucking where the only goal in mind is having the best fucking orgasm. During sex there are any number of emotions that pass between the two people involved. Feelings like sadness, anger, frustration, want, need, lust, love are traded back and forth between us like the spit from a kiss. Everything Brian is feeling gets transferred to me in the way his body moves, in the way hands and lips cross my skin, in the way his eyes watch every move I make beneath him.

He moves inside me a fraction of an inch, causing an electric current to pulsate through my body. As he pulls away from me my bottom lip slips from his mouth. Pushing his hands into my hair he moves again, not hard or fast. It's not pulling all the way out and slamming back into me. It's the tiniest of strokes causing my back to arch and a moan to escape my lips. His fingers trace the scar beneath my hair as his eyes lock on mine. The thumb of his left hand grazes across my swollen bottom lip as he moves again inside me.

This isn't about desire. This isn't just fucking. It isn't about getting off. This is about feeling alive through the sensations our bodies create when they move together. It's about feeling connected. This is about knowing I'm here with him, always here with him. This is about being together despite all the shit we've been through in the eighteen years since we met. *This* is about our love.

He buries his face in my neck and places his lips on my skin at my pulse point as he rocks inside me at a slow and steady pace. Brian and I fuck all the time, hard and fast, but its times like this, when he lets me feel everything, that I love the most. He opens himself up to me. His love fills me in a way nothing else can. It consumes me. It overpowers and overwhelms me. It's so much sometimes that tears come to my eyes. He knows when I feel it. He can tell without even having to look at me. His lips move from my neck, across my flesh, until he's kissing the tears from below my eyes. I press my hands flat on his back and press him down on me until every inch of his body is touching mine. No, this

isn't about getting off, it's about us, him and me, and knowing that no matter what else is going on, no matter what happens, we will always have this, and each other.

When he presses his lips back against my neck I turn my head and whisper in his ear, "Love me."

He pushes his hands between the mattress and me until his arms are wrapped around my shoulders. He pulls me to him, his rhythm never wavering. He does exactly what I ask, he loves me.

As our breathing evens out, Brian starts to talk. His face is buried in my neck, his fingers stroke my hair, and his lips brush against my skin with each word. I'm listening to him recount what Gus told him. Tears spring to my eyes, slide down my cheeks, and drip onto his skin. I can't describe what I'm feeling as he's telling me these things. I can't even begin to imagine what it must have been like for Gus. Then Brian says, "...he told him he knew and then pushed him away from the car." His voice is raspy and I can only imagine what he's thinking.

Taking his face in my hands I lift his head so I can look into his eyes. "That's..." I close my eyes and open them slowly. That's the saddest thing I've heard. No one should have to go through that. No child should have to experience something like that. "God." I slide my arms around Brian's neck as he presses his face back to my neck. He lies mostly on top of me as I cry tears, not for me, but for Gus. There really are no words to describe what Gus has gone through. No fucking words at all.

Brian's POV

I hold Justin to me as he cries silently for Gus. Gus. I held him in the darkroom for a long time. He just seemed fucking drained, physically and emotionally. The fact that my son, our son, has experienced something so fucking tragic just ripped this big fucking hole in me. I'm not one to believe in clichéd sayings that belong in some breeder parenting guide, but it's true that parents want better for their children. I've seen some pretty fucked up things in my life, experienced my own fucking tragedies. I never wanted that for Gus. No parent would want that for their child.

I run my fingers through Justin's soft blond hair. Gus remembers. It explains a few things, like why he wasn't in the car. Why he was on the pavement unconscious. Why Ashley had still been in the car. Ashley had pushed Gus back, away. My guess is that the emergency workers arrived shortly after that, because Ashley may have pushed him away, but not so far to keep the fire from melting the bottom of his shoes. If there was a way to track down the dead, to find them, or talk to them, I'd spend the rest of my life tracking down Ashley in the afterlife just to fucking thank him. He fucking saved Gus' life. There was no way Gus would have let him go. I know that. Gus is that type of person, just like me. He may not always say it, but when he loves someone it goes deep, sets roots, and fucking grows. It's all consuming sometimes. I imagine that's how he felt about Ashley. He would have stayed right there with him and fucking burned if Ashley

hadn't pushed him away. It was never known whether Ashley had still been alive when the car caught fire, but I fucking hope he wasn't. What a fucking way to go. My guess is that he knew he wouldn't make it even if he'd gotten out. Maybe he could feel death coming and that's why he pushed Gus back. If he'd still been alive... what a fucking sacrifice to make. If he'd sacrificed his own fucking life for Gus... If he'd done that he must have loved... fuck that, that wasn't love. That was more than love. That one four letter word can't encompass what that was. It was more than love. It was everything.

June 20, 2019 3:48am

Gus' POV

I wake up slowly. My eyelids are heavy. It's dark. I swallow hard. My throat is sore. It feels raw. It's too dark. I don't like it. Untangling myself from the covers, I stumble to the windows. I yank open the drapes, letting the lights of the city flood my room. Back in bed, I lay still. My thoughts short. I feel numb. I remember. I have no more tears to cry. Nothing left. I shed them all. There will be more. I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. My mind wakes up, my body tingles. Thoughts begin to surface. Why? Why the fuck did this happen?

He saved me. He saved me. He fucking saved me. It plays in my head like a CD with a scratch on it. I press next track but it's the same fucking thing. *He saved me. He saved me.* Next track. *He saved me.* All the songs in the CD are the same. I listen. *He saved me.* It plays over and over. I cover my ears but the beat comes from inside. *He saved me.* Stop. Please stop.

I didn't want to be saved, not at the expense of his life. I should have tried harder. I should have done more. I should have gotten him out when I had the chance. He knew I loved him. Does that make it better? Worse? It's all so fucking confusing. The whole fucking thing. All of it. That whole night. My whole life since then. My biggest fear was that he didn't know. He knew. He fucking knew. Should that comfort me? God, I want it to. It doesn't because I smell it, feel it, fucking taste it. His death is in my mouth, coating my tongue, pumping through my veins, and pulsating with my heart. It's in every breath I take. It's all around me, through me, in me. It's fucking everywhere.

Was I better off not remembering? Not knowing? What comfort is to be had in the fact that he died and I lived only because he chose to save me? Anger creeps up on me. It's like a razor blade against my skin. It cuts, it stings, but it doesn't bleed because this emotion is so small compared to the others.

What am I suppose to do with this memory? What am I suppose to take from it? Is this what I've been waiting for? He's never felt completely dead to me until the moment I remembered. Is that how it's supposed to work? Am I supposed to move on? Forget it? Forget him? Is this where the healing begins? How do I fucking process the images that

play behind my eyes? How do I move on from seeing my car burning with him still-

Bile rises in my throat. I scramble off the bed, fall to the floor, and crawl to the trashcan in time to expel the dinner I barely ate in silence with Dad and Justin. Pushing the trashcan away, I crawl back over to the bed and pull myself up. I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling as if it might be able to provide me with what I need. Fuck, I don't even know what I need right now. I feel...I'm not sure how I feel. How am I supposed to feel? It's not like remembering changed anything, did it? Whether I remembered or not it doesn't change the fact that Ash is dead. God, I hope he didn't suffer. I fucking hope he was already gone before the fire... Is that a fucked up thing to think? It can't be because the other option, that he was still alive, that's just fucking inconceivable.

I didn't tell Dad everything. I didn't tell him what I saw. I couldn't. I couldn't say those words out loud. I don't know that I'll ever be able to say it out loud to anyone. Rolling over I press my face into the bed. Why did it happen? Why did it have to happen to us? Why? Why did he die? Why did he push me away? Why did he fucking do that, knowing that I fucking loved him? Why?

I don't stop the tears that bleed out of my eyes. I couldn't stop them even if I wanted to. It's so fucking unfair. The whole fucking thing is just fucking *wrong*. He shouldn't have died. He should be here with me. He should be..."Ash." His name rolls off my tongue and I hug a pillow to me. "Ash." I just wish he was here with me. I wish none of this had ever happened. I wish...I wish...I grip the pillow tighter and cry harder. Everything that had been buried in me, every emotion that had been locked away inside me since I woke up from the coma, is ripped from me and it fucking hurts. It cuts. It bleeds. It makes me feel raw, open, and so fucking alone. It doesn't matter what I wish. This is my reality. He's not coming back, he's not missing, he's dead. There's no way I can lie to myself about it anymore. I've seen it. I know it. Even when I went to his grave I wasn't connected to his death. Now I am. I press my face harder into the bed as the CD in my head begins to play again, *he saved me*. I drown in the sound. I let it wash over me and drag me under the current. I let it fill my lungs and choke me. I let it consume me as I take from it the only comfort I can, that he knew I loved him, and that *he saved me*.

“An artist finds his happiest combination in a play of complementary colors. They are direct contrasts yet do not jar; they awaken the beholder, but do not disturb him.”
~ Charles Burchfield ~

June 22, 2019 5:38am

Gus’ POV

The morning sunlight slides along the street, highlighting the sides of the buildings. The sky melts from cobalt blue to an ember orange. The two colors blend, fading in and out of each other, so that the only color between them is a soft slate grey. It’s not like I’ve never seen a sunrise before, but there is an aesthetic beauty to a New York City sunrise. I watch as the sun pushes its fingers through the city, marring the shadows cast by the tallest of buildings with the stain of its bright fingerprints. I can’t ignore my artistic yearning to capture the battle of the sun verses the city. I turn from the window and quickly dress in a worn blue t-shirt, baggy khaki shorts, and my flip flops. Grabbing my digital camera from the top of the dresser, I leave my bedroom, walk out of the loft as quietly as I can, and head to the stairs that lead up to the roof. I’ve only been on the roof of this building once...with Ash. There is a slight pain in my chest from that thought, but I ignore it. It’s okay...to remember the good times. I want it to be okay to think about him and not feel that fucking ache that comes from the mere thought of his name.

I climb up the steps and push open the door to the roof. The air is still cool this early in the morning. As I step onto the roof I let the door close behind me, knowing from experience it’s not one that automatically locks when it’s closed. I remember Ash freaked out about it for a minute until I pulled the door open to show him, *“See it’s not always like you see on TV, stop queening out.”* He laughed then. I miss his laugh. The way it would start in the back of his throat and just seem to come bubbling out of him. Stepping up to the ledge of the roof, I lean against it and turn my camera on. Tears blur my vision as I remember wrapping my arms around Ash as we stood in this very spot watching the sunset on our last day together in New York. He told me what a great time he had, that he knew he’d catch hell when he got home, but that it was worth it.

“Every minute I’ve spent with you here Gus was worth it.” He leaned into me, his head resting on my shoulder as he gazed up at me. He looked so beautiful just then, the orange of the sunset making his hair shine like a new copper penny, his eyes dark and teeming with emotion. He caressed my face and said, in a low husky voice, *“I love you.”*

I didn’t say it back to him. It wasn’t that I didn’t feel it. It was as if I felt it too much. I leaned in to kiss him, trying to convey how I felt without words. I’d probably loved him for a long time by then. We’d been together a while by the time we went to New York together, but long before we got together we were best friends. I brush the tears from my

face with the back of my hand, trying to tell myself that it's okay to remember him. It's okay to remember the good times. It just hurts so fucking much, but it's better than remembering how I last saw him. It's better than remembering that last terrible glimpse I had of him before my world faded to black. I want to remember his smile, his laugh, the way he liked to be kissed on the inside of his elbow, the way his hair would always fall into his eyes and how he was constantly pushing it back. I want to remember that he loved me. I want to remember how he made me feel. How I never felt lonely or scared or any of this shit I've been feeling lately, because Ash was there to make everything seem better, even if it wasn't.

Bringing my camera up, I point it down to the street and snap a picture. I've had a few days of trying to deal with the memories of the accident. It's been three days of sleeplessness, of trying to cope with the images and the feelings associated with them. I've been trying to process it. When Justin and I were walking to the gallery yesterday morning he told me that just because I remembered didn't mean I was going to wake up and feel better about everything. He told me it would take time, and that was okay. I don't think Justin realizes how much he helps me sometimes. He never forces his opinions on me, or tells me how I should think or feel. He just says these little things that always make sense. Dad does it to. It's like they pull these little nuggets of knowledge from their past experiences and let me take from them what I want. There's no pressure when I'm around them.

I move to the corner of the roof, taking a few more pictures. I'm not saying my Moms put pressure on me to remember anything, but they did put pressure on me to deal with it better. It wasn't malicious, or even intentional. My Moms just want me to be better, to get better, to be okay, and to be the son that they used to know. I think I've been so busy pretending to be okay for them that I never really had a chance to sort through all the bullshit of what happened. Maybe that's one of the reasons I like living with Dad and Justin, I don't have to pretend anything.

I set my camera down and lean against the ledge of the roof. Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back and take a deep breath. I miss Ash more than ever before. Maybe it's from remembering the accident, or maybe it's because I feel the loss of all the things we could have done together, all the places we could have seen, the life we could have shared, the memories we could have made. I miss what could have been as much as I miss what we had. I let tears slide down my face freely, because I feel the loneliness and sadness of missing everything wrap itself around me. It's okay, I realize, to miss these things, to miss him, to want what is no longer possible. It's okay to cry about it and mourn it. Someday I have to believe it will even be okay to let it go, but not today, not yet.

June 22, 2019 6:29am

Justin's POV

Yawning, I slide from beneath Brian's arm, which is flung across my stomach. He doesn't even move when I leave the bed. I smile down at him as I pull on my shorts. I remember the days when he'd never sleep late, not even on weekends. It was either because he just couldn't sleep, or work forced him from our bed at ungodly hours. I'm more than happy that those days are behind us. It's not that we sleep until noon on the days we are off. We just aren't like that. If we spend all day in bed, believe me, it's not because we're sleeping. Grinning to myself I use to bathroom and wash my face. I look longingly at the shower, but decide to go make some coffee first. I pull on a plain white t-shirt and make my way to the kitchen. I have one foot in the doorway of the kitchen when the front door opens. I lean back into the hallway and watch as Gus walks in, carrying his camera and the newspaper.

He looks up at me. "Hey." He says as he walks by me, flipping on the coffee machine, and sitting down at the table.

"Where were you?" I ask, leaning against the counter near the coffee machine.

"On the roof." He gets up and grabs his camera. "Check out the pictures I took."

He hands me his digital camera and I flip through the pictures. "Wow Gus, these are really good."

"Are you just saying that because you aren't totally awake yet?"

Laughing, I look up at him. "No." Looking back down at the camera, I pause on a particular shot that shows the light sneaking up the street, interrupting the blackness of the shadows. "This one is...the composition, the balance of light and dark. It's got a certain feel to it." It feels like loneliness, sadness, but the light that enters the picture seems to provide a sense of hope. I want to tell him that, but I'm pretty sure he already knows.

"Yeah." He takes the camera from my hands. "I really like that one."

"It's a great picture. You should definitely have it framed."

He scoffs. "Framed? Justin, it isn't *that* good."

Pulling a mug from the cabinet above the coffee machine I shake my head. "Don't sell yourself short. It's great...and I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it."

He sets his camera on the counter and walks over to the refrigerator. "Maybe I'll show it to you again after you've had your coffee."

I shrug and pour myself a cup. "I'll still think it's brilliant." I stir cream into my coffee and take a sip. Setting my mug aside, I pull another one down from the cabinet and pour a cup of coffee for Brian. After I pour an ungodly amount of sugar into his cup I turn to

Gus, who's pouring himself a glass of juice. "It's a great shot Gus, and even if you don't frame it you should definitely include it in your portfolio."

He looks at me over the rim of his glass before lowering it. "You think it's that good?"

I smile at him and grab the two cups of coffee from the counter. "I really do Gus." The corner of his mouth lifts up in a lopsided grin. It's so nice to see him smile, even just a little, after the last couple of weeks he's had. Still smiling, I raise the cups to him. "Now I'm going to wake up your Dad and convince him to take us shopping."

Gus laughs, and god that's a really nice sound. "Convince Dad to go shopping? Isn't that like trying to convince a hardcore Christian to read the bible?"

I laugh. "I suppose that's true, but only if we were going shopping for clothes. We need groceries, and he hates that kind of shopping."

He smirks. "Why is that?"

I smile. "He has an aversion to coupons."

"You clip coupons?" Gus raises his eyebrow. I nod. "Why?"

"Honestly?" He nods. "To annoy your Dad." I start laughing and Gus joins in. It's nice, really nice, to see him laughing. Shaking my head, I hold up the coffee cups and leave the kitchen. Gus' laughter follows me to the bedroom and I can't stop smiling.

June 22, 2019 6:38am

Brian's POV

I'm leaning against the headboard when Justin walks into the bedroom carrying two cups of coffee. He turns, shutting the door with his hip, and looks over at me with a smile. I raise an eyebrow as he walks towards me. Leaning over, he kisses my lips and hands me a mug. "Morning."

I set my cup on the shelving unit behind our bed. I take his cup from him and set it down next to mine. I tug at the bottom of his shirt. He smiles at me and quickly discards it as I unbutton his shorts. When they slide down his legs he steps out of them. His cock is hard. He wiggles his eyebrows and smiles at me. I raise my eyebrow as I grab him by the waist and flip him over me onto the bed. He laughs as I straddle his hips and pin his arms above his head. "You know..." I run my tongue slowly over his bottom lip and pull back before he can kiss me. "All these years..." I nip at his neck, at the sensitive spot near his pulse point. He moans and squirms beneath me. "I thought you..." I run my tongue down his

neck and suck on his skin where it curves into his shoulder. “Really...” I push his arms out further as I lean down and flick my tongue over his nipple. He moans and pushes his hips up. “Used...” I nip at his nipple before kissing my way up the middle of his chest, along his neck, until my lips are hovering above his. His eyes are dark blue with lust. “Coupons to save money...” His eyes widen. “But, I’ve just recently learned...” I bring his bottom lip into my mouth, sucking on it hard, before releasing it. “That you really aren’t as tight...” His eyes move down my face focusing on my lips. He runs his tongue over his swollen bottom lip before looking up at me. “As I thought you were.”

He pushes against me, his whole body straining with effort. He lifts himself up just enough to place a peck on my lips. “Oh, I’m still tight.”

When I release his hands, he grabs my face, and our mouths smash together in a hungry wet kiss. I weave my fingers into his hair as I suck his tongue into my mouth. I slide my legs between his. He presses his cock to my stomach and moans in my mouth at the contact. We spend the next few minutes just kissing. The coffee taste in his mouth mixes with the minty toothpaste flavor of mine. The taste is both sweet and bitter. Our tongues slide against each other, tracing teeth and lips. His hips buck up a little against me seeking out the contact my stomach is making with his cock. My cock, hard and dripping, is pressed in the spot between his balls and his ass. It would be so easy just to move a fraction of an inch and enter him. When we finally break from the kiss I pull back from him and brush the hair from his forehead.

He runs his hands up and down my upper arms. “You heard me.” He’s breathless and smiling.

“You left the door open.”

Sliding my arm between our bodies, I take his cock in my hand. I rub the pad of my thumb over his slit, smearing the pre-come over the head. I tsk at him. “So wet.” He arches his back as my thumb moves back and forth over the head of his cock.

“Brian.” That moan goes straight to my cock, making it pulsate and ache.

I remove my hand from his cock, sliding it over the soft skin of his stomach before pushing it back into his hair. I kiss him again. His mouth is hot and wet. When the kiss ends I tell him softly, “Roll over.”

When I lift myself off of him, he turns over onto his stomach. I run my hands over the pale creamy skin of his back down to softness of his ass. With my knees on either side of his legs I playfully slap one of his ass cheeks. “Hands and knees.”

As he maneuvers himself into position, I reach over and grab the lube. Kneeling behind him, I pour some of the lube into my hand and take my time lathering my cock with it, just to watch him squirm with anticipation. He moves his ass toward me but I back away. “Patience.” I tell him. Tossing the bottle of lube to the floor I cover my body with his.

The slick head of my cock presses against his hole. Supporting myself with my left hand I push the hair off the back of his neck before kissing him there. “You’ve been a bad boy haven’t you?”

His body shivers beneath me and I feel his hole clenching as the head of my cock rubs against it. “Yes.” His answer turns into a gasp as I enter him.

I kiss and suck his neck, telling him how hard I’m about to fuck him. He pushes back against me saying, “Do it.”

I lift my body, sliding my hands down his sides until I’m gripping his hips. I slowly pull out and quickly slam back into him. His whole body moves forward a few inches at the force of my thrust. I do it again and a loud gasp escapes his lips. I fucking live for the sounds he makes when I fuck him like this. I thrust into him harder and faster. He grips the sheets, the pillows, his body sliding forward until he starts pushing back against me thrust for thrust. Sweat seeps from beneath our skin. Our grunts and groans get louder each time our bodies slam together. When we hear the stereo in the living room come on full blast we both laugh.

Heavy metal music charges into our room and soon our pace begins to match the bass line beats. When I alter my angle so that each stroke of my cock now rubs against Justin’s prostate, he practically screams out my name. It only makes me want to fuck him harder, faster. My fingers dig into the soft skin of his hips and I know he’ll have bruises there later. He releases the twisted sheets from his right hand and makes a move to grab his cock. I slap it away. “No.” That makes him whimper. I angle my cock even more, changing my strokes inside him to quick short thrusts. His body starts to shake as the head of my cock continues to rub over his prostate. He says my name over and over in short gasps. His hole clinches around me, his body tightens up, and I know he’s not far away from coming. I thrust deep into him. His orgasm causes his ass to tighten around me. I am buried to the balls in him as his ass siphons the come out of my cock.

We collapse onto the bed, our sweat slick bodies sliding against each other. I gently pull out of him and flop onto my back. It takes at least five minutes before our breathing returns to normal. I look over at Justin as he props himself up on his elbow. He blinds me with his beaming smile. “So?” I raise my eyebrow as I suck my lips into my mouth, trying not to smile. Laughing, he slides his body over me until he’s straddling my lap. “Say it.” I laugh at him as our hands meet and our fingers lace together. He squeezes my hands. “Say it.” He leans forward, takes my nipple between his teeth, and bites it.

“Okay, okay.” I push against his hands until he’s sitting back up and smiling down at me. I roll my eyes and say, tongue in cheek, “You’re still tight.”

June 22, 2019 7:48pm

Gus' POV

I've been to my fair share of art shows. When I was younger, my Mom would drag me to them all the time telling me it would, "Broaden my horizons", "Expand my knowledge of different cultures" and "Someday Gus, it will make you a better artist." I was twelve when she said that last one. What did I know about being an artist then? I just liked taking pictures with my camera. In any case, I never particularly enjoyed them, and when I got old enough I refused to go unless I was interested in the work of the artist. Most of the shows were full of artists with over-inflated egos, and critics who'd either mock, ignore, or kiss the ass of the artist. Everyone was dressed as if they were attending a dinner at the fucking White House. They walked around snacking on puff pastries, sipping red wine, and using every art word they knew to describe what they were seeing. I never cared for the scene, but as I got older I knew one day I'd be a part of it.

Looking around the TK Gallery, I never realized I'd be a part of it quite like this. This is something totally different and it has the influence of Justin all over it. Everyone is dressed in casual clothes, blue jeans, slacks, sneakers. I look over at Dad, whose arm is draped across Justin's shoulders. Even he is dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, all designer labels, of course. There's still wine, but there's also other alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. There are no puff pastries, but rather baked goods from Carmelo's and pasta dishes from Mia Mona's. There are a lot more people here than I thought there would be for a show that contains art from a bunch of kids still in college.

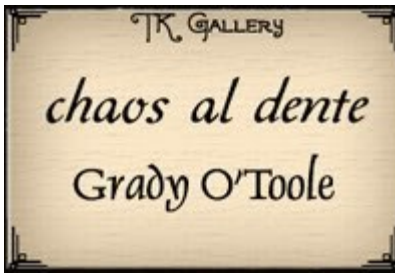
I walk around glancing at the art on the walls. Some of it's good, some of it's not so good...not that I expected Justin to allow any crap to be hanging on the walls. I stop in front of a large piece. It's all black with scratches across the surface, obviously made with a pallet knife, which reveals the bright pink below it. It's an odd use of color. Good balance and use of texture. It feels foreboding, and yet there's a sense of...happiness, or hope that comes from the pinks that show through the layers of ebony.

"It's amazing isn't it?"

I turn and look down into dull green eyes. I've been trying to avoid the fact that this guy's been casing my every move since he got here. I say nothing and turn my attention back to the painting. Leaning forward, I notice the black is really deep dark green. I search the lines of pink and notice touches of brown that dull the hope it brings forward.

"I can't believe next month my work is going to be hanging next to his." I look back down at the guy as he takes a sip of his wine.

Turning back to the painting, I check the tag next to it.



Holy shit, the fucker is talented. I take a step back and take in the canvas again. There is so much going on in the painting, but it's all very subtle. I almost can't stop looking at it.

"He's really talented and he's only twenty-three. Do you know how hard it is to get into The New York Academy of Art? You have to be really good. He is, isn't he? He's the best."

"Are you in love with him or what?" I ask mostly to get him to shut up or go away.

He laughs nervously. "Grady?" I look down at him and raise an eyebrow. His face flushes bright pink. "I...umm..." He swirls the wine in his glass. "He's just really talented, you know?"

"Yeah, right, whatever." I turn back to the painting. I want it. It just *speaks* to me.

"Hello darlings." Maddie walks up to us and slides her arm along the guy's shoulders. That's when I remember who he is, Chase, or Jas, or some shit like that.

"Great, Maddie, do you have one of those stickers on you?" I ask, turning to her. Jas is fucking watching me like he's wishing I'd drop to my knees and suck him off.

"Sure do hon." She smiles up at me, her eyes twinkling.

I raise my eyebrow. "Well, can I have one?"

"Did somebody buy something?" She looks around. "They know to come to me."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Can I just have one?"

She watches me for a minute and finally pulls a little package out of the front pocket of her dress. Once she opens it, she peels off a sticker and hands it to me. Taking the little round green sticker from her, I turn my back on them and place it on the tag next to Grady's painting.

Standing back, I look at the painting again before turning to face Maddie and Jas. Maddie is smiling at me and Jas is...fucking licking his lips. "This one's mine, okay Maddie?"

She smiles a little wider. "Sure hon." She leans over and whispers something in Jas' ear that causes his face to turn beat red. Laughing, she pats him on the cheek and walks off. I roll my eyes and turn back to the painting.

"Um." Please shut the fuck up. That's what I want to tell him. "So..." He clears his throat. "I was wondering if-"

"I'm going out for a smoke. Catch you later." I turn and walk away from him before he decides to finish his pathetic attempt to ask me out. Christ, how can he not get that I'm *not* fucking interested? I walk over to Dad and tell him I'll be outside. He nods. Ever since this morning he's been walking around with this goofy smile on his face, like he's never gotten laid before. They found it endlessly amusing that I'd turned on the stereo to drown out the sounds of them fucking. Christ, they were loud. Dad told me they'd never fucked to heavy metal before and that it added a whole new element to things or some shit like that. I told him that I'd really rather not hear about it. They both just laughed.

I smirk as I walk outside the gallery. As the door closes behind me, I pull my pack of cigarettes from my pocket, tap one out, and light it. I take a deep drag as I shove the pack back into my pocket. I'm about to walk down the steps when I freeze. Grady is leaning against the railing looking up at me. A yellow blur passes through my mind. I shake my head to clear away the flashes of a taxi cab hurling toward me, and walk down a few steps before sitting down. He looks good, dressed in tight dark jeans and a long sleeved green dress shirt.

"It's kinda hot to be wearing long sleeves isn't it?" I ask him as I lean back against the stairs and take a drag of my cigarette. He shrugs. His eyes roam over me, not in a sexual way, it's more of a making sure I'm okay way. I stand up. "Don't." I walk down the last of the steps and away from him.

"Sorry, am I not allowed to ask if you're alright?"

I turn around and he almost walks right into me. Taking a step back, I hold out my arms. "As you can see I'm fine."

He runs a hand through his hair and looks away from me. Dropping my arms, I back a few more steps away from him. When he looks up at me I can see that he doesn't believe me. "Gus-"

I shake my head. "Just don't, okay? I'm fine, really. I...freaked out...and-" And what? I suck on my cigarette and lean against the wall of the building. What do I say to the person that saw me totally fucking flip out? What do I say to the person who fucking saved...my...life? I close my eyes tight and try to push the images away. I feel him in front of me. He takes the cigarette from between my fingers. I want to open my eyes but I can't. His warm hand caresses my cheek, his thumb wipes away a tear that escapes my tightly closed eyes.

“Hey.” His voice is soft. I can feel his breath on my face. “Open your eyes.”

“Can’t.” It starts playing in my head again, like I fucking hit a trigger. *He saved me.* The only problem is I’m not sure if the song is meant for Ash or Grady. *He saved me.* How can I be sure? How do I know? They both saved me, didn’t they?

I feel his other hand press against my other cheek. “Yes, you can.” *He saved me.* “Come on Gus.” His voice is so fucking tender. His thumbs are moving over my cheeks in soft circular patterns that smear the wetness on my face. God, what the fuck is he thinking right now? He must think I’m a fucking basket case. Almost every time he’s seen me I’ve been a fucking mess. “Come on Gus, open your eyes.”

I shake my head. Licking my lips, I taste the salt of my tears. “I never...” My throat closes up. Yellows and blacks mix in my head. Smoke pushes itself inside my lungs. My breath gets stuck somewhere between my lungs and my mouth. Fire. Smoke. Yellow blur. Street. Taxi. Asphalt. Warm arms. Cold, sticky skin. Blood. “*I know.*” Small hands pushing me back. “It’s okay.” Warmth embraces me. *He saved me.* The CD skips. *They saved me.* They saved me. More tears. Sobs break loose. Breath ragged. Arms around me. Arms holding me. “It’s okay.” Whispered words. “*I know.*” Death. That smell. I swallow hard. Push the sickness back. A hand stroking my hair. Soothing me. A body pressing against mine. “Open your eyes.” Reality penetrates my memories. Slowly, I open my eyes. The traffic on the street blurs until it’s nothing but a single smear of bright lights. My hands are gripping the back of Grady’s shirt. His hands rub up and down my back. I shake my head and try to pull back from him. He holds me tighter. “It’s okay.” His lips press against my ear. “Stay.”

I allow him to hold me for a few minutes, then I gently push him away. His hands slide down my back and come to rest on my hips. I wipe the tears from my face. Dropping my hands, I look into his eyes. The soft purple glow of the streetlights makes them appear more yellow than I know they are. His gaze is penetrating, but I don’t look away. Inside I’m trying to gain some sense of composure. Finally I scoff and roll my eyes at myself. “You must think I’m fucking crazy.”

“I don’t think that.”

I place my hands over his and remove them from my hips. I dig in my pocket for my cigarettes. “Why not? I would.”

He shrugs, watching as I remove a cigarette and light it. “I don’t.”

I shove the pack back into my pocket and take a drag of my cigarette as I look at him. “Yeah...well, what do you think?”

He tilts his head. “You really want to know?”

I exhale smoke. “I asked didn’t I?”

“I think...” He steps closer to me and takes the cigarette from between my fingers, holding it up between us. “You smoke too much.”

I take my cigarette back from him and take a deep drag. “You’re fucking hilarious.”

“I also think...” He takes the cigarette from me again and flicks it to the sidewalk. I glare at him. “That you are far away from okay.” He reaches up and brushes my hair back from my face. “I also think...” He steps forward as his hand moves from my hair, down my face, and cups the side of my neck. “That you are the most beautiful person I’ve ever met.”

I suck in a breath. “Does that line usually work for you?” My words come out low and husky.

“Never used it before.” His face inches closer to mine. “Is it working?”

“No.” I whisper.

“That’s too bad.” Before I can even think of something to say to stop this, his mouth covers mine. A hot sensation builds inside me as his tongue pushes against my lips. I want to tell him to stop, but at the same time I want to give in to what he’s offering. I feel torn as a thousand different emotions and thoughts pass through me. He’s hot. He’s more than hot. He’s fucking nice. He doesn’t think I’m fucking crazy, and just escaped the ward of an asylum, even though he probably should. Ash’s face flashes behind my closed eyes. I snap them open and shove Grady back. He looks shocked or embarrassed, I can’t tell which. “Fuck.” He mumbles. “I’m sorry.”

I shake my head. “It’s not you.” I push myself away from the wall and walk back toward the steps.

“Gus?”

I turn around and wait as he walks up to me. “Listen, if you ever want to talk or anything just...” He pulls a card and pen from his pocket. It would be weird if we weren’t at an art show. He scrawls something on the back and holds the card out to me. I stare at it for a minute before taking it and shoving it into my pocket. “I didn’t mean to overstep the line.”

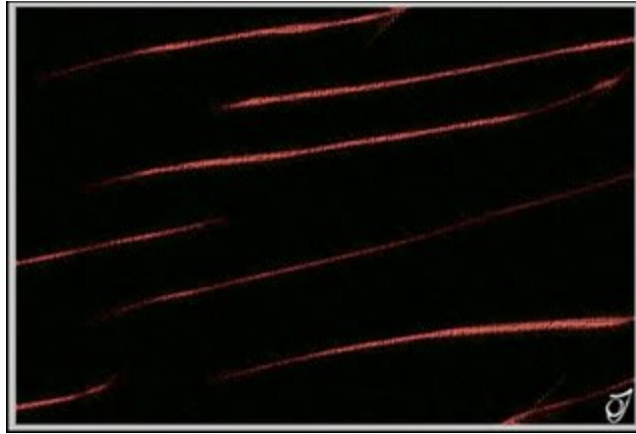
“It’s not you.” I tell him again.

“Okay.” He says softly. “If you ever want to talk or anything just give me a call.”

I nod and start to turn away from him, but I stop. “Thanks.”

He smiles at me. “For what?”

I shrug. “Saving my life.” I don’t wait for him to answer me or say anything back. I take the stairs two at a time and enter the gallery.



*"The doors we open and close each day decide the lives we live."
~ Flora Whittemore ~*

June 26, 2019 8:38am

Justin's POV

I walk into the kitchen just as Gus is throwing the comics away in the trash. Looking at me, he shrugs as he walks over to the table and sits down. I decide not to say anything about it. Why make an issue of something that seems ridiculous in the scheme of things? Gus has been acting different since the show on Saturday. He hasn't had any panic attacks or nightmares that I know of, and the sudden absence of these things seems odd when it should feel comforting. I want to believe that remembering what happened has helped him, but I know it won't make him better overnight. I pour myself a cup of coffee and join him at the table. He's biting the end of a pen, his brows are furrowed, and his concentration is focused on the crossword puzzle in front of him. Setting my coffee aside, I reach for the Arts & Leisure section and spread it out on the table. I try to concentrate on the article about post-modern digital animation, but I can't help but feel like something is wrong with Gus. It's not like he's a big talker-he's like Brian in that respect-but he's been unusually quiet the last couple of days. I glance up from the paper. He looks fucking exhausted.

"Don't forget I won't be at the studio until this afternoon."

He looks up at me. "I know."

"Are you-"

He looks back down at the paper, his forehead crinkling. "I'll be fine. I don't need you to hold my fucking hand." He tosses the pen on the table and stands up.

I furrow my brow as he walks back into the kitchen. "Hey." He stops and turns back to me. "What was that about?"

The anger that was on his face only seconds ago dissipates. He shakes his head. "Sorry Justin. I'm just..." He sighs, leans against the counter, and rests his chin against his chest. "You have that meeting with your agent today?"

I'm suspicious about the change of subject, but I answer him anyway. "Yeah, in SoHo."

His head snaps up and his eyes meet mine. "SoHo?"

Standing, I grab my cup and walk over to the sink. “Yeah, Amy loves this little French restaurant there that she claims ‘serves the best fucking crepes, darling’.” I laugh as I put my cup in the sink. “I think the fact that it’s expensive appeals to her upper-class nature.” I look over at Gus. He’s biting his lip and staring at the floor. I turn to him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Alright what’s up?”

Slowly he looks over at me. “Nothing.” He pushes himself off the counter and turns to face me. “Is the restaurant near...the SoHo Grand Hotel?”

“The SoHo...” I tilt my head and furrow my brow. “Why?” He shrugs, but his eyes don’t leave mine. “Uh, it’s not far from the restaurant, maybe about three blocks.”

“Mind if I go with you?”

“To the restaurant?”

He shakes his head. “No, to SoHo. I have something I need to do.”

I don’t know if he thinks I’m clueless or just that I can’t put two and two together. I know Grady works at the SoHo Grand. He’s looking at me and there’s something in his eyes that I can’t quite make out. “Why do you need to go to the SoHo Grand?”

“Look Justin, the guy fucking...” He shakes his head. “Never mind, forget it.” He moves to walk by me but I stop him. He looks down at me and smiles, but it doesn’t look or feel genuine.

“I’m sorry Gus.”

His brow furrows. “What for?”

I laugh. “For acting like a parent.”

He rolls his eyes and grins at me. “I hate to tell you this Justin, but you are a parent.” He moves out of my hold. “It’s no big deal.”

I shake my head. “You can come if you want. I was going to drop by and see your Dad afterward.”

He smirks at me. “Are you kidding? I think I’ve been exposed to enough of you and Dad for this week.”

I feel my face flush. Two nights ago Gus walked in on Brian and me in the kitchen. We didn’t even know he was there until we heard the refrigerator open and Gus say, “Don’t you two have a bedroom?” I was completely mortified. Of course Brian thought it was fucking hilarious. It wasn’t like we planned it. I was hungry and then there was ice cream and Brian and one thing just happened to lead to another. Gus may have been with us

three weeks, but sometimes we forgot we no longer lived alone

Gus shakes his head. “You should see your face right now.”

I furrow my brow. I know diversionary tactics when I hear them. “If you want to-”

The smile fades from his face. “I don’t. I have a shit load of pictures on my digital camera to develop.” He leaves the kitchen without saying anything else.

I didn’t mean to give him the third degree about going to SoHo with me or even going to see Grady. He did save Gus from being hit by a taxi. I lean back against the counter and try to puzzle out something that seems to be simple but feels complex. It was a shock to both me and Brian when we found out Gus bought one of Grady’s paintings from the show. When we asked him about it he just told us, “I like it, that’s all, it’s no big deal.” In fact he seemed rather defensive about it. I sigh. It’s probably nothing. I tend to blow things out of proportion, at least that’s what Brian tells me. Besides that, it’s not strange for Gus to want to thank Grady, he did save his life. It isn’t even strange that he bought a piece of Grady’s art. Gus is an artist himself, and Grady’s work is good. Shrugging it off, I walk out of the kitchen, grab my bag, and yell out to Gus that I’m going and to call if he needs anything. He’s right, we can’t hold his hand. I stop in front of the elevator and look back at the loft. If he goes to the studio it will be the first time since his panic attack that first week that he’s gone alone. I won’t deny that I’m worried about that. Christ, I am a parent. When did that happen?

June 26, 2019 8:59am

Gus’ POV

It was stupid, like looking at this painting is stupid, like remembering a kiss that was barely a kiss is stupid. I lie back on my bed and stare at the painting hanging on the opposite wall. What the fuck was I thinking asking Justin about going to SoHo? Why did I even fucking mention it at all? It’s completely fucked that I can’t stop thinking about Grady’s lips on mine, or the way he whispered in my ear, or the way he stoked the heat in my stomach that’s been dormant since... I close my eyes as guilt presses heavy on my chest. I’ve tried not to think about it. I tried every way I could to make it a mistake, to make it not mean anything. It didn’t mean anything, did it? Opening my eyes, I focus on the painting. I can’t stop fucking looking at it. The last four nights have been filled with restlessness and insomnia. When I did sleep, all my fucking dreams were a mixture of something I could see, but not quite reach. It’s been endless nights of staring at this fucking painting as the city lights shine across the dark canvas, making the pink glow like neon.

Everyday I went to the studio I kept expecting Grady to show up, only he never did. I thought about calling him, but what the fuck would I say? Why the fuck am I even giving

this so much thought? I fucking know why, and the guilt on my chest gets heavier. I want to deny, deny, deny, but it's all just building up in me. It's getting out of my control and I fucking hate that. I can't deny what I'm feeling any more than I can deny the guilt that comes with it. Isn't my life fucking complicated enough without adding this shit to the pile? Don't I have enough to worry about, to think about, to fucking keep me awake at night without this? What is this anyway?

I push myself up and get off the bed. Fuck this. Just fuck this. Maybe if I just go fucking see him I can rationalize these thoughts and fucking feelings away. Maybe if I just see him I can say to myself, see Gus, it's fucking nothing. I pull on a pair of Levis, my Metals of Death t-shirt, and my red Converse shoes. I try to clear my mind as I gather my cameras and shove them into my bag. I check my wallet just to make sure I have enough cash to get me to SoHo. Once I toss my cigarettes and my cell phone into my bag I close it up and sling it over my shoulder. This is going to be fine. I'll just keep telling myself that until I fucking believe it.

I leave the loft locking the door and setting the alarm before heading to the elevator. When I exit the building I stop just outside the doors, realizing that this will be the first time I've gone anywhere by myself since that first week. Has it really been that long? I try not to think about it, but there is a fear in me that I can't escape. I have to hail a cab which requires me to basically step out into the street. There's no fucking way that's going to happen without me freaking the fuck out. I know it, just like I know JR hates rap music. Shit. What other fucking choice do I have? I could walk...all the way to fucking SoHo. Yeah, that's not going to happen. I don't even know where the fucking hotel is. Fuck. What if he isn't even at work? I lean against the side of the building and light a cigarette. This is a fucking dumb idea. Running around, putting myself in situations I won't be able to handle, just to fucking prove that his kiss didn't mean shit. That Ash is still everything I ever wanted or needed, and that this whateverthefuck with Grady is nothing. Yeah, right.

Sighing, I pull my cell phone out of my bag and flip it open. I scroll down to Grady's cell number, and yes I fucking entered it in my contacts because who the fuck carries around numbers anymore? I take a deep drag of my cigarette and press the dial button before I can fucking change my mind. I feel stupid and pathetic and something else that's a mixture of excitement and guilt.

He picks up in three rings. "Hello?" His voice is raspy and thick with sleep. Fuck. "Hello?"

Speak Gus. Say something, anything. "Hey." It comes out in a whoosh of air and smoke.

"Gus?"

I close my eyes and take a drag of my cigarette. "Yeah."

He yawns and I can hear the rustling of sheets. "I didn't think you'd call."

“Me either.” There is a long silence that feels both uncomfortable and comfortable at the same time. “You haven’t been by.” I mumble because it’s the only thing I can think to say.

“I know.” He sighs. “I didn’t think you’d want to see me.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

Yeah, I did know why and isn’t that the bitch of it all. Just do it Gus. I’ve never been fucking shy, or a fucking pussy. “Can you come by the studio today?”

“You really want me to?”

I take the last drag of my cigarette, open my eyes, and flick it to the street. “I asked didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I can come by.” He pauses. “Is around ten okay?”

“Yeah.”

There is another silence. “I’ll see you then Gus.”

“Right.” I flip the phone closed before I can say anything else. What the fuck am I doing? I know what I’m doing. I’m going to go to the studio, I’m going to work on developing my pictures, and then I’m going to tell Grady that while I fucking wish something could happen that nothing can happen. I light another cigarette and start walking to the studio. I stop and take a deep drag of my cigarette, since when did I wish something could fucking happen? I’m so fucked.

June 26, 2019 9:14am

Brian’s POV

I’m in the middle of replying to an e-mail when my direct line rings. Without even looking away from the computer screen, I pick up my earpiece and put it on. “Meeting over already?”

A soft laugh comes over the line. “Hello Brian.”

I click send on my e-mail and sit back in my chair. “Lindsay.”

“How are you?”

I roll my eyes and spread out a set of preliminary drawings for the new Vox gaming system across my desk. "Busy." I say, because I know that while she might care how I am, that's not why she's calling

"Oh." She says as if she's surprised. "Well...I won't keep you."

"He's fine Lindsay."

"I know." She pauses. "His prescriptions are about to run out. I called his doctor and-

"He doesn't need them." I say, cutting her off

"What do you mean he doesn't need them?" Even though her voice is soft I can feel the sting of the sharpness in her tone

Pinching the bridge of my nose I lean back in my chair. "He isn't taking them."

"He isn't?" Her voice is unsure.

"No, he isn't." I wonder how many times I'll have to repeat it before she gets it

"Why not?"

"He doesn't want to."

"Did you tell him to stop taking them?"

"Christ Lindsay, you're like a dog with a bone. Look, he came to me and Justin and told us that he wanted to stop taking the sleep meds. We said fine. He said he wanted to stop taking his anti-depressants. I said; let me call about that because I know how long he's been on that shit. My doctor gave the okay to start decreasing how much he took, so he's almost weaned himself off of it." I remove my fingers from the bridge of my nose and pick up one of the drawings. Hot and sexy, but not blatant. Good, but still needs some work.

"Brian?"

"What?" I snap.

"Why didn't you tell us?" She snaps back

I laugh. "Like you told me about the fucking sleeping medication?" She sighs into the phone. "Look, he said he wanted to tell you himself, so we left it up to him."

She pauses. "We're thinking about coming up to see him."

Christ, he's only been here three weeks and already they want to fucking visit him. "Talk to him about it."

"We're going to Pittsburgh this weekend to get JR."

“And you thought you’d make a little detour to the Big Apple?” I stand up and walk around my desk to some boards that are set up against the wall.

“JR has been begging us to let her see Gus.”

“Call Gus. Ask him. You know Justin and I don’t care if you want to come. Now I have to go. I’ve got a shitload of work to do.” It wasn’t even a lie. I have way too many meetings today and way too many ad-copies to approve, and art to look over, and clients to please. Not only that, I have to make a little room in my schedule for the surprise, but not really surprise, visit Justin is going to pay me after his meeting is over.

“Brian, are you listening to me?” She sounds irritated. Shit, was she talking?

“No.” Why lie?

She sighs into the phone. “I’ll call Gus, but I’m sure he’ll want to see JR.” I can almost see her smiling. “He can’t say no to her.”

I laugh as I take a board and toss it across the room because it is pretty much complete crap. “Well then I guess we’ll see you this weekend.”

“I’ll let you know. Bye Brian.”

“Later.” I remove my earpiece and toss it on my desk. Great, Mel, Linz, and JR will most likely be here this weekend. Fucking great. Maybe Justin and I should just get the next flight to Ibiza and spend the weekend at the summer house. I pick up another board and walk back over to my desk. I press the speaker phone and before Cynthia can even say hello I tell her, “Get Ted on the phone. These boards they sent over for PittSteal are for shit.”

“Sure thing boss.”

I toss the board to the floor and wonder how much it will take to convince Justin that taking a mini-vacation is just what we need. I sigh. Most likely he’ll want to stay. I smile to myself as I sit down in my chair. Maybe I’ll just come up with a plan to convince him to say yes.

June 26, 2019 9:36am

Justin’s POV

I’ve decided that I hate this restaurant. It’s not the atmosphere or the waiters or anything trivial like that. I just don’t care for French cuisine. It’s really kind of funny, considering I spent a month in Paris on my honeymoon. I smile, remembering how Brian would get pissed at me for ordering a hamburger or some other Americanized dish at every restaurant we went to. I watch as Amy takes the last bite of her strawberry filled crepe. She closes her eyes as if she might have an instant orgasm just from the taste. It’s mildly

amusing to watch her eat when we meet here. Amy opens her pale green eyes and smiles at me as she dabs the corners of her mouth with the linen napkin. I take a sip of my coffee, watching as the waiter comes to clear away her plate.

“You know I’m starting to think you don’t like this place.” She pushes back a lock of her strawberry blond hair and grins at me.

“It’s not the place Amy, it’s the food.”

Her eyes widen and she presses a hand to her chest. I swear she wanted to be an actress before she got into her profession. “What a horrible thing to say. You don’t like French Cuisine?”

I shake my head. “Amy, you’ve known me for how many years now, twelve? Are you really just now figuring that out?”

She folds her napkin and sets it aside. “Didn’t you and Brian go to Paris for your honeymoon?”

I shrug. She reaches for her briefcase, placed on the chair beside her, and pulls out a file folder. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean I like French food anymore than I did before we went.”

She shakes her head at me and wrinkles her freckled covered nose. “That’s just not right at all, darling.”

She flips open the file folder which means, thank god, we can finally get down to the reason we are here. “So what’s this great news you just had to share with me?”

She sorts through a few papers and then looks up at me, her thin pink lips spreading into a wide smile. “You have two offers. Both are well known and well respected galleries.” I should hope so. I don’t do Mom and Pop shows anymore. She looks back down at the folder, her long thin index finger running down a piece of paper. “Gavaiz in SoHo and-” She flips a piece of paper over. “Rauling’s in Midtown.”

“Dates?” I ask like I didn’t just hear what she said. I try to keep it all business, but I can’t stop the smile that spreads across my face at the mention of Rauling’s.

“Gavaiz wants you for...the end of December, they haven’t given me a solid date yet.” I love that, plenty of notice and no need to rush things. “Rauling’s...” She looks up at me the smile on her face fading. She sighs. “July 27th.”

Perfect, just fucking perfect. “Can’t do it.”

“Justin.”

I hold up my hand. “I’ll give you two very valid reasons.”

She sighs. “I know your reasons.”

“One, that’s really short notice and two, you know I have a show at TK that same day.”

She rolls her eyes. Sometimes I question the fact that she claims to be three years older than me. “Justin, it’s Rauling’s.” She leans forward on the table. “Rauling’s.” She stretches out the name as if that, and saying it over and over again, will make a difference.

Leaning back in my chair, I have a sudden craving for a cigarette. “I know it’s Rauling’s. It’s a big deal.” I sigh. Fuck. “How many pieces do they want?”

She smiles at me, her eyes twinkling. “Depending on the sizes.” She looks up at me and rolls her eyes. “They’d like ten to twelve of the size you normally bring in...plus ten smaller ones.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Are you seriously telling me that they want anywhere from twenty to twenty-two pieces with less than a month’s notice?” I feel a slight twitch in my hand, but ignore it. “And they want me to include small scale work?” It’s not that I don’t like to do smaller scale work, but they take longer to produce, due to the small details involved. I should say my hand doesn’t like small scale.

“Darling, I have one word for you, Rauling’s.”

I lean forward and place my elbows on the table. Fuck. Rauling’s is one of the top Galleries in New York, and by one of the top, I mean the top. Fuck. I shake my head. “When do they need a confirmation?”

She tries to bite back a smile but she fails miserably. She fucking knows there is no way I can turn them down. She looks back down at the papers in front of her before looking back at me. “Monday.”

Shit. “Okay.” I sigh. “Let me talk to Brian, and can you call Rauling’s to see if they can push back the date?”

She raises her eyebrow at me. “Darling, you don’t ask Rauling’s to push back dates.”

I place my head in my hands and stare down at the white table cloth. “Has Gavaiz mentioned how many pieces they want?”

“Well they are a bigger gallery, size wise, so I imagine they’d want more than what Rauling’s is asking.” I hear her shuffling papers. “Looks like for now they are asking for twenty. Scale is not an issue for them.”

I run a hand through my hair and look up at her. “Okay.” I take a deep breath. “Wait for confirmation on the date for Gavaiz before we give them a go. As for Rauling’s...” I sigh. “I have to talk to Brian first.” She rolls her eyes at me, but I could fucking care less. Sure Brian is co-owner of TK, but he doesn’t have time to be hands on for setting up a show. I could push most of the work off on Maddie, but that’s really not my style. Either Brian or I will have to be at TK that night. I won’t be able to because I’ll have to be at Rauling’s, and Brian, fuck, Brian hasn’t missed a single show since I moved to fucking

New York.

Amy laughs and I glare at her. “You think too much darling.” She straightens out her papers and closes the folder before returning it to her briefcase. “Confer with your husband and let me know this weekend, sooner if possible. They hate to be kept waiting.” She straightens out her blouse and smiles at me. “Justin, you really can’t say no to Rauling’s.”

She’s right, and I fucking hate that she is. Rauling’s is the fucking Mecca. I know it, she knows it, and everyone who’s fucking anyone in the New York art scene knows it. Turning them down would be like digging my own fucking grave. Yes, I’ve worked my ass off for years. Yes, my work sells for top dollar. Yes, I’m pretty well known and respected. This, however, is what every starving artist who’s ever come to New York with big dreams and determination hopes for. How can I fucking turn that down?

“Breathe. Let go. And remind yourself that this very moment is the only one you know you have for sure.”
~ Oprah Winfrey ~

June 26, 2019 9:34am

Gus’ POV

The thing about time is...no one can control it. No one can pause it, stop it, fast-forward or rewind it. Despite outward knowledge and appearances, time is the one constant in everyone’s life. It’s always moving us steadily along whether we want it to or not. I lean forward in the chair and click print on the computer. I’ve been trying not to watch the time, but it’s right there in the corner of the screen and I can’t stop my eyes from looking there every few seconds. 9:35 AM. When the printer starts I push the chair back and stand up. I decided that maybe Justin was right about the picture I took of the sunrise, so I’m printing out a poster-size version of it.

When Justin set up my studio he really did think of everything, printers, computer programs, chemicals, paper, framing supplies, on and on. Of course I can see where Dad made his contributions, like the oversized and most likely expensive couch, the glass-top table, and other modern touches here and there. I’ve added my own touches too, music posters hanging on the walls next to art I’ve collected or been given over the years, CD’s scattered here or there, some of my things laying in messy piles. It’s funny to look around my studio and see the three of us combined within these four walls.

Standing in front of the printer, my eyes dart to the clock on the wall. 9:37 AM. With each minute that passes the knot in my stomach gets tighter and tighter. I feel nervous, anxious, excited, and fucking scared all at once. I’ve tried to separate these feelings and compartmentalize them, but they merge and blend making it impossible for me to tell where one starts and the other begins. The only thing I do know is that there is a blanket of guilt that covers them all. It surrounds them. Its embrace is so fucking tight that it makes it almost impossible for me to breathe. When the printer stops, I pick up the picture and hold it out in front of me. My eyes scan the picture with a critical eye looking for any imperfection in the lighting, balance, context, content, or overall feeling. 9:39 AM. For whatever reason I look over my shoulder, and even though I should be surprised to see Grady there, I’m not. He’s leaning against the doorframe, loose faded jeans falling just right on his slim hips, toned arms crossed over his royal blue t-shirt. His hair is wet, making it appear darker than I know it is. I don’t know how long he’s been there, watching me, but I have a feeling it’s been longer than a minute.

I look back at the picture in my hands. 9:40 AM. “You’re early.” Even though I can’t hear him, I can feel him getting closer. When he is standing next to me, the knot in my

stomach contorts. “What do you think?”

“I think...it’s awesome.” He moves closer to me and our arms brush. I try to deny the heat I feel as his skin grazes across mine. I try to deny the feelings that wash over me from him being right. Fucking. There. Deny, deny, deny, Gus. “It reminds me of this painting I did.” He says softly.

“Oh?”

“Well...it was abstract, but the overall feeling’s the same.” He takes the photograph from me and lays it down on the table next to the desk. He stands in front of the table and looks down at the picture. “I’m glad you called.” He turns to face me. His fingers wrap around the edge of the table as he leans back. “I didn’t think you would.”

I shrug. “Me either.”

He looks over his shoulder, then back at me. “It’s really good.”

His eyes are darker today, more golden-brown instead of golden-yellow. “That’s what Justin said.” My voice is rough as if I need to clear my throat.

“You should listen to him. He knows what he’s talking about.” There is stillness in the air. A thick layer of tension seems to build up between us with each second that passes. Why does this feel so uncomfortable? Or maybe the problem isn’t that it’s uncomfortable, but the fact that it’s not. How the fuck should I know? I don’t know what the hell I’m doing. I don’t know what the hell I’m feeling. I don’t fucking know anything. We are just standing there, looking at each other, as the silence between us becomes so thick it’s almost hard to breathe. This is fucking ridiculous. It wasn’t like this before he kissed me, was it? It wasn’t. I don’t think. Fuck.

I clear my throat. “Look, Grady...” Something flashes in his eyes and everything I planned to say suddenly evaporates. “I...” I had it all planned out. I knew what I was going to say. What I should say, but now that he’s here I can’t seem to remember any of it. “He didn’t break up with me.” Holy fuck! What the fuck was that? That’s not what I wanted to say. That’s not anywhere near what I fucking wanted to say to him.

I step back from him and shake my head. I have no idea what I’m doing. I turn, walk across the room, and flop down on the couch. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I try to think of a way to come back from the statement I just made. I can’t think of a damn thing, and that’s as frustrating as the mix of emotions whirling around inside me. I just want it all to make sense, but none of it does. I remove my fingers from the bridge of my nose and watch as he moves towards me with the grace of a panther. When he reaches the couch, he sits down next to me.

“I know.” He says softly.

I lean back against the couch and close my eyes. "Of course you do." Slowly I open my eyes and look over at him. "How do you know?" He looks at me and quickly looks away. I sit up. Grabbing his chin, turning his head toward me, I force our eyes to meet. "How do you know?" I search his eyes, and I wait. I can fucking wait forever if I have to.

"I know because..." He pulls away from me and runs a hand through his hair.
"Because..."

"Just fucking say it."

His eyes meet mine and a flash of memory rushes over me. Fuck. Fuck. I lean forward pressing my elbows into my knees as I grab my hair. I feel as if I'm going to be sick.

"You were screaming. No matter what I said, or did, you just kept screaming out for him."

I shake my head. "Fuck." I feel the tears, but I close my eyes to lock them inside. I'm not going to fucking cry. I'm not. His hand slides across my back until it wraps around my shoulder. He pulls me to him. I can feel the heat of his breath on my neck, and squeeze my eyes shut tighter. This is all so fucking wrong. So fucking wrong. I grip my hair tighter. If it's so fucking wrong why does it feel so fucking right?

"Hey." His arm leaves my back and his hands cover mine. Gently, he pulls my hands from my hair before wrapping around me like a warm coat in the middle of winter. We lean back against the couch. He holds me and I let him.

I shake my head. "You must think-"

"I don't." He kisses my temple and god, do I want to suck up the comfort that gives me, but there is that guilt again pressing down on me. His fingers move on my shoulder, making small circles against the fabric of my shirt. "I'm sorry."

My eyes snap open and I pull away from him enough to look him in the eyes. "What the fuck for?"

"That he-" I push him back against the couch and move to stand up. His fingers wrap around my wrist. "I'm not the enemy Gus."

I jerk my arm away from him as I stand up. I know he's not the enemy. I know that. I do. I turn and look down at him. "He's...He..." The words are there. They want to be set free, only I can't let them go, not yet, not in front of him.

"You don't have to explain it to me."

"I know I don't." I snap. My hands are clutched together as I pace in front of the couch. "I can't..." I shake my head. This is crazy. I'm crazy. I know what I should tell him. I

know all the things I should say, but none of those words seem to want to come out of my mouth.

“Gus.” His voice is stern, but not harsh. I stop pacing and look at him. “Come ’ere.”

Sighing, I return to the couch and sit beside him. Taking my hands in his, he pulls them apart. I look down at our clasped hands, watching as his thumbs trace small circles against my skin. I want to deny how that makes me feel, but I can’t. I can’t, and it feels wrong and right all at the same fucking time.

One hand leaves mine as he places it under my chin and tilts my head back until our eyes meet. “Tell me about him.”

“What?” I croak, because of all the things I thought he might say, that wasn’t one of them.

“Tell me about him.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “Why not?” He runs the pad of his thumb across my lips, causing heat to course through my body. “Don’t you ever talk about him?”

My eyes drift to the side. Do I ever talk about him? Have I ever really talked to anyone about him? Besides the accident? Besides missing him? I can’t even remember if anyone ever asked about him. I don’t think anyone ever really has. Probably because they didn’t want to upset me...or I don’t know. I look back at Grady. “No.” I whisper. “Not really.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulders and leans back against the couch, pulling me with him. “Tell me what he was like.” I lean my head back against his arm, at a total loss for what to do. “It might help.”

I scoff. “Help what?”

He pulls me closer and whispers against my temple. “You.”

June 26, 2019 10:15am

Justin’s POV

I exit the restaurant, slinging my bag over my shoulder. Kinnetik NYC is only about ten blocks from here. Usually I’d take a cab, but today I need to walk. I need to think of how to tell Brian about my meeting with Amy. I have to think about Rauling’s, TK, and

fucking July 27th. I press the fingers of my right hand into the palm of my left. I'd like to pretend it's the time issue that has me resisting saying yes to Rauling's, but I know it isn't that. I haven't done small scale work for a gallery in a long time. Hell, the last small scale painting I attempted was the one I threw across my studio. If it was another gallery, any other gallery, I wouldn't even have to think about it. I would have told Amy, "Tell them I said thanks, but no thanks." I've done it before, after I'd made a name for myself and could afford to do that. Rauling's isn't just another gallery though. It's the best. It's the *one*.

When I was starting out, when I really didn't have a choice, I'd say yes to anything. Just like I told Grady, a starving artist never turns down an opportunity to showcase their art. Sometimes it worked out, and sometimes it didn't. I've had to drop out of more than a few shows because I just couldn't complete the pieces they wanted within the time they wanted them. It's not that I can't do small scale work, I can, but it's so fucking tedious. I have to take a break and rest my hand after fifteen minutes. Sometimes, when everything is just fucking flowing, when what's in my mind transfers to the canvas with virtual ease, I tend to forget about things like taking breaks, cramped fingers, and fucking nerve damage. That's when things get fucked up. That's when paintings get fucked up. That's when I get pissed and stressed.

I dig through my bag and pull out my pack of cigarettes. Taking one out, I light it and return the pack to my bag. I suck on the cigarette. I haven't even said yes yet and already I can feel the pressure. It's not all because of Rauling's. It's the TK show that would be on the same day. I have to be available for Grady and Jas. I have to help Maddie organize the event. I have to start thinking about advertising for it. Brian usually handles that part, but I always design the posters for the events. I shake my head and take another drag of my cigarette. I can already feel the stress tightening the muscles in my neck and fingers.

There is no way I can say no to Rauling's, but how the fuck am I going to finish twenty to twenty-two pieces by July 27th? I'll have to spend every spare minute I have in my studio. That means leaving the same time as Brian during the week. It means late nights. Weekends I'd usually spend at home will be spent at the studio instead. It means less time with Gus...and with Brian. It's not like this has never happened before. When I was starting out it happened all the time, but Brian wasn't living in New York then. Since he's been here, it has only happened a handful of times, and trust me, I don't look back on those times with fondness. The stress that it caused our relationship is not something I like to think about. It's just this thing that happens when either Brian or I, separately or at the same time, get extremely busy. We tend to drift apart, our connection gets fuzzy, and we start arguing about the stupidest shit. It's always been that way, since the very beginning of our relationship. Sure, now we can make concessions, but we're human, and after a while something always gives. I shake my head, trying to clear away my pessimistic thoughts. Maybe it won't be like that at all. Right, who exactly am I trying to convince?

When I arrive at Kinnetik, I flick my cigarette to the street and walk through the sliding glass doors. Kinnetik NYC is almost nothing like Kinnetik PA. The New York office is

all clean lines, modern furniture, and bright colors. It doesn't have that damp, almost underground feeling that the PA office does. I take the elevator to the top floor. When I exit the elevator, I approach the front desk. I'm surprised to see a man who looks to be in his mid-to late twenties sitting there. Great, fucking perfect. Every time someone new starts I have to go through some bullshit hassle to see Brian.

The man smiles up at me as I lean against the countertop. "Can I help you sir?" He's not bad looking, jet black hair, bright blue eyes, and almost perfect pink lips.

"Yeah, I need to see Brian."

His brows furrow as he looks down at his computer. His fingers click the mouse and fly across the keyboard. "Is Mr. Kinney expecting you?" He asks without looking up. There is a slightly superior tone in his voice that I don't appreciate.

"No, but--"

He looks up at me. "I'm sorry sir. He's in a meeting and doesn't see unscheduled appointments."

I really don't feel like dealing with this right now. I take a deep breath and scratch the back of my head. "He'll see me." I look at the clock behind him. "And his meeting ended twenty minutes ago." He glares up at me as if I just leaked highly confidential information. Usually I'd fuck around with the newbie, make him worry for a while, but I'm not up for it today. I hold out my hand to him. "I'm Justin Taylor." His eyes grow wide as he reaches for my hand.

I can see the recognition and regret in his eyes. "Right, of course, sorry about that Mr. Taylor." Taking his hand back, he presses the button and unlocks the doors that are located to the right of his desk.

I smile at him. "Don't worry about it."

I walk through the double doors and immediately feel the anxiety in the air. Brian must be cracking the whip today. Everyone seems to be talking at once. People are walking this way and that looking flustered. I travel through the maze of hallways until I get to Cynthia's office. I lean against the doorway, watching as she paces back and forth waving papers in her hand as she talks into her earpiece. "Yes, I told him you were in a meeting. No. Yes. I don't know Ted. You tell him that." She sighs. "I'm transferring you." She walks to her desk, pushes several buttons on the phone, and yanks off her earpiece.

She tosses it on her desk, and turns towards the door. The crease in her forehead mostly disappears when she sees me. "Oh thank god!" I laugh as she approaches, giving me a quick hug. "I'll give you half of my salary if you can keep him occupied for the next hour."

“Just half?”

She smiles at me. “Well...I do have to pay rent and, you know, eat.”

“Busy day?”

“God, yes. It feels like Monday.” She shakes her head. “It seems as if nothing is getting done right today.” She raises her eyebrow and I read between the lines. It’s one of those, “no pleasing Brian” days.

I pat her on the arm. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She smiles. “You...are a lifesaver.”

June 26, 2019 10:25am

Gus’ POV

“He was...” We’ve been sitting in silence for the last fifteen minutes. I just don’t know what to say, or how to say it, or even where to fucking begin. How do I describe someone that has been almost my entire life for the last nine years? Especially since, for the last two of those years, he has been nothing more than a series of memories that haunt me day and night?

“How did you first meet?” Grady’s voice is low and coaxing.

I smile. “Fifth grade. He had just moved from California.” I close my eyes. “Some big dumb idiot had him pressed against the wall demanding that he hand over his lunch money.” God, that sounds so clichéd, but that’s how it was. “Ashley refused, kneed the guy in the balls, and ran away.” I shake my head. “I thought, now there is someone I’d like to hang out with.”

“Because he took down a bully?”

I shake my head. “No, because he wasn’t afraid. Ash was just this little guy and he wasn’t ever afraid to stand up for himself when it came to shit like that.” I sigh. “Not long after that we became best friends.”

“When did you become more than friends?” His voice is so fucking calm, so fucking non-threatening.

I lean into Grady, eyes still closed. “We went to this dance in 9th grade. We both took

dates, but we were bored out of our fucking minds. See, I knew I was gay. I'd known a long time by then, but it's not like I went shouting it from the rooftops. I already got enough shit for having four gay parents."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah." I sigh.

"So the dance?"

"Right." I take a deep breath as I let the memory play behind my closed eyes. "We were bored, like I said, so I grabbed him and told him to come with me. The dance was in the gym, so we snuck into the locker room. When we got there I pushed him into one of the shower stalls and lit up a joint." I smile. "Ash thought I was out of my mind. Maybe I was." I shrug. "He was so fucking paranoid. I just told him to chill the fuck out."

"What if we get caught?"

I look down at him as I take a hit of the joint. "We won't."

"Yeah," He whispers. "But what if we do?"

I roll my eyes and place the joint backwards in my mouth. I raise my eyebrows at him and lean forward. His eyes dart to the stall door and back at me before he leans forward, his lips circling the end of the joint. Our lips barely touch, and that feeling that I've been having around him lately pulsates through me. When we pull back, I remove the joint from my mouth and smile down at him. He's grinning up at me with wide eyes. Christ, one hit and he's already fucking high.

"Better?"

He nods as he exhales smoke. "Again."

I laugh, shake my head, but shotgun him again nonetheless. When we finish the joint I put it out with my shoe and push it down the shower drain. Ash starts laughing as if that's the funniest thing he's ever seen. "Jesus, you're high." I tell him.

"Mmm." He leans into me, pushing me against the wall. His whole body presses against mine and I get hard almost instantly.

I look down at him as I raise my eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

He laughs as he pushes his hands under my shirt and rubs his nose against my chest. "What do you call it?" Tilting his head back he looks up at me. I swear to god I must be higher than I thought because his eyes seem to be fucking sparkling. "Putting the moves on you."

I grip his waist and push him against the opposite wall. "Don't start something you can't finish." I whisper into his ear before placing a wet, open mouth kiss on his neck. His skin is salty and a little bitter from his cologne, but god he tastes so good.

He pushes me back against the wall and licks his lips. "I always finish what I start Gus."

Opening my eyes, I look over at Grady. "He got down on his knees and sucked me off right there."

"No fear."

I shake my head. "None." I shrug. "That's when it all started." I half-laugh. "In some shitty locker room during a boring school dance." I lean my head back against Grady's arm. "I think this is the first time I've talked about Ash without freaking out." I'm not going to lie, that surprises me. It also surprises me how easy it was and how good it felt.

"Why don't you talk about him?"

I shrug. "It just seems like no one else want to. I guess they figure I'll just-"

"Freak out."

"I guess."

"Well you should talk about him. You obviously loved him a lot."

I sit up and turn to face him. "I did." I look away, then back at him. "I do." I whisper.

He reaches up and caresses my cheek. "You miss him."

Closing my eyes, I lean against his hand, soaking up the comfort he's offering. "Yeah...I do."

I feel him move on the couch. I feel his hot breath on my lips and I open my eyes. His other hand cups the back of my neck. God, I want to kiss him. I want to, but at the same time I feel like I shouldn't, like it's wrong to want it, or need it. I pull back from him a little. "How do I hold on and let go at the same time?" My voice is so low that even I can barely hear it.

His thumb strokes my cheek. "One day at a time. One minute at a time." His fingers push into my hair. "Remember the good things, the good times. Remember all the things you love about him, and not just that last moment you saw him when things went to shit." His voice is so soft, so comforting.

I press my forehead to his. "How do you do that?"

“Do what?”

“Know the right things to say?”

He chuckles. “I’m older than you?”

I shake my head. “Try again.”

Pulling back, he looks me right in the eyes. “I guess that if I was in your shoes I’d want someone to say those things to me.”

I reach up and hold his face between my hands. I search his eyes, but I don’t know what I’m trying to find. I stop thinking about what I should and shouldn’t do. I stop thinking about what’s right and what’s wrong. I take a deep breath, let go of some small part of me, and I kiss him.

June 26, 2019 10:45am

Justin’s POV

I hear his voice before I reach his office door. “I don’t care. These boards are for shit. Go back to square fucking one. Hire someone new. I don’t give a shit, just make it happen.”

“Bri, calm down.” Ted’s voice crackles over the speaker phone.

“I *am* calm.” I hear something hit the floor and take that as my cue.

Pushing open the glass door, I enter Brian’s office. He’s standing at the window, his back to me. One hand is pressed flat against the window; the other is pinching the bridge of his nose. His suit jacket is thrown over his chair, his sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, his neck and ears are bright red, and I can see the tension across his back. These are all classic signs of a very stressed and irritated Brian Kinney. Quietly I walk over and sit down in one of the chairs in front of his desk. I know better than to interrupt him when he’s in the middle of yelling at someone.

“Listen to me Theodore. Are you listening?”

“Yes Brian.” I almost laugh at the bored tone in Ted’s voice.

“Get it done. Get it right, and get it to me by Monday.” Brian removes his fingers from the bridge of his nose and pushes himself away from the window. “Threaten to fire someone if you-” He turns around and I smile at him. “Have to.” His eyes stay on me as

he walks over to his desk and disconnects the call. He drops into his chair and sighs.

“Rough day dear?”

“It never ends.” He leans forward and spreads several sheets of paper in front of him. “If I have to fly to fucking Pittsb-”

I cross my arms. “You are *not* flying to Pittsburgh.”

His eyes cut to me. “Don’t-”

“Tell you what to do, I know.” He glares at me because he’s stressed and annoyed. I push myself out of the chair and walk around the desk. He swivels in his chair, grabs my hips, and pulls me down until I’m straddling his lap. I’m barely sitting down when his lips cover mine and his tongue pushes into my mouth. His face is hot, and his mouth tastes like ten dollar coffee. His hands slip under my shirt and press against my lower back. Pushing my hands into his hair, I deepen the kiss, asking for more and giving more in return. I could spend hours upon hours just kissing Brian and never get tired of it. I kiss him until I feel the tension leave his body. Finally, we pull apart, both a little breathless.

He touches his forehead to mine. “How did the meeting go?”

“It went.” He pushes me back and raises an eyebrow. “Two offers.” He brushes the hair back from my face. “Gavaiz in December.” He leans forward and licks the side of my neck. Fuck, that feels good. I lean my head back to give him better access. One of his hands slides beneath the waistband of my jeans. I try to focus on what I’m suppose to be telling him, but then he starts sucking on that spot I love, and I can’t remember anything.

He sucks the skin of my neck, nips it, and then runs his tongue over the bite mark. “And?” He mumbles between kisses.

He unbuttons and unzips my jeans so that he can get better access to my ass. “Ah.” His finger circles my hole, and I have no idea what he’s asking me anymore. Blindly I reach to unbutton his shirt. The sudden need to feel his skin is overpowering. His hands grip my hips and I wrap my arms around his neck, knowing that any second now he’s going to stand up and push me down on top of his desk. It’s a quick and well practiced move. Standing, he sweeps all the papers off his desk before pushing me back against the glass top. Our lips meet again as we struggle to free each other of our clothes, or at least most of them. When he removes my pants, and his own fall around his feet, I feel the coldness of the lube right before I feel the heat of his cock. There is nothing, nothing, like getting fucked hard and fast while laid out across Brian’s desk. Our hands clasp together as he presses them to the glass surface. Our tongues dart and dance, and we fuck like we haven’t seen each other in days.

June 26, 2019 10:50am

Gus' POV

His mouth tastes like cinnamon and his hands feel like silk. I'm not sure when or how, but Grady is laid out on the couch beneath me. In between kisses, his shirt was removed and tossed...somewhere. I slide my lips over his jaw, and down his neck. He leans his head back as his hands push my shirt further up my body. His skin is salty and sweet, and like nothing I've ever tasted before. I kiss my way back up until my lips cover his again. I press my body down on his, thinking that this shouldn't feel as good as it does. I shouldn't want it or need it or fucking like it, but I do.

She wants to be a rock star
She dyes her hair the same color as my scars
She's a twisted sister with twisted views
She reads the paper for the ad's not the news

We pull apart and start laughing. "Metals of Death?" Grady huffs.

"My sister." I finally got around to changing my ring tone because if I had to hear O'Canada one more time I'd go crazy.

"You gonna answer?" He kisses my neck.

"She'll call back." I push his head back and suck his lower lip into my mouth. When he moans, I grin, and suck harder.

She wants to be a rock star
She dyes her hair the same color as my scars
She's a twisted sister with twisted views
She reads the paper for the ad's not the news

Releasing his lip, I press our foreheads together. Both of us are a little breathless. "Fuck." I mumble.

"You should get it." His hands stroke my back. "It might be important."

I want to tell him that if I stop now my brain will turn back on and I don't know if I'll be able to finish this. I also know JR will keep calling until I answer. She's annoying like that. Sighing, I push myself off Grady and get up. I cross the room, running my tongue over my lips. They feel swollen and fucking *used*. I pick up my bag from the floor, set it on the table, and dig my phone out. Flipping it open, I press it to my ear. "What?"

"Hello to you too." She sighs.

Great, she's having some kind of crisis. "What's wrong?" I pick up my pack of cigarettes, take one out, and light it before tossing the pack and the lighter back on the table.

"The Moms are coming to get me on Friday."

Taking a drag, I sit down in one of the chairs around the table. I look over at Grady. He's propped up on his elbow, hand against his face, watching me. "Already?"

"Yes." She draws out the word and sighs at the end of it. JR and I are a lot alike, especially when it comes to our Dads. We hate that our time with them always seems to be short, sporadic, and never enough. It's not like that for me anymore, but it used to be. "And..."

I furrow my brow. "And?"

"They want to come see you this weekend." She says it all in one breath, so it comes out sounding like one word.

I stand up so abruptly that the chair falls over. "What?" Grady sits up on the couch, his own brows furrowing.

She sighs again. "That's what Mom told me. She said, 'Call your brother and tell him we want to come see him while we're close by.'"

Taking a drag of my cigarette, I start pacing. "So she asked you to ask me?"

"You know how she is." I can feel her smile as she says her next words. "For *some* reason she thinks you can't tell me no."

Okay...well, that's true. I can't say no to JR. Believe me I've tried. It's impossible. She's too much like Ma sometimes. "No."

"Gus." She whines. And sometimes she's too much like Uncle Mikey.

"I can't believe she didn't just call me herself." It pisses me off mostly because it feels like I'm being manipulated, and I guess I am.

"It's wrong, I know." She sighs. "I do wanna see you though."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. "It's only been three weeks." I remind her. "And you call almost everyday." Not that I mind. Not that I'd ever tell her that. I kind of like it because honestly, I miss her too. More than I thought I would.

"It's not the same and you know it." She sighs. "Are you really going to make me do this? Just say yes so that we can skip the middle part." The middle part, as she calls it, is where I list a thousand and one reasons why I don't want to do what she's asking and she

argues, effectively, against every. Single. One. I glance over at Grady. He's still shirtless, watching me with a concerned look on his face. "Gus?"

"Fine." I sigh. "Yeah okay." I quickly remove the phone from my ear to keep from going deaf as she lets out a squeal of delight. She's so fucking easy.

"Okay." I put the phone back to my ear. "I'm gonna call Mom. I love you. I love you. I love you."

I put out my cigarette and roll my eyes. "Whatever."

She laughs high and loud. "Come on Gus, say it."

I cross the room and flop down on the couch next to Grady. "You too."

"See? That wasn't so hard was it? I'll call you with the info later."

I succumb to my fate. "Yeah okay."

"I really do miss you." Her voice is soft and teary.

"I know. Call me later." I mimic her tone.

"K, love ya, bye."

I flip the phone closed and toss it next to me on the couch.

"Everything okay?"

I lean my head back against the couch. "Yeah. Great." I turn my head towards him. "My Mom and sister are coming to see me this weekend."

He reaches over and pushes the hair off my forehead. "Is that a bad thing?"

"No." I half-lie. It's not a *bad* thing, but I don't know that it's a *good* thing either.

June 26, 2019 11:28am

Brian's POV

I look over at Justin, watching as he picks at the salad in front of him. "What's wrong?"

He looks up at me almost like he's surprised. "Huh?"

"What's. Wrong?"

Setting down his fork, he leans back in the chair. "The second show." Right, the one I didn't get around to asking about. "It's Rauling's."

I raise an eyebrow. "Rauling's?"

"Yes." He sighs.

"That's-"

"Huge." If he doesn't stop fucking completing my sentences... He pushes back his chair and stands up. "I know." He picks up his half eaten salad and throws it away.

"You don't seem excited about it."

He looks over at me. "I am."

"Okay."

I watch as he walks over to my desk and straightens out some papers. I lean back in the chair and wait. "It's in July." I re-raise my eyebrow, because that's fucking short notice for a place like Rauling's. "27th." He sighs. The 27th, same day as the TK show, but that's not what's bothering him, not really, I can tell. "Twenty to twenty-two pieces." He turns around and leans against the desk, meeting my eyes as he says, "Ten small scale."

I shake my head. "No way."

He furrows his brow. "I can't say no."

I get up and throw my salad away in the trash. "Well you aren't saying yes."

"Don't-"

"Tell you what to do, I know." I walk around my desk and sit down. "You can say no."

He turns around and presses his hands flat against the top of my desk. "No, I can't."

I shake my head. "Justin." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "They want twenty pieces altogether, ten of those small scale, with only a fucking month's notice?" I remove my fingers and look up at him. "Tell them no."

"Brian..."

“Do you know what that will do to your fucking hand?”

He pushes himself away from the desk. “Of course I know!”

“Well if you know-”

“Brian, its Rauling’s.”

I shake my head. “So fucking what, Justin? You’re not some piss-ant artist. If they want you, it should be on your terms, not theirs.” I can’t believe this bullshit. I can’t believe Amy even came to the table with that kind of deal. He’s fucking well-known, brilliant, and one of the top-selling artists in New York. He shouldn’t have to cater to any-fucking-one, not even the top gallery in town. He flops down in the chair across from me. Leaning forward, I clasp my hands on top of the desk. “Look, if they want you bad enough they’ll negotiate.” I don’t want to tell him he can’t do it, but the truth is that he can’t. He can’t produce ten, hell five, small scale pieces in a month. He knows it, but he doesn’t want to admit it.

“I know.” He looks up at me and I can see the frustration on his face.

“Tell Amy to work with them. Move the date back for one, and...” I shake my head.

“I know.” He gets up and walks over to the window. “I fucking *know*.”

Sometimes he’s still a stupid little twat. I get up, walk over to him, and wrap my arms around him. “Rauling’s is huge.” He lays his hands over my arms and leans back into me. “I know you want to say yes to this because you think you can’t say no.” I turn him around and cup his face between my hands. I press my tongue against my cheek. “You’re Justin fucking Taylor, remember?” He nods. “You aren’t a starving artist anymore. They came to you, didn’t they?”

“Yes.” I pull him to me, his arms wrap around my waist. He lays his cheek against my chest. “You’re right.” He sighs. “I hate that.”

I curl my fingers into his hair. “I know.”

June 26, 2019 11:29am

Gus’ POV

I watch as Grady puts his shirt back on. I have no idea what I’m doing. All I know is that if JR hadn’t called, if he didn’t have to go to work, that’d we’d still be kissing...or...who the fuck knows.

He turns to face me. “You’ll call me?”

I push myself off the couch and stand up. “Yeah. I’ll call.”

He walks over to me. “Good.”

I push my tongue into my cheek. “Maybe you can meet my Moms.” Like I said, I have no idea what I’m doing. I have no idea how these words are coming out of my mouth, or even why.

He lifts his eyebrow and grins. “And your sister. Maybe I can convince her to teach me her secret ways of getting you to say yes.”

Christ. “I knew I shouldn’t have told you that.”

He leans forward, pauses, and then kisses me. I’m so fucked. He pulls back and smiles. “Call me.”

I nod and watch him walk out the door. Denial is obviously something I’m not any good at.

"Some things are so unexpected that no one is prepared for them. "
~ Leo Rosten ~

June 28, 2019 4:45am

Justin's POV

The faint light of pre-daybreak filters into the room, making everything look washed out and grey. I turn my head and look over at Brian, knowing in a few minutes the shrillness of the alarm will jar him from deep sleep. My fingers itch to sketch him, as they always do when he's asleep. I roll onto my side and tuck my hand under my head. My eyes trace the bridge of his nose, his partially open lips, the edge of his jaw, down the smooth contours of his neck to his sinewy shoulders. My eyes travel over his chest until his body disappears under the covers. Sometimes, when I look at him, I can't believe that I'm here, that we're here. I know how lucky we are to have each other. There were so many times when I wondered if it would ever happen, if this would ever happen. So many things came between us, so many times, that it was difficult not to give up. I never did, and I don't think Brian did either. Sure, there were times we may have wanted to, we may have needed to, but we didn't. When I left that morning fourteen years ago, I thought, this is it. This is our breaking point. If we can't survive this, then we'll never make it. I had mixed feelings about moving to New York. Part of me was so fucking excited and yet another part of me longed to just stay with him no matter what. Looking back on it now, I realize that getting married might not have been the best thing for us then. I can't even imagine it really, living in Pittsburgh, in that house. Britin. I smile slightly. I can't even imagine Brian living there. It just wasn't him, and it never will be. Hell, I don't even think it was me. The time we spent apart, seeing each other here and there over the five years we lived in different cities, was difficult. It was more than difficult. Sometimes I'd be sitting in my shitty little apartment wishing I could just go back to him, but knowing that I shouldn't yet. Every time I seemed to reach some desperate breaking point, where missing him made it almost impossible to function, he'd show up. Over the years that desperation just grew and grew. As each year passed I told myself, this is the last year, and then I'm going back. I needed him, wanted him. Then before I knew it, five years had gone by. I was tired of weekend visits and never enough time. I was done with New York and ready to go home to Brian.

January 15, 2010 11:58pm

Justin's POV

I'm tired, I decide. Putting out my cigarette, I get out of bed and look around my small bedroom. I've done what I needed to do. I've made a name for myself in this city where

everyone thinks they're someone, but they're really just one small fish in an overflowing pond. I can paint anywhere I want now. I can go home and still be a success, still get shows, still have a career. Five years didn't bring me fame and fortune, but I'm comfortable. People know who I am. They know my work. I can go back to Pittsburgh, be with Brian, and continue my career from there, right? Right. Walking over to the window, I look out and take in the city. I'll miss New York, sure, but it won't be anything like the suffocating, gut-wrenching way I miss Brian. Turning from the window, I walk over to the closet and drag out my suitcase. Tossing it on the bed, I decide to only pack what I need to get to home, and ship the rest to Pittsburgh later. I should call Brian, let him know. Lighting another cigarette, I leave the bedroom and go in search of the portable phone that I left somewhere in the living room. He'll probably tell me to stay, but it's not his decision. It never was. Taking a deep drag of my cigarette, I pull the phone out from between the cushions of the couch and sit down. He'll bitch and moan that I haven't accomplished all my goals or some shit like that, but I know he wants me to come home. I run the pad of my thumb over the raised numbers, trying to think of how to tell him that I'm done with New York. I'm ready to start the life we should have started five years ago. I'm tired of missing him, longing for him; wanting and needing him so badly that I can't even stand to paint sometimes.

There is a soft knock at the door. Glancing over at the clock, I furrow my brow. I toss the phone aside, put out my cigarette, and walk to the door. I hope it's not my fucking neighbor Robby. He thinks that it's okay to knock on my door any hour of the night just to hang out. Flinging open the door I say, "Robby it's fucking midnight what the hell do you-" The words die in my throat as I look up and see Brian leaning casually against the doorframe.

"Hello Sunshine." He smirks at me.

Without a moment's hesitation I throw myself into his arms and kiss him. He tastes like cigarettes and bourbon. Sliding my arms around his waist, I practically drag him into the apartment, pulling at his clothes, wanting him now, needing him now. Right. Fucking. Now. He kicks the door shut as he pulls my shirt over my head. We walk backwards and fall to the couch. He kisses his way down my chest and back up to suck on my neck. My hands pull at his shirt, desperate to feel the heat of his skin. I murmur his name over and over because I'd reached my breaking point and now he is here. I don't know how he does it, how he knows, but he does, every single time.

Pushing his shirt off his shoulders, I dig my nails into his skin and kiss him hard and hungry. It's a desperate sort of need. When we are free of our clothes he flips me over, and I'm barely on my hands and knees when he pushes into me. It's rough, it's hot, and it hurts like nothing else ever can. I love it. Every fucking inch of his cock that splits me open, every hard deep thrust into my tight hole. The lube of the condom does little to lubricate me, but I don't care. I grunt and groan, meeting him thrust for thrust, demanding that he fuck me harder and faster. His hand slides up my back and into my hair. He grabs a chunk of it in his fist and yanks my head back so he can kiss and bite my neck. He never stops moving, and I never stop wanting. It goes on and on. I wonder where we

found this restraint, this ability to make it last longer than it should, but we have it, we use it, we fucking own it. His fingers dig into my hips, his mouth ravages whatever skin it can reach, and when his other hand takes hold of my cock, there is little I can do but hold on. He fucks me with the grace of a panther and the force of a category five hurricane. My eyes close tight when my body starts to tense up. He pounds into me harder and deeper, as if he can't get enough. Finally my body gives out. The fuse that was lit when I saw him standing in the doorway reaches the keg, there is a slight pause, and then I fucking explode. Everything is bright white and burning hot. Brian grips my hips with both of his hands and pushes in as far as he can go. I clinch tight around him until I can feel the beat of his heart through his cock. I clinch tighter and tighter until finally he lets go. We collapse on the couch, breathing hard and sweating.

He pulls out more gently than he went in, tosses the condom...somewhere, and rolls us over so that he's lying on his back and I'm lying on top of him. I run my hand over his slick chest. "You're here."

His hand strokes my hair. "To stay."

I pull back from him until our eyes meet. "To stay?" I push myself up and straddle his stomach. "You're..." I bite my lip, trying to neither laugh nor cry. "Are you..." My hands are pressed flat on his chest. He reaches up and pushes the hair back from my face before covering my hands with his. He sticks his tongue into his cheek and grins up at me. I lean forward, and in a move I learned from him, press our foreheads together. "Tell me."

He slides his hands up my arm and around my shoulders, pressing me down until I'm back lying on top of him. "I'm moving."

"Here?" I take a deep breath. "When?"

"Today." His voice catches in his throat like it did when he first told me he loved me.

"To-" I pull back from him as I press my hands against the sides of his face. "Today?" I whisper. "Right now?"

"Yes." I kiss him again, soft and slow, and then I let go. Tears that I've been holding back for five years trickle down my face. They aren't sad tears. They aren't happy tears. They're just tears. He's moving to New York to be with me, so we can be together. I don't think I've ever loved him more than I do at this moment.

June 28, 2019 5:00am

Justin's POV

The obscene shrill of the alarm clock jolts me from my memories. Blindly, Brian reaches over and silences the alarm. He flops back down on his back and exhales loudly. He slowly opens his eyes before rolling over and wrapping around me like a warm blanket. Pulling his head back, he looks at me through half closed eyes. "You're hard."

"You noticed." I couldn't help it really. That memory is one of my favorites.

Gently, he pushes me onto my back, positions himself between my legs, and pins my hands above my head. "And wet," he says as he slides his stomach over my weeping cock. I inhale sharply, not realizing how turned on I'd gotten. "What were you thinking about Sunshine?" Lacing our fingers together he pushes our hands out to the side. He leans forward and places a wet, opened mouth kiss on my neck.

Tilting my head back to give him better access, I moan, "You." It comes out of nowhere, or maybe from that memory, but I suddenly have this desperate, almost urgent need for him. "Brian."

He bites down hard on my neck and soothes it with a quick swipe of his tongue. He slides forward, his stomach brushing over the head of my cock. I need more. I want more. I lift my hips and grind my wet cock against his skin. He pulls back and looks down at me, raising his eyebrow. "What do you want?" His voice is low and raspy.

"Fuck me." I push myself up and nip at his arm because it's the only thing I can reach.

He pushes me back down with his body. "I see."

"Do it." I tell him. I'll fucking beg if I have to. He knows what I want. He knows how I want it. He's just fucking around. "Stop fucking around and fuck me."

When he lets go of my hands, I grip his hair and yank him down into a hot, hard, sloppy kiss. He lifts my legs and pushes them to his shoulders. I'm not as flexible as I used to be, but at this moment I don't give a shit how much it will hurt later. He pulls his mouth from mine and reaches for the lube. I stop him. "Justin."

"Come on Brian." I rub my ass against his leaking cock. My legs slide from his shoulders and around his back as I pull him to me. I press my lips against his ear. "Do it. I want it." God, do I want it.

He grabs my hands and presses them against the mattress. He looks at me, right in the eyes, and then without warning or preparation he pushes the head of his cock into my hole. I push back against him, trying to open myself up to the intrusion. It burns. It fucking burns. I wrap my legs around him tighter and try to pull him into me. Brian presses his body down on me, stays perfectly still, and whispers, "Wait." I don't want to wait. I want it now, just like this. I want to feel that burn. I want to feel split open. I want that deep, dark, intensely pleasurable pain.

He pulls out of me and I growl. “No.”

“I have to.” He says reaching for the lube. He looks down at me. “Just a little.” I know he does. It’s not only painful for me, but for him too. It’s not like we’ve never fucked without lube before, but it does leave both of us pretty raw and sore.

“K.” I whisper.

When I drop my legs from around his waist he pushes himself to his knees and lathers his cock with a thin layer of lube. Tossing the bottle aside, he resumes his previous position and I re-wrap my legs around him. “Ready?” He asks as he presses the head of his cock against my hole.

“Do it.” He pushes in slowly. “No.” I shake my head and grip his forearms. I don’t know why, but sometimes I just need it hard and fast, and fucking wild. I need it right now and he knows it. It’s turning him on. It’s making him harder. I grip him tightly with my legs and pull him into me hard. I throw my head back and let out a sound that is something between a moan and a scream.

Grabbing my wrists, he pins them above my head and finally, finally, he does what I’ve been begging him to do for the last ten minutes. He fucks me within an inch of my life.

June 28, 2019 5:43am

Brian’s POV

I look in the mirror to straighten out my tie, but my eyes slide over to his reflected image. He’s sprawled across the bed, naked, his skin still red and damp from the shower. I don’t know what’s gotten into him this morning, well besides me, but he’s been insatiable since I woke up. Not that I’m complaining, because it was fucking hot. He arches his back as he runs his hand over his chest and down his body. Christ. I quickly glance at my watch. Fuck. I look over at him in the mirror and he’s stroking his cock. That...is fucking hot.

“Brian.” He moans. “I love watching you get dressed.” He gasps and throws his head back against the bed. “You’re...so...anal.” My cock twitches as he strokes faster.

“About...everything.”

When his legs fall open, I walk back to the bed. He looks up at me and grins mischievously. “You little shit.” He knew I was watching. He laughs as I grab him by the ankles and pull him to the edge of the bed. I wrap my fingers around his arms and pull him up for a hard kiss. I flick my tongue inside his mouth as I reach for his cock. I swipe the pad of my thumb over the wet head. He moans into my mouth. When we break the kiss, he leans his forehead against my stomach and watches as I jerk him off. His hands

grip my hips and I can feel his hot, rapid breath through the thin fabric of my shirt. Clutching my hips, he moans my name. Leaning down I whisper in his ear, "Don't come on my suit."

His laugh is throaty and soft. "I won't." He tilts his head back and looks up at me. His eyes are deep blue and half closed. His lips are wet, red, and swollen. He looks so fucking hot that it makes me want to rip my clothes off, fuck him hard and fast, again, and call in sick to work. When I still my hand around his cock he moans.

"Stand up."

He quirks his eyebrow. "On the bed?" When I nod he laughs, but stands up nonetheless. I grab his hips and flick my tongue over the head of his cock. "Shit." He wraps his fingers around my shoulders. As I take the head of his cock in my mouth the tips of his fingers dig into me hard. I tap my tongue against the sensitive spot where the head of his cock meets the shaft. His fingers press into my shoulders as I suck hard on the head, right before I take him all in my mouth. There is nothing, and there never will be anything, that tastes as good as Justin. I guide his cock in and out of my mouth with my hands on his hips, savoring the taste. "Brian." When he says my name like that I know he's close. I redouble my efforts, wanting nothing more than to bring him to the point where he loses himself. I lick, suck, nip, and hum around his cock. I feel his body tense, his cock jerks, and then the salty sweet flavor that is Justin fills my mouth. After I swallow, I release his limp cock, and with my assistance, he slides back down to the bed. Wrapping his arms around my waist, he makes a soft sound that I know is complete contentment.

Idly, I run my fingers through his damp hair. "What's gotten into you this morning?" He chuckles and so do I. "Besides me?"

He pulls back, resting his chin on my stomach, and looks up at me, his eyes still shining with post-orgasmic bliss. "I was thinking about that day...when you told me you were moving to New York."

"Ah." My mind automatically recalls the memory and I smile down at him. "That was hot." My cock twitches just thinking about it.

"Yeah." His voice takes on that "you know you want to fuck me" tone.

His hands stroke my back and suddenly I wonder why he's naked and I still have all my clothes on. Right...work. Cupping his face I lean over, pushing him back slightly. "As much as I want to stay here and fuck you...again..." He smiles up at me as he wraps his legs around my thighs. He presses his body against me as his hand moves from my back toward my cock. Fuck. His fingers lightly brush over my clothed hard-on. I clear my throat. "But I have to-"

He presses down on my cock and his eyes turn a darker shade of blue. "Go to work." His voice is husky and soft. He licks his slightly swollen lips as he unzips my fly. "Work is important."

Sliding his hand inside my pants he wraps his fingers around my cock and swipes the pad of his thumb over the head. Shit. I push him back and yank at my tie. "Fuck it."

Laughing he reaches up for me. "No." Pulling me down on top of him he whispers, "Fuck me."

June 28, 2019 6:08am

Gus' POV

I'm up on the roof for no other reason than not wanting to hear Dad and Justin going at it like a couple of fucking teenagers. After almost four weeks you'd think I'd be used to it...I'm not. Who the hell wants to hear their parents fucking? Not me. I've not only heard it, but, Jesus, seen it. I know they aren't used to anyone else being in the loft with them, but it has been almost four weeks, you'd think they'd remember I'm right down the fucking hall. I take a drag of my cigarette. Honestly, in all my life I've never heard my Moms, never seen them, not once. I mean, I know they...do it, but they just hide it better. Dad and Justin don't hide it at all. I shake my head. They just aren't like that I guess, but it is disturbing to wake up to Justin's half moaning screams as Dad does...I shake my head. I so don't want to even think about it.

I look down to the street and watch the cars and people below. It's funny that I can sit on this ledge, fourteen stories up, and not be afraid. I'm afraid of a lot of shit, cars, driving at night, falling for someone who isn't Ashley, but this, looking down and knowing I could fall to my death, isn't even a blip on the radar. Taking a drag of my cigarette, I avert my eyes to look out across the city. My mind wanders and my first thought is that my Moms and JR will be here later. I don't know if I'm exactly looking forward to it. I'm not sure how I'll handle it, or what I'll even say. I can't help but wonder if I'll revert back to pretending that I'm not totally fucked up. "No Mom, Ma, see I'm perfectly fine." That's not true. It never was true...well, not since the accident.

Flicking my cigarette, I watch it fall until it disappears from my view. Grady told me it will be fine, seeing my Moms, but he doesn't get it, not really, and I didn't tell him. He's supposed to be at my studio later today to just hang out. Part of me wants to feel weird about that, or at least uncomfortable with it, but the truth is I don't. Up here, alone on the roof, denial can be forgotten and I can be honest with myself. I like him. I want him. I want to be around him, and I want him to be around me. I don't want to want it, but I fucking do. It's not like there haven't been other guys since Ash that have showed interest in me. There have been plenty of guys who wanted me. None of them ever interested me, until Grady came along. When I moved here I never expected that I'd meet

someone. I never really believed there would ever be anyone after Ash. Maybe that isn't a rational thought, but it's honestly how I felt. I thought that I would spend the rest of my life longing for something, someone that I just couldn't have, longing for a life that was just no longer possible. It's as if somehow, when I wasn't looking or paying attention, Grady snuck in some secret door that no one else even bothered to look for.

It's not just that he's hot, and god he fucking is, but he actually seems to care. I mean, he asked about Ash for Christ sakes. Those other guys, some of them knew Ash, but they never asked about him. It's not even other guys; my family, my friends, no one asked me about Ash unless it was in relation to the accident. I'd be lying if I said that didn't hurt a little. He may have...died, but to me he's still there, still a part of me. Grady didn't want to know about the accident. He wanted to know about Ash. I was surprised when he asked me, more than surprised, shocked. He didn't push and when I talked he listened. I can't deny how fucking good it felt to talk about Ash, to remember something good that we shared. I smile. I liked remembering how we met and how we got together. It was... easy to tell Grady about him and that kind of scares me.

Just like kissing him scares me. It's not that it wasn't good, because it was. It's that I liked it. I more than liked it. I wanted it and, fuck it, I needed it. Since then it's practically all I've been thinking about. Of course, the more I think about it the guiltier I feel. Is that rational? Does it make sense? I know Ash wouldn't want me to become some hermit who swore off the possibility of being with someone again just because he's...dead. I close my eyes. I wouldn't want that for him either if things were reversed. Sighing, I wrap my fingers around the ledge and lean back. For the last day and a half I've been feeling all this different shit and I just don't know what to do with it. I really don't know how to let go and how to hold on at the same time. It's like this balancing act and my equilibrium is fucked.

I take a deep breath and open my eyes. The only thing I can do is just take it one day at a time. Who knows what will happen? I don't. The only thing I do know is that I like Grady and I love Ash. How do I deal with that? How to I reconcile those feelings with all the other ones? It's not like I ever expected someone like Grady to come along, but he has and maybe the truth is I'm more scared of that than anything else.

June 28, 2019 6:59am

Justin's POV

I pull up my jeans and look over at Brian. I wasn't lying before when I said I love to watch him get dressed. It's almost as erotic to me as watching him get undressed. It's the way he tugs at the cuffs of his shirt, how his tie has to be just right, how if there is one tiny wrinkle he'll change his shirt, or pants, or sometimes his entire suit. Reaching for a shirt, I pull it over my head and glance back over at him. His eyes are on me and part of me thinks that he likes to watch me get dressed too. I look over at the bed, the duvet on

the floor, the sheets twisted and half hanging off the mattress, and all I want to do is drag him back over there and beg him to fuck me again.

Shaking my head, I turn my back on the bed. “What time did Gus say Mel and Linz would be here?” I’m only asking in an attempt to push my thoughts away from being fucked so hard this morning that I screamed, and all I want is for it to happen again...and again.

He laughs because he knows me that well, and he reaches for his suit jacket. “They should be at the building around four.”

“Mmm.” I walk over to him, run my hands over his shoulders, and straighten out his tie.

“Are you calling Amy today?”

Sighing, I look up at him. I’ve been avoiding it and he knows it. We talked about it some more when we got home that night. What he said made a lot of sense. Why is a place like Rauling’s giving such short notice? Brian didn’t have an answer for that, but I had a guess. It only makes sense that they had someone previously lined up, but that person dropped out, so they called me. The more I think about it like that, the more it pisses me off. I’m not some two-bit artist, and I’m no one’s filler. Plus, it’s a pretty well known and established fact about what scale I work in. It’s been years since anyone has asked me to submit small scale pieces for a show, which means Rauling’s didn’t do their homework, and asked for me blindly. Almost as if they picked my name out of a hat. Well, fuck that. Like Brian reminded me, I’m not some shitty starving artist. My pieces sell for thousands of dollars. I don’t have to bend for anyone, even if it is Rauling’s.

“I’m calling Amy this afternoon.”

“Do you think they’ll work with you?”

I shrug. “If it’s like I told you and I’m just a replacement, probably not. I’m sure they can find another artist for that. If they are interested in me and my work, then yeah, they might.”

He cups my face between his hands. “And fuck ‘em if they don’t.”

Resting my hands on his hips I smile up at him. “Exactly.”

“Now...” He pushes me back a little. “I have to go.”

I laugh and wrap my arms around his waist as I lean against him. “Are you coming by the building when you get out of work?”

His left arm slides around me as his right hand combs through the back of my hair. “Yeah. I thought we’d take them out to eat at Mona’s.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I don’t have bad ones.”

I chuckle lightly, but then stop. “Do you think Gus is going to be okay when they get here?”

He’s quiet for a while so I pull back and look up at him. His brow is furrowed and he’s staring out the windows of our bedroom. “I don’t know.” He finally admits. “He’s been keeping a lot of shit from them.”

He meets my eyes. “Still is.” It’s true. He didn’t tell them that he was tapering off his meds. Brian and I are sure he hasn’t told them about almost getting run down by a taxi, or that he remembered the accident, or the fact that since he’s been here, and probably even before then, he’s been a complete fucking emotional mess.

He brushes my hair back from my face. “Nothing we can do. It’s Gus’ decision to tell them.”

I hear the uncertainty in his voice, and it mirrors my own when I say, “I know.” The truth is we don’t know. We’ve talked about it plenty of times, but neither of us knows what to say or not to say to Mel and Linz.

Leaning forward, he rests his forehead against mine. “Ibiza...last chance.”

I huff and push him back. “No. Now go to work.” I look over at the clock. “You’re very late, Mr. Kinney.”

His eyes darken at that and I grin up at him knowingly. “You’re an asshole.” He grabs me and kisses me hard just to prove that he can be an asshole too. When we part, lips wet and swollen, he whispers, “Later.”

I move out of his arms. “Later.” He smiles down at me, kisses me again before grabbing his briefcase and heading out the door. I look back over at our disheveled bed and sigh. Maybe Ibiza wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

June 28, 2019 1:29pm

Gus’ POV

“Nervous?”

I glance over at Grady. He’s sitting cross-legged on the couch, his dark brown hair falling across his brow as he bends over the sketchpad in his lap.

“No.” I take a drag of my cigarette and turn my attention back to the computer screen.
“Why would you think that?”

I hear the soft tap, tap, tap of his pencil against the sketchpad. “Well, it might have something to do with the fact that you’ve smoked a pack of cigarettes in an hour.”

“I have not.”

I hear his sketchpad hit the floor. “Almost a whole pack then.”

I take a drag of my cigarette and put it out. “It doesn’t mean I’m nervous. It’s just my Moms.”

“Gus.”

I look over at him and sigh. Pushing the chair back, I stand up and cross the room, flopping down next to him on the couch. “It’s just-” I sigh. “They just-” I close my eyes. “They don’t-” Get me. That’s what I want to say. They don’t get me. They don’t get it. I love my Moms and they mean well, but since the accident they treat me like I shouldn’t be different. I am different. How could I not be? I know that somewhere in me I’m still the same person I was before the accident, but I’m also all of this now too, all this “after”. I know they want me to be better. I’m fucking trying, but like Justin said, it won’t happen overnight. Opening my eyes, I look over at Grady. “They just don’t know...everything.”

He smiles at me. “Parents rarely do.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t mean it like that.” His brows furrow. “I mean-” Looking away from him I mumble, “They don’t know that I remember the accident.”

“Rem- You didn’t remember?”

“No, not until...” I glance back at him.

His eyes widen with sudden understanding. Looking away from me, he runs a hand through his hair. “Jesus, no wonder-”

“Yeah.” I look down at my hands, clutched in my lap. “If I tell them they’ll think...” I swallow hard and clutch my hands so tightly together that they start to shake. “They’ll think that it means something more than it does.”

“Like what? An instant cure?” He asks incredulously. I can only nod. “Well with all do respect for your Moms, that’s kind of fucked.”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

I look over at him. His brows are furrowed and his eyes are on the floor. “Why do you they think remembering will help?” His eyes meet mine.

I unclench my hands and rub them up and down my thighs. “For months after the accident...after I woke up from the coma.” His eyes widen. Right, he didn’t know about the coma. “They took me to see all kinds of doctors, therapist, hypnotist...you name it, I saw them. They just kept hoping that I would remember something, anything, and it would somehow unlock this door that would...fix everything.” I huff as lean back against the couch and close my eyes. “That it would make everything better. Make me better.”

“I don’t...I don’t understand.”

No, he wouldn’t. Opening my eyes, I roll my head and look at Grady. I’m wonder how much right I have to tell him what I’m about to tell him. “Do you know...about Justin?”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “Know what?”

“That he was bashed.” His mouth drops open in shock. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“He was...when?”

“A long time ago.” I sigh. “The point is he woke up from a coma, just like me, and he didn’t remember anything about what happened to him-” I close my eyes.

He reaches for my hand and our fingers lace together. “Just like you.” He says softly.

“My Moms never really talked to me about it per se. I didn’t even know all the details until my Dad told me last month. When it happened to Justin, my Dad did all this stuff to try to get him to remember.” I open my eyes and look at Grady. “It didn’t work. Eventually he remembered on his own.”

“And it helped him.” I nod. “So your Moms think that if you remember it will help you too?”

“I don’t think they consciously think of it like that, but yeah. I mean, they only mentioned the bashing to me, because it’s just a part of the family history. When my Dad started telling me about it, like details, all of the sudden it made sense, what my Moms were doing.”

His brows furrow. “Yeah, but just because that worked for Justin, it doesn’t mean it would work for you.” The corner of my mouth lifts up in a slight grin as I remember Justin saying something similar. “Did it help?”

I shrug. “I don’t know.”

Tugging my hand he pulls me to him. I lean against his warm solid body and sigh. Suddenly, I feel really tired. "Are you going to tell them?"

"No...yes...maybe...probably."

"Well...I think you should."

"Do you?"

"Maybe they won't react like you think."

"Yeah...maybe." Or maybe they react exactly how I think they will. I can't help the knot that is forming in my stomach at the thought of telling them. I don't want to see that glimmer of hope in Mom's eyes or that look on Ma's face, thinking that somehow remembering that fucking night makes me feel better. It fucking doesn't. It makes me feel like shit. It pisses me off, it makes me fucking sad, it makes me miss Ash, it make me wish for things long gone, it makes me-

"Hey." Grady wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against him. "It's going to be okay Gus." I want to ask how he knows that, but I don't. Instead, we move on the couch, him on his back and me beside him, as if we've known each other for longer than three weeks. "It will be fine." I can only hope he's right.

June 28, 2019 2:18pm

Justin's POV

I wipe the paint from my hands and look over the canvas. It's not nearly done, but my hand is starting to ache and it's either keep going and fuck it up or take a break. I toss the rag to the table, grab my cell, and sit down on the couch. I guess I should call Amy. I've been putting it off. If the circumstances around getting the offer for Rauling's are like I think, then there really is no reason to delay this. I lean back against the couch and dial Amy's cell.

"Darling, tell me the good news."

I laugh. Amy never answers the phone with hello or hey or hi, it's always, "Darling, tell me the good news." My laugh turns into a sigh. "Amy-"

"That doesn't sound like it will be good news."

"About Rauling's." I take a deep breath. "Unless they can negotiate the date and the scale size...I'm going to have to turn them down."

“Ne-Justin I already told you Rauling’s doesn’t negotiate.”

“I know what you told me, but I also know that there must be a reason for the short notice they’ve given and why they’ve asked me for small scale when it’s a pretty well know fact that I no longer show small scale work.” She’s silent for much too long. “So I’m right.” I laugh in spite of myself. “Jesus Amy, how could you even think I would say yes to being a filler?”

“It’s not like that.” She says much too quickly.

“It’s not?”

“It’s Rauling’s, Justin.”

“I know that Amy.” I push myself up from the couch. “I know what it would mean for me.” I pause mid-pace. “And for you.” Every artist’s agent wants to say that they got their client a show at Rauling’s. I’ve been in the game too long not to know that. “I’d love to do a show at Rauling’s, but not like this.”

“I’m sorry.” Her voice is soft and full of remorse.

“Don’t be. I understand. I wanted to say yes, believe me; this is harder than I’m making it sound.”

“They called out of the blue and I just went for it.”

“Went for it?” I don’t like how that sounds at all.

“I...”

“Amy, please tell me that you didn’t.” She’s silent, and the longer she’s silent the more pissed off I get. “Amy.” I try to temper my anger. “Please, please tell me you didn’t.” More silence. I clutch the phone so hard in my hand that it cramps into a claw and I hiss. Quickly, I switch the phone to my left hand and shake out my right. Christ. “Amy?”

“I’m sorry. What do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me you didn’t tell Rauling’s yes.” I shake my head and close my eyes. “You told them yes. You told them yes? Jesus Christ Amy.”

“Darling I know but-”

“I’m sorry. I...I can’t talk to you right now.” I open my eyes. “Did Gavaiz give a date?”

“No...not yet.” She sighs. “Justin, what do you want me to do...about Rauling’s?”

I almost laugh, and tell her, why are you asking me? “I’ll call you later.”

I hang up the phone and toss it onto the couch. After all these years, all this fucking time, she has to go and do something like this. And for what? Because it’s Rauling’s. Because she’s an agent. Because agent plus artist plus Rauling’s means big business. I can’t fucking believe this shit. I can’t do the show. That’s been thoroughly established. I massage the fingers of my right hand with my left. Let’s forget the fact that it’s less than a month from now, let’s forget the fact that it’s on the same day as the TK show, let’s forget the small scale bullshit, and go with permanent fucking injury. The whole time I was trying to talk myself into doing the show, I knew it would be impossible. Yes, I needed Brian to say it, because I needed to hear it, but I knew it already. Deep down I knew I could push myself to complete the work, but it would be the last fucking show I ever did. Fuck that. I sit down on the couch and clutch my hair in my hands. I really can’t believe Amy did this. She’s been my agent for fucking years, she knows everything. She knows what I’m capable of these days and what I’m not.

Sighing, I reach for the phone, because right now I need Brian. I check the time and thank whoever that he doesn’t have a meeting right now. I quickly dial his number and lean back against the couch. “Hey.”

I huff. “I’m pissed.” I can just see the eyebrow creeping up on his forehead. “Amy already told Rauling’s yes.”

“What?” He pauses. “You’re bullshitting me.”

“I wish I was.” I lay back on the couch. “It’s not like her to do something like this. She’s been my agent for twelve years. Twelve years Brian.”

“Wh- I- She-” He’s so fucking pissed right now.

“It’s not only wrong, it’s unprofessional.”

“Agreed.” He grits out. “What did you tell her to do, besides fuck off?”

I sigh. “I told her I’d call her later.” He’s silent. “I’m not doing the show so stop thinking that right now.” I close my eyes. “If she told them yes, even if it was tentative, and now she tells them no, it will look bad not only for her but for me as well.”

“Justin...this is completely fucked.”

“I know.” I roll on my side and stretch out the fingers of my right hand. This is not exactly the kind of break I needed to take. “I can’t believe she did this.”

“Yeah, well, that makes two of us.” He sighs. “Call her back. See if she can still negotiate and if not...” I hear the shuffling of paper. “This could fuck with your career, does she know that?” I know he’s not finished so I remain silent. “It’s one thing to get an offer

from Rauling's and say no, or try to work a deal, it's another thing to say yes and then back out. Fuck."

"Maybe we're overreacting." I don't think we are but I can hear Brian's thoughts in my own head and words like lawsuit keep popping up.

"We're not."

"Okay look...this is fucked...I'll call her back and see if she can work a deal and if not..." I take a deep breath. "We'll just go from there."

"Call me back."

I look at the clock. "You'll be in a meeting."

"Justin." I know that tone too well. That's the "just do it, don't argue with me, I'm here for you" tone.

"Yeah, okay. I'll call."

He hangs up the phone without even saying good-bye. I don't take it personally. He's pissed off. He's almost as protective of my career as I am. He always has been. It's not even about money, for me it never was, but I'm an artist, I want my work out there. I want people to see it. That's what all artists want. I can paint a million pictures, but if no one will ever see them but Brian and I, what's the fucking point? I roll onto my back and call Amy, not that I want to right now, but I have to.

"Justin." She sighs my name.

"I just want to say...that what you did was extremely unprofessional, and that after all these years I can't believe you would do something like this."

"I...don't have any excuses."

"Good, because I don't want any Amy. What I want is for you to call Rauling's and work your ass off setting up a deal with them. I want you to push back the date and let them know, in no uncertain terms, the scale they'll be getting. If you can't work a deal, if this shit blows up in both of our faces..." I close my eyes and can hardly believe I'm about to say this. "Then I'm going to have to...fire you."

She gasps. "Fi...Fire me?"

"Why did you do it Amy? It makes no sense, not to me, not to Brian."

"Brian?" There is a slight shake in her voice. "I thought you would say yes."

“No, you thought you could convince me to say yes. You of all people should know that I’m no longer capable of producing that many pieces in that short amount of time.” I hated saying that. I hate admitting that. “You of all people should know why I don’t work in small scale anymore. Rauling’s is what every artist wants, but I don’t want it for the price I’d have to pay.” I hate every word that’s coming out of my mouth. Admitting that I can no longer work like I used to, that with each year the breaks between painting and not painting increase, hurts. It burns, it cuts, and I just fucking hate it.

“I’ll call them Justin. I’m...I really am sorry.”

“Why did you do it?” I ask again when I realize she didn’t answer me.

She sighs. “The same reason why everyone does anything in my business, the notoriety, the money, being able to say I got my client a show at Rauling’s.”

I let the words sink in. I figured as much, but in a way I feel used. In a way it makes me feel like I’m not worth anything, that I’m just a...commodity. I take a deep breath. I am a commodity, but if there is one thing I’ll never be it’s a fucking sell out. “Let me know what Rauling’s tells you and we’ll go from there.”

“I’ll try to work a deal.”

“For your sake and mine I hope you can make one.”

I end the call and look at the clock. I know I should call Brian, but I just need a fucking minute. I feel the anger boiling under my skin, the anger of what Amy’s done, the anger that I was fucking bashed, the uncontrolled fucking rage that Chris fucking Hobbs is walking around in this world with nothing more than a memory of what it feels like to suck on the cold metal of a gun. I close my eyes for a brief moment and let myself pull the fucking trigger.

June 28, 2019 3:39pm

Gus’ POV

A loud bang from upstairs jars me from my sleep. “What the fuck?” I mumble.

“He’s been banging around up there for the last hour.”

It takes me a minute to realize where I’m at. I push myself up and look at Grady. “I fell asleep.”

He grins at me. “You must have been tired.”

Another bang comes from upstairs and instinctively I look up, as if I've just gained the superpower of being able to see through the ceiling. "Jesus, what the fuck is he doing up there?"

"Angry painting."

I look back down at Grady. "What the fuck is that?"

"Just what it sounds like. It's not pretty to watch, that's for sure."

I shake my head and am about to get up to go see what the hell Justin is doing when my studio door slams open and JR, with Jesus Christ bright pink hair, comes charging in. "Gus where the hell are you?" She surveys the room and finally turns to me. Fuck. I hurriedly push myself away from Grady and stand up. "Who's he?" She narrows her eyes and crosses her arms.

I'm about to answer when Mom and Ma walk into the studio. Fuck. "Gus." Mom smiles and walks over to me wrapping me in her arms. "How are you sweetie?" She pulls back and looks down at Grady. Her smile falters. "Hello."

Grady stands up and holds out his hand. "Grady O'Toole, I'm a friend of Gus'."

Mom smiles and shakes his hand. "Lindsay." She turns around. "That's Mel and the girl with pink hair is JR."

Another loud bang comes from upstairs and we all look up. "Justin's up there?" Mom asks, looking back at me.

"Yeah. Grady said he's..." I look at Grady. "What the fuck did you call it?"

He laughs. "Angry painting."

"Right." I look back at Mom. "Angry painting." Her eyes fill with concern. "Is...that bad?"

She smiles at me and brushes my hair back from my face. "No sweetie. Is your Dad here?"

"Not yet. Um, maybe I should go get Justin." Right now I'd say anything to escape this room, because suddenly it just feels like too much at once. I can't even explain it. Maybe it's because I just woke up. I look at the clock. Maybe it's because they're early. Another loud bang comes from upstairs. Maybe it's because Justin's angry painting, whatever the fuck that is. Or just maybe it's because Grady's here and my Moms and sister are here and maybe, just maybe, I'm not ready for that. "I'll be right back."

I start to walk out but JR stops me. "Hey, aren't you even gonna tell me hello?"

I smile down at JR and tug affectionately at a strand of her pink hair. "Nice color." I look over at Ma and see her scowling. When I look back at JR she's trying not to laugh. I lean down and kiss her cheek before whispering in her ear, "Keep the Moms entertained for me."

She wraps her arms around my shoulders and keeps me in place. "Only if you tell me who that hot guy is you were cuddled up with on the couch."

I push her back gently and mouth, "I do not cuddle."

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever." Louder banging comes from upstairs. "You better go see what that's all about."

Have I mentioned I fucking love my sister? I smile at her and start to back out of the room. Just those few minutes with JR calmed me down. Okay, this is good, not so bad. I can handle-I run into something warm and solid. Turning around, I look up into the face of Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben? "Uncle Ben."

"Hello Gus." He smiles at me and pushes his glasses up his nose.

Uncle Mikey scoots out from behind him, his brown eyes shining with mirth and a wide smile spread across his face. "Surprise."

Okay what the fuck is going on? I look at Ma, but she just shrugs her shoulders. When I look over at Mom, she's blushing slightly and looking guilty as hell. "Where the hell is my Grandson?"

Please, please tell me that isn't..."Grandma Deb." She pushes her way around Uncle Mikey and Uncle Ben and grabs me in a death grip.

After what feels like several minutes she finally lets me go. She cups my face in her hands, small tears catching in the crinkles of her eyes. "Baby, how are yo-" Another loud bang comes from upstairs. "Jesus Christ what the hell is Sunshine doing up there?"

I'm going to freak out. What the fuck is everyone doing here? Why is everyone here? I thought it was just going to be my Moms and JR. Please god, do not let Uncle Emmett or Uncle Ted and Uncle Blake walk through the door. Please, please. Okay Gus. It's fine. It's just the family. No big deal. Right. I've gotta..."I'll be right back." I try to smile but I feel the tightness in my chest. What the fuck? I push open the door and practically run down the hall. I make it up to the first landing before I have to stop. I bend over and grip my knees. Breathe Gus, fucking breathe. I close my eyes as I try to take deep breaths. It's just my family. That's all. No reason to freak out. None.

"Hey." Shaking my head I stand up and push myself against the wall. "Hey, it's just me." I open my eyes to see Grady, his familiar golden eyes full of concern. I've never been so

thankful to see anyone in my life. I reach out for him and bring him to me. Without hesitation he wraps his arms around me and holds me tight, right there on the fucking stairs. “Hey, it’s okay.”

I shake my head. “They...it was only supposed to be my Moms and my sister. That’s practically my whole fucking family in there.” Well not really, but it’s at least half of them.

“They’re worried about you.” He says softly. “They all wanted to come after you, but your sister managed to hold them off and somehow push me out the door at the same time.”

I laugh and take a deep breath. I pull back from Grady, my hands resting on his hips. “She had to push you out the door?”

“Well, she didn’t have to push that hard.”

“Mother fucker!” We both turn our heads when we hear Justin shout.

“I think I need to call my Dad. He’s going to be...” I shrug. “Pissed?”

Grady laughs. “You’re not sure?”

Our eyes meet. “I’m not sure of anything right this second.”

He places his hands on either side of my cheeks and softly kisses my lips. “It’s okay. You don’t have to be.”

Pressing our foreheads together I take a deep breath. “My cell phone is in my studio.” Grady steps back, digs his cell out of his pocket, and hands it to me. “Thanks.” I take the cell phone and sit down on the stairs. He sits beside me while I dial Dad’s number.

“Who the fuck is this?” Wow, Dad sounds really pissed off.

“Dad.”

“Gus?” His voice softens immediately. “Where are you?”

I take a deep breath. “I’m in the stairwell...using Grady’s phone.”

“Grady?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Dad, listen. Justin’s upstairs angry painting or whateverthefuck. Mom, Ma, and JR are here. Oh and Uncle Mikey, and Uncle Ben, and Grandma Deb.” I say it all in practically one breath. Grady rests his hand on my thigh and I automatically cover it with mine.

“Fuck.” I hear shuffling of papers. “I thought it was just going to be your Moms and JR.”

“So did I.”

“And Justin’s...fuck, he didn’t call me back.” He says to himself. “Listen Gus, whatever you do, don’t fucking go upstairs and do not let anyone else go up there either.”

A tight binding feeling settles across my chest. “Is...is he alright?”

“No...well he’s pissed off about something that happened earlier.” He sighs and I can’t tell if he’s frustrated, concerned, or just pissed off in general. “Are you okay?”

“Not really. I didn’t expect all of them to be here. I kind of feel-”

“Ambushed?”

“Exactly.”

“Is...Grady with you?”

I look over at him. “Yeah.”

“Okay look, just stay where you are...if possible and I’ll...I’ll fix everything when I get there.”

I want to ask how, but I don’t. Sometimes Dad thinks he can fix everything...sometimes I’m amazed when he actually pulls it off. “Okay Dad.”

He doesn’t say good-bye, just hangs up on me. I hand Grady back his phone and clutch my hands together. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head and lean into him as he wraps his arm around my shoulder. “This...is so fucked.”

“Accept everything about yourself--I mean everything. You are you and that is the beginning and the end--no apologies, no regrets.”
~ Henry Kissinger ~

June 28, 2019 4:47pm

Brian's POV

When I finally step into the elevator it's earlier than I intended on leaving. Usually on Fridays I get home even later than usual, because I always like to tie up the loose ends before the weekend. As I walk out of the office building I am assaulted with thick humid air that makes me sweat almost instantly. Stepping to the curb, I adjust my laptop case and switch my briefcase to my left hand as I hail a cab. I glance up at the darkening sky...looks like rain. When a cab finally pulls up I get in and give the driver the address of the building as I set my laptop and briefcase beside me. I lean back against the hot leather seat as we pull into the beginnings of rush hour traffic. The noise of the city does little to distract me from my thoughts. I can't believe that Melanie and Lindsay thought it would be a good idea to bring along Michael, Ben, and Debbie. I don't know if Gus is ready for all that. I don't even know if he is ready to deal with Melanie and Lindsay. It's not so much an issue of them being there, it's the fact that they didn't give him a heads up. How hard would it have been to pick up the phone and just let us know that they were bringing Michael, Ben and Debbie? Not that fucking hard. Of course, it's not exactly like Gus has been honest with them. As far as I know he's been telling them how fucking great he's doing out here. If that's the case, why would they feel the need to give him a heads up? Whateverthefuck. They still should have called to at least let me or Justin know. I can only imagine Gus' reaction to everyone walking into his studio.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as my thoughts drift from Gus to Justin. I'd been so busy at work that I didn't even notice that he hadn't called me back, and now I can only wonder what happened. Was Amy unable to make a deal? Well, he didn't sign a fucking contract so they couldn't hold him to shit. The fact that Amy did something so...what had Justin said, unprofessional, is mind numbing. What the fuck was she thinking? I know what she was thinking, money. It always comes down to money and getting ahead in this town; no matter what business you're in. Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Maybe Amy cut a deal or said it was an error on her part, but that didn't explain Justin's current state of mind. I know him. If he's in his studio throwing paint around it's not a good fucking thing. If it were me I'd have fired her ass, no questions asked. Justin isn't like that though. I know better than anyone how many chances he's willing to give someone. As he said, Amy's been his agent for twelve years. I know Justin's reluctant to throw that much history away, no matter how severe the transgression. I have half the mind to call Amy myself, but I know that would just piss Justin off even more, and now isn't exactly the time to increase his anger.

Christ, angry painting. It's been a few years since he's done that. I remember the first time I witnessed it, I had no idea what was going on. He was just so pissed off and honestly, it freaked me the fuck out. I remember I tried everything to calm him down. I tried talking to him, but he just told me to fuck off. I tried holding him, but he just pushed me away. He kept telling me over and over, "Don't touch me. Don't touch me." It reminded me of the days after he'd been released from the hospital after the bashing. It felt just like that. Eventually, I stopped trying anything and just sat back and waited. I sat on the couch in his studio watching as he painted a haphazard picture with his left hand. Later, at one of his shows, that painting sold for two thousand dollars. Still, having to watch him go through that and not being able to do anything was fucking difficult. I've always, whether consciously or unconsciously, taken care of Justin, and when I'm not able to it bothers me like nothing else. Later, he explained what had made him so angry. Over the years he's only angry painted a few times, but each time it's all come down to one core issue, the bashing. I don't doubt that this time will be any different. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to draw the connections of this shit with Amy to him being pissed off. It's all about what his limits are, what he's willing to admit to himself, and what he's willing to admit to other people about what he can or cannot do. This shit with Rauling's about the time frame and the scale has just brought it right up to his face in sharp focus.

"Mister?" I drop my fingers from the bridge of my nose just as the cab driver turns in his seat. "Hey mister?"

I look out the window and realize I'm at the building. I gather my briefcase and laptop, mumble thanks to the driver as I hand him a fifty, and exit the car. After I shut the door I look up at the building and take a deep breath before climbing up the stairs. I pause at the door and look inside. Everyone is standing in the middle of the gallery in a semi-circle. Melanie's arm is rubbing soothingly up and down Lindsay's back. Lindsay keeps wiping her hand across her cheeks. Ben and Debbie are standing side by side. JR, with Jesus pink hair, is leaning against Michael twisting her hair and biting her lip.

I try to school my irritation as I open the door, but before I even have one foot inside I hear myself asking, "What the fuck are you all doing here?"

Everyone turns around. Debbie's hands fly to her hips as she quips, "Hello to you too asshole."

"Brian!" Michael moves away from JR and walks over to me. He smiles up at me as he wraps his arms around my waist.

"Hey Mikey." I push him back gently. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

His smile fades slightly. "Well...we just all thought we'd surprise Gus and come see him while Mel and Linz were heading this way."

"Yeah well, you surprised him alright."

Michael shifts uncomfortably and looks as he is about to say something.

“Brian?” I look over Michael and see Lindsay hesitantly making her way over to me. “Can I...” She tilts her head to the corner of the room and I nod. Michael smiles hesitantly at the two of us before returning to JR. When Lindsay and I are out of earshot of the others she places her hand on my elbow. She looks up at me with concerned red-rimmed eyes. I can tell she’s been crying. “I think he panicked.”

“What did you expect him to do?” I try to keep the sharp edge out of my voice, but fail.

“I don’t know Brian.” She quickly wipes a tear from her cheek. “I guess not that.”

I pinch the bridge of nose quickly and then sigh. “Look, he just wasn’t expecting all of this.” I gesture to the others. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

“It was a last minute thing, Brian, and I thought...we thought he’d be happy to see us.” There is a slight quiver in her voice.

“Hey.” She brushes a tear from her face. I push the anger from my voice. “He’s happy to see you, okay?” I’m not angry at her necessarily. I’m irritated that this situation has upset Gus.

“I know.” She snuffles. “I thought...I...”

“Where is he?”

“In his studio...with Grady.”

What the fuck? I raise my eyebrow. “With Grady?”

She nods. “Yeah, Grady came into the studio and asked us all very kindly to leave.” She smiles up at me sadly. “He said Gus needed a few minutes and if we could just please wait downstairs.” Her eyebrows draw together. “Is he Gus’ boyfriend?”

“What? No. Gus doesn’t...” I shake my head. What the fuck?

She crosses her arms over her stomach. “It’s just...if he has someone...if Gus can...” She bites her lip and looks up at me with so much hope shining in her eyes that I have to look away. A loud bang comes from upstairs and Lindsay flinches. “That’s been going on since we got here.” I look down at her. “Justin’s...”

“Angry painting.” She nods. “Look you should go talk to Gus. Tell him why you didn’t call him about everyone coming. He’s not angry, he just gets...”

“I know.” Her eyes shimmer. “He’s not better.”

I shrug. "Talk to him." Several loud bangs echo throughout the building. I adjust the strap of my laptop case. "I need to go."

I move to walk passed her but she places her hand on my arm to stop me. "Is Justin okay?"

"No." I see no reason to lie. Her hand slides off of my arm as I leave her there and head upstairs.

When I reach the second floor I'm torn between going to Justin and walking down the hall to check on Gus. I look up, then down the hall, and sigh.

June 28, 2019 5:02pm

Gus' POV

I push myself up from the couch, cross the room, and light a cigarette. It's just my family. Fine, I know that. They love me, they care about me. I get that. The problem is that I wasn't prepared for it. I was prepared for seeing my moms and JR, not the others. It's not a matter of feeling uncomfortable in their presence. It's a matter of feeling overwhelmed by it. It reminds me of when I was in the hospital and day after day everyone would be there. They mean well, but sometimes my family is just too much. I take a drag of my cigarette and sit down at the table. For the last few weeks the only people I've been around are Dad, Justin...and Grady. I look over at him. He's leaning back on the couch, his pose making it appear as if he's relaxed, but I can see the tension in the way he's holding his shoulders, and the way his golden eyes are fixed on me. I wonder when I started noticing that kind of shit. I huff and look away from him.

"Do you want me to go?" He asks softly.

I shake my head and take a drag of my cigarette. Maybe I do want him to go. Maybe I want him to stay. Maybe right now I'm not exactly sure what the fuck I want. I just feel fucking overwhelmed. In a way it pisses me off that I feel like this, as if my emotions are a set of jacks that have been scattered across the floor and no matter how many times I try, I can't pick them up when I bounce the ball. They just keep slipping through my fingers. It's just my family. They love me. There isn't a reason to feel as if the world suddenly shifted to the left and I'm barely hanging on.

Taking a drag of my cigarette, I wince inwardly at the expression I saw on my Mom's face when she looked at me right before I left the room earlier. She fucking knew. She saw. I'd spent the hours since JR called with the flight information preparing myself to deal with their visit. I'd been mentally psyching myself up, trying to convince myself that I am okay, that I could be okay for just this one weekend, that I could do it...for them.

Well, that plan went all to hell when my breath caught in my throat and I basically ran out of the studio. A loud clatter from upstairs makes me jump, and scatters my thoughts. Fuck. I don't know why, or where it even came from, but it upsets me, more than I thought possible, that Justin's up there angry painting. I'm not even sure what that is, but Grady said it isn't pretty. I have this irrational emotion that knots itself in my body whenever Dad or Justin is upset about something. I wonder if I've always felt like this. I realize that I have, but maybe not to this extreme. Maybe it's stronger from living with them, from seeing them everyday.

I look up just as Grady reaches for my cigarette and puts it out. I didn't even hear him approach me. He holds out his hand and I take it without a thought. He pulls me up and leads me back to the couch. When we sit down, he wraps his arm around my shoulders and I lean against him. This should make me feel nervous, or weird, or like this is wrong, but it doesn't. As much as I want to deny whatever this is that we have going on, I can't. I can't deny the comfort he's offering me. I can't deny that I need it, that I want it. He kisses my temple and runs his fingers through my hair. He doesn't ask me anything, he doesn't say anything, and I'm grateful for that.

"Gus?" I look up just as Dad walks into the room. I feel myself freeze under his gaze. Fuck. His eyebrow slowly moves up his forehead as he crosses his arms.

I push myself away from Grady and stand up. "Dad..."

We stand there looking at each other. I'm not sure what to say because I can't tell what he's thinking. I just wait for him to say something. His eyes move from me to Grady then back to me. "You alright?" He finally asks.

Stepping forward, I tell him, "Yeah...I..." I shrug. "I just wasn't expecting everyone to show up." I stop a few feet away from him. "Dad, stop glaring at him." I whisper.

His eyes move back to me. "Your Mom is probably going to come up here and talk to you."

"By herself?" A muffled shout comes from upstairs and we both look up. "Dad." He looks at me. "You should go...upstairs."

He glances back at Grady and then at me. "What's going on?"

"Dad...can we just not...you know...right now." I grab him by the arm and guide him toward the door. "Just go upstairs Dad." When we reach the door he turns back to me, his eyes interrogating me. It's unnerving. "Look Dad, he's just my friend." I shrug. "Can you just not give me another thing to freak out about right now?" His face softens at that. I know it's only a temporary reprieve, but I'll take it. I just don't know if I can answer any questions as far as Grady is concerned right now.

He pinches the bridge of his nose as we walk out into the hallway. He turns to me and

drops his hand. “Look I...” He looks towards the stairs, furrowing his brows. He turns back to me. “Gus, I don’t know how long we’ll be.”

“What do you mean?”

He shakes his head. “Sometimes it...takes him a while to...” He pauses as if he isn’t sure how to explain it. Maybe he really doesn’t know how to. “Look, we were going to take you, JR, and your Moms to Mona’s.” He reaches into his suit pocket for his wallet. He opens it and hands me two one hundred dollar bills.

“Dad.”

“No, go ahead and take them.” He shrugs. “I don’t know where everyone is going to stay. We only have one guest bedroom...but-”

I can tell that the more sounds that he hears coming from upstairs the more distracted and worried he’s getting. “Dad, I’ll take care of it.”

He looks at me. “I know you’re unnerved by everyone being here and-”

I shake my head. “Dad it’s fine. I was just surprised, that’s all.” I’m lying to him. I’m lying right to his face, but I can’t help it. I can tell that he’s torn between helping me and going to Justin. “I’ll be fine.”

He sighs. “Okay.” He nods his head again just as Mom comes up the stairs. He looks from me to her and back to me. “I don’t know when we’ll be home.”

“Dad, it’s fine. I’ll handle it.” I nod to the stairs. “Just go.”

He grabs me by the back of the neck and presses our foreheads together. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will Dad.” I say softly.

He pushes me back and looks over at Mom before walking towards the stairs. He stops and looks back at me. I nod toward the stairs. When he hesitates I walk over and hug him. “Go Dad. It’s fine.” I say as I pull back. I can tell that he feels bad for not staying around to help me deal with this, but even I can tell that Justin needs him. He nods again before walking down the hall, grabbing his briefcase and laptop that he must have left there, and disappearing up the stairs. I guess Dad isn’t so great at fixing everything when Justin’s freaking out. Part of me wants to feel upset about it, but another part of me understands how things work when it comes to my Dad. Maybe it should bother me that Justin comes before me, but I don’t see it that way, after all it must have been hard for him to come to me first. I imagine his initial instinct was probably to go right to Justin, but he came to check on me first. I smile slightly at that. Justin has always told me, “Gus, it’s the small things your Dad does that mean the most.”

I look over at Mom, who's smiling. I roll my eyes. "Come on." I say, turning my back and walking into the studio. I might as well get this over with.

June 28, 2019 5:15pm

Brian's POV

I take the stairs two at a time, feeling like shit for leaving Gus to deal with the family. I stop and turn around. Maybe I should just go back down there and deal with them and then... "Fuck!" Justin's voice echoes down the stairs. I feel torn between going back to Gus and going up to Justin. I don't like the fact that it feels like I am choosing one over the other. I turn around and climb up the stairs. Hopefully Gus will be okay. He seemed okay... and Grady is with him. Christ, Grady. I shake my head, trying not to think too much about seeing Grady with his fucking arms over my son's shoulders, in a pose that looked far too comfortable for my liking. I don't even want to think about it right now. I'll think about it later... when I have less shit to worry about.

I approach the door to Justin's studio and lean against it to listen: a paint can hits the floor and sounds like a bowling ball as it rolls across the wood, the wet juicy sound of paint hitting a canvas filters into the hallway, the rough strokes of a brush, that same brush or a different one hitting the floor with a clatter, angry muffled words of a man hell bent on taking his frustrations out in the only way he's ever known how. I close my eyes for a brief moment, because seeing him like this is never easy. Watching him when he's like this, and knowing there is nothing I can do but wait it out, fucking blows.

Taking a deep breath, I push open the door and quietly enter his studio. The room is a mess, paint is everywhere, including on him. An overly large canvas is leaning against the wall. Its surface is almost completely covered in every shade of red, with violent echoes of black. It isn't fully formed, but I can see the reflection of his rage in the piece. It's Justin's insides poured out for anyone to see. He's fucking brilliant, even like this. I move over to the table, set my briefcase and laptop down, remove my suit jacket, and take a seat. I see the tension spread over his bare back that is covered in sweat and paint. I lean against the chair, watching as the muscles of his back tense and flex while he moves the brush over the canvas in long angry strokes. In the middle of a stroke he pauses for a fraction of a second. No one else would have even noticed it, but I did. It's the only indicator I'll get that he knows I'm here until he decides to talk. I lean forward in the chair and watch him. I can tell his hand is cramped by the way he's holding the brush; by the way his arm is twitching and quivering with each move he makes. He's doing his best to ignore it, but I can see the pain cross his face every time he runs the brush over the canvas.

I open my briefcase and go about setting up my laptop. I found that when he gets like this it's better if I have something to do. If I just had to sit here and watch him...well let's just say I'd be unable to stay away from him, and that would make things worse. I spread out my work on the table and glance over at him. His hand is shaking, but he doesn't stop painting. This, I think, is going to be a long night.

June 28, 2019 5:23pm

Gus' POV

I pocket the money Dad gave me and walk into my studio. Mom follows quietly behind me. When I'm inside I turn to the couch just as Grady is standing up. He looks from me to my mom then back at me. "I'll just..." He reaches down and picks up his bag. I look over my shoulder at Mom before I cross the room. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't really know anything except that I don't want him to go. I don't want to...be alone. When I get to him I take his bag and set it on the floor. His eyes meet mine as they fill with unspoken questions.

I resist the urge to touch him. "Just stay, okay?" I say softly.

He looks at me for what feels like a long time before he nods. I attempt to smile at him before turning back towards Mom. She's by the computer looking through some of my photographs.

I walk over to her and she points to the picture of the sunrise as I approach. "This one is really good." She looks up at me smiling.

"That's what everyone says."

I cross my arms and raise an eyebrow at her. She looks at me with soft apologetic eyes. "I'm sorry." She bites her lip. "We should have called and told you they were coming."

"Yeah, you should have." I pause. "Why did you have JR call me?" Her eyes widen as if that's the last thing she expected me to ask. "If you wanted to see me why didn't you just call and ask me? Why did you have JR do it?"

She looks away from me. "JR really wanted to--"

"Mom." She looks at me. "Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. She really did want to see you." She takes a step forward. "It was her idea. She kept asking if we could come see you. I told her that she needed to ask you." She pauses. "Plus we wanted to see you too." She reaches up and brushes the hair back

from my face.

“Mom.” It’s really hard to stay upset with her when she does that. She always makes me feel like a little kid, no matter how upset I may be.

She tilts her head to the side. “How are you?” It’s my turn to look away. “Gus?”

I look back at her and before I can stop the words they are out of my mouth. “I remember the accident.”

Her eyes widen and hope flashes across her face. “Gus.”

Fuck. “Don’t Mom. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It does. It means-”

“No.” I shake my head. “Don’t.”

She takes a step forward. “Gus.” She pauses as if she’s searching for the right words. “Gus, this can help you.”

I scoff. “Help me what Mom? Get better? Move on? *Forget?*” I start to feel the panic rise up in me. I turn my back on her and look across the room at Grady. Our eyes meet and the panic subsides. “It doesn’t mean any of that.” Taking a deep breath, I turn back to Mom.

Tears fill her eyes. “But it might help.” She says softly. “Has it?”

“No.”

“But-”

I throw up my hands. “I’m not Justin, okay? I can’t...” I feel the tightness in my chest. “You can’t expect...” I take another deep breath. “Look Mom...” I don’t know what to say. I can’t even believe I told her. Why did I tell her? I shouldn’t have said anything, because now she’s looking at me as if a wall has crumbled from around me and her real son is back.

“Gus, it has to help.” She reaches for me but I bat her hand away.

“Well it doesn’t Mom. It doesn’t help. It...” My voice starts to crack and shake. I know I’m barely hanging on by a thread. “It just makes it worse.”

“Worse?”

I shake my head and take a deep breath. “Can we...not talk about this right now, okay?”

“But Gus-”

“What did you think would happen if I remembered, Mom? Did you think I’d be back to the same person I was?” I feel it coming and I feel powerless to stop it. “Did you think it would hurt less? Well it hurts more. He died Mom! He fucking died!” I swipe at the tears that slide down my face. I turn around and see Grady take a few steps towards me. “He’s dead.” I whisper. My eyes lock on Grady’s.

“Oh Gus.” She steps in front of me and wraps me in her arms before I can protest. “Gus.” She holds me tightly to her. “I’m sorry.”

I swear to god...five fucking years old. I close my eyes and open them slowly. I look over at Grady and mumble, “I’m trying.”

“I know sweetie. I know. I’m sorry we expected so much.” She pulls away from me and wipes the tears from my face.

“You can’t expect me to be the same.”

Her brows furrow. “No one expects you to be the same.”

“They don’t?”

“No. Where did you get that idea?” She cups my face in her hands. “We just want you to be happy again sweetie.” She leans forward and kisses my cheek. “That’s all we want Gus.”

She pulls back and smiles at me. It feels as if a weight as been lifted off of my shoulders, knowing that they don’t expect me to be someone I can no longer be. I’d always thought they wanted that Gus...not this one. “Mom.”

She wipes a stray tear from my face. “Honey, the only thing we ever wanted was for you to be better, in whatever way that’s possible. We knew you wouldn’t be the same. No one can go through what you did and not be affected by it.” I look away from her. “That’s what you thought? That we wanted you to be the same as before the accident.” She wraps her arms around me again. “Oh sweetie. Gus I’m sorry if we made you feel like that.”

I grip the back of her shirt, unable to say anything. I’ve always thought that’s what they wanted. How did I not see before that they just wanted me to be happy again? How did I miss that they knew that everything that happened would always be a part of my life? How could I not know, not see?

She pulls back from me and brushes my hair back from my face. “You’re still our son and we still love you no matter what.” I nod. “Just...” She bites her lip. “Be happy sweetie and live your life.” She leans forward. “Ashley would want that for you too.”

I can't stop my lip from quivering when she says that. "I know."

She wipes the tears from my face and smiles at me. "You'll get there sweetie." She smiles a little wider and I can't help but smile back. She pulls me back into her arms. I look over at Grady...yeah, I'll get there.

June 28, 2019 5:52pm

Brian's POV

"Fuck." I look up from my laptop at Justin just as his hand spasms and the paintbrush he is holding falls to the floor. Angrily, he kicks it aside and grabs another brush and starts painting, this time with his left hand. His right arm falls to his side, his hand clutched in a fist that I know is completely involuntary. I hate what he's doing to himself right now, and I feel fucking helpless. My cell phone vibrates across the table and I pick it up without taking my eyes off of Justin.

"Kinney."

"Hey Dad." He sounds better than he did earlier.

"Hey Sonny boy. Everything okay?"

"Yeah." He pauses. "Is Justin okay? We can still hear him down here."

I watch Justin throw the brush he was holding across the room and pick up another one. "He'll be alright."

He sighs. "Well...we're leaving. I'm taking everyone to Mona's like you said, and then they are going to stay at the SoHo Grand."

I furrow my brows. "They are?"

"Yeah, Grady can get them a discount since he works there."

I lean back in the chair. "Oh?"

"Dad...don't start okay?" He lowers his voice. "I told you he's just a friend."

For some reason I doubt that, but I don't say anything. "Are you going to stay with your Moms?"

He laughs. "Um, no. After they check in I'm going to go back to the loft." He sighs. "Are you going to be home tonight?"

I can hear the worry in his voice. "I don't know. Don't worry." I say softly so Justin won't hear me. "He'll be okay Gus."

"Alright Dad...I'll see you later then."

"Okay." He hangs up the phone before I can ask how he's going to get back to the loft. I'd prefer if he just stayed with his Moms tonight at the hotel. The SoHo Grand. I shake my head as I set my cell phone down. Something is definitely going on with Gus and this Grady guy. I furrow my brow, not liking the idea that someone that used to have a hard-on for Justin is suddenly sniffing around Gus. I focus my attention back on Justin and watch as he picks up a can of paint. He looks at the canvas and then at the paint as if he's trying to decide if he wants to throw the whole thing on it. He shakes his head, sets the paint can down, and picks up a brush. I can see the anger slowly leaving him, but he's not ready to stop and he's not ready to talk. I return my attention back to my work as I continue to wait.

June 28, 2019 10:07pm

Gus' POV

Dinner was...interesting. After Grady told everyone he could get them a discount at the hotel, they invited him to come to Mona's with us. It wasn't like I planned that, but it was nice. JR kept making faces at me all night and gushing over Grady. In fact, everyone seemed to like him, even Ma, and she doesn't really like a lot of people. I look over at Grady as he gets out of the cab. When he comes to stand next to me I tell him, "I could have made it back by myself."

He laughs. "Are you kidding me? Did you see that look your Ma gave me?" He shakes his head. "There's no way I could have *not* come with you." He smiles and steps towards me. "Besides, I wanted to."

I roll my eyes and push him away. I look towards the front entrance of the loft building. "Wanna come up?" He quirks his eyebrow at me and I roll my eyes. I grab him by the shirt and pull him towards the door. "Come on."

I have no idea what I'm doing, inviting him up to the loft. Alarm bells should be going off in my head, but...they're not. When we get into the elevator I look over at him and smirk. "I can't believe you and my Mom got in an argument over Picasso."

He looks over at me and shrugs. "I can't help it if I don't think he's one of the best artists

of all time.” He smiles.

“Well, maybe he’s not, but you didn’t have to argue with her.”

He laughs. “She didn’t seem to mind.” He shrugs. “She made some good points anyway.” I study him for a minute. “What?” He smiles at me.

“Thanks...for today.”

He nudges me in the shoulder. “You’re welcome.”

I laugh and roll my eyes. When the elevator stops, we get off and I take him to the loft. Once we’re inside he lets out a low whistle. I close the door and look over at him. “You’ve never been here?”

“Uh, no.” He shrugs and follows me as I walk to the kitchen. “Shit this place is nice.” I look over at him before I open the refrigerator and get out two bottles of water. “I mean, I knew they had money, but...”

I shove a bottle of water into his hand and scowl. “It doesn’t matter does it?”

“What? No.” He opens the water and takes a sip. “I was just saying.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Really, they could live in a cardboard box-”

I can’t help it, I bust out laughing. “Okay, I can’t see Dad and Justin living in a cardboard box.”

He laughs. “Yeah I guess not.” He walks over to me and takes the water bottle that I haven’t even opened out of my hands. His smile fades as he brushes the hair back from my face. “How did you feel, telling your Mom about the accident?”

I shrug and look away from him. “I...didn’t expect it to go like that.” I look back at him. “I guess I was wrong about the whole thing.”

He places his hands on my hips and pulls me slightly forward. “Are you glad you told her?”

“Yeah...I am.” He leans forward, but I stop him. “Grady.”

He steps back. “Sorry.” I can see the hurt in his eyes.

I look at him for a minute and think about everything that has happened today, everything that has happened since I met him. I think about how I feel, how I could feel, how I should feel. I can feel that twinge of guilt still in my stomach, but at the same time I feel something else, something for him. Call it want, call it need, call it whatever you want, but it’s there. I hold out my hand to him. He looks at me for a minute and then takes it. I

try not to think about what I'm doing as I lead him down the hall to my room, but I can't help but think about it. I want him. That's just the truth. I want him and I can't deny it anymore.

Once we are in my room I release his hand and close the door. He looks around. "This is-" I see him spot his painting hanging on the wall. He looks at it, then back at me. "You bought it?"

I shrug as I toe off my shoes. I'd forgotten about the painting. "I liked it."

He walks over to stand in front of it. The only light shining in the room comes from the city lights. "Do you want to know when I painted this?" His voice is so quiet that I can barely hear him.

I take off my socks and walk over to stand beside him. "When did you paint it?"

He looks over at me. "The day after I met you." I open my mouth to say something, but the words don't come. Is he implying that... "Right after I met you I went home and started this piece." He shrugs. "I almost didn't put it in the show."

"Why?" I whisper, not really sure if I want to know the answer.

"Because..." He looks from the painting to me. "This painting is about you."

I glance at the painting. "Yeah." Now that he's said that, now that I know that, I can see it. Maybe that's what drew me to it in the first place. Maybe I knew that all along, but didn't want to admit it.

When I look back at him, he reaches up and caresses my cheek before bringing me forward into a kiss. I wrap my arms around him and press my body to his because I want him. I want him in ways that I haven't wanted anyone in a long time. I slide my hands under his shirt and press my palms against the smooth skin of his back. The heat and chemistry between us grows as our tongues slide against each other and our bodies press tighter together. I pull him with me as I walk us towards my bed.

Suddenly he breaks the kiss. "What?" I ask a little breathlessly.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

I reach for his shirt and pull it over his head. "Yeah." I toss his shirt aside. "I'm sure." Maybe I'm not really sure, but I can't deny this anymore...and maybe I don't want to.

I kiss him again, sucking on his bottom lip before pushing my tongue into his mouth. I break the kiss by pushing him down onto the bed. I remove my shirt as he kicks off his shoes. When he moves into the center of the bed I join him and straddle his waist. Just as I'm about to kiss him again he stops me. "What?"

His finger traces the long silver chain around my neck until he reaches the small silver key. “What’s this?” His voice is soft and low.

I look down, watching as he fingers the key. I close my eyes as my guilt presses down on me. Fuck. I’ve worn it everyday for two years, and sometimes I forget that I even have it on. I mean, I know it’s there, but it’s like...it’s like it’s become a part of me. “It’s...” I open my eyes and look down at him. “A key...to a lockbox.” I huff out a half laugh, roll off of him, and lay back down on the bed, exhaling as I stare up at the ceiling.

Grady props himself up on his elbow. “What’s in it?” He asks as his finger traces over the key that is now resting in the middle of my chest.

I look over at him. “Memories.”

He looks up at me. “Of Ashley?” I nod. He looks down at the key and back up at me. “We don’t have to do this.” He says quietly.

I push him back on the bed and re-straddle his hips. “I want to.” I lean forward and kiss him again, unable to stop my need for him, despite the guilt that hangs around my neck. I pull away from him, just enough that my lips graze his when I say. “I want you.”

I sit back and grab the necklace. I am about to take it off when he stops me. “I don’t want you to regret this.”

I take the necklace off and set it on the nightstand. I try not to think about the fact that it’s the first time I’ve taken it off since I put it on. I lean forward and kiss Grady on the lips. “I won’t.” I kiss my way down to his neck as his hands rub up and down my arms. “I won’t.” I whisper again. Whether that is the truth or not, I don’t know. I’m tired of thinking about it, tired of overanalyzing everything. I want to be with Grady, and... I break the kiss and look over at the necklace on the nightstand, and I’m ready. I look back down at him, brushing the hair off his face. “I’m ready.”

June 28, 2019 10:15pm

Brian’s POV

“I was right.” I look up from my laptop at Justin. His back is still to me, but he’s no longer painting. He turns to me and I try not to cringe when I see the smear of red paint on the side of his face. “About Rauling’s.” He turns back to the painting. “They need a filler.” He sets the brush down and looks at the painting. “This is crap.” Quietly, I turn off my laptop and put my papers back in my briefcase. “I asked Amy why she did it.” I close my briefcase and put my laptop away. “She said for the money, the notoriety.” He scoffs.

I lean back in the chair and look over at him. His voice is even and calm, the anger I expected is not there. "I told her if she couldn't make a deal with them that I was going to fire her." I raise my eyebrow at that because it surprises me. "I told her that I couldn't believe she did this." He shrugs. "I told her that out of all people...she should know what I'm capable of." I take a deep breath and wait. "And what I'm not." He sighs. "I told her she should know that I couldn't finish that many pieces in that short amount of time." Anger makes his words sharper. "I told her that she should *know* that I really can't...paint small scale anymore." His last words are gritted out between clenched teeth. "The fact that I had to admit that, even to her--"

"Pissed you off." I say softly.

He turns around to face me. "It's not like I don't know." He turns back to the painting. "I do know," he says quietly. I push myself out of the chair and walk over to him. "I do know," he says again, as if he's trying to convince himself. When he turns around again he steps forward into my arms. He presses his face into my chest and mumbles, "I do know."

I comb my fingers through his hair. "I know you do."

"She should know too."

"Yeah, she should. She does."

"It pisses me off." He pulls away and looks up at me. "The whole thing just got to me." I reach between us and take his right hand in mine. He looks down at it, then back up at me. "Hurts."

"I know." I say softly. I lead him over to the kitchen area. When we are by the sink I turn on the hot water. Once it's warmed up, I move him in front of me and place his hand under the water. I move my fingers over his hand as I work to help the muscles relax. I want to tell him that painting like this, letting his hand get like this, just because he's angry isn't the thing to do, but now isn't the right time to tell him that. As I work at uncurling his fingers I ask, "When is Amy suppose to let you know?"

"She didn't say." He leans back against me. "But I'm calling her tomorrow." When I stretch out his fingers he hisses. "Christ."

"Justin."

He shakes his head. "I know Brian."

I nod and return my attention to working out the cramp in his hand. When he is able to open and close it by himself, I turn off the water, turn him around to face me, grab a rag off the counter, and dry off our hands. Tossing the rag aside, I look him over. "You're covered in paint." I trace the side of his face with the tip of my finger. "This is

disturbing.” I say almost to myself.

“Yeah.” He agrees even though he really doesn’t know what I’m talking about. He fingers my shirt. “I got paint on you.”

I look down and see red and black streaks on my white Armani shirt. I look up at him and our eyes meet. “Guess you’ll just have to buy me a new one.” I roll my tongue into my cheek.

He laughs softly and smiles up at me. “Yeah.”

I cup his face between my hands. “You okay?”

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “I will be.” He shrugs. “I shouldn’t let it bother me, but it still does.”

I wrap my arms around him and pull him back to me. “Yeah, I know.”

His arms circle my waist as he presses his cheek to my chest. “I didn’t ask for this Brian.”

“I know you didn’t.” I don’t pretend to not know what he’s talking about. I swallow hard because I know where this conversation is going.

He presses his body closer to mine. “Tell me about the dance.”

I close my eyes. “Justin.”

“I know Brian, but...tell me anyway.” He pauses. “Please.”

I tighten my embrace and lay my cheek against the top of his head. “You were beautiful.” I kiss his temple. “You should have seen your face.” I laugh softly. “You couldn’t believe I showed up.”

He presses tighter against me. “Then we danced.”

“Yeah...then we danced.”

He pulls back from me and looks into my eyes. “And we were amazing.”

The corner of my mouth rises in a sad half smile. “Daphne said we were amazing.”

He returns my smile and places his hands on my face. “Okay.” He says quietly. “Okay.” He takes a deep breath, steps back, and grabs my hand. “Come help me get all this paint off?”

I quirk my eyebrow at him. “Are you asking me?”

He tilts his head to the side and then he laughs. “No.” He starts walking backward towards the bathroom, dragging me with him.

June 28, 2019 10:35pm

Gus’ POV

Now that we are both naked, I pull away from Grady and look at him. He’s fucking beautiful, more so than I thought he would be. He’s lean and muscular, but not overly so. Spread out against the white sheets of my bed in the semi-darkness, his skin looks even more golden. I lay between his legs and kiss him. Being the same height makes our bodies fit together almost perfectly so that when I press my hips down to his, our cocks slide against each other. We both moan as our hips move together. I remove my lips from his mouth, sliding them across his jaw, down his neck, over his chest and taut stomach. His fingers curl into my hair when he feels my hot breath on his cock, which is beautiful in and of itself. I look up at him as I flatten my tongue over the head of his cock. He arches his neck into the pillows and moans softly. I lap the pre-come off the head before running my tongue down his shaft and back up again. He tastes even better than I imagined he would. When I reach the top of his cock I slide my lips over it and take him into my mouth. His hips jerk up automatically, so I press my hands against him to keep him still. I suck gently on the head of his cock as I press my tongue flat against the underside where the head and shaft meet, applying steady pressure. I lightly run the tips of my fingers over his shaft and his balls before taking him further into my mouth. His fingers curl almost painfully in my hair. “Gus.” I work him in and out of my mouth a few times before kissing my way back up his body. When our mouths meet again the kiss is hungrier, needier. Vaguely, I hear the rain that’s been threatening all day tapping against the window.

I break the kiss and press my lips to his ear. “Are you a top or a bottom?” I whisper, thinking maybe this is something I should have asked before now.

He huffs out a laugh as his hands stroke my back. “Bottom.”

“Good.” I press my lips against his pulse point. “That’s good.” I pull back from him and look down into his eyes before reaching over to open the drawer of the nightstand. I pull out a bottle of lube and a condom.

He laughs. “Prepared.” He mumbles. I want to tell him, well I am my father’s son, but I doubt he really needs to know that. I just smile at him as I set the condom aside and spread lube over my fingers. His eyes darken as I press my slick fingers over his hole. “Fuck.”

“In a minute.” I whisper as I press my lips over his nipple. His laugh turns into a moan as I suck his nipple into my mouth and press the tip of my finger into his hole. I work my finger in him until he’s open enough for me to enter the second one. I cut off his moan by covering his mouth with mine. His fingernails press into my back as my fingers move in and out of him. Christ he’s tight.

He rips his mouth away from mine. “Gus, come on.” He kisses my neck and I nod. I remove my fingers and reach for the condom. I sit back as I open it, roll it on, and slick it with extra lube. I want it to be smooth when I finally enter him. I press my hands on either side of him and line up my cock.

I press the head of my cock against his hole and our eyes meet. “Ready?” He nods his head. I push into him slowly as I lean down to kiss him again. He opens up for me and I slide in until my balls are pressed against him. “Christ.” I press my forehead to his shoulder. His legs wrap around me as I give him a chance to adjust to me.

“Gus. Gus.” He moans as he starts to rock his hips. Fuck.

Slowly I begin to move in and out of him. “So tight.” I whisper as I press my lips to his neck. I pull myself away from his body as I quicken my strokes. When the head of my cock starts to hit his prostate with each stroke, he arches his back and moans louder. Christ. I unwrap his legs from around my waist and push them up to my shoulders. When I thrust into him harder and deeper he grips the sheets. Each time I thrust he tightens his ass around me, and I know I won’t last much longer. When he starts meeting me stroke for stroke I feel my balls tighten. I reach between us and take his cock in my hand. His head is thrown back. “Grady.” I pant. “Grady look at me.”

He pries his eyes open; they are darker than I’ve ever seen them. “Gus...I’m...” His eyes flutter and then he comes. When he does his ass tightens around me and in a few more strokes I come hard into the condom. His legs fall from my shoulders as I drop down on top of him, both of us breathing heavily. I kiss his neck as his arms wrap around me. After my breathing regulates, I wrap my fingers around the end of the condom and slowly pull out of him. Rolling onto my back I remove the condom, tie it off, and throw it into the trash. Grady moves towards me. I wrap my arm around his shoulders as he presses his cheek against my chest. It almost feels surreal.

“You okay?” He asks quietly.

I run my fingers through his hair and I give that simple question a lot of thought. I’ve just had sex for the first time in two years. I had sex with someone who isn’t Ash. Am I okay? I reach down and pull the covers over us. When we are settled back against the bed I finally answer him. “Yeah.” He lifts up his head and looks me in the eyes. “I’m good.”

He presses his cheek back against my chest. He lays his hand flat against my stomach. “No regrets?” He asks softly.

I give that question some thought too. I think about what it will be like tomorrow when I wake up and he'll be here. I think about what this means to me, what it means about him and me. I look over at the window watching the rain streak down the glass. "Not a one." I say and I'm almost surprised that I mean it.

June 28, 2019 10:45pm

Brian's POV

I press into him and wrap my fingers around his hips. His body moves with mine automatically. The warm water slides down our bodies as we move together. I love fucking him in the shower. Justin pushes back into me and places his hand on my thigh, digging his fingers into my skin. I press my lips to his neck. "What?"

"Brian." He moans as I press my cock against his prostate.

I snap my hips and increase the speed of my thrusts. "Is that what you want?" I lick the water from between his shoulder blades as I push into him harder and deeper.

"Yes." He throws his head back. "Yes." He moans.

I wrap my arm around his waist to keep him steady as I reach for his cock and start to stroke it in time with my thrusts. When his ass tightens around my cock I know he's close. I press my lips to his ear. "Come for me Justin."

He arches his back and comes hard, bringing me along with him. I kiss his neck and wrap both of my arms around him. He leans back against me. Slowly I pull out of him and turn him towards the water. He smiles up at me before wrapping his arms around my neck and pulling me down for a kiss. When he pulls back he whispers, "Thanks."

"For what?"

He shrugs. "For being here."

I nod and reach for the bottle of shampoo. He drops his arms from around my neck as I pour some of the shampoo in my hand, set the bottle back on the shelf, and start to wash his hair. "Mmm." He closes his eyes. I swear he's such a slut for me washing his hair. His eyes snap open. "Fuck."

I raise an eyebrow and move him under the water to wash away the shampoo. "What?"

"Mel and Linz are here. I completely forgot."

I scoff. “And Mickey, the Professor, and Debbie.”

“What?”

“Surprise.” I roll my tongue into my cheek and reach for the soap.

“Shit, how did Gus take that?”

“He was unnerved by it at first, but when he called me before they left here he sounded fine.”

He shakes his head as I run the soap over his chest. “I should have been down there.”

I set the soap aside and move him under the water. “He handled it.” I can already see him blaming himself for not being there when Gus was on the verge of a panic attack. I place my fingers under his chin and lift his head. “He’s fine.”

“Yeah, okay.” He turns and shuts off the water. When we are out of the shower and toweling off he asks, “Are they all staying at the loft?”

I scoff. “No. It seems Grady got them all a discount at the SoHo Grand.”

“Grady?”

I hang up the towel on the rack and reach for my pants. “Yeah.” I turn to him as I pull up my pants. “I think something is going on between him and Gus.”

His mouth drops open. “What?” He laughs and opens the small closet in the bathroom. He pulls out a pair of sweats and puts them on. “That’s...” He looks over his shoulder at me as he reaches for a t-shirt. “Why do you think that?”

I slip on my paint stained shirt and button it. “I saw them...*cuddling* on the couch in Gus’ studio.”

He turns around, his eyebrows almost touching his hairline. “You’re kidding?”

“I fucking wish.”

“Wow.” He shrugs. “Well...” He shakes his head. “Did you ask Gus about it?”

I cock my eyebrow and hold out my hand. Justin places his hand in mine and we walk out of the bathroom. “Yeah, he told me they’re just friends.”

“Christ.” I look down at him. Our eyes meet. “You don’t think...”

I lead him over to the table and release his hand as we both put our shoes on. “I don’t

want to think about it at all actually.”

When we both have our shoes on, I reach for my briefcase and laptop and Justin slings his messenger bag over his shoulder. I reach for his hand again and we leave the studio, turning off the lights and locking the door. When we exit the building there is a slight drizzle. As I hail a cab Justin looks up at me. “Well...Grady isn’t a bad guy.”

I glare at him as a cab pulls up to the curb. “He’s too old for him.”

Justin laughs as he gets in the cab. When I get in beside him he gives the driver our address. “You’re kidding right?”

I look over at him and smirk. “I was trying it out.”

He laughs and leans against me. I wrap my arm around his shoulders and kiss his temple. “Yeah, I’m afraid we won’t ever be able to use that one.” He presses his hand against my stomach and yawns. “Maybe they are just friends.”

I look out the window. “Maybe.” I nudge Justin and he looks up at me. “You okay?”

He smiles at me. “Yeah.” His smile fades and his brows furrow. “I’m still pissed at Amy though.”

“Yeah, well that’s justifiable.” I brush his bangs away from his face. “We’ll deal with whatever happens.”

“I know.” He leans his head against my shoulder. “I’ll call Rauling’s myself if I have too.”

“You know I think you should fire her anyway right?”

He sighs. “Yeah, I know.”

I let it go at that. He doesn’t need me to tell him what he should do. Hopefully when he calls Amy tomorrow she’ll have worked a deal with Rauling’s...and if not...well I hope he does fire her ass. She’s fucking with more than just her career, and I won’t sit on the sidelines if it comes down to fucking up Justin’s. If things don’t get taken care of she’ll be hearing from me, regardless of what Justin decides to do. When the cab pulls up to the loft I nudge Justin and we gather all our shit and get out. It’s been a long fucking day, and I just want to get some fucking sleep.

When we get into the elevator Justin leans against me again and yawns. “Tired.” He mumbles. “Mmm...is Gus staying at the hotel?”

When the elevator stops we get off and walk toward the loft. “No, he said he was coming back here, but I hope he changed his mind and stayed.”

We enter the loft and set our respective bags by the door. I lock up and set the alarm. Justin reaches for my hand and we walk down the hall. "Let's just check to see if he's here."

We stop in front of his door and Justin slowly opens it. "Is he there?" Justin closes the door and looks up at me with wide eyes. "What?"

"Yeah...he's in there." I raise my eyebrow. "With Grady."

"With..." I reach for the door, but he stops me.

"Leave them." He tugs at my hand and pulls me down the hall. "Let's deal with it in the morning."

I look over my shoulder at Gus' door. Yeah, I'll deal with it alright. I scoff as Justin leads me into our bedroom and closes the door. Just friends my ass.

"One never goes so far as when one doesn't know where one is going"
~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe ~

June 29, 2019 8:07am

Gus' POV

Standing next to the window, I stare out at the grey sky as I watch the rain fall. For the last two years, I've walked around feeling like a ghost, only I didn't have the comfort of death because I still felt all this pain. I never really allowed myself to live outside of the hurt of losing Ash. I never cared to. There was never any reason for me to believe that things would get better, that I would get better, that the pain I carried around my shoulders like a security blanket would ever fall away. Then I moved to New York and my life suddenly started to change without my permission. It's like living here, living with Dad and Justin, curved my perspective and I started seeing things in a whole new light. I remember the accident for Christ sakes. Three weeks in New York and I remember something that has been locked away for two fucking years. Since I remembered, I've tried to convince myself that it hasn't helped, that it meant nothing in the grand scheme of things, that I wasn't Justin, and it just didn't fucking matter because it didn't change a fucking thing. I know that's a lie. The truth is, since Ash died I've carried around the question "did he know I loved him" like it was a virus eating me from the inside out. Everyday for two years it's all I fucking thought about. Did he know? Then I remembered the accident. I remembered those last fucking terrifying moments Ash and I had together. The last words he ever heard me say were that I loved him. I can't pretend that having that doubt dismantled hasn't helped. I no longer have to wonder if he knew, because I fucking told him. He fucking died knowing. It doesn't change the fact that he's dead, or that I still fucking miss him. I think that in one way or another I'll always miss him. He was a big part of my life for a long fucking time.

Leaning my back against the windowsill, I turn my head to look at Grady. He's lying on his stomach with his hand tucked under his head. The covers are pushed down to his waist, exposing his toned back. I almost can't believe that a few hours ago I was inside him. It just doesn't seem real. For two years I pushed everyone away, kept everyone at arm's length, never letting anyone too close because I never wanted anyone to see me, to see what was inside of me. I look back out the window. I'm not even sure how Grady got in, how I let him in. How in three weeks he managed what no one else had accomplished. He saw me, every fucked up thing about me, and instead of running away as fast as he could in the opposite direction, he stayed. I don't know why he did, but I know I'm fucking glad.

I look down at the necklace in my palm. There my guilt lays coiled like a snake ready to strike. It's not so much that I feel like I betrayed Ash, it's just that I never expected Grady. I never expected this. So maybe it's not so much guilt, but confusion. Right now,

more than any other time, I should be feeling guilty. But I don't. Maybe I should feel like what happened last night is wrong, but I don't. Every touch, kiss, and caress just felt so fucking right. I can't deny that, and I'm starting to think that I no longer want to.

I close my fingers over the necklace and look back out the window. When I got home from the hospital the first thing I did was collect every photograph, note, memento, anything and everything that reminded me of Ash, and lock it away in a small cedar lockbox. Every once in a while I'd open the box and allow myself to go there, to remember, and when I didn't I still had the key that I wore around my neck as a reminder of what I was holding onto. Right now, I'm wondering why I haven't put it back on. Sometimes, especially lately, especially today, I'm just not sure what I should be feeling. What's right? What emotion is the right one to feel?

"Do you always get up this early?"

"Usually." I answer without looking at him.

He yawns. "I'm not a morning person at all."

I scoff. "I'm not a morning person. I just don't...sleep late." It's actually been physically impossible for me to sleep late since the accident.

"Mmm. Can I use your shower?"

"Yeah, it's across the hall."

"You don't..." I look over at him as he sits up in bed. His dark brown hair is mussed up. There are lines from the sheets crisscrossing over his chest and face. He looks so fuckable right now. I raise my eyebrow as I wait for him to finish what he's saying. His brows furrow. "Do you think your Dad's already up?"

I feel the corner of my mouth lift in a half smile. "Dad and Justin don't sleep late either."

His eyes grow wide. "Shit."

I roll my eyes. "They don't even know you're here."

"Okay." He doesn't sound convinced, but he gets up nonetheless and pulls on his jeans. Yeah, he's fucking hot. He walks over to the door and opens it cautiously, as if Dad might be standing right outside my door.

I laugh and he looks over his shoulder at me. Shaking my head, I set the necklace back on the nightstand and walk over to him. I fling open the door and grab Grady's hand, pulling him across the hall to the bathroom.

Once we are inside the bathroom he laughs. "Do you always walk around here naked?"

“Not generally.” I step toward him until his back is pressed to the door. It’s like after last night a floodgate has been opened and all the pent up sexual energy that’s been locked away is suddenly flowing free. It’s the one thing that feels familiar to me. It’s that part of me that’s been asleep for two years that was so much of who I was...before. Placing my hands on Grady’s hips, I lean forward and run my tongue along his bottom lip. His fingers circle around my wrists as I push my tongue between his lips and into his mouth. His tongue slides against mine. I deepen this kiss, giving more, taking more, wanting more. As I move my body toward his, my hardening cock rubs against the rough fabric of his jeans. Tightening my hold on his hips, I pull him forward, feeling his growing erection through his pants. When our mouths finally part my lips feel swollen and wet. His eyes open slowly, the flecks of dark brown are more prominent then I’ve ever seen them. As I lean forward to kiss him again he places a hand on my chest to stop me.

“Wait.” He says a little breathlessly.

I furrow my brows. “Wait for what?” He’s searching my eyes like he’s asking me a question he hasn’t yet verbalized. I know what he’s about to say, but right now I don’t want to think about it. Maybe I’m not ready to think about that yet, or at all. Right now, I just don’t know. I step back, breaking all physical contact with him.

“Gus.”

I stare at the floor. “Look...I...” I look back up at Grady. I don’t know what this is. I don’t know what I want it to be. I don’t know if I’m ready for more...for the possibility of...us. Those are the things I should tell him, but I don’t.

Stepping forward, he runs his fingers along my cheek and into my hair. His eyes search mine and I wonder what he’s looking for. He tilts his head to the side. “I’m not going to lie to you.” I raise an eyebrow. “I want to be with you.”

“Like...a relationship?” My throat tightens and the words barely make it out.

He shakes his head. “Not...” His eyes slide to the side then back to me. “I like being around you.” He shrugs, smiling slightly. “I like being *with* you.”

I feel like there is something I should say back. I feel like maybe I should be saying the same things to him. Not because I feel like I’m required to, but because I feel the same way. “Grady.”

“Hey...” He leans forward and kisses me on the lips. “Don’t over think it.” He smiles. “Just...let it happen.”

Just let it happen. He’s not demanding anything. He’s not asking for declarations or promises. Maybe he’s just asking for a chance at making something, and maybe I want to take the risk. I reach for his jeans and undo the button. His hands slide up and down my

arms as I unzip his jeans. I look up at him as I curl my fingers around the waistband and push them down his legs. They pool at his feet and he kicks them aside. Taking a step forward, I capture his lips with mine. Without stopping the kiss, I place my hands on his hips and walk him backward to the shower.

I break the kiss to open the shower door. I step inside and turn on the water as Grady follows me in. When the water is warm I turn around, grab him by the hips, and pull him to me. The water rushes over our bodies, reddening our skin. As we kiss, Grady pushes me back against the moist ceramic tiles. He pulls back and looks me in the eyes before sinking to his knees. I weave my hands into his hair as he circles his thumb and index finger around the tip of my cock and gently pulls back the foreskin. Wrapping his lips over the head, he rolls the exposed tip in his mouth as his free hand cups my balls. I bite my lips to keep from moaning as he licks, nips, kisses, sucks, and teases my cock. The pleasure of his mouth drives me fucking insane. When my cock slides all the way into his mouth and the tip hits the back of his throat, the moan I was trying to hold back escapes. I throw my head back against the tiles, close my eyes, and tighten my grip on his hair. He pulls me out of his mouth, a whoosh of air escaping his lips, then he does it all over again. Each time he deep throats my cock I can't stop the sounds that leave my lips. I let myself go, giving into the sensations of his hot wet mouth. When he deep throats my cock and fucking swallows around it I come hard down the back of his throat.

Taking him by the shoulders, I lift him to his feet and kiss him, tasting myself on his tongue. When we break the kiss we are both slightly breathless. I touch my forehead to his. "That was fucking amazing."

He smiles and starts to laugh but it turns into a moan as I wrap my fingers around his hard dripping cock. "Gus." His head slides to my shoulder giving me perfect access to his neck. As I start to stroke his cock, I lick the side of his neck and until I reach his ear. He takes a sharp intake of breath when my lips touch him there. He shivers as I nip and suck his earlobe while I stroke his cock. The tips of his fingers dig into my waist as his breathing starts to get erratic. Right when he comes, he throws his head back, mouth open, eyes closed, and I think it's the most beautiful fucking thing I've ever seen.

June 29, 2019 8:23am

Brian's POV

As I lean against the kitchen counter waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, I hear a loud moan coming from the bathroom down the hall. Jesus fucking Christ, I do not want to know or hear or even fucking guess what Gus and Grady are doing in there. It's not that I feel Gus doesn't have the right to be with someone. In fact, Justin told me last night that it's a step in a positive direction. While I agree with that, I can't help but think does it have to be Grady? Out of all the fucking gay men in fucking New York City, does he

have to get involved with *him*? Okay sure, the guy fucking saved his life, and I'm fucking grateful for that, but...

The ringing of the telephone cuts off my thoughts. I cross the kitchen and pick up the portable phone from its charger. "Yeah?"

"Hello Brian."

I walk back over to the coffee machine and pour myself a cup. "Lindsay."

"Did Gus tell you that we're all coming over around noon?"

I set the coffee pot down and add sugar to my cup. "No, he did not."

"Is...that okay?"

"It's fine Lindsay."

"What's wrong?" Nothing much. Justin woke up in the middle of the night with a bitch of a cramp and had to take a pain pill, which I had to basically force him to do because he fucking hates taking them. He'll be fucking knocked out on his ass and probably won't wake up for another three hours. Then there is this shit with Amy and Rauling's that still isn't settled. And, let's not forget that our son is currently locked in the bathroom fucking some kid who not that long ago had a weeping hard-on for Justin.

"Should we order lunch?" Deflection seems to be the best course of action right now.

"Oh no. Debbie says she wants to go the market and pick up a few things to make us all a homemade meal." She laughs. "She thinks you and Gus are way too skinny and need to be fattened up with some Baked Ziti."

"And she plans to cook this shit where?" I pinch the bridge of my nose before grabbing my cup and walking over to the table.

"At the loft, where else?" She pauses and takes a deep breath. "Brian?"

I roll my eyes as I set down my mug and reach for the paper. "What?"

"I think it's wonderful." I can just see the upward curve of her lips. "About Gus...and Grady."

Christ. "Do you?"

"He's very smart and very charming." She lowers his voice. "And he's the first boy that Gus has shown any interest in at all since Ashley." I figured as much, which almost makes me feel like an ass for not liking him. She sighs slightly. "What do you think

Brian?”

What do I think? On one hand I think the kid is a fucking annoying little twat. On the other hand, if he’s doing Gus some good, how can I fault that? “I think we’ll have to wait and see.” I really couldn’t think of anything better to say than that.

She sighs slightly, as if she expects more from me than that, but I haven’t seen Gus and Grady interacting except for that little display of them on the couch yesterday. “I just hope it works out and Gus doesn’t get hurt.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Lindsay, he’s only known this kid for three weeks.”

Her laugh is soft and for some fucked up reason comforting. “And how long did you know Justin?”

I scoff. “It’s not the same fucking thing at all.”

“I think it is.”

I don’t see the connection that she is trying to make. I don’t see how the way Justin and I started our relationship is in any way parallel to how Gus and Grady...

I hear bare feet on the hardwood floor and look up just as Gus enters the kitchen, wearing only a pair of blue jeans. He’s fucking...smiling. No, not just smiling, for the first time in a long time he actually looks fucking...happy. As Gus walks over to the refrigerator I tell Lindsay, “Gotta go. See ya at noon.”

“See you then.” She’s smiling, I can tell, about what though I’m really not sure. I set the phone down and watch as Gus pours two glasses of orange juice. “Morning Sonny Boy.”

He looks over at me. “Hey Dad.”

I nod toward his two glasses of juice. “Thirsty?”

Shrugging his shoulders, he puts the juice carton back in the refrigerator. With his hand still around the door handle, and his face turned toward the stainless steel surface he says, “Don’t say anything.” The smile has completely left his face.

There are a million things that I want to say about what’s going on with him and Grady, but somehow that one little request stops me from verbalizing even one of them. What would I say anyway? If there is one thing I know about Gus, and I know a lot of shit, it’s that despite what has happened to him, once he sets his mind to something that’s it. He told his Moms a long time ago he was going to move to New York and live here with me and Justin. They gave him shit about it. I gave him shit about it, but here he is. He definitely got his, “I’m going to do whateverthefuck I want, like it or not” attitude from me. Another thing I know is that Gus is serious about practically everything he does. I

know if he's fucking Grady, Christ, that it isn't about getting off, or fucking just to fuck. Gus doesn't work like that. Shit, he was in fucking high school and had a fucking long-term boyfriend. That, he definitely didn't get from me. Shit, if Ash was still alive I have no doubt that they would still be together. No, whatever this is with Grady, it's not just about fucking.

I take a sip of my coffee. "You have to do what's best for you Sonny Boy."

Furrowing his brows, he looks over at me. "How do I know what's best for me?" Like I said, he's serious about every-fucking-thing. He releases the handle of the refrigerator, turns to face me, and crosses his arms. "Dad... I have no fucking idea what I'm doing."

I shrug and stand up. "Who the fuck does?" There is something to be said about becoming a parent. Without looking, I've become more understanding about a lot of shit. If I was having this conversation with anyone twenty years ago... actually I probably wouldn't be having this conversation with anyone twenty years ago. I would have brushed whoever it was off with some mocking sarcastic comment before doing a bump, swallowing a shot of beam, and looking for a decent trick to suck my cock. That, however, was before I met Justin. Since he's been in my life I'm sure I've had variations of this same conversation. I suppose there's something to be said about being in a relationship with the same man for, Christ, nineteen years as well.

"It's just..." As I walk to the sink he looks away from me. "I haven't... since..."

After I set my cup in the sink I turn to him and lean back against the counter. "If you're ready, go for it. If you're not, tell him."

He looks at me. "I did tell him... sorta."

"And what did he say?"

He shrugs. "He said to just let it happen."

I raise my eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Yeah." He sighs.

"Then that's what you should do."

He furrows his brow. "You think so?"

I walk over to him, cup the back of his neck, and press our foreheads together. "Sonny Boy, only you can decide what you want to do. If you want..." I can't believe I'm about to fucking say this shit. "to be with Grady, then do it. If you don't, then don't. Do what fucking feels right."

He closes his eyes. "It does feel right." He whispers.

I pull back from him, still cupping the back of his neck. "Well there you go."

He opens his eyes and bites his lip like he's trying not to say whatever it is he's thinking. Finally he nods. "Okay."

I squeeze the back of his neck and pull him a little closer. "Now what's this about the family descending on the loft at noon?"

He laughs and pushes me back. "Grandma said we're too fucking skinny and even though she didn't see Justin, she's pretty sure he's in the same state." His face grows serious once again as he looks over my shoulder to the table. "Where is Justin? Is he okay?"

Stepping away from him, I lean back against the counter. "He's still asleep." He raises his eyebrow. "He had to take a pain pill. He'll be fine; they just knock him on his ass."

He nods his head slightly as he picks up the two glasses of orange juice. "Is it okay if Grady stays...for lunch I mean?"

I laugh. "Are you really going to subject the kid to an afternoon with our family? Are you *trying* to scare him off?"

He rolls his eyes. "No. They all met him last night and he survived dinner with them."

I cross my arms and roll my tongue into my cheek. "Then he *must* be a keeper."

He rolls his eyes again as he turns to walk out of the kitchen. "Whatever Dad."

I shake my head as I watch him go. This afternoon should prove to be interesting, that's for fucking sure.

June 29, 2019 8:24am

Justin's POV

The shrill of the phone pulls me from my drug induced sleep. I fucking hate taking those goddamned pills. I hate the way they make me feel the next day, but it was either take one or be in pain all fucking night. Rolling over onto my side, I look out the windows noticing the dark grey sky and the rain against the glass. I know what I did yesterday was stupid on many levels. I know that I let my anger get the better of me, but that's how I deal with shit. If I'm angry, sad, lonely, happy, whatever, I paint. It's how I deal. It's how I cope. It's how I make things better, for me. Angry painting has and always will be a bad

thing to do. It helps at the time, but I always, always pay for it.

During the process, once most of the anger subsided, I did a lot of thinking about this whole fucking situation with Amy and Rauling's. I'm still pissed that she went behind my back and told them that I would do the show without talking to me first. It all comes down to this simple fact, whether she told them I would do the show or not, it was only a verbal agreement. There is nothing legally binding me for the July show. I know that since they only wanted me as a filler, the chances of them negotiating another show for me is slim. Sure, this shit is going to make Amy look bad, but it's going to make me look bad as well. How far reaching will the repercussions be? It all depends on how Amy handles Rauling's and how Rauling's handles whatever she tells them. For something that should be simple, this has turned into a big fucking mess.

I twist my ring around my finger with my thumb and look at the time. It's early for a Saturday, but so the fuck what? Sitting up, I reach for the cordless phone and dial Amy's number. For a split second I think about her checking the caller ID and ignoring my phone call.

"Darling." Her voice is subdued.

I shake my head. "Well?"

She sighs heavily into the phone. "I called them and told them that I was very sorry, but that you could not do the July show after all. I said that there was a miscommunication between us, but that you would love to do a show there sometime later this year if possible."

"Miscommunication?" Maybe I should be asking what Rauling's said about the possibility of doing another show, but the only thing I can think is that she didn't take full responsibility for this mess. A miscommunication? What fucking bullshit.

"Well that's what it was darling." She snaps.

My mouth falls open in shock. "You can't be fucking serious." The longer she goes without saying anything the angrier I feel myself getting. I take a deep breath and try to keep myself calm. "What did Rauling's say?"

She sighs again. "They said they were very sorry that you'd be unable to do the show in July and that while they appreciated your work, they just didn't have any more openings in the foreseeable future." She says it as if it fucking bores her. It only fuels my anger.

It's not like I expected something different than what she's telling me, but her fucking attitude and her insinuating that this whole fucking thing was about *miscommunication*? No, just no. I grip the phone tighter. It causes a sharp pain to shoot up from the tips of my fingers all the way to my neck. I take another deep breath. Just then Brian walks into the bedroom and closes the door behind him. He looks at me and there must be something

about my facial expression that tips him off to my anger, because his brows furrow immediately and he cross his arms over his bare chest.

“Darling? Are you still there?”

“Yeah. Okay.” I mouth to him “un-fucking-believable”. He raises his eyebrow. “Have you been in contact with Gavaiz?”

“Darling I’ve been dealing with this mess. I haven’t had time to call Gavaiz.”

“Good.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, good. Don’t call them. I’ll call them.” I take a deep breath. “I’m really sorry Amy, but your fired.”

“Justin, please don’t do this.”

I laugh in frustration. “You know I don’t want to do it, but then you couldn’t even tell Rauling’s it was your fucking fault. That you fucking went behind my back and told them I’d do a show you know I’d never be ready for. You know, I didn’t even need you to tell them that. You could have just said it was an error on your part and that would have sufficed. You lied.” I fucking hate when people lie to me.

“I...Justin please, can we just...”

“No Amy, I’m sorry.” I take a deep breath. “I’ll call Hardtford tomorrow and talk to them about dissolving our contract.”

“I can’t believe your doing this.” She sounds as if she’s about to start crying and I just don’t think I can hear that right now.

“I didn’t do this Amy, you did.” Before she can say anything else I hang up.

Just as I’m about to toss the phone across the room Brian says, “Don’t throw that.”

I nod and set the phone down beside me on the bed. Closing my eyes, I lean back against the headboard. The bed shifts as Brian sits down next to me. “I fired her.”

“I heard.” Opening my eyes, I look over at him. “What did she tell Rauling’s?”

I scoff. “That we had a miscommunication.”

“A...” His brows furrow and anger flashes in his eyes.

“Exactly.” When I move closer to him, he wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me against his chest. “I’m trying so fucking hard not to be completely pissed off right now.”

“It’s okay if you are.” He scoffs. “I sure as hell would be.”

“I know.” The thing is, I know he’s as pissed off about this as I am. He’d like nothing more than to call Amy and rip her a new asshole. I almost want to let him.

His fingers start to stroke the back of my hair. “She couldn’t make a deal with Rauling’s?”

“No, but I figured as much as far as that goes.” I lift myself off of him slightly so I can look up at his face. “You know it’s not even about Rauling’s anymore. It’s that she lied. She went behind my back and made a commitment, even if it was only verbal, knowing that there would be no way I could make that kind of deadline. It’s that when she called to tell them I couldn’t do it that she said it was a miscommunication between her and me, instead of what it really was.”

“It’s bullshit.”

I lay my head against his chest and run my fingers over his stomach. “Now I have to call Hardtford, which I can’t do until Monday, to see about dissolving our contract. Then I’ll have to go through the fucking hassle of finding another agent.”

Brian combs his fingers through my hair and I can feel myself relaxing into him. “Is dissolving the contract going to be a problem?”

“I don’t know.” I don’t. Is there a stipulation about lying and deceit in a contract between an artist and their agent?

“If I remember correctly, there is a clause about misrepresentation that could work in your favor. We’ll have to call Hawk on Monday and have him look it over before you call Hardtford.”

I close my eyes. Fucking great. I have to deal not only with the agency, but with a fucking lawyer. “What a fucking mess.”

He doesn’t say anything else. What could he say? All he can do is agree with me because it is a fucking mess. I’ve had the same agent for twelve fucking years and just the thought of finding another one is giving me a fucking headache. It’s like, just when I think everything in my life is going right, something comes along and fucks with my reality. There really is nothing to do about it, but deal with it and I will...we will. We lay there for a while not saying anything. I let my thoughts run this way and that as I listen to the soft tap of the rain against the window. I slide my hand over Brian’s stomach and wrap my fingers around his waist as I press my body closer to his.

“Did you see Gus this morning?” I want to talk about anything but Amy and this mess right now.

“Yeah...and heard him too.”

“No shit.” I pause. “Did you give him a hard time about it?” I know he didn’t because he knows, as well as I do, that this thing with Grady is a good thing, or can be a good thing.

“I think he was waiting for me to.”

“But you didn’t.” It’s not a question, but he responds like it is.

“No.” I look up at him. “I told him if it felt right, then go for it.”

I smile up at him. “That’s kinda sweet.” He just rolls his eyes at me. I place my cheek back against his chest. “Who knows Brian, this could be just the thing he needs right now, and if it makes him happy who are we, who is anyone, to deny him that?”

“I’m not disagreeing with you.”

“No, but I know Grady isn’t your favorite person.”

“True, but if the kid does right by Gus, what the fuck do I care?”

I shrug, knowing he cares but is willing to put his personal feelings aside for Gus. “As long as Gus is happy.” Brian untangles himself from me and stands up. “What?”

He grabs my hand and pulls me up from the bed. “We need to take a shower.” He pokes his tongue against the side of his cheek. “The family is coming over at noon.”

“They are?” I look up at him. “Should we place an order for lunch then?”

He raises his eyebrow. “Debbie is under the impression that we are starving ourselves and therefore she is going to cook us some high-fat Italian food.”

I laugh. “You love Debbie’s cooking.”

His eyebrows lift to almost touch his hairline. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t.” I lean up on my tiptoes and kiss his lips. “What’s that you said about a shower?”

His eyes darken and I feel myself getting hard just from that look on his face. I want nothing more than for him to fuck me hard and fast. I want him to make me forget, for at least a little while, about all of the shit I’ll have to deal with on Monday. He pulls me

toward the bathroom, because he knows that's exactly what I want, and for a few hours he's going to try his hardest to grant me that reprieve.

June 29, 2019 1:16pm

Gus' POV

The loft is like Grand Central Station when our family gets together. People are everywhere and they are all talking at once. Justin, Uncle Ben, and my Moms are in the living room drinking wine and talking about god knows what. Dad and Uncle Mikey are in Dad's office doing whatever it is they do when they get together, I'd guess laughing or arguing about something stupid. JR and I are standing in the kitchen doorway watching Grandma as she teaches Grady how to make Baked Ziti.

"So honey, is Gus giving it to you or are you giving it to him?" She smacks her gum.

"Grandma!" I can't believe she fucking asked that...well okay I can, but still. I shake my head and start to walk into the kitchen to rescue Grady from her.

I stop when she holds up her hand. "You." She points at me. "Go spend some time with your sister." She glances at Grady, pats him on the cheek, and looks back at me. "I'll take good care of him while you're gone."

"I know. That's what I'm afraid of." Grady laughs and is rewarded with a light slap on the back of the head. I laugh. "You have officially been welcomed into the family." The corner of his mouth lifts up in a lopsided grin. I love that grin, it makes me want to kiss the shit out of him.

Grandma puts her hands on her hips. "Don't get smart." She waves her hand and shoos me and JR out of the kitchen. "Go on."

JR, taking the suggestion to heart, grabs my hand and drags me down the hall to my room. Once inside, she throws herself on the bed. Thank god I changed the sheets before everyone got here. Her bright pink hair fans across the white duvet. She smiles up at me and pats the bed beside her. I roll my eyes and flop down next to her. "So spill." She rolls on her side and props her head up with her hand.

"Spill what?" I keep my eyes focused on the ceiling.

"Don't play dumb. Tell me about Grady."

I shrug. "What do you want to know?"

“Anything! Everything!” She leans in closer to me and waits for me to look at her. When I do she asks, “Is he a good kisser?”

I shake my head and look back up at the ceiling. “I’m not telling you that.”

She giggles. “That means yes.”

I look over at her. “Bitch.” That only makes her laugh harder.

“Oh!” She pushes herself to her knees. “What did you change my ringtone to?”

I slide my tongue against the inside of my cheek. “What makes you think I changed it?”

She rolls her eyes. “Right, like you really kept O’ Canada on there. You probably changed it within the first week.” She reaches over and starts to tickle me. “Tell me what you changed it to.”

I grab her hands. “You better stop.”

She yanks her hands from me and tickles me again. “Tell me.” I grab her foot, fling her flip-flop off, and start tickling her feet. “Oh my God, don’t!” She stops tickling me because she starts laughing hysterically. “Gus stop...I’m serious.” She manages to yank her foot away from me and soon we are in an all out tickle fight. Before long we are both laughing so hard that tears are sliding down our cheeks. This is one of the things I miss about home, hanging out and being totally immature with my bratty little sister. After about five minutes, we both stop and collapse onto the bed. When our laughter fades JR rolls onto her stomach, folds one hand over the other, and rests her cheek on top of them. Her face is suddenly serious. “You seem...” I swear to god if she says better I’m going to push her off the bed. “Happier.”

I raise my eyebrow. “I do?”

“Totally.” She nods.

“Huh.” I look up at the ceiling. “It’s *Rebel Girl* by-

“Metals of Death. I love that song!”

I look over as a smile spreads across her face. “I know.” Her smile slowly fades and she sighs. “What?”

“Do you think...” She pauses and bites the inside of her cheek. “That the Moms will let me spend the whole summer with my Dad next year?”

I shrug. “Why wouldn’t they?”

“Gus.” She rolls her eyes as if I just said the stupidest thing. I kind of realize I did. “They told me I have to get a job next summer.”

I furrow my brow. “What the fuck for?” They never told me that I had to get a job after I turned sixteen. She looks away from me. “What?”

Sighing, she glances at me. “I told them I wanted a car when I turn sixteen next year.”

“And?”

“And they said that I’d have to get a job to help pay for it.”

“But-”

“My Dad just can’t go out and buy me a brand new car.” Oh...right. Fuck. That makes me feel like shit. It’s not like our Moms can afford to get her a car even without me living at the house anymore. Sometimes, like right now, I’m reminded that even though we are siblings, our lives are so completely different. Uncle Mikey’s store does well, and Uncle Ben is a full professor now, but it’s not like they can just go out and buy her a car either.

I roll on my stomach and mimic her position. “You can just drive my car.” I shrug. “It’s not like I’m using it.”

She laughs. “Oh my god, yeah right. Ma would never let me drive your car.” She pauses. “You’d never let me drive your car. Uncle Brian would never, ever let me drive your car. Are you kidding? I’m a spaz. No one is going to let me drive a \$35,000 car.”

She has point. Even if it’s completely fucked, everything she said is true.

“Well...why can’t you just ask to spend the whole summer with Uncle Mikey? You can ask him if you can work at the store so you can save money for a car.” It’s totally manipulative in a way, but she smiles at me nonetheless.

“You...are...brilliant!”

I smirk. “It’s true, I am.”

Her smile falters quickly. She reaches out and pokes me in the shoulder. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you.”

“Oh yeah?”

She sighs. “Yeah.”

I grin and raise my eyebrow. “How much?”

She frowns and tears glisten in her eyes. “As much as my Dad missed Captain Astro when he was killed in the final issue.”

Well fuck. There is no way to top that so I don’t even try. I reach out and tug a strand of her hair. “Let’s go rescue Grady from Grandma.”

She smiles soft and sweet. “A rescue mission.”

“Exactly. I’ll be Rage and you can be Zephyr.”

She rolls her eyes and pushes herself off the bed. “Why do I always have to be Zephyr?” I get out of the bed and just look at her. “Oh, right.” She rolls her eyes and grabs my hand. “Come on then.”

June 29, 2019 1:28pm

Brian’s POV

I’m sprawled out on the couch in my office watching as Mikey looks at the framed photographs on the bookshelf. I wait, because he’s going to see the photo that was taken when we got married, and he’s going to say something about it. He picks it up and looks at it for a moment. “How was it?”

“What?” When he turns around I avert my eyes.

When he doesn’t say anything I look up at him and raise my eyebrow. He taps the picture frame. “The wedding.”

“It wasn’t a wedding...it was...” I shrug.

“Right.” He sets the photograph back on the bookshelf, in the wrong place. “You should have told everyone.”

I roll my eyes. “What the fuck for?”

He shrugs and walks over to the couch. He looks over at me as a wide grin spreads across his face. “So how’s married life?”

“How long have you been waiting to ask me that?”

He laughs. "Since you told us." He pauses and his grin widens. "So...how's the wife?"

I pull the pillow from behind my back and throw it at him. "Shut the fuck up." He laughs harder as he dodges the pillow.

After his laughter subsides, he leans back against the couch. "Well...I'm happy for you."

"Thanks Mikey." I snark.

"I'm serious. After all the shit you two have been through you deserve it."

I grin. "Thanks Mikey." This time I mean it and he knows it.

"Everyone get your asses in here and eat!" Debbie's voice booms from the kitchen.

I laugh. "Christ, same old Debbie."

Mikey laughs as he gets up from the couch. He reaches out his hand and I take it. "It will be like the Sunday dinners we used to have before everyone moved away." His voice is a little sadder than it was a moment ago.

I drape my arm over his shoulder as we walk down the hall. "Yeah, except that Ted isn't here to bore us to death and Emmett isn't here to give us the latest gossip from Liberty Avenue."

He laughs. "True, but now we have two fucking teenagers."

"Christ Mikey, don't remind me."

He laughs again, this time even harder. I just roll my eyes and push him down the hall.

June 29, 2019 10:17pm

Justin's POV

I flop down on the bed and groan. "I can't believe I ate that much."

Brian gets into bed and lies down next to me. "Christ, it was like you hadn't eaten in fucking days."

"Well...I didn't eat yesterday...so..." I shake my head. "No, that's not even a good excuse."

Brian laughs and I sigh. I roll over to him, pressing my body to his. His fingers almost immediately start to comb through my hair. "Don't worry, Justin. It will work out."

He's right. It will. It always does. Brian pushes me onto my back and moves between my legs. I raise my eyebrow. "I hope you aren't expecting me to participate." I barely get it out without laughing.

He grabs the end of my shirt and yanks it over my head before kissing me. His tongue slides into my mouth and I slide my tongue into his. The tastes of wine and thick rich Italian flavors mingle together. His hands move into my hair as he kisses me along my jaw and on my neck when I tilt my head back. "That's okay." He says between kisses. "You can just lie here." He knows that once he gets me going I'll be a more-than-willing participant.

I reach for his shirt and tug on it. "Take this off."

He leans back and smirks at me before quickly pulling his shirt over his head. "What you need..." He slides down my body leaving a trail of wet kisses on my skin. "Is a good workout."

His tongue darts into my bellybutton as he undoes my jeans. "Is that what I need?"

He pulls my jeans off my hips and down my legs, tossing them beside the bed when he gets them off. He repositions himself between my legs. His mouth sucks at the base of my cock before he runs his tongue along the underside. My hips arch off the bed when his lips wrap around the tip. He sucks a few times, hard and fast, enough to get me all fucking worked up, before removing his mouth and sitting back to remove his jeans. Once he has them off, he kisses his way back up my body. He presses his lips to my ear as he puts all his weight on top of me. "I always know what you need." He grinds his hips against mine.

"Brian." And in those two syllables I beg him for everything he's willing to give.

"Roll over."

I nod my head and when he lifts his body I do as he says. I feel my cock leaking just at the thought of what he's about to do. He runs his hands all over my back, following quickly with his mouth as if he can't stop touching me. I don't want him to stop...ever. He slides his tongue along my spine, both heating and cooling me at the same time. When I feel his hot breath on the small of my back, I lift my hips from the bed. His finger spread my cheeks and his mouth, kissing, licking, sucking moves down until it's pressed over my hole. I grip the sheets and press my face into the pillow, knowing that once he starts this, once he really gets into it, I won't be able to stop moaning. I'm such a slut for a rim job and he knows it.

His tongue swipes over my hole, wet and hot. He pulls his mouth away and teases me by

blowing his warm breath over it. He knows that fucking turns me on like nothing else. His tongue circles around my hole before finally, finally pushing into me. My hips buck up from the bed, but he steadies them with his hands. He strokes me with his tongue in a rhythm so slow that it is as torturous as it is pleasurable. He's taking his time as he tastes me from the inside out. I can't stop the moans this elicits from my mouth. It's nothing but pure fucking gratification. I know the longer this goes on the harder he's getting, the more he wants me.

When he pulls his mouth away I moan in discontentment. I hear his soft laugh behind me right before he presses a lubed finger into me. Fuck. I didn't even hear him get the lube. I can't stop myself from pushing back against his finger, or from moaning his name over and over. God, I fucking want him. I'll always want him. In this bed, every morning, every night, every fucking day, always. No matter what shit is going on, this makes it all fucking worth it.

He presses a second finger into me and I push myself to my knees. I could ask him to just fuck me already, but doing this works almost as well. He removes his fingers and covers my body with his. His hands slide down my arms until they cover mine. His hot hard leaking cock settles between my cheeks. Our fingers automatically intertwine, the bands on our left hands sliding against each other. I look down at them and feel so much fucking inner piece right at that moment that I gasp in surprise when his cock enters me.

He rocks inside me at a slow sensual pace. Sometimes I get so overwhelmed when he's inside of me. Sometimes it doesn't even seem real. This life doesn't seem real. The tip of his cock strokes my prostate. He knows when I start thinking like that, and he knows how to bring me right back here to our bed, with him. He keeps the same slow pace, only changing his angle every once in a while, enough to keep me there, but not enough to get me off. It's a nice, slow, long fuck and by the time it's over we collapse on the bed all hot and sweaty. He brushes the hair off the back of my neck with his right hand and kisses me there. He rolls us to our side, but doesn't pull out of me because he knows I don't want him to.

He knows that despite the distraction of the family, all I've been thinking about is the mess with Amy. This is how he comforts me, how he takes care of me, and how he loves me. I look at our hands, still interlaced, draped over my stomach. The sky has cleared. The rain has stopped. The city lights shine brightly into our bedroom and reflect off the surface of our platinum bands. I hold that image in my mind as I close my eyes.

June 29, 2019 10:20pm

Gus' POV

When I saw Dad and Justin heading for their bedroom, I grabbed Grady's hand and

brought him to the roof. The last thing I want Grady to hear is Dad and Justin fucking. They're never quiet and they wouldn't be quiet now, even with Grady here. I look out at the city as I approach the ledge. I automatically think about when Ash and I were up here, watching the sunset on our last night in New York. It doesn't feel the same bringing Grady here, but I suppose it shouldn't. I'm actually glad it feels different...not better, not the same, just different. I turn around and lift myself to sit on the ledge with my back to the city.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Grady's eyes are wide and he's standing pretty far away from the ledge.

I roll my tongue against my cheek and raise my eyebrows. "Are you afraid of heights?"

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Terrified is a better word."

"Huh." I lean back slightly as I look over my shoulder, down to the busy street below. "This is one of the things I'm least afraid of." I glance over at Grady. "Come here."

"No fucking way."

I hold out my hand and smile at him. "Come on."

Even as he's shaking his head no, he's walking toward me. I bite my lip in an effort not to laugh. When he gets close enough I wrap my arm around his shoulders and pull him to stand between my legs. He's fucking shaking and has a death grip on my thighs. I lean down and whisper in his ear, "Nothing is going to happen. Relax."

He shakes his head. "This is..."

I laugh. "Crazy?" I pull back a little so I can see his face. "Well we could always go back down to the loft." I shrug. "That is, if you don't mind hearing my Dad and Justin fucking."

"Um...yeah, I'll pass."

I kiss him quickly and smile. "Thought so." He's still shaking, so I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight against me. He grips the back of my shirt in his fist. "I'm not going to fall."

"Yeah, alright."

We're quiet for a few minutes. The only sounds are those coming up from the street. I rest my cheek against the top of his head. "So how was spending the afternoon with my dysfunctional family?"

"They aren't that bad." He laughs. "JR is so funny."

I huff. “Yeah it’s like we aren’t even related.” He tilts his head back to look at me questioningly. I roll my eyes. “It’s a joke.”

“I’m laughing really hard on the inside.”

I smirk. “I can tell.”

He smiles that fucking lopsided grin and now that no one is around I can finally fucking kiss him. Bending down, I cover his mouth with mine and weave my fingers into his hair. His tongue slides against mine, and I know he’s waited all day for this too. The kiss goes on for what feels like a long time. It’s a lazy, sensual, relaxed kind of kiss. It’s the kind of kiss that’s really meant to be enjoyed, but one that doesn’t necessarily lead to fucking. When we pull away from each other we’re smiling like a couple of idiots, then we laugh.

He sighs contentedly. “I have to go. I have the overnight shift at the hotel.”

“I know.”

“It’s too bad your family’s leaving so early.”

I cock an eyebrow. “It is?”

He rolls his eyes as he unwraps himself from me and steps back. “I really do have to go.”

I nod. “Okay.”

He smiles at me. “Call me later.”

“You mean so we can have phone sex while you’re at work?”

He laughs as he continues to back away towards the door. “Sure, why the fuck not, but wait until about two.”

“Why?”

He reaches behind him for the doorknob. “No one checks into a place like the SoHo Grand at two in the morning.”

I roll my eyes. “Go to work Grady.”

“Later.”

“See ya.” As I watch the door close behind him, I wait for this to feel weird. Right now, today, last night, kissing him, fucking him, wanting him, needing him. I don’t know why I’m waiting for that feeling or even why I’m expecting it. It’s so easy to be around him. I

think the last twenty-four hours have proved that. He can't replace Ash, and he's not trying to. Not that anyone can, or ever will. I don't know where this thing between me and Grady is going, but that's okay. It just is what it is, and for now that's good enough for both of us. I hop down off the ledge, look down at the street below, and head back to the loft. Who knows what the future holds, but whatever life may bring from here on out, I'm ready.

Epilogue

August 24, 2019 4:11pm

Gus' POV

It wasn't planned. I didn't spend weeks thinking about it. I just woke up this morning and knew I had to come here, had to do this. I start orientation at SVA next week, and classes start after that. I could have waited until the end of the semester, but I didn't want to. Everything about being back here feels completely different from the last time. The sun is bright, the air is light and cool, and the heaviness that used to weigh me down is almost completely gone. I shove my hands in the pockets of my jacket as I walk along the sidewalk and towards Ash's grave. I didn't think that I'd ever be back here, at least not this soon. I turn and walk along the fence, across the grass, and stop just a few feet from his headstone. The last time I was here I couldn't even walk. I fucking crawled. Looking down at his name etched in the marble slab I take a deep breath and wait for the hurt to come. It's there, it will always be there, but it isn't as painful as it used to be.

Tilting my head back, I squint up at the bright blue sky. "Well..." I take a deep breath and look back down at the stone. There is so much I want to say. So much I should say, but I'm not sure how to start. "I still miss you like crazy." I feel the tears stinging my eyes, but I blink them back. "This is still really hard." I close my eyes and take a deep breath. "There's so much I should say to you. So much that I want you to know, but you know already...don't you?" I open my eyes. "Thank you." That really is the thing I came here to say, needed to say, wanted to say. "Thank you for saving my life. For loving me enough to let me go." I look over my shoulder and back at the headstone. Removing my hands from my pockets, I kneel down and trace his name with my finger. "I love you." I whisper as I press my palm flat against the smooth surface. "Always have...always will." A single tear slides down my cheek. I take one last deep breath before I stand up. It feels different being here now. It doesn't feel as fucking painful as the last time. I don't feel as broken, or as scared, or as...alone.

I take a step back from Ash's headstone; let my eyes sweep over it one more time, and then I turn and walk away. It's not about letting go as much as it is about moving on. Ash will always be a part of me. I'll always think of him. I'll always love him, but I can't spend the rest of my life mourning him. He wouldn't want that for me, just like I wouldn't want that for him if things had turned out differently. I shove my hands back into my pockets as I struggle not to look back over my shoulder.

I stop when I get the sidewalk and look into familiar golden eyes. Grady brushes my hair back from my face. "You okay?"

Unable to help myself, I look back towards Ash's grave. "Yeah." I look back at Grady.

“I’m okay.”

He takes a step back and holds out his hand. I remove my hand from my pocket and place it in his. Our fingers lace together. Sometimes I wonder how he managed to get to know me so well. How in such a short time, he’s learned to read me. Maybe it’s because I let him. Maybe because for the first time since Ash died, I let someone else in. He stands there just watching me and waiting. He doesn’t pull me forward or make any move towards leaving. He knows this is all about me, not him and me. Sometimes I really do wonder how this thing happened with Grady. It wasn’t like I was looking for it, or expecting it. At the beginning I didn’t even want it. I know what Grady and I have is different from what Ash and I had. I’m glad it’s different. I wasn’t looking to replace Ash, and Grady wasn’t looking to be a replacement. I take a step forward, and then another, until side by side we start walking towards the exit.

We pass through the front gate of the cemetery and head towards my car. I glance over at Grady. He’s quiet, but I can tell he’s thinking about too many things. I stop walking, place my hands on his hips, and push him against the car. He raises his eyebrow as his fingers wrap around my wrist. “Thanks.”

He tilts his head. “For what?”

“Coming with me, you didn’t have to.”

The corner of his mouth lifts up and the sun makes the color of his eyes appear lighter and brighter. “I know.”

I press my forehead to his and exhale a breath I’ve probably been holding for two years. “It wasn’t as difficult as last time.”

“This time you were ready.” He says softly.

“Yeah...I guess so.” I take a deep breath and pull back from him. “So.” I smirk and tongue my cheek. “You ready for another dinner with the family?”

He laughs softly. “Yeah.” He looks right into my eyes. “I’m ready.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and lean against him. When his arms slide around me pulling me closer a warm feeling flows throughout my body. I place a small kiss on his neck and whisper in his ear, “If you bring up Picasso you’ll be sleeping by yourself tonight.”

He chuckles. “No Picasso.”

I pull away from him and smile. He smiles back. “Let’s go.” He nods as I pull the keys from my pocket and press the button to unlock the car. As Grady gets in, I walk around the back of the car and stop by the driver’s side door. I pause to look up at the cemetery.

The sun's shining bright, the wind's softly blowing through the trees, and the air is crisp and fresh. For two years I've been walking around feeling raw, cut open, tormented, alone, scared. For two years I've been so fucking lost. Restless. Now...for the first time since I woke up from that coma, I feel a sense of peace, like maybe now things will be okay. Not perfect, but okay. I open the car door and slide in next to Grady. He smiles over at me and I smile back. I start the car and pull out of the parking lot. Grady's fingers curl around my thigh. I cover his hand with mine. I don't know what's going to happen between me and Grady. I don't know what's going to happen when school starts. I don't know what the future holds. I don't know anything, really, except that right now, Grady's here, my family is at the house, I start school soon, and my life, despite the setbacks, is going on. Whatever is meant to happen will happen. I look over at Grady and smile. We still haven't officially decided if what we have is a relationship or not, and that's okay, because someday the two of us will figure out how to get where we're going.

~The End~

Now That We're Here

Incomplete

"Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we often might win, by fearing to attempt."

~ Jane Addams ~

Monday, September 09, 2019

2:17am

Brian's POV

We stumble into the loft all greedy hands and hungry mouths. After the door is closed I press Justin against it, our tongues swirling between our mouths, his hands fumbling with the buttons of my shirt, my hands slipping from his lower back to cup his ass. I shove my tongue deeper into his mouth, but when I hear his head knock against the door I pull back quickly. I lick my lips. "Okay?"

His eyes lazily open, his pupils dilated from the tab of E we shared earlier. Resting his hands on my hips, he leans back against the door, as if it and my hands on his ass are the only things holding him up. "We haven't done this in forever."

He's right, we haven't gone out to the club in a long time. Smiling, I cup his face and rub my thumb along his cheek. "You were hot."

He laughs, soft and deep. "You too."

Reaching for his hand, I pull him away from the door. I stop by the kitchen to get us a couple of bottles of water as he continues down the hall to our bedroom. My cock twitches because I know when I get there he'll be lying completely naked in the middle of the bed, hot, hard and ready. I smile as I get the water from the refrigerator. We needed this, a night out, just the two of us. These last two months have been fucking shitty. I slam the refrigerator door shut, the anger of the entire situation threatening my good mood. After Justin fired Amy the shit fucking hit the fan. She filed a two million dollar lawsuit against him for wrongful termination and then she got Hardtford involved. When Justin fired Amy he still had eight years left of the ten year contract he'd signed. In the beginning I tried to advise Justin against signing long term contracts, but he'd always say, "Why not? I'm not going anywhere and neither is Amy." Hardtford is suing Justin for breaking his contractual agreement. They are after the estimated projected earnings he would have made while still under contract with them. Justin is and has been one of the top selling artists in New York for a while, despite never having a fucking show at Rauling's. A single Justin Taylor painting sells for anywhere from \$20,000-40,000 dollars, sometimes more. They estimate that in the eight remaining years that Justin could

have potentially made twenty million dollars. Twenty fucking million dollars. Christ.

“What’s taking you so long?” I turn from the refrigerator to see Justin leaning against the door frame of the kitchen, naked.

I push back the thoughts of million dollar lawsuits and saunter over to him. Handing him a bottle of water, I wrap my arm around his waist and guide him down the hallway to our bedroom. I don’t want to think about this shit, and I don’t want him to think about it right now either. That’s why we went out in the first place, to forget about this shit for a few hours. By the time we are in our room, with the door closed, Justin’s drained half the bottle of water. Opening my bottle, I take a long drink as I watch Justin move around the room. He finishes his water and throws the empty bottle in the trash before moving across the room to turn on the stereo. When he looks over at me, I raise my eyebrow. He just shrugs. After lowering the volume of the dance mix he’s put on to play, he walks over to the bed and pulls back the covers. He crawls across the bed and lies flat on his back in the middle. The contrast of his fair skin against the dark sheets can’t be described as anything except beautiful.

Setting my water bottle down on the dresser, I wait until he looks at me before I start removing my clothes. I’d like nothing more than to rip them off, jump on the bed, flip him over, and fuck him hard, but that’s not what tonight is about. As I unbutton the few buttons he missed earlier he licks his lips. When my shirt is off and I reach for the button of my jeans, he squirms in anticipation. Once my jeans are off, I take another swig of my water and I’m almost tempted to pour the remaining liquid over my body, but I don’t. Setting down the near empty bottle, I finally walk over to the bed. He’s up on his knees and reaching for me as soon as my legs hit the mattress.

Some time in between the front door kiss and this one, his body has tensed and his energy has changed. As we tumble down onto the bed his hands curl into my hair. He rolls me onto my back and deepens the kiss. All his energy, frustration, anger, and passion is pushed into my mouth by his hot wet tongue. He wants to run this show, and I’m more than willing to let him. As he straddles my waist, he slides down my body until his ass comes in contact with my already hardening cock. His hands grab mine, pushing them over my head and into the mattress. He presses his fingers between mine as he kisses his way from my mouth to my ear.

“I’m going to let go of your hands.” He licks my neck and my cock twitches in anticipation of the words he’s about to speak. “Don’t move them.” He nips my neck and soothes it quickly with his tongue. “No touching.” His voice is husky with lust. He licks his way down my neck, leaving a trail of wetness before pulling back to look me in the eyes. Slowly he eases his hands away from mine. I fight the instinct to follow them with my own. As he slides his hands over my arms, I push my fingers between the mattress and the headboard. Over the years, I learned that the only way to keep from touching him when we do this is to trap my fingers somewhere.

He sits up, his palms pressed against my skin, his fingers fanning out across my chest,

and a smile on his face. I feel a bead of pre-come slide down my cock because this little game we sometimes play makes me so fucking hard. He raises his eyebrows as he reaches behind his back and runs his fingers lightly down my shaft.

“You want to touch me don’t you?” He licks his lips, removes his hand from my cock, and places it on his own. I curl my fingers under the headboard. He presses his thighs against my sides as he strokes his cock. Closing his eyes, he tilts his head back, parts his lips, and leans back just enough for his ass to brush against the head of my cock. When I lift my hips, trying to get more contact, his eyes snap open and his hand stops moving. “Don’t move, Brian.” It’s a command, plain and simple. This is his show and he’s in charge. His eyes lock on mine as he starts to stroke himself again. So fucking hot. I roll my lips into my mouth to keep from moaning, begging, pleading to just let me touch him.

He stops all movement and places his hands back on my chest, the tips of his index fingers just barely touching my hard nipples. He leans towards me, his eyes focused solely on mine, as if he’s trying to get inside my head, inside my body, with that one searing look. He leans in closer and closer until I feel his warm breath on my lips. My mouth parts slightly in anticipation. He slides his hands further up my chest until his palms cover my nipples, the tip of his tongue darting out of his mouth to lick his lips. Even though his body is on mine, even though his hands are on my skin, even though I can feel his lips, practically fucking taste him, that’s not what’s making me hard as a rock and dripping like fucking teenager who’s never gotten off before. It’s that lustful fucking look darkening his blue eyes, like he’s trying to make me come just by looking at me.

A minute passes, then two. My body is tense and sweating. My cock is leaking and so fucking hard and all he’s doing is looking at me, his lips barely grazing mine. It’s more than intense. I want to move, lift my head just an inch and shove my tongue into his mouth. I want to grab him by the hips, roll him over, and fuck him so hard he passes out. The sexual tension builds and builds until I can’t fucking take it. “Justin.” I meant it to be stern, to say get the show on the fucking road, but it comes out a breathy moan suffused with a desperate need for him to kiss me, touch me, anything me.

He smiles at me wickedly; as if that’s all he was waiting for, and maybe it was because his hands finally move, sliding up my neck and into my hair. His tongue darts out of his mouth and swipes across my lower lip. When he denies me a full on kiss, I don’t even try to cover up my moan of disappointment. Pressing his cheek against mine, his hot breath blowing on my ear, he says in a low sultry voice, “This is driving you crazy, isn’t it.” He laughs softly. “You want to grab me right now, flip me over, and fuck me so hard, don’t you?” I stick out my tongue and flick it across the skin behind his ear. He sucks in a breath because he wasn’t expecting that. He presses his body down on mine and grinds his hips. His hard leaking cock presses into my stomach, punishment for catching him off guard. His breath catches in his throat, because as much as he’s enjoying torturing me with those moves, he’s also torturing himself.

He stops moving and catches his breath. Nuzzling my neck he whispers, “You know what

today is don't you?" He places wet open mouthed kisses on my skin, stopping on a single spot to suck the blood to the surface. Fucker is going to give me a hickey and even though I enjoy the sensation of it, the marks the next morning are fucking ugly and not appreciated.

"Justin." This time it is a warning.

He stops sucking and kisses his way up my jaw until finally, finally...then he pulls back. A growl leaves my mouth. He smiles wickedly and starts to slide his body down mine, leaving a hot trail of wet kisses on my skin as he goes. When I feel his breath on my cock my hips automatically jerk toward it. He doesn't say a word as he presses his hands against my skin to hold me down. When his tongue darts out and swipes across the head of my cock I throw my head back against the mattress. I'm so fucking wound up that even that slight little touch seems like almost too much. When my cock slides smoothly over his lips and into his mouth the sensation is so fucking intense that I'm surprised I don't come right then. His tongue presses against the underside of my shaft, sucking, stroking, in and out, licking, nipping. I know he doesn't want me to come, if he did I would have already. He's taking me right to the very edge and then backing off. The noises that I'm making right now are not dignified, in fact he has me seconds away from begging, for what I'm not sure. He hasn't given any indications that he's trying to fuck me. I can always tell when that's his motive. If that's what he wanted, a finger would be in my ass right now. His mouth would quickly follow, and his cock would be there seconds later, like he's afraid I'd change my mind. That's not what this is, not what it's going to be. Any and all thoughts are shoved from my head when he deep throats my cock and swallows. "Fuck." Then he laughs and I almost come. I grip the underside of the headboard, imagining my knuckles turning as white as fresh fallen snow. Releasing my cock with a wet pop he slithers back up my body, stopping every few seconds to lick my skin, or suck on one of my nipples. When I feel him laying flat against me and our cocks are nestled together side by side, I open my eyes and am almost shocked by the intensity I see.

He cups my face and lays light kisses all over it. His hands move to my arms and slide up to my wrists. I think he's finally going to kiss me, but he doesn't. He pulls back and looks me right in the eyes and I know exactly what he's thinking. It shocks me sometimes, even after all these years, how intense his love is for me. When he's looking at me, like he's looking at me now, my chest gets tight and my heart beats a little faster. When he looks at me like this, I know that no one past, present, or future has ever or will ever love me like that except for Justin. It doesn't hurt that it makes my cock a little harder and my desire to fuck him even stronger. I don't care what's going on as long as he still looks at me like that, like just by being here with him makes everything better.

After what seems like forever, but is probably only a minute or two, he presses his lips to mine. He's changed again; he's no longer seeking dominance or a fast fuck. His body relaxes into mine, his fingers pull my hands from between the headboard and the mattress as his tongue gently strokes mine. Once my hands are free he places them on his back saying, "Touch me." It's a soft, almost vulnerable request. I slide my hands down his

back and up again until my fingers curl into his hair. As our mouths meet again I roll us over so that he's on his back and I'm on top of him. I lick the inside of his mouth, caress his tongue, suck on his bottom lip until it feels swollen. When my mouth moves from his lips to his neck, his hand falls off my back until I feel him pressing the bottle of lube into my chest. I lick his neck before I pull back and our eyes meet. He runs his tongue along his bottom lip, lifts his head, and whispers against my ear words that are soft and familiar, "I want you inside me."

I cup his face between my hands and feel the transference of his energy to me. Reluctantly, I pull back from him and kneel between his spread legs. I slick my fingers with lube and press them into him to prepare him for me. Sometimes this is part of the long drawn out foreplay, but Justin is a chameleon right now. His energy and emotions shift before my eyes. As my fingers work him, he shifts again from that soft low voice to one much more demanding, "Fuck me."

Removing my fingers, I spread some lube over my cock before tossing the bottle aside. I grab his thighs and pull him forward until the tip of my cock is pressing against his hole. As I lean down, resting my hands on either side of his chest, he wraps his legs around me. His energy shifts again, because if he was still demanding, still wanton, he'd have pulled me forward and into him. It doesn't matter how many times, or in how many ways his emotions fluctuate, I can always read him, and I always know what he wants. As I kiss his lips, soft and sweet, I rub the tip of my cock against his hole. When I enter him, I do so one inch at a time. It's so slow and so intense that his back arches completely off the bed.

His hands grip my forearms, his nails make half moon indentions in my skin. As I move in him, deep and slow, soft moans leave his mouth. Sweat drips off my skin and on to his. I lean down and kiss him, driving my tongue into his mouth, wanting to feel everything he's feeling. As his hands slide up my arms, his legs tighten around me, and when I'm deep inside him, he holds me there. We stop moving. Our lips part, mine hovering just above his, our foreheads pressed together, and our eyes locked. Again the intensity is there, the emotions, sometimes overpowering and overwhelming, flowing from his body to mine. It's more than love, more than that one little word, and we both know it. After nineteen years, and yes I know exactly what day this is, it's still there between us going strong. Maybe even stronger than it's ever been.

I think about those first five years, the ups and down, the pushing and pulling, the losses and near losses. I think about the man I was then, in the beginning, and it surprises me even now how I got to this place. It wasn't a drastic change that happened overnight. It wasn't like what happened after the bombing of Babylon. It was a gradual yearning that came to fruition over the five years we were together while living apart. That's how I learned to do this, to be this man, and I don't regret one single thing I've done since then, including getting married. Pressing our lips together, I'm suddenly feeling more maudlin then I was five minutes ago. I'd blame the drugs, but I know somehow these feelings came directly from Justin.

My tongue traces the curve of his bottom lip before seeking entrance into his mouth. When my mouth completely covers his, when our tongues tangle together, darting in and out, he squeezes his ass around my throbbing cock. I moan a warning as I slide my lips across his jaw and down his neck. He turns his head to give me better access. I nip and lick the skin of his neck before pressing my open mouth over his pulse point. He presses his fingers deeper into my skin because he loves when I suck, lick, or kiss him there. He squeezes my cock again. Kissing my way up his neck, I press my lips against his ear. "If you don't stop doing that..." I flick his earlobe with my tongue. "This will be over before it's even started."

"Okay," he whispers.

My mouth moves back to his pulse point as I lower my body and curl my fingers into his hair. He slides his hands down my sweat slicked back as far as he can reach. He kisses my shoulder, my neck, and the side of my face as he holds me still inside him. The only sounds in our bedroom are those that come from the street, our uneven breathing, and the wet sucking sounds of our mouths. I run my tongue along his neck, tasting the salty flavor of his wet skin. As I reach his jaw, he turns his head and our lips meet once again. We stay like that for five minutes, ten minutes, I don't know. My fingers comb through his hair, his hands stroke my back, we kiss soft, slow and unhurried, and all the while my cock is buried deep in his ass as his cock throbs and leaks between us.

His hand moves between our bodies and grasps his cock. I moan into his mouth because Justin stroking his cock is one of my favorite fucking things to see. I kiss my way towards his ear. "Ready?"

He nods his head as I lick his neck before moving my hips, thrusting slowly and deeply into Justin again and again. I press my forehead to his shoulder and look between our bodies, watching as he strokes himself with the same rhythm that my cock moves in and out of him. His free hand is on my shoulder blade, his nails digging into my skin as he clenches around my cock with each inward thrust. I bury my face in his hair and grunt. When he licks the sweat from my shoulder and moans my name I almost come.

Nineteen years. Sometimes it feels like a dream; only better, so much better. I fuck him slow and sweet, it almost feels like the first time, but really it can't compare, because we were strangers then, and I was drugged out of my mind. He was seventeen and sweet. Tight and ready. Hot and horny. He was everything I never knew I wanted or needed.

As his eyes close, I slightly alter the angle of my cock. He gasps and throws his head back. I lift myself slightly and his eyes open. I raise an eyebrow and smile. Licking his lips, he runs his hand from my shoulder into my hair. When the head of my cock rubs over the bundle of nerves again his eyes widen, darken, then brighten. His fingers tangle in my hair. Leaning down, I lick the lobe of his ear. "So hot." Justin secretly loves when I talk to him while we fuck. He loves the sound of my voice, the deep timbre of it that being inside him causes.

As my hips and his hand speed up ever so slightly, he withers beneath me, moaning my name over and over. My tongue swirls the hollow of his neck before leaving a hot wet trail as I lick my way toward his wet swollen lips. Mid-moan, my mouth covers his. I push my tongue in and out of his mouth in time with the rhythm of my hips and his hand. I move my hand between us and replace his hand with mine. I take over stroking his cock as we kiss hungrily, greedily, much like that kiss we shared against the front door. I feel his cock twitch, his body tense from an impending orgasm. I've brought him right to the edge by completely taking over every part of his body, his mouth, his cock, his ass. I lift myself off of him, because I want to watch him. I press into him, burying my cock all the way inside and as he comes between us, his eyes closed, head back, mouth open, I come myself, almost just from how fucking beautiful he looks right at this second.

After a minute or less, I collapse half on him and half on the mattress. I feel completely fucking exhausted. I close my eyes, press my lips to his neck, and try to regulate my breathing. His legs uncross from behind my back and slide lazily down my thighs. His hands move up and down my back in slow easy strokes. As I'm running my left hand over his sweat slicked chest he grabs it and our fingers intertwine.

He sighs contently and after a few minutes, my cock still inside of him, we fall asleep, the troubles of the last two months forgotten, at least for one night.

Monday, September 09, 2019

6:48am

Gus' POV

I'm pouring a glass of orange juice when Dad walks into the kitchen in a pressed Armani suit. I glance up at the clock then back at him as he heads toward the coffee machine. "Why are you still home?" I ask as I put the carton of orange juice back in the refrigerator.

He shrugs as he takes two mugs from the cabinet. "Late night."

I lift my glass and take a sip as I eye him suspiciously. "I bet."

I lean against the counter as Dad sets the cups on the counter and pours coffee into them. Last night Justin and Dad went out to some club. I'm not sure why they went exactly, but I figure it was probably to take a break from all the bullshit that's been going on. I didn't even know about any of this shit going on with Justin until last month. Grady's the one who actually told me about it, or rather he asked me something about it and I asked him what the fuck he was talking about. I knew something was up with Justin because he wasn't acting like himself and Dad was being crankier than usual, but I didn't ask and they didn't offer. I figured if they wanted me to know, they'd tell me. Of course, when I found out about what was happening, I was pissed that they didn't tell me. Justin fired Amy and he was being sued by her and the agency? That's big fucking news and I told

them both I was pissed off I found out about it from someone else. They just gave me some bullshit spiel about how they didn't want to make me worry. Right, like them acting strange wasn't already making me worry.

A nudge against my shoulder stops my thoughts. I look at Justin as he smiles up at me. "Happy Birthday."

I'm about to tell him thanks, but Dad cuts me off. "Christ, it's your birthday already?"

I roll my eyes as Justin laughs and walks over to Dad, taking the cup he's holding out for him. "Like you forgot," I say, picking up my juice and walking to the table. Dad shrugs. He sits down at the head of the table and Justin sits down across from me. I look to the center of the table and smirk to myself. Christ, they've got me sucked into their little rituals. The paper is sitting there, Business section on top, Arts and Leisure section below that, then the section of the paper with the crossword stacked on top of the rest of the paper that we don't read. The comics are in their place too, the trash. Just like every morning, Dad sets down his cup, reaches for his section of the paper and hands us ours. Despite everything that's been going on, it's a morning like every other morning. It's routine, familiar. To outsiders it would probably seem painfully domestic and boring, but to me it's comforting and I like it.

I'm chewing on the end of my pen trying to figure out a seven letter word for seedy (rundown), when Dad slides a plain white envelope in front of me. "What's this?" I set down my pen and pick up the envelope. Flipping it in my hand, I look up at Dad who just nods to the envelope, and then at Justin who just smiles at me before taking a sip of his coffee. I almost laugh because I know it's my birthday present, but I know neither one of them is going to say that. When I was little Dad and Justin would show up in Canada on my birthday with gifts, but they never actually called them birthday gifts in front of me. It's like they have some aversion to actually defining them as that. Justin will tell me happy birthday and smile, but Dad...Dad usually just gives me a quick hug. Although Dad had no trouble calling my graduation present a gift. My parent's are freaks, I know. Smiling to myself, I look down at the envelope and turn it over in my hand. I pull the flap open and peer inside. I feel my mouth gaping open and my eyes widening.

Snapping my head up, I stare at them. "You got me a credit card?" I pull the card from the envelope and hold it in my hands as I look it over. Holy shit, it's not just any credit card, it's a fucking American Express Platinum card with my fucking name on it: Gus K. Peterson-Marcus. Holy fuck. After I pick my jaw up off the floor I look up at my dad and grin. "So...what's the limit?"

Justin laughs and Dad rolls his eyes. "\$5000."

I arch my eyebrow. "Really?"

"It's for school."

Oh, right. I look down at the card. For school. Since I started at SVA they've been giving me what I like to call a weekly allowance, mostly for cab fare. They asked me if I was ready to take the subway. I told them no, therefore they gave me money for cabs. What they don't know, and I haven't told them, is that I've been walking to school. It's a long ass walk, but every time I step up to the street to hail a cab I start to freak out.

I look up at them and smile. Even if I won't use it for cab fares, they still got me a fucking credit card. "Thanks."

Justin stares at me for a minute. He's looking at me like he looks at Dad sometimes, like he's trying to figure out what we're thinking. It's unnerving. "You can use it for other things as well." See? Like he *knows* I won't use it for the reason they are giving it to me.

Dad looks over at Justin, then at me. "Don't fucking go overboard and *don't* fucking lose it."

I roll my eyes as I reach into my back pocket for my wallet. "I won't." I insert the card in one of the empty slots and shove my wallet back in my pocket.

Dad nods and that's that. We go back to doing our own thing and sipping our respective drinks.

A while later, when Dad gets up and Justin starts rearranging the paper, I ask, "We're meeting back here tonight right?"

Dad stops in the middle of putting on his jacket. "Seven o'clock." He rolls his tongue into his cheek as he finishes putting on his jacket. "And tell your boyfriend not to be late."

Rolling my eyes I push myself back from the table and stand up. "He's not my boyfriend," I throw over my shoulder as I walk into the kitchen and grab my bag off the kitchen counter, swinging it over my head.

Justin starts laughing and looks at Dad. "Christ, he is your son."

I shake my head, ignoring that comment. "See you tonight," I say right before walking out of the loft.

Monday, September 09, 2019
7:26am

Grady's POV

I groan into my pillow as my cell phone starts ringing. It's way too early for anyone to be calling me. Blindly, I reach for my phone on the table next to my bed. Without opening my eyes, I flip it open and press it to my ear. "lo?" My voice is clogged with sleep and

just a hint of irritation.

“This is your wake up call. Now get your ass out of bed.”

I smile and roll onto my back. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Happy birthday.” I yawn and run my hand over my bare chest. “What time is it?”

“Thanks.” I hear the flick of a lighter. “Almost 7:30.” He mumbles around the cigarette I know he has in his mouth.

“I thought you were quitting?” My eyes snap open. “Did you say 7:30?”

“You have plenty of time.” He exhales. Even though I don’t really like that he’s a smoker, I can’t deny that he looks fucking hot when he does it.

I shake my head and push the covers back. “You were supposed to call me at seven.” I get out of bed and walk over to the closet. “I’m going to be fucking late.”

“Christ, the restaurant is like across the street from your apartment, Grady.” He exhales again. “What the fuck did you do before I started calling to wake your ass up?”

I roll my eyes. “I told you my alarm clock broke and I haven’t had time to buy another one.” Which isn’t really true and he knows it. I just do it so he’ll call me and he uses it as an excuse to do so. Honestly, I’ve never been in a...relationship...with anyone like Gus before. I hear the blare of a horn and his sharp intake of breath. I close my eyes and press my forehead to the closet door. “Are you walking again?” I ask softly, already knowing the answer. “Gus?”

“Aren’t you going to be late?”

“Don’t do that.” I push myself away from the closet door and slide it open.

“Yes, I’m walking,” he snaps.

I hold back a sigh. Gus is doing really great. He’s had less panic attacks, but he still has a few issues...like hailing a cab. He doesn’t mind riding in them. It’s actually having to step up to the curb that he can’t quite manage, especially if he’s alone. Not that I blame him. I flip through the clothes in my closet. “Have you told your dads?”

He exhales. “Justin knows.”

I shake my head. “How’d he figure it out?” I start to yank a pair of jeans off a hanger, but change my mind and take out a pair of grey dress slacks instead.

“It’s Justin. He just knows shit.” He lowers his voice. “Can we not do this right now?” This is code for, “Let’s talk about something else so I don’t have to think about walking down this street by myself.” Ever since I found out he’s been walking to school instead of taking a cab, I’ve made up excuses for him to call me when he’s doing it, because for whatever reason I’ve always felt like I’ve had to protect him, to keep him safe, in whatever way I could. Since I first laid eyes on him, I’ve felt like that.

I remember the first time I saw Gus. Right then I knew that he wouldn’t be like anyone I’d met before, and it wasn’t just because I thought he was beautiful. I couldn’t stop looking at him, because while sarcastic veiled threats were coming out of his mouth, he couldn’t hide the deep sadness that swam in his dark hazel eyes. It wasn’t only in his eyes though, it was woven between his words, his tone was suffused with it, and it was present in how he held his body, as if it was keeping him prisoner inside himself. I remember he smiled after telling me his dad was upstairs with Justin and then a split second later something inside of him seemed to crack and break. I’d never seen anything so tragically beautiful in my life. I don’t know what kept me coming back again and again. I don’t know what made me go after him like I did, unwilling to let him brush me off. I’d never pursued anyone in my life. Everyone I’d been with before came to me. From day one being with Gus was like swimming in uncharted waters. It still is sometimes.

“So what did they get you?” I change the subject, for him. He doesn’t know it, or maybe he does, but I’d do anything for him. Shit, I was willing to do anything before I really even knew him, including dragging his ass out of the middle of the street before that fucking taxi could take him out.

He sighs gratefully into the phone. “A Platinum American Express.”

“A Platinum Express?” I cradle the phone between my shoulder and I ear as I put on my pants.

“Yeah.”

“Shit.” I’ve known Justin and Brian for a few years. I always knew they had money, one look at Justin’s studio told me that, but until I started hanging out with Gus I never really knew how much money they actually had. It doesn’t matter to me, Gus could be dirt poor and it wouldn’t change things, but sometimes, like right now, it still shocks me how rich they really are. My parents aren’t exactly poor, but they’re not exactly rich either. Certainly they’d never get me a credit card, much less a Platinum Express. “And your moms?” I zip up my pants and reach for a white dress shirt.

“A Panasonic Sable XR1500.”

I slip on my shirt. “Jesus.” That’s a fucking expensive camera. “I didn’t know your moms had that kind of money.”

“They don’t.” I hear him light another cigarette. “It’s not just from them. My entire family chipped in.” I sit on the edge of the bed and reach for my shoes. “You know I could loan you the money.”

I close my eyes. “They’ll give it to me...or I’ll just have to work full-time at the Grand.” I’d been doing pretty good on my own the last several months with the shows I’ve been getting, but like every starving artist I’ve hit a lull. Plus, the last year at the New York Academy of Art is a fucking killer. Between going to class, finishing projects, and working, it’s going to be hard for me to pound the pavement. “Besides, this isn’t the first time I’ve had to ask my parents for help.” It probably won’t even be the last. If I didn’t get student loans, I wouldn’t even be attending NYAA. God knows my father would never pay for it.

“Just thought I’d offer.”

“And I appreciate it.” More than he knows, really. More than I could ever tell him. I stand up, walk into the bathroom, and look in the mirror. Christ, my hair. “What time is it now?”

“Fifteen till. You have time.”

I turn and lean back against the sink. “Are you almost there?”

“Grady.”

“Gus.”

He sighs. “Maybe another five blocks. Give or take.”

“I wish-”

“Don’t okay?” He takes a deep breath. “Just...don’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I snap. “I forgot I’m not allowed to worry.”

“No one said you couldn’t worry, but I’m not a fucking child. I’m quite capable of walking down the fucking sidewalk.”

Fuck. “I know you’re not a child.”

“Then stop treating me like one.”

I swear to god sometimes he just does this shit to piss me off, like we don’t have this argument every other day. I run my hand through my hair and take a deep breath. “I don’t want to fight about this today.”

He doesn't say anything for a while. I wait, because I know eventually he'll say something. "Are you still coming to dinner with us tonight?" His voice is so soft, and even though he's trying not to let it out, I can hear the worry in his tone. He gets like this after every little tiff, as if he's not sure how far he's pushed. It's part of the package and I know that, but sometimes I can't help but wonder if he was like this before the accident. I feel a sharp stab of guilt shoot through me. Christ, that's a fucking shitty thing to think.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts. "Of course I am." My voice is strong, solid, reassuring. "Are we still meeting at the loft?"

"Yeah, seven o'clock." He pauses. "Don't-"

"Be late, I know."

He chuckles lightly and I breathe a sigh of relief that the moment of tension has passed. "Good. Hey?"

"Yeah?"

"I-"

"It's okay Gus."

"Okay." He pauses. "So...see ya tonight?"

I close my eyes. "I'll be there."

"You have five minutes."

My eyes snap open. "Shit. Okay."

"I'll see ya later."

"Okay." He hangs up and so do I. Turning to the mirror, I lean in close and look myself right in the eyes. "What the fuck are you doing?" I shake my head and finish getting ready to meet my parents. I know that pushing Gus only puts us on this endless loop of conversation that we seem to have over and over, but I refuse, just fucking refuse, to let him pretend with me like he does everyone else. He once told me that he used to pretend with his moms all the time, but then he moved in with his dads and suddenly he didn't have to pretend anymore. Well, since this thing with Justin has his dads occupied, Gus feels why bother them with what he thinks is petty shit. Well, he isn't going to do that shit around me. I know he's been doing it lately because of my own fucking drama with trying to make rent and just...live, but if he thinks I'm going to be like everyone else, he's wrong. He shouldn't have to deal with this shit alone, and as long as I'm around, he's not going to whether he likes it or not.

I grab my keys and pocket my cell phone as I leave my apartment. Gus may be five years younger than me, but he's the most complex, beautiful, brilliant man I've ever met, and that's saying something.

"We don't accomplish anything in this world alone ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something."

~ Sandra Day O'Connor ~

Monday, September 09, 2019

7:28am

Justin's POV

I click my thumbnail between my teeth, watching as Brian drains the last of his coffee and sets the cup in the sink. Looking down at the paper, I bend the edge of the business section as I try to figure out a way to tell him what I should have told him days ago. I slouch in the chair and stare at the paper. "Hawk wants me to think about settling out of court with Hardtford."

When he doesn't say anything I raise my head. He's leaning against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed over his chest. "When was this discussed?" Fuck. I avert my eyes. He knows when it was discussed. He knows I had a meeting with Hawk last Wednesday. I look up at him. As he walks back to the table, he shakes his head and uncrosses his arms. "How much?" He sits down and raises his eyebrow.

I bite my lip. "Ten million."

"No." He doesn't even hesitate which sets me off, because I've been thinking about it for days and couldn't decide one way or the other.

"Why the fuck not? Maybe it's what I should have done in the first place." I push the chair back, stand up, and glare at him. "When this is over do you even think I'll have a fucking career left?" I scoff. "I can't even get a fucking agent. It's like...it's like I'm starting all over again. Like when I just fucking moved here." I laugh bitterly. "Except now I have a reputation...and not a very good one." I start to walk away, but he grabs my wrist.

"Justin."

"What Brian? You know it's the truth."

"So, we'll deal with it, but you're not giving into them." I yank my wrist from him and walk to the kitchen. I'm not angry at Brian. I'm pissed off at Amy and Hardtford, at the situation. "So, you're just going to give up?"

I stop and turn around. He raises his eyebrows. Sighing, I turn to face the sink and wrap my fingers around the cool stainless steel. I hear Brian get up. When he places his hands on my shoulders, I lower my head and stare into the cup he put in the sink. He runs his

hands down my shoulders and over my arms until his hands cover mine. He presses his chest to my back and rests his chin in the crook of my neck.

“It’s not just about the money. It’s everything I’ve worked for. It’s all the sacrifices I had to make...we had to make.” I want to say more, like all the bullshit I’ve gone through to even be an artist at all. Going against my father by choosing PIFA over Dartmouth, even if I never graduated. Getting fucking bashed in the head, and how long and how fucking hard it was to come back from that. How I had to find new ways to be an artist. How the bashing fucked up my life and how I still deal with the residual effects of it every fucking day. How I left the man I love, the man who wanted to marry me and give me everything I ever fucking wanted. Who stood by me, stayed with me, still fucking loved me, even when I left him and all of that to pursue this, to live this life, to create this career.

When I turn around, I wrap my arms around his waist. He places his hands on either side of my face. “You’re right. It’s not just about the money. Fuck the money. We have the fucking money. You know as well as I do we can pay them off, but that’s not the fucking point.” His thumbs stroke my cheeks. “This is about your career and how hard you’re willing to fight for it, Justin.”

I shift my eyes. He’s right and we both know it, but it’s been one bullshit thing after another for two months. It’s seeing my fucking name in the paper. It’s not being able to find a fucking agent because suddenly *The Great Justin Taylor* has been blacklisted. It’s how I haven’t been able to paint anything worthy of ten dollars, much less thousands, in weeks. I look up. “I just want it to be over.”

Pulling me to his chest, his fingers tangle in the hair at the nape of my neck. “All the times you wanted to give up, you never did. You’re a fighter, Justin, that’s part of who you are.”

I don’t know if that’s true, but I want it to be. I know in the past I was very much a quitter. I had no problem giving up the things I wanted for whatever reasons. I gave up on Brian several times, gave up on myself even more, wanted to give up many, many times during those five lonely years I spent here without him...but at the same time I was fighting for those things as well. Sometimes I feel like a living, breathing contradiction. That’s how I’m feeling right now. It’s why I couldn’t decide whether or not to settle out of court with Hardtford. I want to give up as much as I want to fight, and that leaves me feeling unsure about every fucking thing. It’s why last night in bed I couldn’t decide if I wanted to be in control or not, whether I wanted it hard and fast or slow and sweet. It’s why one minute I feel angry and in the next breath feel so fucking depressed.

Brian leans back and traces my bottom lip with his thumb. Out of nowhere, I have the sudden urge to ask him if he loves me, if he’ll love me after I lose everything, but I know that he does, that he will. It’s completely fucking ridiculous. I hate feeling like this, as if my emotions are an ocean during a storm and I’m a boat being tossed back and forth in the waves with no control over my destination. Brian’s eyes lock on mine. I know he sees everything I’m feeling because despite my best efforts, I can never be like him when it

comes to sliding on the mask. I can never so thoroughly close myself off. The longer I look in his eyes, the more open his expression becomes, the more he lets me see inside. It's not that he's as closed off as he was years and years ago, but sometimes he still is and that's okay, because that's Brian.

He touches his forehead to mine. "We're fine."

It's not I love you, it's not everything will be all right. It's Brian's way of letting me know that despite the bullshit he and I are fucking solid. And I love him just a little more because that's the one thing I don't ever want to start doubting.

Monday, September 09, 2019
7:58am

Gus' POV

I flip my cell closed and shove it into my bag. I stop walking, take a drag of my cigarette, and consider, just for one second, walking up to the curb and hailing a cab. Part of me wants to do it just so I can say, "See Grady, it's not a big fucking deal. I can do it. I just choose not to." Of course, that's bullshit. I exhale the smoke from my cigarette and continue walking. So I walk to school. What's the big fucking deal? I hate when Grady and I argue about it. It's so fucking pointless. Doesn't he know that if I could, if I didn't get that tight feeling in my chest every fucking time I think about it, that I'd do it? Of course he knows, but honestly, he worries too fucking much. He's been like a dog with a bone over this. I hate when he brings it up. I hate when he pushes me, because it makes me push right back, sometimes harder. I always, without fail, feel like shit afterwards. I know he just wants to...protect me, or some shit like that, but maybe I don't need his fucking protection. Maybe I'd like for there to be one day when all my bullshit isn't hanging between us like a wet rag. I know sometimes Grady thinks I'm a stubborn asshole, but so is he. I told him, more than once, that I'd loan him the money he needs to make it this month. He just kept telling me no. I know why he won't take the money from me. Taking it from me is like taking it from Dad and Justin. That's how Grady sees it, and even though I think that's completely fucked, I understand it.

Flicking my cigarette to the street, I pull the door open of the Starbucks on the corner because somehow I've gotten addicted to caramel frappuccinos. I glance around, surprised that there isn't a line. I look at the guy on the other side of the counter. He's short, barely 5'5". Light brown hair, dark green eyes. He's lithe, but has awesome muscle tone, from what I can tell.

He smiles. "Hey Gus."

I lean casually against the counter. "Hey Ryan." He's also in one of my classes at school.

"The usual?"

“Yeah.” I tap my fingers on the counter, my eyes automatically following him as he turns to tell another green-apron-wearing worker my order.

He places his hands flat on the countertop. “So...did you finish your project yet?”

I laugh. “Hell no. I haven’t even started. Grady keeps telling me to stop procrastinating.” I shrug and ignore the slight furrow of Ryan’s brow when I mention Grady. “I told him, I do my best work under pressure.” I raise my eyebrow. “What about you?”

“Yeah, I finished.”

I take the drink his co-worker hands me, set it down on the counter, and pull out my brand new fucking Platinum express. As I hand it over to him I say, “Christ, don’t tell me you’re one of those.”

He takes the card from me, swipes it through the machine, and hands it back. “One of those?”

I return the card to my wallet. “Yeah, one of those.” I take a sip of my drink. “I bet you’ve finished at least three of the six projects already.”

He shakes his head and laughs. “Fuck you.”

He slides the receipt and a pen across the counter. I quickly sign it. “That’s really no way to talk to a paying customer.”

He pushes my shoulder. “I’ll see you in class, asshole.”

I laugh. “See ya.” I exit Starbucks, take a sip of my drink, and continue on my way to school.

I met Ryan last week, on the first day of class. I knew before he even opened his mouth that he had a thing for me. His eyes were on me as soon as I walked in the door. I remember the first thing Ryan asked me after all the, hi I’m Ryan blah, blah bullshit that people say when they first meet each other.

“So...are you with anyone?” This guy’s obviously not into being subtle.

I bite my lip to keep from smiling. “Yeah. I am.”

“Well, what’s his name?”

If he wasn’t interested in me I’d tell him to fuck off and mind his own business, but I want it to be clear right up front, I’m not looking for someone else to fuck. “His name is Grady.”

I'm a little surprised when Ryan says, "Grady O'Toole?"

I raise an eyebrow. "You know him?"

He laughs. "A lot of people know him."

"Oh?"

"Not like that. He's known at SVA because of how many shows he got while he was a student here."

I laugh at myself for feeling that pathetic pinch of jealousy. I lean back in my chair. "Well, that's because he's fucking talented."

Ryan looks me over. "Yeah, I'm more than jealous."

I would have asked what he meant by that, but the professor came in at that point. I don't care if he likes me as long as he knows that I'm not going to fuck him, and I believe I made that perfectly clear, more than once. So flirting with Ryan is perfectly harmless; that's all it is, all it's ever going to be. Besides that, this thing with Grady, it works on a whole other level that no one else could possibly understand or get. I don't care how hot someone is, or how much they might want me, they aren't Grady. They weren't there to catch me right at the exact moment I fell apart.

**Monday, September 09, 2019
8:03am**

Grady's POV

Standing outside Butterfields, I smooth down my shirt and take a deep breath before opening the door of the restaurant. I walk up to the podium where a tall, sandy-haired blonde has his back to me. "Excuse me?" When he turns around a familiar face greets me. Fuck. "Josh?"

His blue eyes narrow slightly as he looks me over. Great, there is nothing like running into an ex-boyfriend when it's least expected, especially if things between us didn't exactly end nicely. "Hey G." He leans on the podium and leers at me. "You're looking... good." There isn't even a hint of sincerity in his voice.

"You too." I reply in the same exact same tone of voice.

"Table for..." He pushes himself away from the podium and looks over my shoulder. "One? That's a surprise."

I cross my arms over my chest. “Still holding a grudge?” I really don’t feel like dealing with his bullshit right now.

“Maybe.”

I roll my eyes. Josh was my boyfriend for almost two years. We were in one of those relationships where we weren’t completely monogamous. It was his idea, because, “Jesus G, I’m too fucking young to be someone’s fucking husband.” It was all well and good. He fucked whoever he wanted, as long as I never had to see it, and I didn’t fuck around at all, at first. I started fucking around, because after a year and a half of him coming back to our place smelling like other guys, I’d had enough. I did it mostly to get him to see how fucking pathetic the whole arrangement was. The only thing it did, though, was piss him off. Suddenly, it was okay for him, but not for me. What eventually broke us up was the fact that Josh started acting like a jealous twat because he thought other guys were getting in my ass more than he was.

I scan the restaurant for my parents because I’m late, and my father hates it when I’m late. The last thing I need right now is my father to be pissed off before I even get to the table. After I spot my parents I tell Josh, “Well maybe you should let it go.” I shrug. “We broke up six months ago, we never loved each other, why hold onto that?” I wait for him to answer. When he doesn’t I just shake my head and walk away. Josh hates when anyone is openly honest, it fucks with his world view.

As I walk towards my parents I quickly look them over. My father is a short man with thinning jet black hair and cold black eyes. He’s dressed for the office, dark blue slacks, heavily starched light blue dress shirt, and a dark blue silk tie. My mom is sitting beside him. She’s short and plump with light blond hair that she has pulled back from her round face. She’s wearing a light pink blouse and a dark grey ankle length skirt. When I approach the table mom looks up. A smile spreads across her face, making her green eyes appear smaller than they are.

Before I can even lean down to give her a kiss my father says, “You’re late.”

I kiss mom and sit down across from her. “Barely.”

“Five minutes late is still late, Grady,” he replies sharply. Great, this is going well so far. My father takes a sip of his coffee as he looks me over. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. No matter how old I am, every time I’m around my father I feel like I’m being interviewed for a job I’ll never get no matter how outstanding my resume might be.

I’m saved from whatever else he might criticize me for by the waiter approaching the table. I try to order just coffee, but my mom won’t hear of it. “Honey, you’re too skinny.” She looks up at the waiter. “He’ll have three eggs, scrambled, with a side of bacon, and two pieces of toast. Oh, and a glass of milk.” She smiles over at me, knowing that had I ordered breakfast that’s exactly what I would have gotten. I smile back at her.

I hear the give in the chair as my father leans back. The smile fades from my face as I look over at him. “So?”

Right...well, what did I expect, for him to wait until after we have breakfast to question my motives? I opt to say it fast, just like ripping off a band-aid. “I need money.”

My father snorts. “Of course you do.”

“Not much.” I don’t even know why I’m bothering to try to smooth it over.

He scoffs. “Isn’t that what you always say, Grady?” He shakes his head. “Bhett, give me the checkbook.” I look from my father to Mom. She’s still trying to smile, but she knows that it’s pretty much going to be all downhill from here. When Mom hands him the checkbook, he opens it and looks at me with those fucking cold black eyes. “Well, how much?”

“\$1,756.85.” It’s the exact amount to the fucking cent I need to cover my ass this month. That’s how my father is, a fucking accountant twenty-four seven. I wouldn’t be surprised if he keeps track of every cent he’s ever given me.

He leans towards Mom and says almost conspiratorially, “Not much he says.” He takes the pen Mom hands him before looking at me. “It’s chump change really.”

I bite my tongue to keep from telling him to shut the fuck up and just write out the fucking check and why does this have to be a big deal every fucking time? Can’t he just write the check and leave his fucking comments to himself? Of course not, that’d be asking too much of Patrick O’Toole.

When my father rips the check out of the checkbook, I take it and quickly put it in my wallet, as if any second he’ll change his mind and take it back. If I didn’t need it, if I wasn’t fucking desperate, I’d tell him to shove his money up his ass.

He hands Mom back the checkbook and the pen. “I wouldn’t have to keep giving you money if you got a *real* job.”

“Patrick.” Mom places her hand on his arm.

“I have a *real* job.” It’s pointless. This conversation is so fucking circular.

“And what job is that?” He shrugs off Mom’s hand. “Starving artist or lowly hotel clerk?”

I don’t even bother to answer him. There is nothing to say that hasn’t already been said. I’ve tried to tell him that just because being an artist isn’t a steady career, like fucking accounting, doesn’t make it any less of a career. It doesn’t mean it takes less work, and that when it happens, when you get to the big time, it doesn’t pay well. I mean, look at

Justin, that's proof right there that if a person has the talent, they can have a great career. Of course, my father doesn't know anything about what goes on in the art world, and not for lack of me trying to tell him. He just doesn't care. I bet if I mentioned that I know Brian Kinney my father would probably shit his pants, because that's business and he gets that.

As the waiter arrives with our food, a heavy silence falls over us. My father has this stupid fucking rule that once food is on the table there should be no talking. I shove my food around on my plate, feeling as far from hungry as a person could get. Eventually I start to eat because to my father, not clearing the plate is wasting money. When breakfast is finally said and done, I'm past ready to get the fuck out of there. I'm literally opening my mouth to tell them thanks and good-bye when Mom asks, "So are you seeing anyone?"

She's smiling at me, all rosy cheeks and mischievous twinkle in her eyes, because she knows about Gus. She's bringing it up for *him*, so *he'll* know, like he will suddenly give a shit. My father looks from me to Mom. "Christ, another one?"

I glare at him and the words leave my mouth before I can stop them, because the anger my father ignites in me has been burning since I sat down at this table. "Gus isn't *just* another one."

His eyes widen. "Gus? What kind of name is that? Is he a mechanic?" He laughs at his own snark.

The anger burns me from the inside out. "No, but I'm sure you'd consider that a *real* job. Unfortunately, Father, he's a student at SVA."

"Christ, another pansy-ass artist." He completely ignores the sarcasm in my tone, which is fucking typical. He only hears what he wants to hear.

"Patrick," Mom scolds. I start to get up, but one look from Mom keeps me in my chair. "You can't judge someone based on their name. You of all people should know that." I raise my eyebrow at Mom. That's right. Imagine great-great-great grandpa O'Toole coming to New York trying to make a living as an Irish immigrant. My father rolls his eyes and looks away. Sometimes I marvel that Mom always seems to know exactly what to say to shut my father up. She looks from me to my father, satisfied that she's put a stop to the argument before it could get out of hand. "Grady." She looks at me and smiles. My stomach starts to curl in on itself from nervousness, because I have no idea what she's about to say. "I'd like to invite you and Gus over to the house for dinner this Friday."

I stare at Mom in disbelief. She has to be kidding. I am *not* inviting Gus to dinner at my parent's house. If it was just going to be Mom, I'd consider it, but with my father there? No, just no. I search for some excuse to use, because I know Mom, and she's probably been thinking about this since I mentioned Gus two weeks ago. I look at my father. I can see how much he hates the idea, and how much he wants to tell Mom that "under no

circumstance does he want to know about or see any guy who his *gay* son is dating.” Since my father found out I’m gay, it’s been a don’t ask, don’t tell policy around him. I look at Mom, my face set, my voice hard. “No.”

Her smile falters slightly. I can see she’s about to try to talk me into it when my father snaps, “What, is he too good to eat dinner with us? Your poor little starving artist?” He sneers as he leans across the table. “Or are we not good enough?”

“Christ Dad, like you want to meet Gus!” Several people look our way. “Like you even give a shit!” Despite the pleading look in Mom’s eyes I stand up, because I’m tired of his shit and I just don’t want to deal anymore. I walk over to Mom and kiss her cheek. “I’ll call you.”

Before I can pull away she wraps her arms around me and holds me there. “I love you Grady, please think about dinner, okay?”

I close my eyes and sigh. “I’ll think about it,” I mumble. When she releases me I look at my father. “Thanks for the money.” I leave before he can say his usual bullshit about how I need to get a real job and that this is the last time he’s going to give me money.

As I’m walking away from the table I hear Mom ask him, “Why do you have to do that?”

I want to turn around and yell the answer. “He’s an asshole Mom, that’s why!” Shaking my head, I leave the restaurant and cross the street, heading back to my apartment.

God, my father is such a fucking asshole about everything. I enter my apartment building and take the stairs two at a time. Once I’m inside my crappy little apartment, I remove my uncomfortable dress shoes and throw them across the room. Flopping down on the couch, I suddenly wish I was a smoker, or an alcoholic, or at least that I was at my studio on campus so that I could drown these fucking feelings that bombard me every time I’m in the same vicinity as my father. I swear he fucking hates me, hates my chosen career, how I live, that I’m gay, that I’m not really his son anyway so what the fuck do I really matter? That’s what really pisses him off about me. Well, if he didn’t want a son, a fucking kid, maybe he should have been more adamant when Mom brought up the idea of adopting one. Of course, no one can tell my mom no and mean it, not even my father. I lie back on the couch and close my eyes. Some days I really don’t care what he thinks about me, or even if he loves me, and some days...some days I just care too fucking much.

Monday, September 09, 2019
7:33pm

Gus’ POV

There is something about going someplace like Dánte’s with Dad. Usually I don’t notice

because we don't really go out to eat dinner that often, unless it's to Mona's, which is just this Italian dive that we all love, probably because it reminds us of Grandma Deb's cooking. When we walk into Dante's the hostess, a too-skinny girl with long dark black hair smiles at us. "Good evening, Mr. Kinney, Mr. Taylor."

Dad smiles and reaches for her hand, slipping her at least a fifty. "Is our table ready?"

Her smile, if possible, widens. "Certainly, Mr. Kinney, right this way."

This is what happens when your dad takes a small up-and-coming restaurant in Chelsea and turns it into a marketing success in less than two months. We get treated like royalty, like Dad is Donald Trump or some shit. Dad doesn't own any real estate in Manhattan, but he can convince anyone that something totally frivolous, totally expensive, totally not necessary for life, is a must have. I glance over at Grady as we are led toward the back of the restaurant. His brow is furrowed, he's biting the inside of his cheek, and his hands are balled at his sides. Wherever he's at, it's not here with me, Dad and Justin. He doesn't even have to tell me what he's brooding about. It's a scary thought to know someone that well.

As we are being led into a private dining room, I nudge Grady with my shoulder. He looks over at me and at least attempts to smile. I lean towards him, run my tongue lightly over the lobe of his ear, and whisper, "Don't let him get to you."

He sighs slightly, and then he smiles, a genuine lopsided Grady smile. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just enjoy my dad paying for this ridiculously expensive not-birthday dinner."

As we reach the table Grady laughs, low and soft, and that sound simply makes me smile.

Brian's POV

As we are sitting down at the table I hear Grady laugh. I look over just in time to see something I haven't seen in a while, Gus looking genuinely happy. Seeing the smile spread across Gus' face makes me almost forget that I don't even really like Grady. Of course, who my son is seeing is really none of my business, and frankly as long as he doesn't shit all over Gus, treats him right, then that's all that matters.

I look over at Justin, clicking his thumbnail between his teeth. Besides, I have more important things to worry about, like the fact that Justin is retreating behind some fucking shell. He's depressed. I know it, even if he hasn't told me. He hasn't painted a thing in weeks. He spends his time at the loft, overanalyzing everything, asking himself over and over if firing Amy was the right thing to do, even though deep down he knows it was. I don't blame him and I don't hold it against him. I understand, but this morning, when he looked up at me with all those questions blazing in his eyes and that shadow of doubt I felt lingering between us, I have to admit it pissed me off. He can doubt his decision to

fire Amy, he can brood all he wants about the fucking lawsuits, and why he isn't painting, but doubting what we have after all these fucking years? That I will not stand for. I've learned my lesson when it comes to reassuring his doubts about us, and married or not I know he still has them sometimes--hell, so do I--but we've come too far to regress into mistakes of the past. So this morning, I let him know, despite this bullshit, we are fine, we're going to be fine, and just stop doubting that.

I look over at Gus and Grady who are basically having a conversation without words. I lean towards Justin and kiss the curve of his neck. "Stop."

Justin's POV

A shiver runs down my spine at Brian's whispered word. I want to stop. I don't want to think about the fact that nothing seems right inside my head. I don't want to think about the fact that I went to my studio today and couldn't bring myself to pick up a paintbrush. I tried sketching. I tried using pastels, prisma colors, even charcoal, which is a medium I've grown to loathe in recent years. Absolutely nothing worked. I've never felt so unequivocally, irrevocably uninspired in my entire fucking life. Even after I got out of the hospital and my hand was nothing more than a limp noodle of bone and skin attached to my arm, I was never uninspired. I wanted to create then. I wanted it more than I wanted to take my next breath. Now, I can't shut my brain off long enough to even think of a concept.

Today, despite the fact that he left late this morning, Brian came home fifteen minutes to seven. Before all this shit started he hadn't come home later than six o'clock in years. Now he's been coming home later and later. If it wasn't for this dinner, he would probably still be at work. He's not trying to hide it, and I'm not pretending to like it, even if I know why he's doing it. I was trying not to worry...much. Then Ted *had* to call me. Fucking Ted.

"Justin, he's pushing." He doesn't even have to explain that statement. I know exactly what he means. It's funny how protective Ted has become of Brian over the years. It's funny that Ted is closer to Brian than Michael is. That's all thanks to the drama that happened before I moved to New York. Sure, Michael and Brian made amends, but whatever they broke during that time wasn't necessarily fixed, just...glued back together. The damage had been done. So when Ted calls now, instead of Michael, I know it's serious. Ted isn't a drama queen. He's an accountant, he thinks logically, he's pragmatic, and he's serious about almost everything.

"How bad?" I sit down on the sofa and click my thumbnail between my teeth.

"He wants Pittsburgh Kinnetik to go international."

"What? I thought your office was for local business and he was leaving the international accounts for the New York office."

“He was...but, well...”

I shake my head and slump back into the couch. “Christ.”

“I...He’s going to rip my head off for calling you, but...”

“He’ll be pissed, but that’s just tough shit.” I run my hand through my hair. “Thanks letting me know. I knew he was working too hard, but I had no idea it had reached that point.”

“I tried telling him, even if you had to pay out the twenty-two million, that your finances would be okay. Shaky, yes, depleted, certainly, but it’s nothing that couldn’t be replenished within five years or less with budgeting and cutting some costs.”

That...did not make me feel any better. If anything, Ted’s knowledge of our finances and how they would be affected made me feel even worse. I feel Brian’s hand on my leg. It’s the slightest of touches, his fingers pressing into my thigh, but it brings me out of my reprieve long enough to see that he’s ordered my favorite red wine, and that the waiter is looking at me with a mix of impatience and interest. I notice how his eyes shift from me to Brian. “I’ll have the scampi saltati.” There is a sharp edge to my voice. I’m used to guys cruising Brian, it’s just a fact of my life, same for him, but some days I wish people would just do their fucking job without getting a hard-on over either one of us.

Grady’s POV

Up until this very moment I always thought it was Brian I should worry about. His anger, irritation, and indifference is noticeable to even the blind. Before I met Gus, I was always a little intimidated when Brian would come to the gallery. After meeting Gus I grew even more intimidated. He just fills the room and leaves no space for anyone else, except Justin. When Justin smiles and sneers at the waiter at the same time, I feel like he’s the one I should have worried about all along. I’ve never noticed his anger before. It’s like blood rising to the surface of his skin, forming a slow, almost unnoticeable bruise, until it’s right there all purple and yellow. I see it in him for the first time. Being an artist, I usually notice these things right away. Maybe the Justin I’ve been around for the last few years wasn’t the whole Justin. I lean back in my chair. Justin’s cool, almost-hidden anger certainly explains a lot about his artwork, which I’ve always found extremely fascinating, though most of the time I have no idea what it means. Couple the bashing with his anger, and his artwork takes on a dark, twisted context.

Brian doesn’t even raise an eyebrow at the tone of voice Justin uses to effectively dismiss the waiter, but his whole body seems to be vibrating with tension. I glance at Gus, who has his eyes focused on Justin. His brow is furrowing already with worry. Gus claims that I worry too much about him, but that’s because he’s too busy worrying about everyone else to think of himself. I notice that none of us are talking. Brian pours wine into our glasses, even Gus’, because it is his birthday after all. I try not to think too much about how much the glass of wine I’m about to consume costs. I’ll also ignore that the three of

them rattled off the most expensive dishes on the menu while I ordered something that could probably almost be considered an appetizer.

As I pick up the wine glass in front of me I look over at Justin. It's barely noticeable, but he shakes his head to himself. His eyes clear suddenly and he leans back in his chair. He looks across the table at Gus and for a moment I'm actually worried about what he might say. He tilts his head to the side and reaches for his wine glass. "So, how's school?"

That's all it takes. That one little question banishes the silence that was hanging over the table like a dark storm cloud. I once told Gus that I'm observant, and sometimes I pride myself on that. As I lean back in my chair and sip my wine I watch them. Gus' brow smooths out as the worry leaves his face. Justin's anger recedes back to wherever it is he keeps it locked most of the time. Brian physically relaxes into the chair, as if the tension was the only thing keeping his posture correct. It's as if their moods solely depend on each other when they are in the same room, as if there is an invisible thread that ties them together. I can't help the small twinge of jealousy I feel at that thought. Justin and Gus aren't bonded by blood, but that doesn't decrease the connection they seem to have to each other. It makes me long for something I've never really had, to be that connected to my own father regardless of the fact that his blood doesn't run through my veins.

I shake away those thoughts and join the conversation. When the food comes, I have to fight every instinct in me not to stay quiet. Brian and Justin are nothing like my parents, when food is on the table around them I don't have to worry about the reprimand I'd receive for saying even one word before the plates are cleared. When Gus asked me if I wanted to come tonight I wanted to tell him no. I just thought it would be uncomfortable for everyone. It's not like I've spent a lot of time around the three of them together. Lately, Brian hasn't been around at all. So when I said yes, that I'd love to go to the not-a-birthday birthday dinner (which is further evidence that Brian and Justin aren't like my parents) I was nervous as hell.

Surprisingly, it's the most relaxed I've been all day. As the dinner comes to an end, I almost want to blame that feeling on the three glasses of extremely expensive wine I've consumed, but I know it has nothing to do with the wine and everything to do with the three of them.

Monday, September 09, 2019
10:07pm

Brian's POV

By the time Justin and I arrive home his entire disposition has changed. I'm not sure if it's the wine, or just being out of the loft, or perhaps he's given his mind a break from his dark thoughts, but whatever it is I'm grateful for it. He hasn't been this relaxed in weeks. Almost as soon as the door is closed and the alarm is set Justin is all over me with his hot wet mouth and his cool strong hands. I know instantly, as his tongue slides against mine,

that tonight won't be anything like last night. As he leans his body into mine, my back presses against the door. Our hands are as greedy for skin as our mouths are hungry for each other. Both of our shirts are off. Our mouths separate, but remain close enough that I feel his hot breath enter my mouth each time I inhale.

"We have the whole place to ourselves," he sing-songs in a breathy whisper.

"This is true." Gus will be gone for the night. We'll have the loft to ourselves for the first time in months. Maybe I like Grady more than I thought.

We don't say anything else, because we don't need to. Our mouths meet again as we make our way toward the couch, discarding our pants along the way. When we reach the couch, I push him down onto it. Justin's eyes darken as I kneel between his spread legs. I've blown him more times than I can count, but the number of times I've actually been on my knees to do it probably doesn't exceed twenty. Without breaking eye contact, I wrap my fingers around his ankles and slowly slide my hands up his legs. Despite the warmth of the loft, his body breaks out in goose bumps. My eyes travel down his face, lingering on his wet lips before continuing down the curve of his neck, his chest, his stomach, until they land on his hard leaking cock. With my hands laying flat on top of his thighs, I lean forward and lick the pre-come off the head. Even though I know he's watching me, it doesn't stop his gasp of surprise. When my lips wrap around his cock, his hands move into my hair.

This is the difference between being with a perfect stranger and being with someone for nineteen years. It's knowing exactly what they want, and how they want it. It's knowing all the right places to touch, kiss, lick, caress. It's knowing that moan means "more", and that grunt means "wait". I pump his cock in and out of my mouth a few times before releasing it with a wet pop. When I look up at him, his eyes are half-closed and glazed. It makes me so fucking hard knowing that I did that. That look of contentment is something that I created. I stand up, ignoring the pain I feel in my knees, and reach for his hand. I pull him up from the couch until he's standing with his body pressed against mine.

I kiss his neck, right over his pulse point. "As much as I'd love to fuck you right here--"

He nips my shoulder. "Bed."

It's moments like this, both of us preferring the comfort of the bed regardless of having the loft to ourselves. It's his body under mine once we're there, exactly where I want him, where he wants to be. It's pushing into him, fucking him hard, fast, and loud. It's the scorching desire that I have for him that burns me every single time, but it never stops me from coming back for more, again and again. He makes me come harder than any nameless trick ever has. *That* is the difference between fucking a stranger and fucking Justin.

Monday, September 09, 2019

10:38pm

Gus' POV

We arrive at Grady's apartment building after seeing his best friend Marci in a play off, off, off, off Broadway. It was quite possibly the worst thing I've seen in my life. We reach Grady's apartment and as he puts the key in the lock he turns to me. "I have a surprise for you."

I raise my eyebrow. "Oh?"

He unlocks the door and pushes it open. "Yes, but you have to close your eyes."

I roll my eyes, but close them nonetheless. As he's pulling me in the apartment I tell him, "I hate surprises."

He laughs as he releases my hand. "Well...you better like this one." He closes the door and pushes me forward a little. "Now stay here and keep your eyes closed."

"I don't know." I hear the floorboards squeaking as he walks to his bedroom. "The suspense might kill me."

"Just because it's your birthday doesn't mean you get to act like an asshole," he says from the bedroom.

I laugh. "That's just what JR told me when she called earlier."

"Well, great minds think alike," he says from somewhere in front of me. "Okay...open them."

Sighing dramatically, I open my eyes. Grady is standing in front of me holding the picture I took of the sunrise a few months ago. I step forward, my eyes on the picture. "You had it framed?" I look up at him.

"Do you like it? I know it's not much..."

I take it out of his hands and hold it out in front of me. "It's great." I smile. "Thank you."

He takes it away from me and leans it against the back of the couch. "I have one more surprise for you."

I raise my eyebrow. "You do?"

Smiling, he grabs my hand and leads me to the kitchen. When we get there, and it only takes a few seconds because his apartment is so fucking small, I see something that looks suspiciously like a lemon pound cake on the counter. "Is that...?"

“It’s your favorite, right?” I look at him. “That’s what your mom told me when I called to ask.”

“You called my mom?” That’s so...sweet. Smiling, I wrap my arms around his waist and pull him against me. “It is my favorite.” He smiles crookedly at me and it makes me want to fuck the shit out of him. I roll my tongue into my cheek. “Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes, I did.” He seems very proud of that fact.

I glance over my shoulder and then back at him. “Is it edible?”

He shoves me away playfully. “I’ll have you know I’m an excellent cook.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is, and I’ll prove it.”

He starts walking to, I assume, get plates, but I stop him and pull him back to me. “Later.”

Leaning forward, I run my tongue over his bottom lip. When his lips part, like I knew they would, I cover his mouth with mine and slide my tongue between his lips, over his teeth, tasting the sweetness of the cinnamon candy he’s so fond of. Without breaking the kiss, I lead him out of the kitchen and down the short hall to his bedroom. He pulls back from the kiss, and pushes me down on the bed. He bends down and licks my bottom lip as he unbuttons my shirt. As he kneels down in front of me, he kisses every inch of skin that is exposed as he pushes my shirt away from my chest. I reach for his shirt, but he pushes my hands away and looks up at me. “Let me.” He covers one of my nipples with his mouth, his tongue flicking over the hardening nub. He places hot wet kisses down my chest as his fingers work to unbutton and unzip my pants. I finish taking off my shirt and lift myself from the bed when he starts to tug my pants off. When they are fully removed, I feel his hot breath on my hard cock. I look down as he wraps his fingers around my cock and pulls the foreskin down gently. When he curls his tongue around the tip, I moan softly and weave my fingers into his hair.

It’s not like I’ve never been blown before, but Grady makes me almost forget that anyone else has ever done it. Not even Ashley gave head as good as Grady. It’s not fair to compare, but my mind does it anyway. I shove those thoughts away and bring myself back to the here and now, back to Grady’s mouth on my cock and his hand massaging my balls. When he takes me deep in his mouth I throw my head back and close my eyes. Good...so fucking good at this.

When he releases my cock I open my eyes. He stands and starts removing his clothes. It isn’t quite a strip tease, but it’s close. I move to the middle of the bed when his pants are off. “Come here.”

He smiles at me, grabs the lube and a condom, and crawls into bed. When he sets the supplies aside, I grab him by the waist and flip him onto his back. He starts to laugh, but as my mouth covers his, and my fingers lightly stroke his cock, it turns into a low moan. Wrapping my fingers around his cock, I squeeze the shaft as my thumb smears the pre-come across the head. I kiss my way across his face until I get to his ear. As I suck the lobe into my mouth, he arches his back. I don't know how sucking on someone's earlobe is erogenous, but Grady fucking loves it.

He starts panting and writhing beneath me, all wanton and lustful. "Gus," he moans, but I know really he's begging. Smiling, I remove my hand from his cock and reach for the lube. When I pull away from him, I look into his eyes, dark gold with chocolate brown flecks, burning with desire. I kiss him again because I don't want him to ever stop looking at me like that, as if one touch, one look from me is almost too much to take. As our tongues slide against each other I slick my fingers with the lube and press them against his hole. He moans into my mouth as I push one finger in. He rocks his hips against me, wanting more, needing more. I insert a second finger because I want more too, need more.

I press my lips against his ear. "Need to be inside you."

His hands are all over me, as if he can't stop touching me. "Gus." There is so much he's saying with that one word and I feel it all. It's almost overwhelming.

I remove my fingers and reach for the condom, quickly putting it on. I slick my sheathed cock and hover above his body, with the head pressing against his hole. His eyes close in anticipation. "Open your eyes." Those are the same words he's spoken to me countless times since I met him, and just like with me, he does it.

Slowly, I push into him. He's tight and hot and just so fucking beautiful. Every time we fuck that's all I can think, he's so fucking beautiful like this. I cover him, move inside him. Our hands are everywhere, our mouths wet, hot, and hungry. There is nothing like the feeling of being inside Grady. Nothing feels as good to me as this. When I'm inside of him I feel completely content. All my erratic thoughts and anxieties melt away. I forget about things like the fear I fight everyday when I walk to school, how I can't even hail a taxi and how pathetic that makes me feel, how I'm more worried about Dad and Justin than I let on, how I've started keeping things from them and Grady, how sometimes I still feel more alone and more scared than I ever have in my life.

I give myself over to the here and now. I let Grady's steady hands; the warmth and tightness of his body take me away until the only thing I can think about is this moment and the only thing I can feel is something that I'm so fucking afraid is love.

“If you can't sleep, then get up and do something instead of lying there worrying. It's the worry that gets you, not the lack of sleep.”
~ Dale Carnegie ~

Tuesday, September 10, 2019
2:17am

Brian's POV

I walk into the living room to see Justin lying on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, watching Yellow Submarine. My mouth tilts in a half-smile; some things never change. I cross the room until I'm standing in front of the couch. He pulls his knees up to his chest to make room for me to sit down.

“What are you doing?”

He doesn't take his eyes off the TV. “I'm being a twat.”

I laugh. “What?”

He mutes the TV, sits up, and turns to face me. “I've been doing some thinking.”

My stomach twists at those words. “Oh?”

He nods. “I've been sitting around the loft for weeks feeling sorry for myself, and I'm sick of it.” He pauses to lick his lips. “I decided maybe I don't need a fucking agent to get shows. I didn't have one when I first came to New York, and I did all right even when no one knew who I was.” The knot in my stomach loosens and I breathe just a little easier.

“True.”

He shrugs. “So now people do know who I am, and even though this shit has marred my name somewhat, my art is still the same as it's always been. That hasn't changed.”

I brush back the hair from his face. “It is.”

A small smile spreads across his face before it falters. “I know we have the money should I lose, but I know what the payout will do to our finances. We just gave Gus that credit card. We have this loft and the building, and our house in Ibiza and our apartment in Paris, and our overall living expenses to think about.”

“We'll be fine.”

He shakes his head. “I know, but...” He bites his lip.

“What?”

“I don’t like how much you’ve been working lately.” I open my mouth to argue the point, but he places his fingers over my lips to stop me. “And I know you want to be prepared in case I lose, but it’s not right for me to be sitting on my ass feeling sorry for myself when I could be out there at least trying to get work.”

I remove his hand from my lips and intertwine our fingers. “I’m fine.”

“Ted called me.”

Fucking Ted. “Oh?”

“He said you’ve been pushing for the Pittsburgh office to go international.” I raise my eyebrow and say nothing. “I thought you decided to let the Pittsburgh office handle local accounts *only*.”

“Ted has a big fucking mouth.” Dropping his hand, I push myself off the couch and walk to the kitchen.

He follows me. “Maybe he shouldn’t have called me.”

“You’re right, he shouldn’t have.” First thing in the morning Theodore is going to get a fucking wake up call.

“But he said you’re pushing, and he’s worried.”

I turn to him and cross my arms. “So he thought he’d call and voice his concerns to the little wife?”

“Dammit Brian, don’t do that.” He walks over to me, uncrosses my arms, and wraps them around his waist. “He can worry if he wants to and so can I.”

I look down at him. “I told you, I’m fine.”

“I know, and I just want it to stay that way.” He wraps his fingers around my hips and lifts himself on his tiptoes to kiss my lips. “Stop pushing yourself so hard, okay? Nothing is worth what that will cost.”

I have nothing to say to that. Sure, I’ve been stressed out, and yeah, maybe I have been pushing myself, but I know my limits. The last thing I want is Justin worrying that I’m going to stoke out at work, or have a fucking heart attack while I’m bitching someone out. I wrap my arms around him tighter and kiss him, my tongue pushing into his mouth. I pull back from him slightly, my lips still touching his, our foreheads pressed together. “Okay.” I say softly.

I feel the smile spread across his face. “Good,” he whispers. “Now...” He pulls back, his eyes darkening with desire. “Since we have the loft all to ourselves, why don’t we make use of it?”

“I thought we already did.” He kisses my chest. I raise my eyebrow, look around the kitchen, and then back at him. “Here?”

“Everywhere.” He kisses my neck. “Anywhere.”

I back him up to the counter. “Okay.” I kiss him, pushing my tongue in his mouth, before turning him around and fucking him hard and fast right there in the kitchen.

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

2:23am

Gus’ POV

I’m standing in the middle of a deserted asphalt road. There are no trees, no plants, nothing except flat dirt in either direction. Off in the distance a huge fire burns. Bright reds, oranges, and yellows lick the night sky. The tips of the flames reach the stars. Each time a flame touches one it explodes like fireworks on the fourth of July. It’s fascinating, beautiful, and haunting. A chill creeps down my spine as a gust of arctic air penetrates my worn clothing. Wrapping my bare arms around my waist, I start walking towards the fire, wanting, needing, to get warm. Each step I take is clumsy. I have to hold my arms out to my sides to keep my balance. Something is wrong with my leg, but I don’t dare look down. I just keep walking. The desire to reach the fire is too great. As I move forward, I am riveted by the sight of the fire and the exploding stars. Another cold wind blows and with it comes my name, whispered by a soft low voice. The familiarity of the voice forces all air from my lungs. I can’t breathe, can’t think. I want to stop walking. I no longer want to reach the fire. I no longer want to be warm. I don’t want to see what I know is there.

I try to stop. I try to close my eyes, to turn away, but I can’t. It’s as if a force stronger than me is pulling me forward. The closer I get, the clearer and louder the voice becomes. It echoes into the night and can be heard over the exploding stars. I am forced to the edge of the fire. The flames billow up around the twisted metal of a car. The driver’s side door is open and inside...

The smell of his burning flesh assaults me and makes my stomach roll. He turns to me. Where his eyes should be are two hollow black holes. The flames engulf him and his skin melts like wax from a burning candle. I don’t want to see this, but I can’t look away. He pushes himself out of the car and reaches for me. “Come here Gus.”

I shake my head and take a step back. “No.”

He keeps moving forward. I try to take another step back, but I can't. "Don't you love me anymore, Gus?"

I shake my head and hold back the tears that threaten to fall down my face. "No."

His hand drops and then he screams and screams and screams...

I jolt up in bed, sweat dripping down my face and back. My breath is quick and shallow. I try to take deep breaths, but I can't. It feels as if someone has my lungs in their fist and is squeezing all the air out of them.

"Hey, are you all right?" When I feel Grady's hand on my back, I jump out of bed and grab my pants. "Gus?" I quickly put them on and leave the bedroom. I hear him calling for me, but I ignore him. I just don't want him to see me like this right now. Fuck. I lock myself in the bathroom and reach into the pocket of my pants, pulling out two small pills. I flip on the light switch, turn on the water, pop the pills in my mouth, and use my hand to get a drink of water. Once I swallow the pills, I splash cold water on my face and fall down to my knees. Fuck. I blink back my tears as I cover my face with my hands. I've been having the same dream for the last two weeks. I started taking my medicine again in hopes that it would help. It hasn't really. The only thing the sleep medication does is keeps me from waking up screaming in the middle of the night. Of all the nights I forgot to take the fucking pills...shit.

There is a soft knock on the door. "Gus?" I hear the worry in his tone. Fuck. I didn't want him to know about this. I didn't want anyone to know. Grady, Justin, and Dad have their own shit to worry about; the last thing they need to deal with is my shit on top of theirs. "Gus, open the door."

I want everyone to think that for the most part I'm fine. That yeah, okay, I can't hail a cab, but other than that things are fine. I'm fine. It's not really true, because despite my best efforts I've been having these fucked up dreams and my anxiety has been at an all-time high. I don't know if it's just because of school or because of how worried I am about everything else. I don't know what it is. I don't know what's causing it, but I just want it to go the fuck away.

"Gus, I'm coming in."

"No." Gripping the edge of the sink, I pull myself to my feet. "Hold on." I turn off the water and quickly dry my face with a towel. I just need to get a hold of myself. I need to calm down and just...shake off the residual effects of my dream.

I take a deep breath before opening the door. Grady is standing there, his arms crossed over his bare chest, his brows furrowed, and a mixture of worry and confusion in his eyes. "What's going on?" I shake my head and try to move past him, but he wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me against his chest. "Just tell me, Gus." I want to tell

him. Maybe if I told him, if I told someone what I really saw that night, these nightmares would stop. But I can't tell anyone. I can't even formulate the words to tell someone that.

"It was just a bad dream Grady, that's all."

He strokes the back of my hair with his fingers and kisses my neck. "That's all?"

I pull back from him. I want to say, "Yes, that's all," but I can't look him in the eyes and outright lie. "Can we just go back to bed?" I can feel the effects of the drugs already starting to kick in.

He brushes the hair away from my face as he searches my eyes. I silently beg him to just let it go. Just let it go, Grady. He traces my lips with the tip of his index finger. "Yeah... okay." I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. I know he doesn't want to let it go, but he is, for now, for me.

"Thanks." I move out of his arms and start to walk back to the bedroom, but he grabs my hand to stop me.

I glance at him over my shoulder. "I just want you to know...that whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I know." Even if the whole truth is that I really can't. If I could tell him, I know he'd understand, he'd listen, but I just can't tell him. I can't tell anyone.

He nods once and walks with me back to the bedroom. I doubt he's satisfied with that, but it's the best I can do.

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

7:59am

Brian's POV

As soon as Cynthia walks into my office I start talking. "I want you to get Theodore on the phone ASAP. Get me the boards for Mercedes, Leopold, and The Franklin Center Memorial. Also get me the mock ups for Dante's new campaign."

"Christ, Brian."

I look up from my desk. "Also, have that what's his name from the front go to Starbucks and get me a triple non-fat latte."

She crosses her arms and raises her eyebrow. "Anything else?"

I stand up and hand her the board I was just looking at. "Give that to Adam and tell him

to make the changes I've indicated. Also..." I pause. "Call my lawyer and set up an appointment for me and Justin this Friday. If you need to move meetings around that's fine."

She holds the board to her chest. "Did something happen?"

"They want him to fucking settle."

"Fuck that."

I smile slightly. "That's what I said." I sit back down in my chair and look up at her.

"Well...move."

"Right."

I take off my jacket and drape it over the back of my chair. I'm looking over a pitch when the phone rings. "Theodore."

He sighs. "I'm not apologizing."

"And what would you need to apologize for?"

"Look, I know I shouldn't have called Justin but--"

"No, you shouldn't have. He has enough shit to worry about."

"I know, but--"

"And he doesn't need phone calls from you telling him that I'm about to have a heart attack in my office."

"That's not what I said."

"He also doesn't need you to scare him with talks about budgeting money and cutting expenses. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking--"

"Did you set up the meeting with Vague Bleue Cosmetics?"

"Yes, we have a video conference with them on Thursday."

I lean my elbow on the table and pinch the bridge of my nose. "Okay here's what I want you to do. Have Gail call Cynthia to set up the meeting through the New York office, and overnight the boards and the proposal to Maddox. We'll handle it."

“I think that’s for the best Brian. Kinnetik PA doesn’t really have the resources or the funding to support an international account.”

“Right.”

“Look, I still think-”

“Also I need the numbers for the PA office. Send them over to Darren in accounting.”

“Brian-”

“And one last thing, Theodore.”

“Yes?”

“Next time mind your own fucking business.”

“I wasn’t just calling because I was concerned about your health. I’m trying to keep this office running smoothly and efficiently. Catering to an international campaign would hurt our other accounts.”

I lean back in my chair. “And why is it you never mentioned this before now?” Of course, I already knew this, but I pushed it out of my mind and ignored it.

“I...I...”

“Exactly. So next time come to me first before you call Justin.”

He sighs. “Right. Sorry Bri.” So much for not apologizing.

“Now...tell me how the center is coming along.” He laughs before he starts talking. I’m not really pissed at Theodore. I fucking appreciate his concern, but he didn’t need to call Justin and get him all worked up about it. He’s already got enough shit to worry about and the last thing I want is for him to worry about me on top of all of that.

Tuesday, September 10, 2019

11:28am

Grady’s POV

I set up the table-top easel that I keep in my apartment for when I get inspired and don’t want to wait until I get to my studio at school. I lay out my paints and brushes and start painting. I’m wired on caffeine and lack of sleep. Gus fell back asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow and I just...stayed awake. I couldn’t get his scream out of my head. That scream led to the memory of hearing him scream in the middle of a busy New York street

not even two months ago. The longer I laid there, the more I tried to convince myself that his dream was just a random occurrence, a once in a while kind of thing. It didn't feel like it was, though, and there was nothing that I thought of to convince myself otherwise. The fact that he's still asleep furthers my suspicions that this has been happening a lot and he's taking something to sleep at night. Of course, if I ask him about it, he'll get defensive and then we'll just end up arguing. This entire situation with Gus is so fucked sometimes. I know when he wakes up he's going to pretend that nothing happened last night, not for my benefit, but because he doesn't want to deal with it. I can push the issue, but all that will do is piss him off and I really just don't know if I feel like fighting with him today. Tuesdays are really the only days we have to spend together since school started. Neither of us have class and we can just hang out together all day. Tuesday is rapidly becoming my favorite day of the week. So yeah, maybe I don't want to fuck that up by bringing up last night, but I fucking hate what he's doing to himself by keeping it locked inside. It's not good for him and he knows it. Hell, he spent two years after the accident pretending he was okay for his moms and look how that turned out.

I almost totally fuck up the piece I'm working on when my cell phone rings, startling me. Without taking my eyes off the painting, I pick up my phone and flip it open. "Yeah?"

"You're awake."

I close my eyes and open them slowly. "Mom."

"What are you doing up so early?"

I look over my shoulder at the microwave. "It's almost noon."

She laughs. "Like I said, what are you doing up so early?"

I switch brushes. "I'm painting." I try to sound annoyed, but I can never really pull off that tone of voice with her.

"Well, I won't keep you." She pauses. "So should I set two extra places at the dinner table on Friday?"

"Mom--"

"I'm making stobhach gaelach," she sing-songs.

"Is that supposed to be a bribe?" Irish stew is my favorite home-cooked meal and she knows it.

She chuckles. "Yes."

"At least you're honest about it."

“So?”

“I don’t know, Mom. I don’t think Gus can handle-”

“What can’t I handle?” I look over my shoulder to see Gus walk into the kitchen naked. His hair is sticking up all over the place and he just looks so fucking hot. “Hold on Mom.” I press the phone to my shoulder, covering the mouth piece. “I bought you a caramel frappuccino. It’s in the fridge.”

He raises his eyebrow. “One of those fucking bottle drinks?”

I roll my eyes. “Take it or leave it.”

He grins at me. “Fucker.”

Smiling I lift the phone back to my ear. “Mom?”

“I think you should let Gus decide what he can handle and what he can’t.” Great, I gave her time to think about it.

“Mom, I don’t think-”

“You think too much sometimes, Grady. I’ll see you and Gus on Friday, seven o’clock. Don’t be late.”

“Mom. Mom?” I close the phone and throw it back on the table. “Fuck.”

“Problems, honey?” Gus walks over to me carrying his drink, the entire lemon pound cake, and one fork. He kisses my shoulder before sitting down at the table.

“Are you going to eat all of that yourself?”

He looks from the cake to me. “Well, if you’re good, I might save you some.”

I sigh. “Right.”

“What’s wrong?”

Oh let’s see, you had a fucking nightmare last night and woke up screaming. You didn’t want to talk about it last night, which means you definitely won’t want to talk about it now and oh yeah, “My mom invited us to dinner on Friday.”

He chokes on the cake in his mouth. “What?”

I load my paintbrush with color. “I tried to tell her no, but she...” I look over the canvas at him. “No one can tell her no.”

“Apparently.”

“You don’t have to go. I can tell her-”

He shrugs. “I’ll go.”

“Gus...” I shake my head. “My father is an asshole.”

“I said I’ll go, now stop queening out and finish your painting.” He reaches across the table, picks up a tube of paint, then raises his eyebrow at me. “Acrylics?”

“My oils are at school.” Technically they aren’t my oil paints; it all belongs to the school. I haven’t had the money to buy any recently, which sucks because-

“I thought you hated acrylics.”

“I didn’t say that.”

He tosses the tube back on the table. “Yeah, you did.”

“Well, it’s all I have on hand, so they’ll have to do.” He goes back to eating and I go back to painting. I try to talk myself out of bringing up last night, but I open my mouth before I can stop myself. “Gus, about-”

“Don’t.” His tone of voice is a warning. I don’t even have to look at him to know that.

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

He stands up, picking up the half-eaten cake and empty frappuccino bottle. “Yeah, I do and I don’t want to talk about it.”

I follow him as he walks to the kitchen. “Gus, we’ve got to-”

He sets down the cake and throws the bottle in the trash. “No, we don’t have to.”

“Gus I just-”

“Hey how about this, you tell me the real reason you’re painting with acrylics and I’ll tell you all about my fucking nightmare.”

I shake my head. “Fuck you.”

I try to turn away from him, but he grabs my arm. “Why are you always pushing me? I’ll talk about it when I want to, *if* I want to.”

“I just don’t think keeping it...” I sigh. “Pretending it...”

“I’m not pretending.” His voice sounds sad and hurt.

I cup his face between my hands. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to do that

around me. I don't want you to."

"I don't want you to do that either."

I'm shocked by that, but maybe I've been trying to pretend that my money issue isn't as big of a deal as it really is. "Okay...I can't afford oil paints right now."

I wait for a confession, a little something, but he just removes my hands from his face and says, "I'm going to take a shower."

When he walks away I just want to fucking scream, or throw something, but I don't. I return to my painting and I pretend not to be hurt that he won't tell me what the fuck is wrong.

Tuesday, September 10, 2019
3:59pm

Justin's POv

Ellis sits back in his chair and pulls on the ends of his sleeves. "You know I love your work, Justin--"

I close my portfolio and zip it up. "But?"

"But we're not really showcasing abstract art this season. You know how it is." He laughs. "It's the season of the realist."

"Right." I stand up and swing the strap of my portfolio over my shoulder. "Thanks for your time Ellis, I appreciate it." You fucking pretentious cunt. I hold out my hand and plaster a smile on my face.

He stands up and shakes my hand. "When you get a new agent have them get in touch with me."

I release his hand. "I'll do that."

As soon as I'm out of his office I wipe my hand on my jeans and the smile off my face. I've been to six galleries and they've all said variations of the same fucking thing. Fuck this shit. As I'm digging my pack of cigarettes out of my pocket and opening the door, I run right into someone outside the gallery. "Shit, I'm sor--" I look up to see Amy standing in front of me. Oh this is great, just fucking great.

She juts out her chin trying to take on an air of superiority. "Justin." I pull out a cigarette and light it. "How are you?"

I pocket my cigarettes and lighter. "Like you give a shit."

"I'm sorry you're having a rough time, Justin." I scoff. "Do you blame me for all of this?" She holds out her arms and looks around. "You fired me, remember?" I remain

silent, refusing to give her any ammunition that could be used against me later. “How could you throw away a twelve year relationship over one minor indiscretion?” She drops her arms and shakes her head. “I don’t know how someone like you can do this.”

I take a drag of my cigarette. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Come on. You’re kidding right?” I raise my eyebrows. “Justin, darling, you married a man who you forgave time and again for fucking you over more times than I can-”

I step forward. “First of all, this has nothing to do with Brian or our relationship.” I take a drag of my cigarette and flick it to the street. “And second of all, my personal life is none of your fucking business.” I shake my head, unable to believe her fucking audacity. “I’ll see you in court, Amy.”

As I’m walking away she says, “You should just take the deal, Justin. It will save us all a lot of time and you a lot of money.”

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood just to keep from turning around and yelling, “Fuck you.”

I hail a cab and give the address for Kinnetik as I get in. She talks too fucking much, but then again she always has. An indiscretion? So that’s what she’s calling it now? And what the fuck was that? Bringing up Brian? She doesn’t know shit about us or our relationship. That’s always been the case when it comes to me and Brian. People think they know everything about what goes on between us, when in actuality they don’t have a fucking clue. Everyone acts like Brian is this cheating abusive man and I’m just the little faggot that sits back and takes his shit. First of all, I always knew when Brian was fucking around. Second of all, I never put up with his shit, or if I did it was never for very long, and certainly in the last nine years I haven’t, just like he doesn’t put up with mine. People should really get their fucking facts straight before they go running off at the mouth.

When I get to Kinnetik, I pay the cab driver and walk inside. The front desk guy doesn’t even ask my name or who I’m here to see; he just buzzes open the door. That’s good, because I’m not in the mood to deal with anyone else’s bullshit. I feel my anger boiling under my skin. I quickly say hi to Cynthia before walking right into Brian’s office. He looks up at me and raises his eyebrow.

I move to stand in front of his desk, cross my arms over my chest, and say, with anger laced between every word, “I want to file a fucking countersuit.”

“Occasionally in life there are those moments of unutterable fulfillment which cannot be completely explained by those symbols called words. Their meanings can only be articulated by the inaudible language of the heart.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr. ~

Friday, September 13, 2019

2:57am

Grady's POV

The red numbers of my new alarm clock blur and double. I curl my fingers into the palms of my hands as Gus' breath quickens beside me. The bed shakes with his movements. I lie still, on my side facing away from him, watching the clock as if it's the most interesting thing I've ever seen. He wakes with a word fading on his lips and a scream choked back in his throat. I hear him fighting to regain control of his breath. I work on keeping mine regulated in that deep, I-promise-I'm-still-asleep pattern. It's not that I don't want to roll over, pull him close to me, and tell him everything will be alright. It's that he won't let me. He's stayed over at my apartment every night this week, and every night around the same time he wakes up from a nightmare. The first two nights I tried comforting him, but he got up both times and locked himself in the bathroom. He won't talk to me. If I bring them up in the morning, he gets mad and then he ignores me. Gus isn't a big talker to begin with, but his punishing silences fucking kill me. I figured I had two choices, keep pushing or join the ranks of people in his life that pretend he's fine. If someone were to ask me why I decided to pretend that I don't hear him, why I've turned deaf, blind, and dumb, the answer would be simple. I can't lose him. I've never felt for anyone in my life the way I feel about Gus.

As Gus flops back onto the bed taking deep breaths, I think about when we went to Canada, to Ashley's grave. I thought at the time that I knew what that moment was about. I thought that was about Gus letting go, moving on, closure. Now I'm not sure what it was about at all. Maybe I fell into the trap that most people have when it comes to Gus, thinking that suddenly, because he remembered the accident, because he could visit Ashley's grave standing on his own two feet, that somehow he was better. The truth is, he still has panic attacks, he still has nightmares, and he still wears that fucking key around his neck. Is it wrong to be jealous of someone who is dead, has been dead for almost three years? Is it wrong to wonder if Gus told him everything or if he's always been so guarded? Is it wrong to wonder what their relationship was like, if it was better than this? Is it wrong to feel hurt that Gus called Ashley his boyfriend while I'm just Grady? Titles shouldn't matter, but they do. Is it wrong to wonder what Gus was like before...was he better than he is right now, or is this the improvement? I hate myself for all these thoughts because I know they aren't fair.

As his breathing evens out, he rolls towards me and wraps his arm around my waist, and all I can think is that this is a completely fucked situation. I'm trying to be everything he

needs me to be, everything he wants me to be, but the truth is that I don't know what he needs or what he wants. Does he want or need anything from me at all? He kisses me between my shoulder blades and slides his hand lower. Right, well, there is always that.

Gus' POV

I know he's not asleep. In fact, I doubt he's slept at all tonight. I don't know what he's doing. I don't know why he's doing it. I should be thankful that he isn't pushing, but the truth is that his indifference hurts. I know I'm not the easiest person to be around all the time. I know that my issues are sometimes so big they fill up the entire fucking room, but the fact that he's ignoring them scares the shit out of me. Grady is the only person in my life that refuses to let me get away with my bullshit, or at least he was, and now he's doing this. I know I push him away, but that doesn't mean I want him to stop trying, to fucking give up. I fucking need him, no matter how much it seems otherwise. Maybe he thinks his lying here pretending to be asleep is what I want. Maybe he thinks he's helping me. I don't know. If I could tell him...if I could tell anyone, I'd tell Grady...but those images...I can't describe them. I can't...talk about them.

Each night the nightmares have gotten progressively worse. The medication has been little to no help, by no fault of its own I'm sure. My mind just refuses to let me remain there. Tonight was the worst of them all. It started the same as the others, but the ending...Ash coming at me, his body engulfed with flames, asking me, *"Don't you love me anymore Gus?"*

And just like every night I replied, *"No."*

After that, he usually starts screaming. Tonight that was no different, except this time he reached out and grabbed me. I can still feel the burn of his fingers around my wrist. His screams always follow me into consciousness. Sometimes they leave after a few minutes, sometimes it takes hours for them to fade away. Every time I wake up, after I get my breathing under control, I always think about the same thing. When I tell Ashley "no" in the dream, is that the truth? What's the difference between loving someone and being in love with them? Fundamentally, the dream comes down to one thing, and that's my guilt. I don't need to see a shrink to know that. It doesn't matter how many times I tell myself that being with Grady isn't betraying Ash, it still feels like I am, everyday.

I press myself closer to Grady, wanting nothing more than to feel him, to just be here with him and not lost in my head, not drowning in my guilt. Pressing my lips to his skin I whisper, "I know you're not asleep."

He rolls onto his back and looks up at me. I see it all in his eyes, every truth, every word he wants to say, and I wonder if he'll say any of them. "I couldn't sleep."

I trace the edge of his jaw with my finger and feel unsettled at the distance I feel between us, despite the closeness of our bodies. "What are you doing?" I didn't mean to say that, but I couldn't help it. Part of me wonders if he'll know what I'm even talking about, and

if he does, will he just ignore it?”

He averts his eyes and sighs before looking back at me. “I’m trying to sleep.”

Friday, September 13, 2019

11:16am

Justin’s POV

I push open the door and step into the law offices of Mathis and Clark. The office has a strong masculine feel with its dark cherry wood desk and side tables, and dark chocolate leather chairs and couch that make up the waiting area. The only thing remotely feminine in the space is the young woman standing next to the desk. Cassidy Mathis’ light blond hair is pulled back from her heart-shaped face, she’s wearing a light blue cotton blouse that flows loosely around her protruding belly, dark grey slacks, and tennis shoes. As the door closes behind me, she looks over and smiles. “Justin.”

I walk over to her and kiss her cheek. “Hey. How’s the baby this morning?”

She rubs her hand over her belly. “Kicking the shit out of me.” We both laugh.

“I hope that’s not a sign of things to come.”

She tilts her head to the side and grins. “If my husband is any indication...”

The door opens behind us and we both turn around. Brian walks into the office pulling on the sleeves of his jacket. Cassidy practically shoves me aside as she makes her way toward him. “Brian!”

He looks at me helplessly as Cassidy wraps her arms around his waist. I bite my lip to keep from laughing. “Cassidy, you’re a lot bigger than the last time I saw you.”

Stepping back from him, she lays her hands flat against her belly. “I’m about ready to pop.” She smiles at both of us. “I’ll go let Hawk know you’re here.”

When Brian and I sit down on the couch, I turn to him. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

Leaning back, he throws his arm over my shoulders. “I already told you—”

I rest my head against his shoulder. “I know, nail the bitch to the wall.”

I know that Brian would drain all of our accounts and sell every last thing we own to bring down Amy and Hardtford. My fight is his fight, that’s how we live our lives now. I know that this is going to get dirty and messy. It’s going to be a fucking circus, as he said--she said bullshit--but I just can’t sit back and let these people take away everything

I've worked so hard for. If I lose everything in the end anyway, at least I can say I didn't go down without a fight.

"Justin, Brian." We stand up as Hawk Mathis walks towards us. He's a tall man, built like a fucking brick house with skin the color of milk chocolate. He's intimidating in and out of the courtroom. He shakes each of our hands in turn as Cassidy moves to stand beside him. As Hawk wraps his arm around her slender shoulders I take in their height differences, the way they lean against each other, how his smooth dark skin compliments her peaches-and-cream complexion. There is an aesthetic beauty to the pair that makes me want to paint them. I tilt my head to the side, mentally placing their image on a canvas and visualizing the brush strokes, the colors, the...

"Gentlemen, shall we?"

I blink my eyes. "What?" Brian and I ask at the same time. I look up at him and we connect in that moment.

Brian's POV

I'm half-listening to Hawk and Cassidy talk about their upcoming adventures in parenthood. I watch as Justin's eyes lock on Hawk's bare arm where it's resting against the curve of Cassidy's neck. I see it in his eyes, inspiration. I almost want to cancel this meeting and send Justin to his studio right now to physically paint what he's already mentally painting in his head.

"Gentlemen, shall we?"

"What?" Our eyes meet and we each smile.

"Shall we get started?" I turn to Hawk, place my hand on Justin's back, and nod my head.

As we follow Hawk down the hallway towards his office, I nudge Justin. "Going to the studio after this?"

He laughs. "Yeah." There is nothing but relief in his voice.

Once we are all seated, Hawk flips open a file folder on his desk and it's down to business. "Did you consider what we talked about last week?"

"Yes, I have." The softness that finding inspiration had brought to Justin's voice is now replaced by a hard, cold, determined tone. Ever since he decided to he wanted to look into filing a countersuit against both Amy and Hardtford, he's started to act more like himself. Amy made a big fucking mistake confronting him on the street when he ran into her on Tuesday. She should have kept her fucking mouth shut and walked away. The

biggest problem about this situation is that they were friends before this all happened. If anything, I think that's been harder on Justin than anything else. So when Amy brought his personal life, *our* personal life up to make her case, it only served to piss Justin off. If there is one thing I've learned about Justin, is that he never feels anything half-way. When he loves someone he fucking loves them, and when he hates them, he really fucking hates them. Being on the receiving end of Justin's anger really isn't the best place to be. I know from personal experience and if I can't be believed, well Amy can call up fucking Hobbs and ask him exactly what the barrel of a .45 tastes like.

Justin looks from me to Hawk. "I'm not taking the deal." He leans back in his chair and juts out his chin. "In fact, I'd like to know my options in filing a countersuit against them both."

Hawk props his hands on his desk and raises his eyebrow. "You want to file countersuits?"

I can't help the pride I feel when Justin pushes back his shoulders, looks Hawk right in the eyes, and says in a voice that could be made of granite, "Yes."

Friday, September 13, 2019
7:31pm

Gus' POV

Grady's parents are nothing like I thought they would be. Looks and personality wise, they are nothing like Grady. His mom is nice and kind of bubbly, overly friendly some would say, and his father...well, he's colder than a winter in Antarctica. Their house borders on anal-retentive. Everything has its place. There is no clutter of any kind; when we walked in I even noticed the magazines on the coffee table in the living room were stacked neatly. Comparatively, Grady's place is organized disorder. Hell, even the loft isn't as neat as this place, despite Dad's best efforts. I am, however, slightly amused to see a re-print of one of Justin's paintings hanging on the wall of the dining room. *Spring Fevered*, one of the brightest, least depressing of all of Justin's work, with bold brush strokes of yellows, blues, and pinks against a solid white background.

My eyes travel from the painting to Grady. When our eyes meet across the table he smiles, but it quickly fades when he notices Mr. O'Toole looking at him. He lowers his head, almost as if he's embarrassed at being caught looking at me. The fact that his father makes him feel like that makes me hate the man without even knowing dick about him. As I listen to the scrape of silverware against porcelain, I think about how fucking odd it is to be eating in complete silence. At my house it is never quiet at any meal. Mom and Ma always have something to say, and if not then JR fills up the silence with whatever she wants to talk about. Even meals with Dad and Justin aren't eaten in complete silence. And to think about no one talking at Grandma Deb's house, well, that's not even fathomable. Silence during meals in my family always means that there is something big going on, something bad, that something is completely off. I get that same feeling here,

even if this silence is normal to them.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Mr. O'Toole place his spoon facedown in his empty bowl. Immediately Mrs. O'Toole and Grady follow suit, even though there is still food in their bowls. What the fuck is that? I feel all their eyes on me as I continue to eat. It's not that the food is that great, it's okay, but to stop eating on command is just fucking ridiculous. As I take another bite of food, I glance up at Grady. His eyes nervously dart from me to his father, and I feel guilty for being defiant, not because of Mr. O'Toole's ludicrous rules, but because Grady looks about ready to jump up, take the spoon from my hands, and place it in my bowl, facedown.

As soon as I place my spoon in the bowl, both Mrs. O'Toole and Grady stand up to begin clearing the table. I'm about to get up and help them when Mr. O'Toole clears his throat. "So... you go to art school?"

I look over at him. He's leaning back in the chair with his arms crossed over his chest. "Yes."

"And what do your parents think about that?"

Grady shoots me a warning look as he follows Mrs. O'Toole into the kitchen. "They're thrilled."

Mr. O'Toole cocks his eyebrow. "They don't think it's a waste of time?"

I scoff, "Why would they?"

"It seems like a waste of time to me."

I pick up my water, take a drink, and set it back down. "Well, thankfully my parents don't agree with you."

"What exactly do your parents do, Gus?"

Anger boils to the surface of my skin at the way he practically sneers my name. As if it's quite possibly the most disgusting word he's ever had to say. "My Mom is a curator at a famous art gallery in Toronto, my Ma is a very successful lawyer at a well-known firm also in Toronto, my father is a very successful Ad-man and his husband is a well-known and highly successful artist here in New York." Any other questions, asshole?

His eyes widen. "His husband? You mean to tell me that your parents are...?"

"Gay?" I take another drink of my water.

"Well," he sneers. "It's no wonder they approve of your lifestyle."

I fold my arms over my chest and lean back in the chair, mimicking his posture. “And what lifestyle would that be, Mr. O’Toole?” I raise my eyebrows.

He seems flustered for a moment. “Your lifestyle as a starving artist.”

I laugh and uncross my arms as I reach for my water. “I’m hardly starving.”

“What possible pleasure do you get from being an artist?”

I should bite my tongue. There are a number of things I could say. I’m sure there is a right answer to that question. Well, fuck what’s right and fuck this asshole. “Somehow I don’t think your issue has to do with me being an artist at all, but the fact that I’m gay.” I push the chair back and stand up. “And as far as pleasure goes, I get plenty of it every night when I’m fucking your son.”

Grady’s POV

I’m just putting a dish away in the cabinet when I hear my father yell, “Get the fuck out of my house.”

I throw my towel down on the counter. As I head towards the dining room, Mom grabs my arm. “Grady...”

I turn to her. “I have to...we have to go.” I kiss her cheek and hug her quickly. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Grady, wait.” Her voice is pleading, but I ignore it and walk into the dining room.

Gus is nowhere in sight. My father is standing in front of the table, his face beet red. As I walk into the dining room, his eyes immediately focus on me. My heart pounds against my chest and the contents in my stomach threaten to revisit my mouth. He turns to face me. “I don’t ever want to see him again. You got that?”

“What did you say to him?”

His mouth hangs open in shock for a minute. “What did *I* say?”

I shake my head and start to walk out of the room. “It doesn’t matter.”

“And one other thing.”

I turn around. “What?”

“As long as you are seeing him,” he sneers, “don’t bother asking me for one fucking dime.”

“What?” I loathe the pathetic squeak in my voice.

“You heard me.” And without another word he walks out of the dining room and into the kitchen.

I stand there totally dumbfounded, wondering what the fuck just happened. Why did I agree to this fucking dinner in the first place? I knew nothing good would come out of it. I know Gus and I know my father. Leaving them alone in the room together was a big mistake. If there is one thing I know about Gus it's that he hates being pushed, and if there is one thing my father is good at, it's pushing. Gus isn't the kind of person to be insulted or degraded or belittled. Gus may be fucked up twenty ways to Sunday, but he doesn't take anyone's shit. He isn't like me. He isn't constantly looking for approval or love from my father.

Sighing heavily, I turn around and walk out of the room. My father is pissed, and despite wanting to try and fix things with him, to appease him in some way, I know now isn't the time. When I walk outside, Gus is sitting on the porch steps smoking a cigarette. I close the door and sit down next to him. “Did you call a cab?” I ask quietly.

He takes a drag of his cigarette, flicks it in the yard, then turns to face me. “I'm fucking sorry.”

I shake my head. “It doesn't matter.”

“Yeah, it does.”

“He's an asshole, Gus. I told you.”

“Well, maybe so, but that didn't give me a right to...”

I place my fingers over his lips. “It's fine.”

He removes my hand and holds it between his. “What the fuck is going on with you?”

I furrow my brow even though I know exactly what he means. “What are you talking about?”

“Why are you acting like nothing I do bothers you?”

“Do you want this to bother me?”

He drops my hand and stands up. He paces in front of me for a few minutes, before stopping and placing his hands on his hips. He sighs and looks at me. “Yeah, I called a cab.”

I don't know if I should laugh or cry when he says that. It's like we continually start the same conversation, but neither one of us has the balls to finish it. Everything feels so fucking out of my control. The truth is, I just don't know what to fucking do about anything, and I don't know how much longer I can go on pretending that everything is fine.

Friday, September 13, 2019
7:42pm

Justin's POV

Inspiration can come from anywhere. All anyone has to do is open their eyes and see it. It can be instinctive. It can be random. It can come from something beautiful or from something tragic, but when it comes, the feeling is so intense that if it isn't expressed through some medium it could implode and get lost someplace inside. I've been inspired by many things, some of them mundane, some miraculous: Brian eating an apple in bed, Gus doing his crossword at the table in the mornings, a homeless man I see on the street on the way to my studio, a fireman running out of a burning building carrying a child. It can come from anything or anyone, including how our lawyer's dark skin is both a contrast and a compliment to his wife's fair coloring.

To say the meeting with Hawk was beyond satisfying would be a gross understatement. To know that by late Monday both Hardtford and Amy will be served papers on the countersuits sends a pleased thrill through my body. To have Hawk say my chances of getting them to either back down, or if they don't, then cleaning them out, almost made me feel smug. Thank god for Brian who, as we climbed into the back of the cab, whispered in my ear, "You haven't won yet, Sunshine." He brought me back to reality before I got too far into the fantasy.

Brush in hand I step back from the painting. I chose one of the bigger canvases to work with, because if I am going to do this, I am going to do it big. My eyes scan the painting. The colors swirl, blending and harmonizing. I see the imperfections, the instability in the upper right-hand corner from when my hand started to shake, the spot where the background spills into the foreground. To most people these mistakes will go unnoticed. That's the great thing about abstract art; it doesn't have to be perfect to be beautiful. It doesn't have to follow a strict code to get the feeling across. It can be anything the viewer wants it to be.

"Are you going to sit there until I'm done?" I smile without turning around. I'm not sure how long he's been here because I haven't looked at the clock since I started painting, but I felt it the moment he walked into the room.

"Are you almost done?" His voice is soft, like how it sounds right before he falls asleep at night.

I picture him in my mind's eye lying on the couch, one arm behind his head, the other thrown across his stomach, his fingers fiddling with the buttons of his shirt. His jacket, shoes, and socks long since abandoned. His eyebrows raised, his tongue pressed into his cheek, and his eyes looking only at me.

Brian's POV

Lying on the couch, I watch the muscles in Justin's back and arm flex with each stroke of the brush across the canvas. Secretly, or not so secretly, I love watching him paint. Whether his moves are quick and frantic or slow and flowing, just watching him calms me like nothing else ever has. I don't know when I became so fascinated by it. Maybe I always have been. He's having a good day, better than any of the days that preceded it for the last two months, and I can feel it in the way he moves.

When Hawk smiled and leaned forward during our meeting, telling Justin, "They'll either back out or you'll come out of this a much richer man," his voice was so confident that even I got lost in the moment. Once we were out of the meeting though, I gave us both a reality check. Nothing is over until it's over. If anyone knows that, it's me and Justin.

"Are you going to sit there until I'm done?" Even with his back to me, I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Are you almost done?" Lazily, I pop one of the buttons of my shirt in and out of its hole as I wait for him to answer.

"In a while." He switches brushes and loads the new one with color.

"Okay." I don't have anywhere else I'd rather be. In fact, I'm quite comfortable just laying here.

"Let's go to that new sushi place when I'm done."

"Sushi?" I raise an eyebrow. He hardly ever wants to eat sushi.

Looking at me over his shoulder, a grin on his face, he says in a deep sensual voice, "Yeah, I feel like something raw."

We stare at each other for a second before we both start laughing.

Friday, September 13, 2019
10:11pm

Gus' POV

Sitting on the edge of the tub, I stare at the two small pills in my hand before getting up

and flushing them down the toilet. They don't help. They aren't helping. Nothing is helping. Grady isn't even helping because he can't, or he won't. He's acting like what happened at his parents' house doesn't matter, when I know it does. It matters to him more than he's leading me to believe. He's just begging his asshole father to love him, to care about him, to give him even a little something. He didn't have to tell me, I could see it on his face the minute we walked in the door of his parents' house. We don't get to pick our parents, and I guess I'm pretty lucky that I got good ones. Not that they don't have their flaws, god knows they do, but I've never doubted for even one minute, despite all my bullshit, that they love me. If there is one thing in my life I never question, it's that. Gay, straight, art student, whatever, none of that shit matters to them, because I'm their son. It must suck to question whether your parents love you, or even care about you. I can't even imagine living my life always wondering that. Sighing, I wash my hands, flip off the light, and make my way to the bedroom.

The room is dark when I enter it. Grady is lying on his back staring at the ceiling. I cross the room, strip off my clothes, and slide under the covers beside him. "Did you know I'm adopted?"

I turn my head. "You are?"

"Yes."

I look back up at the ceiling, watching as the city lights dance across the surface. "No, you didn't tell me." That explains a few things.

"My mother...my birth mother, she was an actress in Los Angeles."

"No kidding."

"She didn't want a kid, but she had me anyway." He sighs. "I don't remember anything about her, really."

"Did something happen to her?"

"She died...of a drug overdose. That's what my parents told me anyway. Who knows if it's true or not."

I roll over onto my side and look down at him. "How old were you?"

His eyes meet mine. "Five." He lifts his hand and brushes the hair back from my face. "I'm not mad about tonight. In fact, I pretty much knew something like that would happen."

I avert my eyes before looking back at him. "I didn't mean to cause trouble between you and your father, but he just--"

“Pushed.”

I grab his hand and intertwine our fingers. “I hate being pushed,” I say quietly.

“I know and I’m sorry for pu-”

“But, Grady,” I lean down and kiss him softly on the lips, the chin, the neck, before pressing my lips to his ear. “Don’t stop pushing me.”

Grady’s POV

He says it so softly, so sincerely, that it fills up this spot inside of me. It suddenly occurs to me that maybe that’s what he needed all along. Everyone else in his life allows him to just be. If it’s erratic, defiant, troubled, depressed, they all just let it go without question, and I’ve never been like that with him until recently. I always thought that he hated how much I push him, but... He pulls back and looks at me, his finger tracing my lips. “I’ll get there. Just don’t...give up on me.” He presses his lips to mine before pulling back enough to whisper, “Because I need you.”

If I could pick and choose moments where Gus and I make perfect sense, where everything between us feels completely right, it would be moments like this, moments where, just for a brief second, he opens himself up and offers me what he thinks is the smallest of truths. As his lips press against mine again and his tongue slides into my mouth, I think about what he just said and what it means. No one in my life has ever said they needed me. I’ve never felt needed before, not by any of my other boyfriends, not by my friends, certainly not by my parents. The truth is that I’ve never needed anyone either, not really, but I need Gus. *Ineed* him and I want him and sometimes I can’t bear to think of my life without him. I wonder how in just three months I’ve become more attached to him then even someone like Josh, who I was with for almost two years.

As Gus pushes into me, I savor the moment. I memorize every movement of his hips, every kiss, every caress, because it’s in this moment that all the bullshit falls away and it’s just him and me. As our eyes lock, I feel the burning desire I have for him triple. He’s not just complicated, he’s not just beautiful, smart, funny, sometimes even a pain in the ass, he’s all of those things. They all make him who he is, and despite my earlier thoughts of what he might have been like before the accident, I know that this man, the one with his lips pressed to my neck, his cock in my ass, is the Gus that I love.

I’ve never been in love before. In fact, I’m afraid of the concept. It’s dangerous to love someone, because there is always that fear that my love won’t be returned. I fear that even with Gus, but as he comes with my name on his lips I wonder if it’s possible that he loves me too.

Friday, September 13, 2019
10:11pm

Brian's POV

I feel the weight of his body on top of mine as his warm lips press against my chest. Automatically, my hands move into his hair and I guide him up to my mouth. After a minute or two we separate, and I slowly open my eyes. "D'you finish?"

"No." As I try to look over his shoulder at the painting, he kisses my chin and my neck forcing me to lean my head back into the cushions of the couch. "Hand gave out."

I reach for his hand and bring it to my lips. He laughs quietly, and I laugh too. I tend to be overly sweet when I'm half-asleep, which he thinks is funny, but likes nonetheless. He sighs softly and looks me right in the eyes as he caresses my face with his other hand. "Thanks."

I furrow my brow slightly, still feeling the haziness of sleep. "For what?"

"Today. The last two months. The last nineteen years. Everything."

I grin as I slide my tongue against my cheek. "It has been a terrible burden to bear."

He laughs, pushes himself off me, and stands up, pulling me with him. "Come on, I'm hungry and I know you haven't eaten anything today."

I scoff as I let go of his hand to put on my shoes. "I'll have you know that Cynthia bought me a salad today."

He swings his bag over his shoulder and cocks his eyebrow. "Did you eat it?"

I roll my eyes and grab my suit jacket. "No."

As soon as I have my jacket on, he grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door. "Talk about burdens to bear." He looks over his shoulder. "Maybe *you* should be thanking *me*."

I scoff. "Don't press your luck, Sunshine."

He turns around and kisses me hard and fast. "Now what fun would it be if I didn't?"

Well, no fun at all, actually. Besides, we both know the score. We bear each other's burdens, that's part and parcel when you decide to share your life with someone. Their fight becomes your fight, their sadness your sadness, and so on. It's never easy, but I think, as Justin leads me down the stairs and out of the gallery, it's worth it. As he steps to the curb I shake my head, trying to clear the sleep from my brain, because it's got me feeling all lesbianic. I'll just make up for it later by fucking Justin into the mattress.

He catches me smirking. "What?"

I wrap my arm around his waist and pull him to me. “Mm, I’m going to fuck you. I’m going to fuck you all night long.”

He laughs that low, sweet, throaty laugh that makes my cock instantly hard. “Ever the romantic.”

“Your body needs to be held and to hold, to be touched and to touch. None of these needs is to be despised, denied, or repressed. But you have to keep searching for your body's deeper need, the need for genuine love.”

~ Henri Nouwen ~

Saturday, September 14, 2019

2:41am

Grady's POV

Standing in front of the bedroom window, I watch the rain beat against the glass as lightening flashes across the sky. When I was little, my biological mom would tell me that lightening was just God taking a picture of the world. She must have thought that lightening frightened me, but I was always more fascinated by it than scared. I rest my forehead against the cool glass, my breath creating a misshapen circle of fog on the surface. I can't stop thinking about what happened at my parents' house. I knew that going there was a mistake the moment that Gus and I walked in the door. I could see it all playing out in my father's eyes as he stood back, his arms crossed and a slight sneer on his face, his eyes sweeping first over me, then Gus. It was the first time that anyone who I was involved with met my father. My mom met Josh twice, by accident, but with my father it's always been a don't ask, don't tell policy. If he never had to see it he could pretend it didn't exist. When Gus and I walked in the door, he not only saw the truth, but he hated it. It's not like I went out of my way to shove it in his face. I barely touched or looked at Gus the entire time we were there. Besides that, it's not like the whole dinner thing was my idea to begin with.

Of course I'm upset about what happened, but I can't be mad at Gus. I don't really feel like what he did or said was wrong. I know my father. I know how he operates, how he knows the exact spot to shove the knife in and the exact ways he can twist it to make you bleed. Sometimes I think he should have been a lawyer instead of an accountant. What my father didn't count on was Gus pulling the knife out and using it on him. Gus, for all his faults--and they are many--is a stronger person than he knows. I know he doesn't always feel that way because of his panic attacks and nightmares, but he is. Shit, look at all the things he's been through in his life, and he's just barely nineteen. So when my father started with his bullshit not even one minute after Mom and I left the room, I wasn't surprised that Gus lashed out. He'd been on edge all day and had been fighting off a panic attack since we got in the cab to go to my parents' house. He probably doesn't even think I noticed the deep breaths he was taking, or how he would close his eyes every once in a while to do that counting backwards thing, but I noticed. My father tried to treat Gus like he treats me. Maybe he thought Gus would sit there and take it like I always do, but he didn't. That's why my father is really mad. It's not the context of what Gus said; it's that he said anything at all.

I could have said something too. When I was standing there, facing him after Gus walked out. When he told me he wouldn't give me another dime as long as Gus is around, I could have--should have--said something. Instead, I stood there, mouth open, watching him walk away, feeling like I was the one who'd done something wrong. I should have told him that I don't give a fuck about the money. Yeah, okay, I don't know how I'm going to pay rent and bills next month, or afford art supplies and fucking food, but that's not what has me awake at almost three in the morning. It really isn't about the fucking money. He can keep his money.

For once I just wanted my father to act like he gave a shit. I wanted him to like Gus, to see that this...that my life really isn't as pathetic and wrong as he believes it to be. I should have known better than anyone to think such idealist thoughts, especially where my father is concerned. I should just accept the fact that my father is never going to love me or care about me like I want him to. I can't accept it, though, as much as I really should to keep from being hurt or disappointed by him. I just want him to love me, and I just don't think that it's too much to fucking ask for.

I feel Gus behind me before he even touches me. "Hey." He slides his arms around my waist and rests his chin in the crook of my neck. "What are you doing up?"

Placing my hands over his arms, I lean back into him. "Couldn't sleep."

"Mmm." He kisses the curve of my neck and whispers, "Come back to bed."

I simply nod my head. He removes his arms from my waist, takes my hand, and leads me back to the bedroom. I know he just had a nightmare. I know he probably freaked out because I wasn't there when he woke up. I don't have to ask, and he doesn't have to say anything, because our lips meet before we're even back in bed and I know that he needs me right now as much as I need him.

Saturday, September 14, 2019
8:12am

Brian's POV

The feel of his thick, wet, warm tongue gliding along my shaft draws me slowly from sleep. When my cock is hard, he covers the head with his lips and starts to suck softly. Eyes still closed, I lazily place my hands on his head and thread my fingers through his hair. My hips jerk up automatically when he pulls me further into his mouth. As he wraps his fingers around my cock, I arch my back and press my head into the pillows. He redoubles his efforts, his mouth and hand moving together on my cock. I grip his hair in my fist as a series of groans escape my lips. Justin may be a slut for a rim job, but I'm definitely a slut for his blowjobs. Just as I am about to come he releases me from his mouth. I moan in frustration as he slides up my body, his leaking cock leaving a trail of pre-come along my inner right thigh. When he's lying practically on top of me, he grinds

his hips against mine. Threading his fingers in my hair, he sucks my bottom lip. It's only a split second after he releases it that his tongue pushes into my mouth. I try to push my tongue against his, but he forces it back. The kiss is a little demanding, but I don't mind. There is nothing hotter to me than Justin when he really fucking wants it. Releasing my grip on his hair, my hands move down his back to his ass. As he sucks my tongue into his mouth, I pull his ass cheeks apart. I trace his crack with my index finger and just as I reach his hole I feel...I break our kiss and open my eyes. Justin raises his eyebrows and grins.

"How long have you been up?" I ask as my finger traces the edges of the butt plug. Christ, if this isn't just another reason to fucking love him. Nineteen years together and he still knows how to surprise me and how to fucking turn me on like no one else.

He laughs softly and kisses the side of my neck. "A while."

"I see." The image of Justin on his knees in bed, his eyes on me while I'm asleep, stroking himself as he inserts the butt plug, makes my cock twitch. Growling, I wrap my arms around him and roll us over until he is on his back and I'm hovering above him.

He reaches up, grips my hair hard, and yanks me down for a deep, tongue-thrusting kiss. He pulls me back and looks right into my eyes. "I want you to fuck me."

Pressing my tongue to my cheek, I raise my eyebrow. "Oh?"

He kisses me again before releasing my hair to reach under his pillow. He pulls out my leather cock ring and holds it between us. "Hard." He licks my arm. "Fast." He bites my shoulder. "And for a long, long time."

Fuck. I lean to the side, my cock hard and leaking over his stomach. "Put it on me."

Licking his lips, he reaches between our bodies and secures the cock ring. Once it's on, I grab his wrists and hold his arms above his head as I place my mouth over his right nipple, sucking, biting, and licking the hard bud. "Brian."

Releasing his wrists, I move down his body, touching, kissing, and licking him everywhere. By the time my mouth is around his cock, he's writhing, panting, and begging me to fuck him, *right now*. I slide back up his body, our mouths meeting again. I stroke his tongue with mine. Our breathing is already uneven, our bodies already starting to sweat, and our hands are everywhere.

I pull away from him only enough for our mouths to part. Resting my forehead against his, I mumble, "Roll over."

I push away from him, kneeling behind him once he's on his hands and knees in front of me. When he's in position, I wrap my fingers around the edge of the butt plug. I press it into him before slowly removing it. As I look down, I'm glad I have the cock ring on

because that sight alone would have made me come. Tossing the butt plug aside, I place my hands around his hips and place the head of my cock against him. He tries to push back against me, but I don't let him. "Fuck me."

I lean over his back, kiss his neck, and press my lips to his ear. "Okay."

When I enter his well-lubed hole in one smooth stroke, he lowers his head. Justin and I fuck all the time. It's part of who we are. It's a huge fucking part of our relationship, and while it's always different and filled with more emotion than I ever thought it could be, there is nothing, nothing, like fucking him into the mattress like this. I grip his hips firmly as I pound into him. The faster and harder I fuck him, the more he pushes back against me. The sound of my balls slapping his ass and our breathy gasps fill the room.

He reaches back with his left hand and slaps my thigh. I jerk from the sensation and hit his prostate. "Fuck." I slide my hand up his back, leaning over his body, and grip his hair in my fist. "Ah...Brian."

I yank his head back and run my tongue along the side of his throat. I've fucked a lot of guys. It's not a secret, it's part of who I am, but there has never been anyone like Justin. Even after all these years, when I'm fucking him, it still gets me higher than two hits of Ecstasy and harder than any trick in any backroom. Releasing his hair, I reach around his waist and grab his cock. This...this is all for me. I run my tongue up his sweat-slicked back. I love every fucking inch of skin on his body, every gasp that leaves his mouth, the way his ass clenches around my cock as I fuck him, every single thing about him.

"Now, Brian." He pushes my hand off his cock so that I can unsnap the cock ring. I last three more hard, deep thrusts, before he comes hard and brings me along with him. Fan-fucking-tastic.

Justin's POV

I push his hand away from my cock. "Now, Brian." I take over stroking my cock and when I hear the release of the cock ring, I push back onto him. As I start to come, my right arm gives out and I fall chest first into the mattress. Brian grips my hips, pounding into me one, two, three more times in my tight ass before he comes, hot and wet inside of me.

We collapse onto the bed. He groans as his sweat-slicked body rests half on me and half on the mattress, now completely bare of covers, sheets, and pillows. I let out a soft moan as his hand slides up my back and into my more-than-slightly damp hair. After my breathing has evened out, I turn my head towards him. He pecks my lips and pushes his tongue into his cheek. I smile. "What?"

His fingers comb through my damp hair. "I love...Saturdays."

I roll my eyes and mumble, "Asshole," before kissing him again. He kisses my neck, his tongue licking away my sweat. I love Saturdays as well. It really is the only day of the week that Brian and I allow ourselves to let go of the bullshit and just do whatever we want. Sometimes we have to work, but mostly we don't. At least *I* haven't had to lately. I sigh without meaning to.

He sucks the lobe of my ear into his mouth. "Not today."

I nod my head and find his mouth with mine once again. I can't help but think about all the shit going on, but he's right, today is a day to just let it go. While we're kissing, he gently pulls out of me and rolls me over onto my back. I hear the low rumble of thunder in the distance and the rain tapping against the window.

Brian licks the inside of my mouth with his tongue and threads his fingers through my hair before pulling his mouth from mine. "That was hot."

I laugh softly. "Yeah."

His mouth moves from my lips to my neck. "You're full of surprises."

I run my hands over the contours of his sweat-slicked back. "Gotta keep you guessing."

"Mmm." His mouth finds mine again. It's a soft, unhurried kiss; one I know will last a long time, and not necessarily lead to another round of fucking. Brian gently sucks my tongue out of the warm cavern of my mouth and caresses it with his. Pulling him closer, we increase the intensity of the kiss. As our tongues dart and dance between our lips, I feel my cock starting to get hard between us. I lift my hips and rub the head of my cock against his stomach. He laughs into my mouth before sliding one of his hands down my chest and around my cock.

When he buries his head against my neck, sucking the skin over my pulse point as he strokes my cock, I nip his shoulder. "That...feels good." He sucks harder on my neck as he starts to stoke my cock faster. "Brian...don't-" Give me a fucking hickey. The words never leave my mouth because he presses the pad of his thumb against my slit. I gasp and dig my fingers into his back. I feel his hardening cock pressing against my thigh. I should be surprised that either of us is hard again after the intense round of fucking we just had, but I'm not. He slides between my legs, and before I even have time to think about it he's back inside me.

His lips leave my neck, but only long enough for him to whisper, "Justin."

I arch my back as he starts to fuck me again with the same rhythm that he's stroking my cock. "Brian...Brian..." I grab his head and lift it up until our eyes meet. His hand and hips never stop moving. "I love..." I gasp and wrap my legs around his waist. "Saturdays...too."

That only makes him fuck me harder, which was more or less the point.

Saturday, September 14, 2019

8:32am

Gus' POV

I run my hand through my still-damp hair and push myself away from the kitchen counter. I try to let the sounds around me...the hiss and gurgle of the cheap Mr. Coffee machine, the rattle of the pipes as Grady finishes up in the shower, the blare of Kermit the Frog singing how it ain't easy being green from the neighbor's TV...distract me from my thoughts. But they are just background static in my head. I feel like shit for what happened at Grady's parents' house. I know Grady said he wasn't mad about it all, but I know he's upset. I know that's why he couldn't sleep last night. I know there is more to it then he's telling me, and that makes me feel like shit as well. I've been trying to tell myself that Grady's parents' (especially his father's) dislike for me shouldn't matter, but it does and I know why. Last night when I went off on Mr. O'Toole, it was partly because I was already feeling on edge, partly because he was pissing me off, and partly because the feeling of the situation reminded me of Ash.

Before Ash came out to his mom over his bowl of oatmeal, Mr. and Mrs. Parker treated me like another one of their kids. Sometimes I'd do things with them and it felt like we were a family, even though I have more family than anyone I know. Still, it was nice. Then Ash came out and they realized that not only was I his best friend, but I was also his boyfriend. Their dislike for me wasn't blatant. They became distant, but they still tolerated me. When Ash cashed in his ticket to California to come with me to New York, their indifference turned to hate. They forbade Ash to see me, and even if that didn't stop us from being together, it still became a hurtful situation for all of us.

This thing with Grady's parents isn't nearly the same, because I don't even know them and they don't know me, didn't even make an effort to know me, but that same feeling is there. That feeling that I'm being looked down on, judged, because of who I am and who I care about. It shouldn't matter what his parents think about me, but it does, because Grady cares what they think and he matters to me. I shake my head, open the fridge, and remove the carton of orange juice. I pour myself a glass and just as I'm returning the carton to the fridge I hear a knock at the door. Picking up the glass, I take a sip and walk to the door. I don't even think about who it might be before I open it.

I swallow the juice in my mouth. "Mrs. O'Toole." Fuck. She looks me over. I'm dressed in jeans, the top buttoned undone, and no shirt.

I step aside so that she can come in. "Is Grady here?"

"He's in the shower." She nods and walks into the apartment. As she sets her purse on the bar, I move into the kitchen, putting a counter between us. "Uh...do you want something

to drink...coffee or..." I hold up my glass and try to push aside my anxiety. "Orange juice?"

She leans against the bar and smiles. "Grady has orange juice?"

I shrug. "He actually hates it, but-"

She smiles a little wider. "You love it."

I set the glass down and press my fingers, moist from the condensation of the glass, into my palm. "Mrs. O'Toole, about-"

"Please call me Bhatt."

"Right..." I try not to clutch my hands together, but fail. "I just want you to know that... I'm sorry about what I said to Mr. O'Toole last night." I let out a deep breath.

She frowns slightly, pushes herself from the bar, and stands up straight. "I appreciate that, Gus. My husband told me what you said, and while I do think it was a little uncalled for, I don't think that my husband should take it out on Grady." I nod my head. "Threatening to stop supporting him financially if he doesn't stop seeing you because of one comment is just ludicrous on my husband's part."

I furrow my brows. "What?" His father...fuck...fuck, fuck.

"Yes, well I realize, even if my husband does not, that we really didn't give you a fair shake. That's why I'm here to tell Grady-are you okay?"

This is so fucked. I clutch my hands so hard that my arms shake. It's like fucking déjà vu, only...it's different...it's-

"Gus, have you see my-" I try to take a deep breath to calm myself down, but it doesn't work. "Gus?" I feel myself slipping. On the inside I'm pissed as hell that this is happening. I don't want it to happen. I want it to stop. I'm freaking out for no fucking reason, and at the same time, the panic is there, looming over me like an ever-present demon. "Gus...breathe." I feel Grady's slightly damp body pressing against mine. "Just take a deep breath."

"Is he alright?" I hear Mrs. O'Toole ask.

That's all it takes to snap me out of it. I push Grady away from me slightly and meet his eyes. "I'm going to...get dressed."

As I walk out of the kitchen, I hear Grady tell his mom, "I'll be right back." I walk into the bedroom, pick my bag up from the floor, and slam it on the bed. A myriad of emotions assaults me, everything from panic, to anger, to fear, to embarrassment.

I yank a royal blue t-shirt out of my bag and put it on. When I hear the door close behind me, I whip around and don't even try to keep the anger out of my voice. "Did your father tell you that he wouldn't give you any money as long as you were seeing me?"

His eyes widen, either from the sound in my voice or from what I've asked. "Gus... just..." He runs a hand through his hair and takes a step toward me. "He's pissed right now...he'll get over it."

I scoff and close my bag. "What if he doesn't? Were you just going to wait until you got kicked out of your apartment to tell me about this?"

He shakes his head. "He does this all the time. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

I turn my eyes on him, feeling the coldness of my anger settling in the pit of my stomach. "Do not fucking lie to me."

He takes a step forward, because Grady's never been intimidated by my moods. "Gus... I'm sorry I didn't tell you, okay? I just needed to figure out what I was going to do first." I stare at him and say nothing. "I'm going to talk to Ericka today when I get to work...see if she can give me some extra shifts."

I cross my arms. "And if she can't?"

He shrugs and walks toward the closet. "I'll just get a second job."

I scoff as he unwraps the towel from around his hips and tosses it on the floor. "Where? Doing what? And how exactly do you plan to get another job on top of the one you have now *and* still go to school?"

He pulls on a pair of underwear before he slips into a pair of black dress slacks. "Unload. Bartending. I can work there at night." He says it like it's no big fucking deal.

What the fuck? "Unload? That gay club near your apartment? And since when do you know how to bartend?"

He yanks a white dress shirt off the hanger and turns around to face me. "You don't know everything about me, okay?" He puts on the shirt, but leaves it unbuttoned. "It's just something I used to do, something that I'm good at, something that I'll make good money doing in a short amount of time." He sighs and walks back over to me. "Look, if I have to do it, it's not like it's going to be a long-term thing." He places his hands on my shoulders. "It would just be until my father gets over himself or I get a show somewhere."

"I'll give you the money."

He shakes his head and releases my shoulders. "I don't need your money. I don't want it."

The anger surges back, pulsing through my veins. "Why won't you just let me fucking help you?"

"Because I can take care of myself," he snaps.

"I know you can." I grab my bag and sling it over my shoulder. "But that's not the fucking point."

He throws out his arms. "Then what is the fucking point?"

It's all there, every emotion, the anger, the panic, the fear, and it causes the next words to come out of my mouth unfiltered. "The point is, I don't want you working at some sleazy gay club." He opens his mouth to reply, but I cut him off. "The point is that I have money, my own fucking money, and I should be able to give it to my fucking boyfriend to help him out when he's having a hard fucking time." I step up to him. "That...is the fucking point."

Grady's POV

Silence falls between us and time stands still. Part of me wants to hold him because I know he's freaking out, part of me wants to stay angry at him, and another part of me wants to kiss him so fucking hard that his lips bruise. We stand there, neither one moving, our eyes locked on each other. There are so many things that I could say, but I see the vast emotions that are playing out in Gus' eyes and how he's desperately trying to suppress them. I know he's about to leave, not because of this, but because my mom is here. The last thing I want is for him to leave when he's two seconds away from a full blown panic attack. Mentally, I take a step back from the situation. I bury some of my own emotions, because I know what he needs right now to feel centered again.

Taking a step forward, I place my hands on either side of his face. "You," The corner of my mouth lifts in a crooked smile, "are such a drama queen." He scoffs and looks away from me. I take a deep breath and wait for his eyes to meet mine before going on. "I appreciate that you want to help me out." I feel his jaw clench beneath my hands. "It would be so easy just to say, 'Okay Gus, I'll take your money.'" He opens his mouth, but I cover it with my fingers. "But...it's not just about taking money from you. It's about..." I thought about this entire situation for so long last night, this morning. Really thought about it. And I finally had a moment of clarity about it. "Not being dependent on anyone, you or my father." That's what I decided. Being an artist, especially one just starting out, who is also going to graduate school and just trying to live life, well it's all a lot of fucking hard work. Whether my father stays angry or not, I decided that it's time I make it on my own, for good.

When I remove my fingers from his lips, he sighs. Placing his hands on my hips, he leans

forward until our foreheads are pressed together. “Yeah...okay.” He pulls back, his eyes filled with regret.

I shake my head. “Don’t say you’re sorry.” I brush his hair back from his face. “Never apologize for saying how you feel.” He leans forward and kisses me softly. His tongue gently pushes against my lips until I open them. I cup the back of his neck, deepening the kiss. When we pull apart, I smile. “If my mom wasn’t out there...” I press my body to his and lick his neck. “I’d so blow you for calling me your boyfriend.” There is no way in hell I was going to let that comment go by without some sort of response on my part.

He pushes me away gently and smirks. “I knew you weren’t going to let that slide.” I laugh and start to button my shirt, but he stops me. I stop laughing when I see the intensity on his face. He looks at me for a long time before saying anything. My heart starts to beat hard against my chest because I have no idea what he’s about to say. He strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. “I meant what I said...last night and today.” He kisses me softly once again.

That feeling that I felt last night surges back into me. When he takes my hand and leads me out of the room, I think about all the things I want to say. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I love him, because god fucking help me, I do, but now isn’t the time and I know it. Out of the corner of my eye I see my mom sitting on a barstool, drinking orange juice. I know she probably heard most of what we said, and I know she’s watching us right now.

Gus releases my hand and opens the door. “Hey.” I grab his arm, stopping him. “Take a cab.” He arches his eyebrow. “It’s still raining.”

His brows furrow. “You know I can’t-”

Stepping up to him, I whisper, “I could go down with you.” He shakes his head no and looks over at my mom, then back at me. “Well...ask Letty to do it for you then, okay?” He furrows his brow. “She won’t mind.”

Letty is one of those people like you see on TV shows, the one neighbor who sits on the stoop and knows everything about everybody in the building. She’s an older lady with plenty of spunk, but she also happens to be extremely nice. The other day when Gus had to leave to go to school, she saw me hail a cab for him, because I didn’t want him to walk. When she asked me about it, because she thought it was peculiar, I told her that Gus just has a hard time doing it. She smiled at me, patted my cheek, and told me, “Honey, you just tell your little boyfriend that anytime he needs a cab, I’ll be glad to throw my hand up and give a whistle.”

He takes a deep breath, nods, and kisses me again. “Call me after work.”

I smile. “I will.”

He rolls his eyes and walks down the hall. After he disappears down the stairs, I close the door and look over at my mom. She tilts her head to the side and says, “We need to talk.”

Saturday, September 14, 2019
9:13am

Brian’s POV

I walk into the building, shaking the rain from my hair. Grunting a hello to the doorman, I make my way to the mailbox. I can’t believe I had to take a cab to the fucking corner. I shake my head. Justin, the clever devil that he is, asked me to “please go to Starbucks and get him a Grande Mocha Frappuccino®” while he was blowing me in the shower. Then he deep-throated my cock and I moaned yes. Smart fucker. I smirk as I set down his coffee, my non-fat Caffè Latte, and a small box of pastries so I can check the mail. I stopped at Carmelo’s on my way back and got him some chocolate éclairs, not because I’m loving and caring or whatthefuckever, but because he woke me up with my cock in his mouth and a butt plug in his ass.

Tucking the mail under my arm, I grab the box and our coffees, and take the elevator to the loft. I get off on our floor and walk down the hall. I tap my foot against it, because it’s either knock or set all this shit down to unlock the door. He opens the door, looks down at my hands, and smiles. Taking his coffee and the box of pastries, he steps back into the loft and mumbles, “Thanks.”

I close the door behind me and raise my eyebrow. “That’s it?” He turns around. “I go out in this fucking shitty weather and get you coffee and éclairs and all I get is a weak little thank you?” I roll my lips into my mouth, because yeah, I’m really fucking irritated.

He smirks and takes a sip of his coffee. “I promise I’ll let you blow me later as a reward for being such a great husband.”

When he starts laughing, so do I. I take the mail out from under my arm and follow him to the kitchen table. Before I sit down, I kiss his temple. “Fucker.”

I take a seat at the table, roll my eyes, and set my coffee aside. “Look at this.” He slides the Arts and Leisure section of the newspaper in front of me. I look up at him, but he just points to the paper before pulling an éclair out of the box.

I look down at the paper to see whatever it is he wants me to see. “What the fuck?” I look up at him.

“I know,” he says around an éclair. He takes a bite. “Read it.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” He rolls his eyes and taps the paper. Looking down, I quickly read over the article.

FORMER AGENT OF JUSTIN TAYLOR GETS NEW ARTIST A SHOW AT THE INFAMOUS RAULING'S GALLERY IN MIDTOWN MANHATTAN.

Tobias Jacobson is taking the art world by storm. The twenty-six year old artist, relatively new to the New York Art scene, is making great strides to becoming the next Rembrandt with his unique attention to detail that is clearly visible in his body of work. Born in Wichita, Kansas in 1993, Jacobson started painting at a relatively young age. After graduating from the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago, he came to New York to pursue a career as an artist. When asked why he decided to start his career in New York, Jacobson laughed and said, "Well if I can make it here, I can make it anywhere, right?" In regards to what he thought about getting his first solo show at Rauling's Jacobson said, "It's a great honor and I'm very pleased."

Jacobson's agent, Amy Gorden, also seemed very pleased at this turn of events. "It's been a rough couple of months for me professionally, but this has really turned things around." Gorden, former agent of famous New York abstract artist, Justin Taylor, is still in litigation with Taylor over contractual issues. Taylor and Gorden parted ways two months ago after twelve years together due to, what some are saying, a simple misunderstanding that got out of hand. When asked if she thought it was ironic that she got her new client a show at the gallery that caused the split between her and Taylor, she said, "I'm not really at liberty to talk about it."

Jacobson's work will be shown from November 9th-November 13th at Rauling's Gallery in Midtown Manhattan. For more information on this and other shows visit their website at www.raulings.com

I look up at Justin. "The next Rembrandt?"

He licks his fingers. "I know. It's fucking ridiculous."

Leaning toward him, I wipe a smudge of chocolate from the side of his mouth and lick it off my finger. "It's all just advertising bullshit."

He nods and takes a sip of his coffee. "True."

I pick up the paper and scan the article again. "It could work in your favor though, because-

Taking the paper out of my hands, he tosses it on the table. He stands up, straddles my legs, and sits down on my lap. "I thought we weren't going to talk about this shit today."

I lean toward him and wrap my hands around his waist. "We're not."

“Good.” Our mouths meet, blending the flavor of our coffees and the éclair. The sweet taste is passed back and forth in our mouths by our tongues. I push my hands under his long-sleeved red t-shirt and then beneath the waistband of his grey cotton sweat pants. I break the kiss and move my mouth to his neck. He pulls my head back. “Ah-ah.”

“What?”

“One hickey is enough, thank you.”

I laugh and raise my eyebrows. “Says who?”

“Me,” he whispers as our mouths meet again.

Justin’s POV

I love kissing Brian, but then I’ve always loved kissing him. Inside my head I’m gloating because I know these lips, this mouth, this tongue, have been mine and only mine for nearly eighteen years. Even when we weren’t together, he never kissed anyone else. I have no actual proof of this of course, but it’s something that I’ve always known. Brian is just like that. If he says he’s going to do something, or not do something, then he means it. For a man of action and few words, it’s a big gesture, and one I no longer take for granted. As I suck his tongue into my mouth, I slide my hands down his bare chest to his blue jeans. As per usual, the top button is undone, so I reach right for the zipper. Just as I’m about to pull his cock out, I hear the door open. Brian groans and lifts his hips toward my retreating hand.

I break the kiss and rest my forehead against his. “Guess we’ll just have to finish this later.”

He huffs. “Fuck.”

I peck his lips. “Later.” Smiling, I stand up and return to my chair just as Gus walks to the table with a glass of orange juice in his hand. Not wanting to break all contact with Brian, I drape my right leg over his left leg and cup his right thigh with the top of my foot. Almost instantaneously, he places his hand on my thigh.

“Hey,” Gus says as he sits down across from me.

Brian picks up his coffee cup and looks at Gus. “So you do still live here.”

Gus rolls his eyes. “You are so funny, Dad. I wasn’t gone *that* long.”

“Justin?” I raise my eyebrow. “When was the last time we saw Sonny Boy?”

I laugh and reach for another éclair. “Tuesday night.”

“Right.” Brian looks back at Gus. “I hope Grady’s at least charging you rent.”

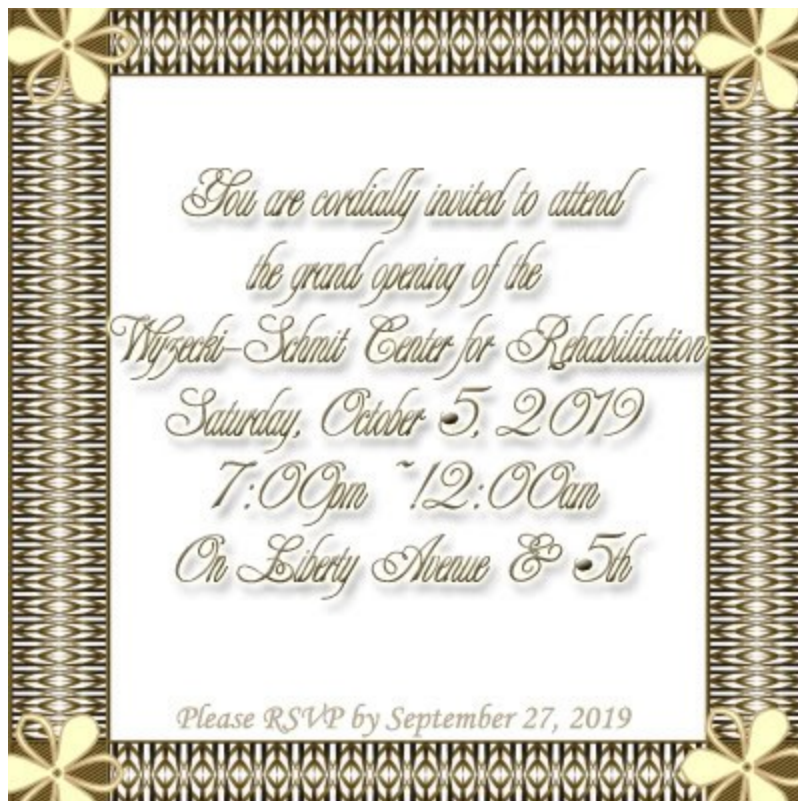
I hide a laugh by taking a bite of the éclair. I push the box towards Gus, but he shakes his head no. Shrugging, I look over at Brian as I lick the cream from the inside of the éclair with my tongue. Brian, as he’s watching me, slides his hand further up my thigh and squeezes.

“Hey, look we got an invitation from Uncle Ted and Uncle Blake.”

We both look over at Gus, who is holding the invitation up. I glance at Brian. “It’s done?”

He shrugs and takes the invitation from Gus with his free hand. “I talked to him yesterday, he didn’t say anything.”

I set my half-eaten éclair back in the box, wipe my hands on a paper towel, and take the invitation from Brian.



“Nice graphics.”

“He probably got someone from the Art Department to make them.” I look up at Brian to see if he’s serious, but he’s got his tongue pressed against his cheek.

“We’re going, right?”

We both look over at Gus and answer at the same time.

“Of course.”

“Hell no.”

I press my leg against his crotch and he squeezes my thigh as our eyes meet. “We’re going.” My voice books no argument, but that’s never stopped Brian before.

He shakes his head and frowns. “I have to work that weekend. Mercedes’ contract is up and we have a negotiation meeting that Monday.”

I set the invitation on the table. “You can work in Pittsburgh.”

He cocks his eyebrow. “You know that won’t happen.”

I stare at him, and he stares right back. To Gus it probably looks like some version of that elementary game kid’s play, the first one to blink loses, but we’re having a conversation. He cocks his eyebrow. *It’s a fifty million dollar account. I know. I won’t get shit done there. You’ll make time. Justin. Brian.*

“Dad.” We both turn to look at Gus, who is smirking. “You should just give in.” He shrugs and stands up. “Unless you’re holding out for a blow job or something.”

It’s silent as we watch Gus walk into the kitchen. I look over at Brian and raise my eyebrows. He pinches the bridge of his nose before dropping his hand to the table. “Justin...you know what will happen. We’ll get there, Debbie will demand we spend time with the family, the guys will want to go to Babylon to relive some fucked-up version of the past, then the opening, then dinner at Deb’s and-”

“Fucking me in the hotel room on those very expensive white sheets.”

“Right...so when exactly will I have time to work?”

“Are you really going to make me blow you to get you to say yes?”

He sighs. “It’s a fifty million-”

I lean toward him and cup his face with my hand. “I know.”

“Justin.”

“Brian.” I scoot to the end of my chair and kiss him. “We’ll make time.”

He stares at me for a long time. “I have to keep that account.”

I hear exactly what he’s saying between the lines. We need that account because if he loses it, with all the legal expenses, especially now that I’m countersuing, we’ll be fucked. Mercedes is Kinnetik NYC’s biggest account and it brings in the most revenue. I really don’t know what to say to that, because when I think about it in that respect I can’t think of a good argument for going to the opening at all.

He brushes the hair back from my face. “I guess I’ll just have to refrain from fucking your brains out in the hotel room every time we’re alone together.”

I smile sadly at him, and as he pulls me into a kiss I think, love really is sacrifice sometimes.

Saturday, September 14, 2019

9:13am

Grady’s POV

I trace the lip of my coffee cup with my index finger. We’ve been sitting in silence for ten minutes. “What does he have?”

I look up at her and shrug. “Probably PTSD, but he’s never said.”

She takes a sip of her juice and sets the glass back on the table. “How long has he had it?”

“Mom...” I sigh. “Can we not talk about Gus?”

“No, we are going to talk about it. Now, answer my question.”

I look back down at my coffee cup. “I don’t know.” I could guess, but I just don’t fucking want to.

“Do you have any idea what you are getting yourself into?”

I look up at her. “It’s not-”

“That bad? Grady, I was standing right there. He had a full blow panic attack right in front of me.”

“That wasn’t a full blown attack.” I snap my mouth shut and mentally kick myself for saying that.

Her eyes widen. “He’s had worse?”

“Mom, why are you here?” I just want to stop talking about Gus like this, with her.

She sighs. “I’m here to talk about what happened last night, although now I’m seeing things a bit more clearly.”

I furrow my brow. “Meaning what?”

“I thought that Gus acted inappropriately-”

“Dad-”

“Let me finish.” She pauses and when I don’t say anything she continues. “While I think what Gus said to your father was very disrespectful, I can see now that he was acting out.” I open my mouth to say something, but she stops me. “Yes, now that I think about it, I can see the signs, the deep breaths he kept taking, the nervousness in his eyes and body. He must have been fighting off a panic attack all night.”

“He was.”

“Still...it doesn’t excuse him for disrespecting your father in his own home.”

“Dad baited him!”

“That may be true...” She sighs. “I just want you to know that I don’t agree with how your father handled things with Gus, and especially with you.”

“Mom.”

“What I came to tell you was that if you need money, just ask.”

I roll my eyes. “I wish everyone would stop trying to give me money.” I stand up and grab my coffee cup. “It’s not about the money, Mom, and you fucking know it.”

“I think you need to calm down.”

I take a deep breath. “I am calm.” I feel the sting of angry, hurt tears prick my eyes, but I blink them back. “You know what, Mom? I don’t care if you like Gus.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like him.”

I go on as if she didn't say anything. "I don't care if Dad likes Gus. I like Gus and that's all that matters." I swallow hard. "Just...can you please tell Dad I'm sorry...about last night?" I hate that the anger in my voice is now replaced by a needy, desperate tone.

"You didn't do anything wrong." Her voice is quiet and sincere.

"Well...I'm the one being punished for it, right?" I feel it, that emptiness that longs to be filled up, settling in my body. I know what she's going to say. I know it like I know the sky is blue. She'll stick up for him, she'll lie by omission, she'll say the words for him like she's done for years.

"He loves you." The words float into that empty space and fall like dead weight into the abyss.

What is there to say to that? I don't know that, because I don't fucking feel it. I walk to the kitchen and set my cup in the sink. "I have to get ready for work, Mom."

She stands up and walks over to me. Wrapping her arms around me, she pulls me into a hug, which I return because despite all the bullshit, she's still my mom and I know at least that *she* loves me. She pulls away and brushes the hair back from my face. "Take care of yourself and...Gus. Being with someone with PTSD isn't easy."

"I know."

She smiles sadly and walks around the kitchen counter to get her purse. I follow her to the door and open it for her. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"I will." Even though I know I won't. She probably knows it too.

She kisses my cheek. "I love you."

I sigh. "I love you too, Mom."

She kisses my cheek again and then she's gone. I take a deep breath, close the door, and lean back against it. This has been the longest fucking day and it's not even ten o'clock yet. It's going to be a busy fucking day at Grand too. There is some kind of convention going on this weekend. I fucking hate when conventions are in town. I only hope Ericka, the weekend manager who even on her best days is kind of a bitch, can give me some extra shifts. After this morning's fight with Gus about working at Unload...well, I just don't want to have that argument every day...or ever again.

I'm just sick of my father using money to push me around. I say I don't need it, but that's not true, not really. And it's not like I'm making a shitload of money from my art right now, what with the galleries claiming, "it's not the season for abstract art". Maybe if I can prove to my father that I really don't need his money, it will make some kind of difference to him. The least I can do is fucking try, even if he's not willing to.

Pushing myself away from the door, I walk to my bedroom. Bartending isn't the best job, but it's not such a bad way to make good, fast, easy money. When I first left my parent's house, I hooked up with this guy, Rex. He was a few years older than me and gave great head. Long story short, he was a bartender. He made pretty good money and convinced me to enroll in bartending school, which I did. I worked Unload for a year and a half. I made good money, but when it started to interfere with school, I quit.

I get my shoes out of the closet, sit down on the edge of the bed, and take a deep breath. My father gave me enough money to cover my ass this month, but if I really do want to be totally independent, and if I can't get extra shifts at the Grand, then bartending for a few weeks seems like the best solution I can come up with.

As I flop back onto the bed, only one thought enters my mind, god, just let there be extra shifts at the fucking Grand. I don't need any more fucking drama.

"A year, ten years from now, I'll remember this; not why, only that we were here like this, together."
~ Adrienne Rich ~

Monday, September 16, 2019
10:15am

Justin's POV

The light grey lead marks the canvas in a jagged, shaky line. The tips of my fingers are numb. The tendons cramp as I clutch the thin pencil in my hand. The muscles in my arms are so tight I feel it all the way to my brain. I don't stop, even though I know I should. I have to get this image sketched out. I have to do it now, while I have it, while it's in me. When the last haphazardly crooked line makes its way onto the canvas, I step back. The pencil falls with a clatter to the hardwood floor and I hold my hand to my chest. My eyes roam the canvas. The sketch is crude, nothing more than an outline of possibilities that waits for color, texture, and vibrancy. The scene is the skyline of Paris as seen from the hotel where Brian and I stayed the first week of our honeymoon. A genuine smile etches its way across my face.

I remember being eighteen, horny and insatiable, pressing my body against Brian's on the couch of that doctor's house. Brian's tongue claiming me, possessing me, while Michael droned on in the background and slides of Paris flashed, one after the other, in my peripheral vision. I remember thinking at the time that, despite the culture, the art, the ambiance, Paris sounded pretentious and boring. After seeing the same slide of the The Arc de Triomphe from five different angles, I stopped paying attention. Instead, I closed my eyes, pressed my body closer to Brian's, and savored the moment he was giving me. At eighteen, I remember thinking Paris had nothing on a man like Brian Kinney and I didn't care if I ever went there.

But I did go there, and it was nothing like I imagined it would be.

Paris, France
Thursday, April 25, 2019
5:58am

I step out of the bold colors of the suite and into the grey dawn of the day. A late-night rain shower suppressed the smog, making the air smell clean and fresh. Barefoot and clad only in the white terrycloth robe provided by the hotel, I make my way to the edge of the terrace. I rest my hands on the cool slick railing and survey the landscape before me like a painting come to life. A wide smile spreads across my face. Joy like I've never felt before blooms inside of me like the first bud of spring.

At thirty-five, I've lived a life that many would dream to have. I met the love of my fucking life at seventeen, had a successful comic book before I was nineteen, spent eight months under the glittering California sun working on a movie, and fourteen years in New York City becoming the successful artist that everyone, including myself, thought I'd someday be. Not that my life has been perfect. It's had its low points, almost death points, points of heartache and longing, but I know, as I look down at the band of silver wrapped around my finger, I wouldn't trade a second of pain or a moment of happiness for anything in the world. In my head I allow myself to be trite and clichéd, because my life, as it stands, really is a dream come true.

We've been in Paris for four days. Brian's spent countless dollars on clothes while I've spent countless hours in museums. We've eaten at countless restaurants and fucked more times and in more ways than I ever thought possible. For the first time in my life it feels as if all the puzzle pieces that I've collected over the last thirty-five years have finally fallen into place, and the picture is so fucking beautiful that it's almost too hard to look at.

I hear Brian before I feel him, his bare feet softly slapping against the moist tile as he walks towards me. He wraps his arms around me, rests his chin in the crook of my neck, and presses his warm naked body against my back. If there is one way in which I love to be held by him, it's like this. I love how it makes me feel protected, wanted, and loved.

"What are you doing?" His voice is muted with sleep, thick, low, and deep.

"Admiring the view," I say quietly, as if talking too loud will ruin the peacefulness I'm feeling.

His head shifts as he rests his chin on my shoulder. I know he's seeing what I'm seeing. "It's--"

"Amazing." I turn around and drape my arms over his shoulders. "It's been the best four days of my life."

A quiet sort of sadness darkens his eyes. He leans forward, until his lips are hovering just above mine. "Even if it has been--"

His words are lost as my tongue snakes out of my mouth and into his. Not even a dance at a prom eighteen years ago, that I'll never remember, can compare to this moment. I tell him so with warm kisses, soft touches, and tender caresses.

When we are back in the room, with me spread out against the expensive white silk sheets and Brian hovering above me, the palms of our hands press together as our fingers interlace. Our rings mold and fit against each other as he pushes inside of me, and we let our bodies speak the words we don't need to say.

New York, NY
Monday, September 16, 2019

With the pad of my left thumb, I rub small circles into the palm of my right hand. As great as our time was there, as much as I love Paris, it still can't hold a candle to Brian... but then, I think nothing ever could.

Monday, September 16, 2019
10:15am

Gus' POV

Professor Spensor, who insists that we call him Brock, paces in front of the classroom. He's young, probably close to Justin's age. He's tall with russet colored hair and sharp green eyes. He's built like he spends more time at the gym than Uncle Ben. Out of all my classes this is the one I enjoy the most, mainly because Brock doesn't bullshit us. If something is for shit, he tells you straight up, no fucking pretenses. It makes you either admire him or loathe him. In a lot of ways, he reminds me of Dad. He stops pacing and turns to the fifteen of us sitting in front of him. "Your assignment was to take a photograph. The only requirement was that the subject be a person, man or woman. The context, composition, etc. was left up to you." He pauses, surveying us. "I looked at each and every photograph, and I commend you all on completing the assignment." I look around the room, watching as some of my fellow students sit up straighter in their chairs. I smirk to myself, because unlike them, I hear the 'but' coming. "But, each and every one was dreadfully boring."

The front row of students, who I've decided are typical pretentious snobs who think they are the best photographers since Cartier-Bresson, collectively gasp.

Completely ignoring them, Brock strolls over to the podium. "In class today we will be going through each and every photograph, at which point we will spend ten minutes discussing each one." He presses a button on the podium and the first photograph flashes on the screen. It's nothing special, an old woman reading the paper on a typical New York stoop.

As expected, the Art House clique argue why each of their pictures is the best thing since sliced bread. Jeremy or Jacob or Johnny, who dresses in all black and has pasty white skin, spends fifteen minutes explaining to Brock why his photograph of a child playing in a dumpster is expressing the fundamentally tragic flaw of all humanity. Brock's response? "Possibly, but that doesn't mean it's not boring."

Ryan and I share a glance as we try not to laugh at the way Johnny whateverthefuck crosses his arms over his chest and pouts like a kindergartener who just got told his goldfish died.

Mine is the last photograph put up for review. It's the one I took of Dad and that homeless man at the park. Brock looks up at the photograph and back at us. "Anyone can take a picture of a homeless man in New York." He waves to the screen. "What's so special about this one?" His eyes scan the class. "Ryan, what do you think about this picture?"

I look over at Ryan and see a light pink shade spreading across his pale skin as he fidgets in his chair. He knows it's mine. "Um...well..."

Brock's eyes slide over to me. "Gus, what do you think?"

I lean back in my chair and shrug. "I think that giving a homeless man a hundred bucks is a waste of money." A few of my classmates laugh.

Brock tries to hold back a smile as he asks, "Well, yes, but what do you feel when you look at this picture?"

I shrug again. "Nothing."

He nods and leans against the podium. "And why is that?"

"It's just a picture. It doesn't say anything." I press my tongue into my cheek. "It doesn't showcase the tragic human flaw of society." A few people laugh. Jeremy turns in his chair and glares at me. "Anyone with a camera could have taken it." I pause. "Like you said, it's fucking boring."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ryan looking at me with wide surprised eyes.

"Class, I want you to remember this." He pushes himself off the podium. "I want you to do what Gus has done. Even though this picture is his, he actively critiqued it, maybe a little too harshly, but still recognized that it isn't the best." A few people turn to look at me with interest or wonder or something. "Don't fall into the trap where you believe every shot you take is brilliant, because not every shot will be."

As he walks back behind the podium, Ryan leans over and whispers, "I can't believe you said that."

I just shrug. What would be the point of lying? It's a good shot, but it's not brilliant, even I can see that.

Brock picks up a stack of papers and starts passing them out. "For your next assignment I want you to think about the happiest you've ever been, the saddest, the most afraid, lonely, whatever emotion you choose. Don't just take a picture, create a moment, make a memory, make me *feel* it."

After we all get the next assignment, Brock dismisses class. I gather up my shit, stand up, and sling my bag over my shoulder. I walk out into the hallway and Ryan falls in step beside me. "I think you pissed off the queen of the Art House Bitches." He nods towards the small group that has gathered down the hall.

I scoff. "Like I give a shit."

When Ryan and I walk outside, I quickly light a cigarette. "Hey Peterson." Jeremy whateverthefuck walks around Ryan and stands in front of me, stopping my forward progression. I raise my eyebrow and blow a cloud of smoke towards his face. He exaggerates a cough before crossing his arms over his chest. "Just because your dad is some big shot doesn't mean you're better than anyone else."

I roll my eyes. "Fuck off." I step around him and continue walking down the street.

Ryan quickly catches up. "In case you didn't know...everyone is aware who your dad is."

I look over at him and press the tip of my tongue against the inside of my cheek. "Which one?"

He pushes a strand of his light brown hair away from his face. "Justin Taylor...he's your dad, right?"

I bite back a laugh. "Yeah." I take a drag of my cigarette. "What does it matter anyway?"

Ryan laughs. "You're kidding, right?" I look over at him and raise my eyebrows. "Every student here wants to be showcased at the TK Gallery."

I furrow my brow. "They do?"

"Where have you been?" I think, Canada, but say nothing. "Do you know how many artists have gotten their start there since it opened?"

I take a drag of my cigarette. "I didn't know it was such a big deal."

Ryan snatches my cigarette from between my fingers and takes a drag. "Yeah, well, here it's a big fucking deal."

I take my cigarette back and throw my arm over Ryan's shoulders. "Then they should be kissing my ass, not harassing it."

Ryan laughs, soft and low. "I'm sure Jeremy would *love* to kiss your ass."

I smirk and take a drag of my cigarette. I'm sure Jeremy isn't the only one, but I keep that comment to myself.

Monday, September 16, 2019
10:15am

Brian's POV

The phone barely rings once before I pick it up. "Kinney."

"It's Ted. I got a message to call you asap."

"What the fuck have you been doing? It's almost ten-fucking-thirty. ASAP means as soon as fucking possible, Theodore."

"Okay, what's wrong?"

I close my eyes briefly and pinch the bridge of my nose. "We are in deep-shit trouble."

"We are?" He pauses. "I saw the NY Times...Mercedes?"

"I need you to get all the accounting information for the PA office and call Dan and get the information for the NYC office." I remove my fingers and lean back in my chair. "If we lose Mercedes, I need to know where the company will stand financially." I pause. "I also need you to figure out my personal financial standing."

"Am I including Justin's income in this as well?" It's taken years, but Theodore has finally learned how to handle a crisis without getting spastic. It's a quality that I've grown to respect.

"Yes, include everything." I lean back in the chair.

"Do you want me to create a document that shows how much you would have if you liquidated your personal assets?"

Fuck. "Do both....and-"

"And?"

"I'm going to need you to get the specs for all the accounts from both offices."

"Are you thinking of consolidating?"

"No, I'm not considering it, but I'd like to have the information if it comes to that."

"Jesus Christ, Brian."

"I need this shit soon. The meeting with Mercedes is in three weeks. We'll be in the Pitts

for the opening; can you have everything ready by then?”

“Yeah, yeah, no problem. I’ll start working on it right away.” He pauses. “Have you told Justin?”

“I just found out this shit this morning, Theodore. No, I haven’t told him.”

“But you’re going to?”

“Just get me everything I need, can you fucking do that?”

He pauses for a moment. “Yes.”

“Good. I’ll check back with you later this week.”

“Okay. Look, don’t stress out about this. I’m very familiar with your finances as is, and I’d say you’d still be in good shape if anything happens.”

I shake my head, but say nothing except, “I’ll be in touch.”

I hang up the phone, push back my chair, get up, and cross the room. Standing in front of the window, I twist the ring around my finger with my thumb as I look out at the clutter of buildings surrounding Kinnetik. I feel the weight of stress tightening the muscles in my neck and back. Kinnetik acquired the Mercedes account two years ago. The company had been going through major changes that resulted in a loss of sales and a cut of the advertising budget from 150 million to 50 million. At the time, none of the big name agencies in the city wanted to take the account, because comparatively for a motor vehicle account the budget was extremely low. I jumped at the account, worked with the budget, and in time sales increased. Mercedes is now on its way back to the top. The only problem with that is what I read in the paper this morning. In the coming year they plan to increase their advertising budget back to the original 150 million per year. This announcement has opened the door for bigger, more well-known agencies to make their intentions known. It would be a fucking dream come true to land a 150 million dollar account, but I’m a born realist and I know there is no way, no matter how flawless the campaign we create for Mercedes, that we will keep them.

Losing that account could bring Kinnetik NY to its knees. Before I landed Mercedes, the agency was doing well on its own, but it still depended heavily on Kinnetik PA to cover some of the overhead. When we landed Mercedes, things turned around for the NY office. We started beating out well-known agencies, bigger agencies. If Kinnetik NY is unable to hold onto the Mercedes account there could be a bloodletting. Things could get bad, really fucking bad. Fuck. This is absolutely the last fucking thing that needs to happen right now.

Monday, September 16, 2019

10:15am

Grady's POV

Standing outside of Ericka's office, I run my hand down the front of my shirt. I came in early just to talk to her about maybe picking up some extra shifts. I didn't get a chance to do it this weekend because of the bullshit that went on with the convention. I only hope she's in a better mood now that it's over and done with. Taking a deep breath, I knock on the door.

"Come in."

I try to gauge her mood by those two words, but there's no inflection of emotion in them. Cautiously, I open the door and step inside. She's hunched over the cheap wooden desk that's crammed in this small office. Her unruly black hair is pulled back into something that is a mixed breed of a bun and a ponytail. As she looks up at me, she pushes her thick black glasses up her nose and waves to one of the plastic red chairs in front of the desk.

I quickly sit down and rub my palms over my legs. She takes off her glasses, sets them aside, leans forward, and clasps her hands on top of the desk. "What can I do for you, Grady?"

"Well, I was wondering if there is a possibility that I could pick up some extra shifts."

Her eyebrows creep up to her hairline. She watches me for a moment, her eyes searching mine. After a second or ten, she swivels her chair around and opens a file cabinet. When she turns back around, she has a file in her hands that she quickly opens and places on the desk. She picks up a piece of paper and holds it between her thick fingers. "This is your current class schedule, correct?" She holds up the piece of paper that I'd given to her a few weeks ago with my schedule from NYAA printed on it.

I nod. "Yes."

She flips the piece of paper back around, picks up her glasses, and puts them back on. "Your schedule is not very flexible."

"I understand that, but--"

She turns around and looks at the bulletin board behind her where she has everyone's work schedules posted. After a minute or two she turns back around, puts my schedule back in my file, and closes the folder. "I'm sorry, but the times that you aren't in class are already covered by our full-time front desk clerks." She doesn't actually sound sorry about it at all, but I smile and thank her for checking, and leave feeling a heavy weight pressing against my shoulders.

I check my watch and see I still have thirty minutes until my shift starts. I think about

calling Gus, but I know he's in class. Every time I called him this weekend he asked if I'd gotten around to talking to Ericka yet. I know as soon as I call him today, he'll ask me again. He's going to queen out, because I already made up my mind that if I couldn't get any extra shifts here, I was going to see about getting on at Unload. He doesn't want me to do it. He wants me to just take his money, but I'm not going to do that. I told him I can take care of myself, and I meant it.

Monday, September 16, 2019

3:28pm

Justin's POV

Due to the detail of the piece, and the unwillingness of my hand to cooperate, I've only completed one-eighth of the painting thus far. I wipe my hands off on a rag, toss it aside, and massage my fingers until they relax. I take a step back and survey what little I've done so far. This one is going to take me a while, and I'm okay with that...in fact, I'm quite happy about it. Getting lost in my work is something that I've desperately missed for the last two months. I reach for the warm bottle of water on my work table, unscrew the top, and take a drink. I think when I'm done with this painting I'll take it to the loft and hang it. I'm not sure which room I could put it in, the living room maybe...yes, the bold sunrise golds and fading night blues would match the color scheme in the living room. Maybe I can convince Brian to take down the piece we have over the fireplace, although that might be difficult because the one there now is Brian's favorite. It's one of my older pieces, one that I did during that first month I was in New York, when I felt so fucking lonely, and like I'd made a huge fucking mistake. I put everything I was feeling at the time into that piece and when Brian first saw it, he had to have it. He didn't say why, but I knew it was because that's exactly how he had felt as well. I think we've kept it as the focal point in the living room for so long just to remind us how things used to be, how things are now, and how, even though we weren't living together then, we still were experiencing the same emotions. It was only after Brian had seen the piece that I thought of a name for it, *Connected Despite Distance*.

I hear my cell phone ringing, so I cap the bottle of water, set it down, and cross the room to answer it. With my eyes still on the canvas, I flip the phone open without looking at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"You're countersuing me? After everything I've done for you, *you* are suing *me*?"

I shift my focus away from the painting and lean against the countertop. "If you have an issue with it, I suggest you call your lawyer."

"I can't believe you are doing this to me." Her voice is shrill, almost panicky.

Something inside me snaps. "You can't believe it? How the fuck do you think *I* felt?" Anger rushes to the surface and pushes the words out of my mouth.

“So you’re doing this to get back at me?” she snaps.

I laugh. “I hate to break it to you Amy, but not everything is about you.”

“Then why are you doing it?” I remain silent, because really, I already said too much.
“Justin?”

“Have your lawyer call my lawyer. Good-bye, Amy.” I flip the phone closed and set it down.

Even though I’m pissed that she’s done all this shit, even though I’m angry that it’s come to this, I can’t help but feel hurt by it as well. I didn’t just consider Amy my agent, I considered her my friend. In fact, she was the first person in New York that I allowed myself to get even a little close to. It’s one thing to end a business relationship that spanned more than a decade; it’s another to end a friendship that lasted just as long.

When my phone rings again, I answer even though I know I shouldn’t. “I told you to call your lawyer.”

“Ah...is this Justin Taylor?” An unfamiliar voice asks.

“Oh...sorry, yes, this is Justin.”

A soft sigh comes across the line. “Hello Justin, my name is Penelope Foster, and I was wondering if you’d be interested in meeting with me to discuss the possibility of Foster Artist Inc. representing you in your future endeavors.”

Monday, September 16, 2019

3:28pm

Gus’ POV

I’m sprawled out on the couch. The TV is on, but I’m not really watching it. Since class this morning I’ve been racking my brain trying to come up with a concept for the assignment Brock gave us. After that asshole Jerry whateverthefuck confronted me, I decided I wanted to take a photograph that is so fucking perfect, so fucking flawless, that after he sees it he’ll be second-guessing his chosen career. It’s pathetic, I know, but whatever gets me there, right? The bitch of it is, I’m drawing a fucking blank and it’s giving me a fucking headache. How hard will it be to take an absolutely perfect shot that will leave everyone fucking breathless? A knock at the door saves me from my self-induced torture. As I get up to answer it, I think maybe if I stop thinking about it so much the idea will just...come to me.

When I open the door, I see Grady standing in front of me. He’s still dressed in the

clothes he wears to work, although he looks a little more rumpled than usual. I step back as he walks in and heads straight into the living room. I close the door and follow him. When I get to the living room, he's already sitting on the couch. "Why are you still dressed like that? Didn't you get off work hours ago?"

He looks up at me and holds out his hand. "Come here."

I raise my eyebrow at his avoidance, but cross the room nonetheless. I've barely sat down when he straddles my lap, takes my face in his hands, and proceeds to kiss the shit out of me. A little voice in the back of my mind is telling me that something is off with him, but I ignore it. I run my hands up his thighs and rest them on his hips. It's difficult to listen to little voices when Grady's lips are sliding over mine and his tongue is licking the inside of my mouth. Yes, all little voices are to be ignored when my cock is starting to harden beneath my jeans.

When we finally break apart, I rest my forehead against his. "What was that for?"

He shrugs. "I just felt like kissing you."

I lean back. "That's really sweet." I raise my eyebrow. "Now tell me the real reason."

He shifts his eyes to the left, then back to me. "Ericka didn't have any extra shifts at The Grand." I keep my expression blank as I wait for him to continue. He sighs as his hands slide down to cup my neck, his fingers combing through the hair at the back. "So when I left work I went to see Larry." He pauses. "He owns Upload." On second thought, maybe little voices shouldn't be so easily dismissed after all. "I start there tonight."

If he asked me point blank why I have a problem with him working at some sleazy gay club, I probably couldn't answer him. It's not that I have an issue with him trying to do what he has to do to make ends meet, I'm fucking lucky I don't have to do the same thing, but something about him working there just doesn't sit well with me. I don't know specifically why it bothers me, it just fucking does.

He bites his lip. "Are you pissed?"

I push away the unsettled, undefined feeling that this is a bad fucking idea. "You told me yourself it wouldn't be for forever." I shrug, and say nothing else.

"Well, it won't be. I know it's not the ideal job, but the pay will more than make up for that."

"So you've said."

"The thing is..." I furrow my brow. "I won't get to see you as much as I have been. I mean, between classes, working on my projects, The Grand, and now Unload..." He trails off.

I shift my eyes away from him. I didn't really think about that. Maybe that's what that nagging feeling inside me is. The fact that I'm so used to him being around, and now I know he won't be around as much...well, I don't like the idea of that. Still, I have to respect Grady's decision to take care of himself. "Well..." Well what? We'll see each other when we can? How fucking clichéd is that? I look back at him. "We'll still have Tuesday's, right?"

He grins lopsidedly. "Yeah, I won't have to go to Unload until ten." He leans forward and pecks me on the lips. "Do you want to know something funny?"

"What's that?"

"Tonight is dyke night."

"Great, then I have nothing to worry about." I didn't plan on saying that, but I did nonetheless. Maybe therein lies the issue.

He pulls away from me. "Hey, even if it wasn't-"

"I know." I cup the back of his neck and kiss him hard. The truth is, I don't know. I don't know if I will be able to handle thinking about hundreds of guys hitting on him night after night. I've never been into jealousy, not even when guys would hit on Ash, but I'm not the same person that I used to be. I've come to depend on Grady, probably more than I should. In this city of millions, he's the only person outside of Dad and Justin that I've connected with. He's the only person that I've allowed in since Ash. The threat of losing that has me kissing him just a little harder and holding on to him just a little tighter. The thing is, Grady is my safe place, and I fear the loss of that.

Monday, September 16, 2019
8:49pm

Brian's POV

I throw my jacket over my shoulder and approach his studio. The door is open and a soft melody echoes throughout the space. I lean against the doorjamb and look over at him. All the lights in the studio are on. They shine on his bare back, making his skin look paler than I know it is. He's kneeling in front of an oversized canvas, his face only inches away from where he's laying down brush strokes. My eyes shift from him to the canvas. The tight frown that's been on my face all day suddenly gives way to a soft smile. The sketch is crude, but I know exactly what it's an image of, the view from the terrace of our hotel room in Paris.

"You're here late." My eyes go back to him as he stands up, puts his brush in a jar of turpentine, and turns to face me.

I shrug. "I could say the same thing about you."

He furrows his brow slightly as his eyes scan my body. "You just left work." It isn't a question. I nod as I walk into the room. I throw my jacket over the arm of the couch and sit down.

I meet his eyes. "Come here."

His brow still furrowed, he walks over to me, takes my hand, and sits down next to me. It's not exactly where I wanted him, but whatever. I release his hand, turn toward him, cup the back of his neck, and bring his mouth to mine. I don't hesitate, as my tongue slides into his mouth, to push him back on the couch and press my body down on his. I've had a for-shit day, and all I want at this moment, all I fucking need, is to get lost in the feel of his body, the warmth of his kisses, the touch of his skin against mine. As the kiss becomes harder, more passionate, we find ourselves pulling at clothes, practically ripping them off of each other, even though he was already half-dressed to begin with. This moment isn't about how much I love him or anything even close to that, it's about how much I just need to fuck him.

Justin, who can read me like an open book even when I'm trying to keep closed, seems to understand this need. When all of our clothes are finally off, he kisses me deeply one last time before rolling onto his stomach. I place a kiss between his shoulder blades before running my tongue down the center of his back to his ass, until it's pressing against his hole. I lick it, suck it, and push my tongue into it until he begs me to fuck him, which was really all I was waiting for.

I reach over him to the side table, where we always keep the lube, because we fuck here almost as much as we fuck at home. I slather some over my cock and toss the bottle to the floor. I push into him and let go off the stress of the day. I give myself over to the heat of his body, the feel of his ass around my cock, the way he moans my name as he pushes back against me. I fuck him hard and fast and for a long time as I escape to the one place where I've always found comfort. "Justin."

Monday, September 16, 2019

8:49pm

Grady's POV

With my ear pressed to Gus' chest, I listen to the slow rhythmic sound of his heartbeat as my fingers trace lazy circles on his stomach. He hasn't said a word since we left the living room, but he fucked me twice, each time pushing into me so deep, as if he couldn't get close enough. I want to tell him that nothing is going to change between us, but I have a feeling he wouldn't believe me. Besides, I can't guarantee that, things change between us everyday already. I look over at the clock and sigh. Gus' fingers, which have been

combing through my hair, pause for a moment. When I went to see Larry, I didn't expect for him to hire me back right away, but he said he was short-handed and that I came at the perfect time. I tried to tell him that it's been years since I tended bar, but he waved his hand at me dismissively and said, "It's just like riding a bike."

I kiss Gus' chest before lifting my head. My eyes meet his and I try to read what's going on with him, but his eyes are as blank as his expression. "I have to go."

His hand slides out of my hair and down my back before he reaches for his pack of cigarettes. Before he can pull one out, I stop him. He looks at me and raises his eyebrows. It's on the tip of my tongue to say it, to just blurt it out, to let him know how much I fucking love him, but I just peck his lips before rolling away. As I stand up, I hear the flick of the lighter and the heavy scent of cigarette smoke fills the air. While I'm getting dressed I feel his eyes on me, but each time I look over at him he's watching the ceiling as if it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen. After I slip on my shoes and button my shirt, I round the bed and lean over him. "I'll call you tomorrow." I brush a strand of hair from his face. "We'll go do something."

He doesn't say anything, just holds his cigarette away, reaches up with his other hand, and pulls me down into a kiss. I give into it for a minute, tasting the bitter smoky flavor of his mouth as his tongue pushes into mine. Eventually, I pull away because I know that a kiss like that always leads to me being naked and panting beneath him.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I say softly before standing upright.

As I expected he doesn't say anything, just nods as he brings the cigarette back up to his lips. The expression on his face makes me feel uneasy. He's shutting me out, protecting himself, only I'm not sure from what. With a sense of heaviness growing in my chest, I turn and leave. I have to do what I have to do, for me. I only hope that it doesn't cost me more than I'm willing to pay out.

Monday, September 16, 2019
9:27pm

Justin's POV

I'm laying half on Brian and half on the couch. Something is bothering him, I can tell. It's something to do with work, I'm pretty sure. I know he's not ready to talk about it yet, otherwise he would have said something by now. I want to ask him, but I've learned from experience that if I give Brian enough space, eventually he'll come to me.

His fingers comb through my hair, randomly twisting a strand every now and then. I've always been fascinated by his fascination with my hair. I'm surprised he didn't queen out more when I shaved it all off that one time many eons ago. "You're painting Paris."

I lift my head and smile. "You could tell it's Paris?"

“The sketch isn’t that rough.”

I look over at the canvas. “No, I guess not.” I meet his eyes and decide that I can’t hold off my news any longer. I don’t want to. “Guess what.”

He cocks his eyebrow. “What?”

“I got a call today from an agency.”

“No shit?”

I nod. “I’ve never heard of it before, Foster Artist Inc.?” He shrugs. “Anyway, I’m meeting with the owner, Penelope, Friday afternoon.”

He furrows his brow. “What’s the catch?”

I shrug. “I have no idea, but I figured what the hell, no one else is calling and all the other agencies might as well have steel doors.”

“Well...just don’t-”

I cover his lips with my fingers. “I know.”

I remove my fingers, peck his lips, and return my head to his chest. “Well, if it’s legit, and they can get you a few shows, that will be good.” I feel it coming, whatever it is he has to tell me. “Justin.”

I lift my head, taken aback by the serious tone in his voice. I can’t help asking, “What’s wrong?”

He averts his eyes and blows out a long breath before looking back at me. “Kinnetik might lose Mercedes.”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. “What? Why?”

“They are going to increase their budget from 50 million to 150 million now that their sales have gone up.”

I shake my head. “But why wouldn’t they re-sign with you? You are the one that got them where they are now.”

He shrugs. “It’s a fickle business, you know that.”

I lick my lips and press my hands flat against his neck. “So what does that mean...what happens if they don’t re-sign?”

He strokes my cheek with the back of his hand. “You know what it means, and you know what will happen.”

In a flash, I see it all, the “for sale” sign on the house in Ibiza, the “for lease” sign on the apartment in Paris, the cutting costs....the lawyers. “I should-”

This time he covers my lips with his fingers. “Don’t even fucking think about it.”

I yank his fingers from my mouth. “How can I not? It’s going to cost a lot more in fees to countersue than it is just to-”

This time he brings my lips down on his, my words getting lost as his tongue pushes them aside. When he pulls away, he lays his hands on either side of my face, “I’m not going to go down without a fight. I’m going to do my fucking best to keep that account. I’m not going to promise you that things won’t get bad if I lose it, because I don’t make promises I can’t keep. What I don’t need is for you to queen out about it. What I don’t need is for you to pull the countersuits.” He strokes my cheeks with his thumbs.

“Brian,” I say softly, because it’s the only thing I can think to say.

“I want you to paint. I want you to set up a show for the gallery. I want you to meet that agent on Friday and see what she has to say.” He kisses my lips. “I want you to let me take care of it.”

I huff. “You know I can’t just sit by and let-”

“Like I’d really expect you to, but-”

“I know, no queening out, no stressing out, no stressing you out. Paint and be happy and not worry at all that everything you’ve worked for, that we’ve worked for, might go to shit in a matter of weeks.” I remove his hands from my face. “Just be the perfect little wife and let you handle everything.” I widen my eyes. “Oh and don’t forget how I’m not supposed to worry about what all this stress will do to you. Nope, I certainly can’t think about that. I’ll just sit back and paint my fucking cutesy little pictures as if absolutely nothing is wrong.” I start to get up, but he wraps his arms around me and holds me against him.

He presses his tongue into his cheek and smirks. “Are you done?”

I huff out a breath and try to stay in my pissed-off, queen-out moment. “I guess.”

“First off all, you aren’t my wife, because you aren’t a fucking woman.” He slides his hand between our bodies and grabs my cock. I gasp. “Secondly, I never said for you to be happy and oblivious.” He scoffs, “Like you could ever successfully do *that*.” He starts stroking my cock, which is totally unfair of him. “And finally you have never painted

anything that could be considered *cutesy* in your life.”

“I’ll have you know, I’ve painted a lot of cutesy pictures when I was little.” I arch my back as his thumb rubs over my slit. “Fuck.”

His eyebrow twitches and before I know it, I’m on my back with him above me. “It doesn’t matter what happens.” He kisses my neck. “If we lose everything but our names...” He lifts his head and looks down at me as he slides back into my body. “Because we’ll still have this.”

This: each other, love, sex, companionship, marriage, a life.

As always, I hear what he’s saying even if he’s saying it in a way no one else would. So for now, I arch up against him, I touch and kiss and caress him, and I decide that tomorrow I’ll start really worrying, but for tonight I’ll gladly lose myself to *this*.

*"Falling in love with someone isn't always going to be easy... Anger... tears... laughter.
It's when you want to be together despite it all. That's when you truly love another."*

~ Author Unknown ~

Friday, September 20, 2019

5:45am

Brian's POV

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, I straighten my Zegna tie, fasten my cufflinks, buckle my belt, and take one last look at my hair before walking to the closet. I remove a dark blue pin-stripe jacket and fold it over my arm as I make my way to the kitchen.

When I get there, I stop and lean against the doorframe, watching as Justin adds way too much cream to his coffee. He's wearing dark grey Brown Athletic sweatpants that hang loosely around his hips, accentuating his ass. I force my eyes away from his ass and up his body, still pink from the shower. His hair is damp and messy. His brow is slightly furrowed and he's biting the corner of his mouth. I know he's thinking about all the shit going on right now. I know he's worrying. The bitch of it is that he's not worried about Kinnetik, not really. He's worried about me. I find it both endearing and fucking annoying at the same time. I want to tell him to stop fretting like some mother hen, that I'm fine, but it wouldn't make him stop.

I move away from the doorframe and drape my jacket over the back of one of the barstools. I cross the room and wrap my arms around his waist. When he leans his head back against my shoulder, I kiss his neck.

As he lowers his head, he slides his hands over my arms and fingers one of my cufflinks. I don't have to look at his face to know he's smiling. I'm wearing the cufflinks he got me in Paris. I don't wear them often, and when I do I don't like to think too much about it.

"Big meeting today?"

I pull him against me and say nothing.

He turns around in my arms and rests his hands on my hips. He looks down and then up until our eyes meet. He runs his index finger down the front of my shirt. "This is my favorite suit."

"I know." He cocks his eyebrow, because nothing gets past Justin, ever. I move away from him and grab an apple from the bowl on the counter. Leaning back against the counter, I remove the stem of the apple. "Vague Bleue Cosmetics."

He picks up his coffee and takes a sip. "I didn't know you had a meeting with them."

I shrug. “I wasn’t sure they wouldn’t cancel again.” For the fifth fucking time.

“How do you know they won’t cancel today?”

I toss the stem into the sink and take a bite of the apple. Sweet and tart, just like I like them. After chewing and swallowing I tell him, “Because the owner, Luca, is in New York with his wife.”

“And that means he won’t cancel?”

“He’d better fucking not.” I pause. “It’s a twenty million dollar account.”

Justin raises his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. If I can sign them then all this shit with Mercedes-”

“Won’t be such a big fucking deal.”

“Exactly.” We stare at each other from across the kitchen. He drinks his coffee and I eat my apple. It won’t take away all the stress I’m dealing with trying to work up a fucking fabulous campaign for Mercedes, but it will give the company some clout, and may just keep a few accounts that are literally hanging on, waiting to see how the Mercedes deal goes down. After finishing the apple, I throw the core in the trash and wash my hands. “Is Gus still asleep?”

“I think so. He’s been keeping to himself a lot this week.” I noticed that as well. “I tried to ask him if anything was wrong when I saw him yesterday, but he just said-”

“I’m fine.” I turn around to see Justin nod. “Yeah, I got the same.”

“Do you think they broke up?”

I shrug. “Fuck if I know.” What I do know is if that punk did anything to my son, I’ll fucking cut his balls off myself. I’m pretty sure Justin feels the same way.

Justin crosses the room to the sink. “Guess it’s really none of our business anyway.” He rinses out his cup. “Oh...” He looks up at me as he places his cup in the sink and dries his hands. “Did you pay the electric bill...or did you want me to do it?”

I laugh because he’s so fucking random sometimes. Draping my arm over his shoulders, I pull him forward. “You do it.”

He runs his hand up my side. If I asked him point blank what he was doing, he’d say something like, “Just touching you,” or some bullshit like that. The truth is he fucking loves the feel of my silk shirt against his skin. He loathes designer clothes, except when they’re on me. “I’m going to pick up the dry cleaning after my meeting, so you don’t

have to stop after work.”

I kiss his temple and mumble, “Okay.” Cupping the back of his neck with one hand and resting the other on his hip, I kiss him. The flavor of his coffee, which now I know was flavored with caramel creamer, and the tangy flavor of the apple I ate mix and mingle in our mouths. After a minute or so, we pull apart, my forehead resting against his. “Nervous about the meeting?”

He shakes his head slightly. “Anxious.” He pulls back. “But kind of excited as well.”

I nod. “Just be-”

“Cautious, I know.”

I bring him forward again and cover his mouth with mine. This morning’s kiss reminds me of going to the carnival when I was little, and taking that first sticky sweet bite of a caramel apple.

Friday, September 20, 2019
11:37am

Gus’ POV

With a lit cigarette dangling from my lips, I pull my cell phone out of my messenger bag. Four missed calls. Two messages. I flip it open and press *1 to get to my voicemail. Taking a drag of my cigarette, I press the phone to my ear.

“First Message from ‘Grady’, today, 9:35am... ‘Hey...I have class in a few minutes... then my meeting with my final project advisor. I saw him a minute ago and he was on my ass about my lack of focus...I think my meeting with him is going to take a while so I don’t know if I’ll have time to-”

I flip the phone closed and shove it back into my bag. Fuck this shit. I knew Grady was going to be busy and that he might not be able to see me as often, but this shit is getting fucking ridiculous. I haven’t seen Grady since fucking Monday. Tuesday was a complete bust because Grady had to go to Unload earlier than he thought. Apparently dykes could care less if you give them a Hurricane instead of a Blue Hawaiian, but a queer will have your balls if you make that mistake. I lower my head, take another drag of my cigarette, and flick the end, watching the ashes get carried away by the wind. I’m starting to wonder what the point is of having a fucking boyfriend if I never get to fuck him or see him.

“Hey Gus.”

I exhale smoke as I lift my head. Ryan is standing in front of me. He’s wearing black

boots, ripped jeans, a Metals of Death t-shirt, and a grey hoodie. He has a JanSport (who the fuck carries a backpack anymore?) over his shoulder. I take another drag of my cigarette. "Hey."

"You okay?"

I exhale the smoke out of the corner of my mouth so that it doesn't blow in his face. "Perfect. Fucking fabulous." I pause. "Don't I look it?"

He shakes his head as he shoves his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. "Actually you look like someone just told you your dog died."

I scoff. "I don't have a dog."

His brows furrow slightly. "It's just an expression."

I laugh as I flick my cigarette to the street. Pushing myself away from the wall, I approach him and throw my arm over his shoulders. "What are you doing right now?"

He shrugs. "My roommate said I should find somewhere else to be." When he looks up at me I raise my eyebrow. "He said he and his girlfriend are going to be studying." His last word is accompanied by air quotes.

"Well...fuck that. Come over to my studio. We'll order pizza and get stoned."

His dark green eyes widen. "Yeah?"

I lean down slightly. "Unless of course you'd rather listen to your hetero roommate bangin' his girlfriend."

He pushes me away from him, laughing. "Fuck you."

I smirk and take a step back, holding out my arms. "Hey, how do I know you're not into het sex?" He grins and for one split second a flash of a memory invades my thoughts. I push it down, shove it away, back into some far corner of myself where it won't be seen or heard from again. "So you'll come over then?"

He smiles. "Yeah."

"Great." I step forward and throw my arm back over his shoulders. "Now," I point toward the street. "Make yourself useful and get us a cab."

**Friday, September 20, 2019
12:24pm**

Justin's POV

I'm sitting in the far back booth of Hello Deli!, lazily playing with my straw while waiting for Penelope Foster to show up. My mind should be on the upcoming meeting, but it's not. All I can think, over and over, is please let Brian land that account today. He's been so stressed out this week, even though he's been trying not to show it. He thinks he's pretty good at hiding it, but after all these years there is no one that can read Brian better than me. Every night this week he's come home with his jacket off, shirt sleeves rolled up, neck and ears red, muttering under his breath about the lackluster ideas that he and the Mercedes team are coming up with. Vague Bleue may not be a fifty million dollar account, but if it can alleviate some of Brian's stress then that's good enough for me. It's not that I don't care what happens to Kinnetik, but if I had to choose between it and Brian...well it's really no fucking contest.

I take a sip of my raspberry tea and look out the window at the people walking hurriedly along the sidewalk. Everyone in the city always seems to have someplace to be, now, now, now. It's a lot like L.A., except there no one walks anywhere, they drive. I rub my forehead, a dull ache that's bound to turn into a migraine pounding behind my right eye. I've been stressed myself, not only about Brian and Kinnetik, but about my own bullshit as well. Hawk called Tuesday to inform me that both Amy and Hartford's lawyers are trying to find a way out of the countersuits. At this point, I'm almost willing to make a deal with the both of them. I'm so fucking tired of it all already. I've tried to bring that point up to Brian, but he doesn't want to hear it. I tried to tell him it doesn't have anything to do with the money we're paying Hawk. He didn't believe me, of course.

"Justin Taylor?"

I turn my head to see a woman standing next to the table. She's tiny, with straight black hair that falls mid-chest. She's dressed in a short black skirt, a purple dress blouse, and a black suit jacket. Everything about her is designer, down to her Gucci briefcase and purse. I only notice these things because I've been with a label queen for the last nineteen years. "Penelope Foster?"

I move to stand, but she waves me off and slides into the other side of the booth. After she sets aside her purse and briefcase, she removes her jacket. She leans back and smiles, revealing perfectly straight white teeth. "Please call me Penny, Mr. Taylor."

"Justin."

"Justin." She waves to a waitress, and orders a water, "Lemon on the side please." After the waitress leaves, she looks over at me. "Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me." The waitress brings her water with the side of lemon and asks if we are ready to order. "Not just yet," Penny replies and I nod in agreement.

When the waitress leaves again, I ask, "So why did you want to meet me?"

She squeezes lemon juice into her water and sets the rind aside. "I'm not going to bullshit you." I raise my eyebrow. "I understand you had some issues with your last agency-"

I laugh. "That's a nice way of putting it."

She smiles. "Right, well, despite all of that I'd like to represent you. You're a hot commodity, and why other agencies aren't banging your door down to sign you is beyond me."

"Right." I lean back in the booth. "I've never heard of you or your agency, can you tell me a little about yourself and your business?"

"Certainly. I recently moved here from Los Angeles, where I worked for six years as an agent representative at MoHill Incorporated." I nod. That's a pretty well known agency on the west coast. "I have an MBA from Stanford, so while I enjoyed the work I was doing, my goal has always been to start my own agency. I finally saved up the money to do it, so here I am."

"So why not open an agency in LA?"

She laughs, light and airy. "Honestly?" I nod and smirk. "LA is a nice place, mostly, but everyone knows this is the place to be if you want to make something of yourself in the art world." She stirs her water with a straw. "Besides that, I was born and raised in Brooklyn. I've been wanting to move back for a while."

"Fair enough." I take a sip of my tea. "How many artists are you currently representing?"

She looks me right in the eyes. "None."

I cock my eyebrow. "So why should I sign with you?"

"You're one of the top selling artists in New York. I'm trying to start a successful business. I believe that I can move your career to greater heights and in the meantime turn a nice profit. As I see it, it's a win-win situation." She takes a sip of her water and watches me over the rim of the glass.

I furrow my brow. "Greater heights?"

She nods. "I have to admit I did a bit of research on you long before I decided to move here. You make roughly 1.8 million a year?"

"Roughly." I shrug. "Sometimes more, sometimes less." Right now, a lot fucking less, but if she's done her homework, I'm sure she knows that.

"And all that is from galleries that request you, correct?"

I nod. “Yes.”

“I understand you have some limitations as far as how much you can paint at any given time.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I just think that an artist of your stature should be able to pick and choose the galleries where you want to show, not the other way around.”

I sit back in the booth. I’ve never really thought about it. Since I’ve been with Amy, that’s how it’s always been done. She would come to me with galleries that wanted to show my work and I’d either agree to it or not.

“Justin.” Penny clasps her hands on top of the table. “It’s quite surprising that after fourteen years and all your success, you still have not had shows at some of the top galleries, here in New York or in other places.” She widens her cool blue eyes. “Those places should be fighting each other to get you, not requesting you because they need someone to fill a blank wall,” she adds pointedly.

I stare back at her for a minute. She’s fucking right and how fucking stupid do I feel for not noticing all this shit before? Maybe that’s why a person should never be friends with the people they work with, who manage their careers, because twelve years down the road you see what a fucking doormat you’ve been. I like her, Penny, she’s honest, all business, no bullshit. “Do you have a copy of a contract?”

She smiles. “It so happens that I do.” She opens her briefcase, pulls out a contract, and slides it across the table. “I’d be happy to work out any details with you, restrictions, clauses, etc.”

I flip through the contract, and then look back up at her. “I’ll have my lawyer look over it and get back with you.” I’ll also have to talk it over with Brian.

She nods. “Of course. Now how about we have lunch? I’m starving.”

I smile and agree. I don’t want to give any indication one way or the other, but I’m thinking that she’s right. It seems like a win-win situation for the both of us.

Friday, September 20, 2019
3:26pm

Brian’s POV

I lean forward, plant my elbows on the desk, and press my fingers to my temples. Looking down at the board for Vague Bleue Cosmetics, my eyes scrutinize every fucking

detail. It's fucking perfect. It's the right model, the right font, the right colors, the right composition, the right fucking everything. I know dick about make-up, but even the pitch was fucking flawless. None of it seemed to please or displease Luca Colsson. The man, who reminds me of fucking Santa Clause in a designer suit, simply looked over to his wife, Simone, who looks like she was put together by highly skilled and expensive plastic surgeons, and nodded. They both stood up, Luca saying, "It's innovative Mr. Kinney, we'll be in touch." as he shook my hand. That was it. It wasn't a no, it wasn't a yes, it wasn't even a fucking maybe. I know what he's doing. I have been in this business too long not to know when I'm being played. Fuck. I pick up the board and fling it across the room. Even that is unsatisfying because it simply glides through the air and lands without a sound on the carpeted floor.

I tilt my head back and close my eyes. It's not even that I want the fucking account. I never really wanted it, but I fucking need it and that...that fucking pisses me off.

"Wow, you really outdid yourself."

My eyes snap open as I lower my head. Across the room Justin is holding the board for Vague Bleue in his hands. "What the fuck are you doing here?" My anger bleeds into my words.

Slowly he walks across the room, not looking up until he's set the board down on top of my desk. He crosses his arms over his chest, raises his eyebrows, and just stares at me. After a minute or so, he rounds the desk, pecks my lips, and walks out without saying a word. Sometimes I fucking hate when he does that, how he knows exactly what to do when I'm in a bad mood. He knows when I need to fuck him, he knows when I don't, he knows when I want him around, and when I don't. I look at my cluttered desk, on top of which is the board for that pompous fat fuck. Without thinking I shove everything on my desk to the floor, and just ride my anger like the best piece of ass I've ever had. I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Fuck." I'll be kissing that piece of ass later because I learned a long time ago that even if I don't do it on purpose, pushing Justin away isn't advantageous to any degree.

Friday, September 20, 2019
6:26pm

Grady's POV

I flip my phone closed in frustration and shove it into the back pocket of my jeans. Gus hasn't answered his cell phone or returned any of my calls all day. He's pissed and probably hurt. I promised him that I'd see him today, but when I got to NYAA my advisor saw me and ripped me a new one about my final project. He then informed me that we'd have a long talk about it at our meeting today, which we did. I knew that after going to class and then talking to my advisor, I wouldn't be able to make it to see Gus like I promised. The truly fucked up thing is, when I told Gus I'd see him today, he asked

in that voice of his that's as vulnerable as it is indifferent, "You promise?" It nearly broke my fucking heart. What else could I say but yes? Gus is strong, one of the strongest people I know, but at the same time he's not. He's like a living, breathing contradiction.

On Monday I told Gus that I wouldn't be able to see him as much as I had been. I zip up my worn coat as a gust of cool wind blows. Of course, I never expected things to be this hectic. This whole fucking week has felt like one endless day. I feel like shit. It's not because I haven't slept and haven't been able to paint because I'm so fucking exhausted. It's because I haven't seen Gus. I don't know how he is, not really, because it's hard to read a person like Gus over the phone. His body, his face, his eyes are how I know exactly how he's feeling. I can't tell shit from the monosyllabic phone calls we've had the last few days.

Fuck this shit. I have to see Gus. He's pulling away from me and I promised myself that I wasn't going to let him do that anymore. I'm worried about what he's doing, how he's doing. He doesn't really talk to anyone other than me or Justin and Brian. The last thing I want is for Gus to shut himself off and walk around in this world alone. I could never stand for that.

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket and flip it open. My father is an asshole, but if I've learned one thing from him, it's that breaking promises is more hurtful than not making any promises at all. I scroll through my contacts and press send call. "Larry?" I say before he can even utter a hello. "It's Grady."

Friday, September 20, 2019
6:58pm

Gus' POV

Sitting on the floor in front of the couch, I take a hit from the bong before passing it over to Ryan. I'm fucking stoned...more than stoned, but I don't really know what more than stoned feels like. Maybe I'm just...stoned. I lost count of how much we've smoked when I got out the bong. Fuck it. I'm fucking high and I don't give a shit because I fucking needed it. I needed something to take my mind off all the bullshit. Ryan leans against me, resting his head on my shoulder. "So your dad is a cop?" I pick up on the conversation we were having five minutes ago.

He exhales. "Yeah, in Jersey." He lifts his head, eyes widening. "My older brother is a cop too."

"No shit?"

"Yeah." He lays his head back on my shoulder and I automatically drape my arm behind him. "When I told him I was gay, his biggest concern was that I wouldn't want to be a cop."

I laugh. "You're fucking making this shit up."

He sets the bong aside and sits up on his knees, facing me. "I swear! He was like..." Ryan clears his throat. "Son...does this mean you won't be enrolling in the academy when you graduate?" He leans forward. "I told him that I never planned on enrolling in the first place." He shakes his head. "I thought he was gonna have a heart attack right there."

He leans a little to the left. I reach out to steady him. "Easy." Before I can think about what's going on, I feel his lips on mine. There it is again, some distant untouchable feeling, a memory, a moment of familiarity. I pull away from him. "What are you doing?"

His face flushes red. "Um...nothing." He laughs nervously as he stands up. "It's the drugs."

I watch as he crosses the room. "Right."

He picks up a tube of oil paint and waves it at me. "You paint?"

I push myself up and cross the room. Taking the tube from him, I return it to the table, placing it back in its rightful spot. "No." My eyes scan the tubes of paint. All of this, the brushes, the blank canvases, the easel, is for Grady. I was feeling particularly pathetic yesterday, and this is what I did. I thought that if he had an area set up here, maybe he'd spend time with me, even if he was only painting. I'm fucking pathetic.

"Oh."

I look down at him, my head swimming as everything becomes fuzzier...duller. "Why did you kiss me?" He tries to step back, but I stop him. "Hey." I cup his face with my hand. His eyes look everywhere but at me. He's biting his lip so hard that I'm afraid at any moment it's going to start bleeding. I tap his lips with my index finger. "Stop."

His eyes meet mine as he lets out a long sigh. "I...I..." He removes my hand and steps back. "You know I think you're hot."

I smirk. "Thanks, but you know I have a boyfriend."

"Yeah? Well why isn't he here with you, then?"

I furrow my brow. "Fuck you." Fuzzy, dull, boiling, anger...below that somewhere... fear, depression, loneliness. I shake my head. Fuck this. I grab my camera from the table and walk to the door. My thoughts are going lightening fast one minute and lethargically slow the next.

“Gus, where are you going?”

I turn around and hold out my arms. “I’m going to take a picture that represents the tragic flaw of my fucking life.” My words come out as a half-sneered, half-screamed, half-choked sob.

I turn away from him; feet bare, no jacket, and walk out the door. This is why I don’t fucking get high. It makes me feel fucking insane, more insane than I already am. I take the stairs, racing down them as if my life depends on it. Behind me I hear Ryan calling my name, but I don’t stop. It’s in my head now, in my drugged-out, fucked-up mind. Inspiration so pure it’s like a line of cocaine on a mirror. I laugh at myself as I reach the gallery. Like I would know. I’ve never done anything harder than pot and E.

With my camera gripped tightly in my hand, I push open the gallery doors and step outside. Fuck everything. Why even fucking bother anymore. None of this shit is worth it. I should have just fucking died that night. It should have been me fucking burning alive, screaming as the flames slowly and painfully melted my skin, torturing the last of my life out of my body, searing my soul. Then...then at least I’d know what hell feels like. I laugh and turn on my camera. I have to blink my eyes because my vision is blurry and unfocused. It doesn’t matter, nothing does. Without hesitation or pause, without thinking or feeling or knowing, I step off the curb and into traffic. The perfect shot. “Here Professor,” I aim my camera at an oncoming car. “Feel what it’s like to be me.” Snap.

Friday, September 20, 2019
7:10pm

Grady’s POV

Instead of taking a cab, I decide to walk to Gus’ studio, hoping that’s where he’ll be. I need to walk just to give myself some time to think about the situation that I’ve gotten myself into. Working at Unload has been great money-wise. I’ve made almost five hundred dollars already, but it’s hurting my art and taking away my time with Gus. It’s only been four days and yet every day I ask myself if it’s worth it. Is it really fucking worth losing him? I can feel him slipping through my fingers, shutting me out, drifting.

“Gus? Gus, what are you doing? Stop fucking around. Gus!”

Tires screech against asphalt. My heart pounds against my chest. Fear trickles down my back as a cold sweat. All thoughts leave my mind, except one...run. My shoes slap against the concrete, my breath comes out as fast-fading fog. The scene unfolds before me like a twisted nightmare. A short guy is gripping Gus’ arm, yelling his name over and over. All around cars skid to a stop. Some people are out of their vehicles, yelling, “Get the fuck out of the way you fucking lunatic.”

It takes me less than a minute to reach him. He’s frozen, his face is blank, his eyes void

of emotion, his body shaking with each labored breath. I try to push away the guy that has his arm, but he doesn't let go. Fear gives way to anger and I turn on him, grabbing the front of his shirt in my fists. "You need to back the fuck off and let me handle this." My words are low and harsh. I didn't know I could sound like that...like my father. I release the guy and turn back to Gus. Without giving it much thought, I wrap my arms around his waist, half-carrying, half-dragging him toward the gallery. I yell over my shoulder to the young guy who obviously knows Gus, "Come open the fucking door."

This is so fucked. The guy runs up the stairs and holds the door open for me. Once we are inside, I push Gus against the wall, holding his face between my hands. "Gus, it's Grady."

It takes less than a second, his breath hitches and his eyes clear. He looks right at me before closing his eyes and leaning his head back. "Fuck." He tries to hold back, but he can't. We slide to the floor, a twist of arms and legs. He grips the back of my jacket and pulls me as close to him as he can get me. "Fuck this shit, Grady. Fuck it."

I hold him just as tight and press my lips to his ear. "I've got you. I'm here." It's the only thing that I can think to say.

Friday, September 20, 2019
8:39pm

Justin's POV

Lying back on the bed, I stare at the ceiling and think that the way the lights from the city look against it might make an interesting abstract. It's funny that I've never noticed it before now. As my eyes trace invisible lines, I think back to my meeting with Penny. She had good ideas and she didn't bullshit me. Signing with her could actually be a good thing. She said some very interesting things, especially about how my career has been handled by Hardtford, and how she wants me to take a more active role in it. I actually thought I had an active role in it this whole time, but I realize now that maybe I didn't, and I wonder how the fuck that happened. Penny was right, and everything she was saying made sense, especially the fact that I haven't been showcased at the bigger galleries even though I'm thought of as a highly successful artist. In retrospect, it feels like I've been getting fucked for years by Amy and Hardtford.

"Why are you lying in the dark?"

I lift my head slightly. Brian is leaning against the doorjamb, jacket off, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair is slightly mussed, probably from the wind. "I didn't hear you come in." I sit up and lean back against the headboard. He raises his eyebrow and walks towards me.

He comes to my side of the bed, looks right at me, and shrugs his shoulders. "Sorry about this afternoon."

I shake my head. "I caught you at a bad time."

He sits down on the edge of the bed and caresses my face. "Maybe, but-"

I pull his hand from my face, but interlace my fingers with his. "I do it to you all the time." I shrug. "I knew it wasn't about me." I kiss his wedding ring. "Did you lose the account?"

"No, but they didn't sign with us either."

I cock my eyebrow. "They're shopping?" He nods. "But didn't Kinnetik go to them and suggest a national campaign?"

"Yeah." He lets out a long breath and looks toward the window.

"Hey." I tug his hand until his eyes meet mine. "Kiss me."

The corner of his mouth lifts in a half-smile, half-smirk as he leans forward and kisses me. His free hand, as always, finds its way into my hair, while mine strokes the back of his shirt. I love the way the fabric feels against my skin. Brian pulls back after a minute. "How was your meeting?"

I laugh and pull him down on top of me. "I promise to tell you all about it...after you fuck me."

He looks down at me with a smile in his eyes, even if it's not on his lips, and whispers, "Okay."

Freeing his hand from mine, he removes his tie and tosses it aside. When he starts to unbutton his shirt, I stop him. "I love this shirt." I run the back of my hand down the front of it.

He raises his eyebrow. "If you get anything on it-"

"I'll buy you a new one." I cup the back of his neck and kiss him hard. It wouldn't be the first shirt I've had to replace.

He pulls away and laughs as he licks my neck. "I can't believe your kink is silk shirts."

I unbutton his shirt just enough to slip my hands inside of it. "Not all silk shirts, just the ones Zegna makes."

He laughs and nips my earlobe. "And they call me a label queen."

I wrap my legs around his waist and use my body weight to flip us over. We stop talking and start kissing, touching, rubbing. Maybe later we'll order some Thai food and talk about my meeting and he'll tell me more about what happened at the office, but right now, we're doing this.

Friday, September 20, 2019
8:39pm

Gus' POV

Grady is sitting across the table from me, drumming his fingers on the discolored and scratched wood surface and looking everywhere but at me. After I got a hold of myself at the studio and Ryan left, Grady and I got in a cab and came back to his place. We didn't talk about it, we just both silently agreed to it. We haven't actually said anything to each other since he pulled me up from the gallery floor. I twist an unlit cigarette between my fingers, wishing I could light it. He's pissed off at me, but maybe I'm pissed off at him too. Why had he even been there tonight? He was supposed to be at work.

"Why the fuck did you do that?" I'm not surprised by the anger in his voice.

I shrug my shoulders, but don't take my eyes off the cigarette. "I don't-"

"Was it because you were so fucking high you weren't thinking straight? Or was it because you were fucking *trying* to kill yourself?" He pauses so long that I look up and when our eyes meet he says, "Or did you just want to see if *Ryan* would rescue you?"

I crush the cigarette in my hand, and stand up so fast that the chair I was sitting in falls over. "Fuck. You."

He stands up and throws out his arms. "Then why did you do it?"

I shake my head. "Fuck this." I don't need this shit. I walk around the table and head toward the door. Fuck him. It's not like he's even... I turn around and Grady almost runs into me. I take a step back to give myself space. "Why the fuck were you even there? I thought you had to work."

"I made a promise."

"Fuck your promises." I turn around and reach for my coat from the peg by the door.

"He looks just like him."

My insides freeze as everything I'd been trying to push away all day comes rushing back over me like ice water. Slowly, I turn to face him. "What?"

He crosses his arms over his chest. "Ryan. He looks just like-"

"Shut the fuck up." My voice is low, deadly in its warning.

"Darken the hair, give him brown eyes-"

I grab him by the front of the shirt. "I said shut up."

He doesn't move, just stares back at me with fire burning in his eyes. He's not scared, not even a little. "If you want him, if that's what you want, you better fucking tell me right now." He grabs my hands and removes them from his shirt and pushes me back. "If he's what you want, have the balls to tell me."

"I don't want him," I snap. "I want you. Only *you* haven't exactly been around."

He steps toward me and lowers his voice. "Did you fuck him?"

"No."

"But you want to."

I furrow my brow. "Don't tell me-"

"I'm sorry I've been busy. I'm sorry that I haven't been around." He licks his lips. "What do you want me to do?"

I shrug. "Whatever you want." I grab my jacket and put it on.

"You're just going to leave?"

"Yeah, well, maybe I'll go fuck Ryan." I know as soon as the words leave my mouth that I've gone too far, but he's pushing me too hard from all sides. He doesn't say anything, just turns, walks down the short hallway, and closes himself up in his bedroom. Fuck. I lean back against the door and bang my head against it. "Fuck."

Friday, September 20, 2019

10:02pm

Brian's POV

With our hands pressed palm to palm, and our fingers interlaced, Justin pushes himself up before slowly lowering himself back down on my cock. He squeezes my hands with his and my cock with his ass, eliciting a gasp from my mouth. He's been riding my cock at this excruciating slow pace for the last ten minutes. He looks fucking beautiful as he

moves above me. His damp hair falling over his brow, his eyes taking on a deeper shade of blue, his mouth parted ever so slightly, and his skin pink from exertion. Somewhere in between our first fuck and this one, my shirt has made its way onto his body. The silk sticks to his sweaty skin, and for a moment I think that he's not the only one who has a shirt fetish. He strokes my cock again with his ass so slowly that it makes me hot and crazy simultaneously.

When he raises himself again, I lift my hips and thrust into him. He throws his head back and moans my name. I almost come right then. "Stay there," I tell him as I lower my hips and thrust back into him. His slow torturous rhythm was so fucking intense that my quick hard thrusts have us coming within minutes. He collapses on top of me. I release his hands and push them under the shirt to stroke his sweat-slicked back.

We lay there for a few minutes as we catch our breath, our wet heated bodies pressed together, my cock softening in his ass, our hands on each other's skin. "Mmm." He kisses my chest and sighs.

I smile. It's pathetic really, but that satisfied little sound just makes me fucking happy. "Aren't you hot?" I tug on the shirt.

"Yeah, but I don't want to move."

I laugh. "Don't fall asleep. I haven't eaten all day and I'm fucking hungry."

He slides his cheek over my skin. "Yeah? I was thinking about ordering Thai earlier."

"No, that's too fatty for this late." I smack his ass lightly. "Which you know."

He chuckles. "I tried. That new sushi place delivers, I think."

"Did I like their food?" I don't fucking remember.

I feel his smile. "You said it wasn't bad."

"Ah...yeah, let's get that." I pick his head up from my chest and kiss him. "You order and I'll start the shower."

He cocks his eyebrow. "You order and *I'll* start the shower."

I roll my eyes even though I know I'm going to give into him anyway. "Whatever."

He grins big and wide before kissing me deep and hard. For some reason, moments like this make me realize how fucking amazing my life is and how different it might have turned out had I given up on him...on us. I wrap my arms around his back and roll us over, kissing him harder. I don't even want to imagine how fucking sad and pathetic my life would have been, and I'm glad I don't have to.

Friday, September 20, 2019

10:02pm

Grady's POV

I wake with a start when I feel him behind me. He drapes his arm across my stomach and rests his cheek against my neck. I thought he left. I look at the clock; it's been over an hour since I came in here, hurt, afraid, and angry. I know I overstepped some line I shouldn't have. I mentioned Ashley. I was just so fucking pissed off for what he did, for that Ryan guy being there. When they went up to Gus' studio to get their bags, I stayed downstairs because I needed a minute to get my shit together. When they walked back down, and Gus' arm was over Ryan's shoulders, I just felt this fucking ache inside my body. It wasn't Gus; it was Ryan, the way he was looking at him like he was a fucking god or something. He wants Gus, and Gus probably knows it. That's all I could think about all the way back to my apartment. It festered and boiled under my skin. It cut me and made me bleed green. I let my emotions rule me and I said things that I shouldn't have. I deserved that last comment, even if it hurt, because I hurt him first.

"I miss you," he whispers in the dark.

I close my eyes briefly and grab his hand. "I know."

He runs his thumb over the back of my hand. "I don't want to fuck him. I just thought it'd be nice...to have a friend to hang out with when you're not around."

"I want you to have friends." I do, not in place of me, but because he doesn't have anyone but his dads and me. I don't want him to feel like if we aren't around, he doesn't have anyone. I don't want him to feel alone and I know that he does sometimes. Maybe I don't want him to be friends with Ryan, but I don't own Gus and it's not right for me to pick and choose who his friends are. "I'm sorry for what I said." Everything I said.

"Me too."

I roll over and look up at him. "Gus." I lay my hands on either side of his face. After a minute of staring at each other, he lifts his eyebrows. I take a deep breath. "I love you."

His eyebrows lower. "You do?" His voice is so soft and so fucking vulnerable that it makes me ache.

"Yeah, I really do." Believe me, just believe me.

He traces my lips with his index finger before leaning down to kiss me. I didn't expect him to say it back, and maybe I don't care if he ever does, but I needed to say it. I needed him to know. I fucking love him and I don't care what shit we have to go through to

make this work. I don't know how to explain it any other way than this, Gus is everything to me. With all his perfections and imperfections, he's all I've ever wanted, and somehow I think he's all I'll ever need. I don't know if he feels the same way, but I hope against hope that he does.

"In avoiding all pain and seeking comfort at all costs, we may be left without intimacy or compassion; in rejecting change and risk we often cheat ourselves of the quest; in denying our suffering we may never know our strength or our greatness."

~ Rachel Naomi Remen ~

Friday, September 20, 2019

11:51pm

Justin's POV

As I gather up the take out boxes from Kobe, I glance over at Brian. Chest bare, grey sweats riding low on his hips, he walks towards the couch flipping through the contract Penny gave me. During dinner I told Brian about my meeting with Penny and everything she said. Now that he actually has the contract in his hands, I'm nervous about what he'll say. I really think signing with Foster Artist Inc. will be good for my career, but I don't want to make a hasty decision just because she's the first agent that's shown any interest in me since everything with Amy and Hardtford became public knowledge. I throw away the take-out boxes, wash and dry my hands, and head to the living room. By the time I get there, Brian is sitting on one side of the couch leaning against the arm rest with his legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles.

As I approach the couch, he looks up. "It seems pretty standard." I nod and sit down across from him. I lean back against the arm of the couch and stretch out my legs so that my feet are on either side of his. "It looks like the agency only wants twenty-five percent of the profits from each show."

"Yeah, I saw that. It's better than the thirty-five percent that Hardtford was getting. Plus, you'll notice that as the agent, Penny will be paid through the agency and not from the profits."

He cocks his eyebrow. "Will she be your agent?"

"I asked if it was possible that once the company becomes successful and she gets more artists, if I'd be assigned another agent. She said it's not out of the realm of possibility, but for the duration of that contract," I nod to the papers in his hand, "she would be my agent."

He looks down at the contract and flips back to the beginning. "A year," he mumbles.

"I figured you'd like that. She doesn't believe in long-term contracts."

He smirks. "That's smart on her part."

I smile slightly. "I knew you'd think so."

He turns to a back page of the contract and hands it over to me. "Did you see the buyout clause?"

I take the contract from him and look at it. "Yeah, if either party is dissatisfied then either party may buyout the other for a set amount of \$500,000." I look up. "What do you think of that?"

He leans over and picks up his cigarette case and lighter from the coffee table. "I think..." Opening the case, he pulls out a cigarette and lights it. He takes a drag as he returns the items to the coffee table. "That she designed this contract with you in mind." He looks over at me as he exhales. "After the standard bullshit, all the additional clauses are things that normally we'd want Hawk to tag on, and some we wouldn't have thought to add until recently." He reaches for the contract and flips to another page. "She even put a clause in here that, albeit abstractly, refers to your 'production limitations'."

I shrug and pick at a loose string on my dark blue sweat pants. "Well, she did say she researched me before and after she came to New York."

He takes a drag of his cigarette, holds it in, and exhales. Through the smoke our eyes meet. "You mentioned that she said something about shows out-of-state?" His play at nonchalance does not go unnoticed, or unnoted.

I've thought about that. I knew immediately that while having my art shown in other states, in other galleries outside of New York, would be exciting and beneficial to my career, I also know that spending long periods of time away from Brian is not something that I'm willing to negotiate. We've spent too much time apart as it is to go through it all again, and for basically the same reason. "I'm going to have Hawk add a clause stating that I will only be required to attend x amount of shows out-of-state per year. It will be non-negotiable."

Brian swipes his bottom lip with the pad of his thumb. "Do you think that will cause a problem?"

I shrug. "If she wants me to sign with her agency as badly as I think she does, then no, I don't think it will be an issue." I pause and tilt my head to the side. "So, what do you think?" I wave my hand in the air.

He shrugs and puts out his cigarette in the ashtray. "I think it looks pretty fucking promising."

I don't stop the smile that spreads across my face. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." He rolls his lips into his mouth to hide a grin.

My smile widens, if possible, as I crawl across the couch and straddle his thighs. I take

the contract away from him and toss it to the floor. As I rest my hands on his shoulders and lean forward, his fingers wrap around my waist. “So you think I should do it?”

He runs the back of his left hand across my stomach. The cool touch of his ring against my skin causes me to break out in goosebumps. “Yeah, I think you should.” He arches his eyebrow. “If she follows through with the plans she has in place in that contract,” he nods his head towards the floor, “I can retire and you can support...me.” He lodges his tongue in his cheek.

I huff out a laugh and shake my head. “Already thinking of retirement, are you?” I shrug, and keep my eyes locked on his. “I guess someone your age-” The rest of my sentence is swallowed by his mouth, the words pushed back by his demanding, reprimanding tongue. His right hand moves from my waist, up my body and into my hair, as the other pushes its way beneath the waistband of my sweats.

Our kiss breaks momentarily as Brian flips us over so that I’m on my back and he’s above me. “I’ll show you...” He kisses my neck as his fingers wrap around my cock. “What men my *age* think about.”

I press my lips to his ear and whisper, “Do your worst, Mr. Kinney.” He bites down on my skin where my neck curves into my shoulder and I know his *worst* will be the most mind-blowing fuck we’ve had all week.

Saturday, September 21, 2019
8:28am

Grady’s POV

I wake up with the sheets twisted around my legs. Before I even open my eyes, I know I’m alone. The heaviness of dread sets in my chest as I try to fight my way back towards the comfort of sleep. I want to put off whatever I’ll have to face when I open my eyes for as long as possible. I console myself by rolling onto my side and blindly reaching for a pillow. Hugging it to my body, I press my face into the softness, inhaling the faint scent of citrus and mint. I made a mistake, possibly more than one, last night. Not only did I bring up Ryan and my jealousy of him, but I also let my secret jealousy of Ash stain my words. Only now, with nothing left to hold onto but this pillow, do I know that even the profession of my love was tainted by it. I should have known when Gus kissed me, held me, but didn’t attempt to take it any further, that something was wrong. Instead I buried my face in his neck and let him hold me tightly, possessively, soaking up the last dregs of whatever he was offering me of himself.

With trepidation I open my eyes, blinking against the bright rays of sunlight filtering into the room. Releasing the pillow from my arms, I slowly untangle the sheets from around my legs. Despite the noise of the neighbor’s TV, the sounds of the city, and the bang of the pipes, the silence of my apartment bears down on me. Slowly I make my way out of

the bedroom and down the hall. My eyes survey the living room for any signs that Gus might, by some slim chance, still be here. I close my eyes briefly and fight against the surge of emotions rushing over me. When I walk into the kitchen, my mind set to follow the normal routine, I stop after taking only two steps into the small space. Propped up against the coffee machine like a bad omen in a horror film is a single sheet of paper folded in half. I stare at it for a long time, my eyes unblinking. It's like a horrible car accident on the freeway, you know you shouldn't look, but you can't help yourself. When the image of the paper blurs, then doubles, I close my eyes and turn my head away.

Taking a deep shaking breath, I force myself to face it, to walk towards it, to pick it up and hold it between my shaky fingers. My heart pounds against my chest, my stomach coils in on itself, and I stop breathing for one brief moment. I furrow my brows, capture my bottom lip between my teeth, and bite down as I unfold the paper.

Grady,

I haven't been fair to you, in many ways I suppose. I probably should have stopped whatever was happening between us long before now, but I didn't. Maybe I was too weak to do it. I needed someone, and you were there for me in more ways than I probably ever deserved. I can't explain why I did what I did last night, but I can tell you that it didn't have anything to do with being high, killing myself, or looking for someone else to rescue me. I wish that I could tell you why I did it, but I just can't. I'm only sorry that you had to see me fall apart again and that it hurt you. This last week, with you not being around, I realized how dependent I've become on you. A week without you and I felt as if the bottom of my world had fallen out. That's not healthy, Grady, for me or for you. I'm going home for a few days, to Canada, to try and figure some things out. Take care of yourself, Grady.

Gus

Take care of myself. Take care of myself? Is that his version of good-bye and have a nice life? That's what it sounds like...that's what it fucking *feels* like. I try to blink away the sting of tears. I don't know if I'm hurt, or angry, or both. Just as I'm looking back down at the sheet of paper, hoping it will disappear from between my fingers, from existing at all, something on the counter catches my eye. The paper falls from my hands as I pick up the key from the countertop. It's not just any key, it's the extra key to my apartment that I gave Gus a month ago. I close my fingers around it, squeezing it so hard the teeth bite into my skin. I stumble back a few steps and sink to the floor when my back hits the counter. Once I'm on the floor, I open my hand and stare at the offending piece of cheap metal lying heavy on my palm. His letter may have been ambiguous, but this, this says everything that letter doesn't.

It's over.

I throw the key across the small room, finding little satisfaction in the noise it makes as it

hits the wooden cabinet door and falls to the fake linoleum floor. I don't even bother to fight back the stream of hot tears sliding down my face. I give in to them, into my hurt, my fucking pain. Yeah, I made a mistake, a big one. I forgot the most important lesson my father ever taught me: I'm not worth loving. Sitting alone on my kitchen floor, my tears unstoppable, my stomach clenching, my heart ripped from my chest, I'm so fucking sorry I ever forgot that.

Saturday, September 21, 2019
9:15am

Brian's POV

I take a sip of my coffee and lean back in my office chair. I've been up for a few hours looking over the preliminary drawings the art department has come up with thus far for the Mercedes campaign. The ideas aren't bad. They just aren't what I'm looking for. Frustrated beyond comprehension, I get up and walk across my home office to the window. Looking out at the area that surrounds the loft, I press my fingers against the back of my neck in an effort to relieve some of the tension that's built up there. There is a part of me that really doesn't want to care about this fucking campaign, a part of me just wants to say, "They don't want us, fuck 'em." I firmly believe, even without Theodore's figures, that Justin and I will be fine no matter what happens with this or the lawsuits, but there is another part of me that knows that Kinnetik NYC needs this account. It isn't just about the money that account is currently bringing in, it's about the prestige it brought Kinnetik. It took it from a boutique agency almost into the vicinity of the high rollers of Madison Avenue.

There is a soft knock on the door, followed by Gus' voice. "Dad?"

"Come in." I walk to the desk and pick up my coffee cup. Slowly the door opens and Gus comes in dressed in a pair of dark 7 Jeans, a light brown Juicy Couture short sleeved vintage logo t-shirt, brown Vans, and a Howe 'Peacekeeper' jacket. I take a sip of my coffee and sit down in the desk chair. Despite the designer outfit, there are dark circles under his eyes and his hair looks as if he's been continuously running his hand through it. When our eyes meet, I am taken aback by the emptiness I see there.

"Where's Justin?"

"At the studio." I set down my coffee cup and lean forward slightly, resting my elbows on my knees and clasping my hands together. "What's wrong?"

He huffs a little and shrugs as he walks over to the bookshelf. With his back to me he says, "Everything, I guess." The despondent tone of his voice concerns me.

"Gus?"

He shakes his head slightly. "I want to go back home for a few days."

"Any particular reason why?" Maybe he's feeling homesick, although something is telling me whatever is bothering him is bigger than that.

He shrugs. "I just want to go."

"Well, you know you don't need my permission if you want to go home." He knows I'd never say no to that.

"I know."

"So then, what's really going on?"

He looks over his shoulder and raises his eyebrow. "You really want to know?"

"I asked, didn't I?"

Picking up the wedding picture of me and Justin, he says softly, "I don't really feel like talking about it."

I lean back in my chair, feeling somewhat out of my element. "Fair enough." I recognize a door slamming shut when I see it. "When are you planning on leaving?"

"As soon as the doorman calls to tell me the cab is here."

I furrow my brow. "That soon?"

"It was a last-minute decision." Somehow I doubt that, but I say nothing to call him on it. "Dad?"

I cock my eyebrow, but he doesn't turn around. "What?"

"What if I said I didn't want to come back?" The question throws me off and renders me momentarily speechless. As I try to process that question and think of how exactly to answer it, he sets the picture back on the shelf, adjusting it until it's in exactly the same spot as before, and turns around to face me. "Would you care?"

I try to keep the anger out of my voice when I reply, "Of course I would, and so would Justin." I stand up and walk over to him, placing my hands on his shoulders. "But, it's your choice where you want to be." Whether that is the right thing to say or not, I don't know.

"I know."

I search his eyes, taking in the blankness I see there, how completely void they are of any

emotion. It's a look I've seen in my own eyes. "What are you running from, Sonny Boy?"

He shakes his head. "I'm not running from anything." It goes unsaid, but we both know he's lying. The ringing of the phone puts a stop to further discussion. My hands fall from his shoulders as he walks to my desk and picks up the phone. "Hello? Okay, thanks." He hangs it up and turns around. "The cab's here." He crosses the room and hugs me quickly. "I'll call when I get there." He pulls away. "You'll tell Justin I said...that I'll see him...when I get back?"

I wonder if he really means that about coming back or not, but I nod. "I'll tell him."

He nods in return and walks out the door. Maybe I should have said more, pushed for him to really tell me what's going on with him, but I didn't. I'm not going to lie and pretend that Gus not coming back won't bother me, because it will. I'm man enough to admit that I want him to, that I like having him here, that it almost, but not quite, makes up for all the years I've missed out on. It is his decision to make, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't care if he stays in Canada. I know Justin and I have a lot of other shit going on right now, but that doesn't mean we haven't noticed when he hasn't been at the loft, or that we wouldn't care if he was permanently gone. We like having him here.

I return to my desk and sit down. I can't even look at the shit for Mercedes right now. I glance at the clock on my computer. Justin just left a few hours ago for the studio. I decide to give him a few more hours of undisturbed painting time before I go tell him about Gus. The possibility that he might be moving back to Canada really isn't something I want to tell Justin, but he has a right to know, and to be prepared for it if that's the decision Gus decides to make.

Saturday, September 21, 2019

12:11pm

Justin's POV

When the tips of my fingers start to go numb, I pull the brush away from the canvas. That's always the first sign that a cramp will soon follow. I'm actually surprised that I've managed to go this long without taking a break. Usually I'd keep going for another ten or fifteen minutes, but this painting is something so different and so important that the last thing I want is to risk something happening to it. I drop the paintbrush into a jar of turpentine and step back from the canvas. I've been working on it all week and have been making great progress. I'm a little over half done, which is quite an accomplishment, considering the hand. It's been years since I've worked on a painting where perfection was a goal. Abstract painting allows me a freedom that this kind of painting does not. Small errors or missteps in an abstract can be fixed to seem as if they are not mistakes at all. There is a certain amount of pride in finishing something that requires so much of my time and concentration. I'm actually thinking of making a series of paintings like this,

maybe to fit into the current market, or maybe just because I'm at a point in my career where I want show people that I'm more than an abstract artist, that my talents are wide and varied.

A knock on the door, followed by the rustle of plastic and light footfalls, pulls me from my thoughts. I turn around and smile at Brian as he walks into the room and lifts the plastic bag in his hand. "I brought lunch."

Still smiling, I walk over to him. He wraps his free arm around my waist and pulls me forward, kissing me quickly on the lips. The perfunctory nature of his kiss and the tension in his body immediately tell me something is wrong. I lean back slightly and look up. His brow is slightly furrowed and his eyes reveal a hint of worry. "What's wrong?"

He huffs out a laugh and releases me before walking over to the table and setting down the bag. As he removes his light jacket, I walk over to the table. When he sits down, so do I. The food he brought is ignored. Brian's eyes meet mine. "Gus went home for a few days."

"Okay." I know there is more. I try not to hold my breath.

He's quiet for a long time, his eyes scanning the room, until finally he meets my eyes. "He's thinking about moving back."

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. "What?"

He shrugs. "That's what he told me before he left."

I shake my head and frown. "Why?"

"He didn't say why." He sighs slightly. "I don't know how serious he is about it. He told me to tell you he'd see you when he got back."

I run my hands through my hair. "Shit." I don't even know what to say. I thought that Gus liked living here with Brian and me. I look up. "Do you think something happened between him and Grady?"

Brian shrugs. "I don't know."

"And he didn't say? Did you ask?"

"I asked what was wrong, but he wouldn't tell me."

"Or couldn't." Our eyes meet. "I don't want him to leave."

"Neither do I, but we both know that--"

I narrow my eyes. “That it’s his choice where he wants to be?”

Brian’s brow furrows and he snaps back a reply, “Well, isn’t it?”

I stare at the table, knowing that he’s right. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

“Look, Justin.” He pauses until I look up at him. “If he’s not happy here, then what can we do about it? We can’t force him to stay.”

“I know.” I click my thumbnail between my teeth. Maybe there is something we could have done, or still could do. Maybe we gave him too much freedom, or not enough. Maybe we should have tried to be around more...or maybe less.

Brian grabs my hand, pulls it away from my face, and lays it on the table, keeping his hand on mine. “Don’t start.”

Our eyes meet and I know that he’s having the exact same thoughts. Sometimes, and in certain situations, Brian and I tend to think and react the same way. After a while I try to reassure us both with a sentence that falls short of complete optimism. “I guess we can only hope that he decides not to leave for good.”

He looks down at our hands and, consciously or unconsciously, strokes my ring with the pad of his thumb. “I guess so.”

Saturday, September 21, 2019

12:40pm

Gus’ POV

Through the window the scenery changes from building-lined streets of the city to tree-lined streets of suburbia. I watch silently from the interior of Mom’s 2015 Ford Escape, banishing any and all unwanted thoughts to the Siberian part of my brain. I made it through the entire day perfectly numb, and I’d like it to stay that way. What’s better, feeling all the pain, or choosing not to? It’s a rhetorical question, at best. Of course, Mom asked question after question when she picked me up at the airport, mostly in regards to if I was okay and if anything was wrong. I deflected these questions with one simple tactic, “Aren’t you glad to see me?” In turn, she fawned over how great it actually *was* to see me and of course she was glad and Ma and JR would be equally so. Parents are easy as long as you know where they are the weakest when it comes to you. The ride home, thus far, has been silent except for the easy-listening music coming from the stereo. I’m more than surprised that she hasn’t tried to get me to talk. If I were her, I’d be a little more than suspicious at why I suddenly decided to make a spontaneous visit home. I should clarify, a spontaneous trip home, *alone*. I crumble that thought into a ball and throw it far away.

As the scenery outside becomes more familiar, I feel the tension already in my shoulders

tighten. This probably isn't the best plan, but it feels like the only logical place I can be right now. I don't know how true that statement is. In fact, I doubt it's valid at all. Choosing to block out all emotions has an effect on how honest I'm being with everyone, including myself.

"Gus are you sure?"

"How come JR didn't come with you?" Deflect, deflect, deflect.

"Oh, she's at her friend Megan's. You remember her, right?"

I place my elbow on the door and rest my chin on the palm of my hand. "Vaguely."

"Well, they're attending another friend's birthday party this afternoon. JR should be back later this evening."

I nod my head, but say nothing. She doesn't try to ask me again if I'm okay or if anything is wrong, which just goes to prove that my methods of deflection are seamless, at least when it comes to Mom. When we pull into the driveway, I wonder if such tactics will work on Ma. The car comes to a stop, and as I grab my small duffle bag from the back and open the door to get out, I realize that no, it won't work on Ma. She's a fucking lawyer after all. That profession probably invented the word "deflection." After closing the door, I follow Mom up the steps and into the house.

Ma is standing in the foyer, her hands on her hips but a smile on her face, a combination of joy and concern in both her stance and her eyes. "Hey Ma." I set my bag down by the door and walk over to give her a hug.

After a second or two, she places her hands on my shoulders and holds me away from her. "To what do we owe this unexpected visit?"

I shrug and smile slightly. "Just missed you is all."

She raises an eyebrow for a split second, right before a full-on smile spreads across her face. "Well, next time try to give us a little warning." I wonder when she became so easy--or maybe I've just gotten better at this.

She pats my cheek, and for some reason, it makes me miss Grandma Deb. Holding back a sigh, I nod and pick my bag up from the floor. "I will."

"I'm going to go fix some lunch." Mom looks over at me as she hangs her jacket on the coat rack by the door. "Anything special you want?"

I want to tell her that I'm not hungry, but that's not really an option when trying to fly under the radar. "I ate at Dad's before I left, so maybe," I shrug, "just a sandwich." They both smile at me and it makes me feel kind of sick and kind of guilty when I smile back.

As they finally kiss each other hello, I tighten my fingers around the strap of my duffle bag and race up the stairs.

I step into the cool darkness of my room, closing the door and leaning back against it, fighting the urge to scream, or cry, or maybe both. Instead, I close my eyes, letting my bag fall from my hands as I slide to the floor. The difference between here and New York is the stillness. In New York, complete quiet is rare and often so hard to come by that one might forget that deafening silences like the one living and breathing, gnawing and crawling its way inside me right now exist at all.

It is the perfect, most poetic of all moments to let the pieces of myself that I've gathered close to my body fly from my hands and splatter against the wall in the most spectacular array of colors anyone has ever seen. But as I sit there, eyes closed, breathing rushed and heavy, there is no letting go of any sort, there is only the self-imposed prison of numbness I've built around me, the walls too close and too high for anything to escape. The world behind my closed eyes remains cold and grey, the feelings locked away in an underground isolation tank, awaiting execution.

Sunday, September 22, 2019
3:38am

Grady's POV

I watch the passing car lights flash against the ceiling, cutting through the shadows already present there. Exhaustion of every facet kept me from making it to the bedroom when I walked in the door a little over fifteen minutes ago. Or maybe I just don't want to be in my bedroom right now...alone. Not for the first time tonight, I wish that I had a vice, something perfectly self destructive that I could fall into to numb the pain. Cigarettes, drugs, booze, sex... I sometimes wonder how I've made it through my life without becoming addicted to *something*. Still, I know none of those things would change anything, and so here I lay on my couch in my tight blue jeans and even tighter shirt, smelling like alcohol, cigarette smoke, and the sweat of a hundred dancing queers, wondering how someone I've known for barely over three months has somehow managed to absolutely dismantle me with a few words scrawled on a blank sheet of paper. How did I come to care about Gus so fucking much when I didn't give a flying fuck about Josh and I was with him for almost seven times as long? How did Gus manage to make me fall for him so quickly, and so completely, that now that he's gone it's as if the only thing that matters in the world has been taken from me?

This day has been a battle of raging emotions, all while trying to manage to function both at The Grand and Unload. To say that it's been an arduous day in every way, shape, and form is a fucking understatement. I spent all day analyzing and reanalyzing every single aspect of my relationship with Gus. I tried to remember everything I'd ever said or done, forcing myself to pinpoint the exact moment I'd asked for too much, wanted too much, needed too much, loved too much, *pushed* too fucking much.

“But, Grady, don’t stop pushing me. I’ll get there. Just don’t...give up on me...because I need you.”

I clench my hands so hard into fists I can feel the tips of my fingernails digging into my palms. “You fucking liar!” Anger, uncontrolled boiling rage, pushes the words out of my mouth at maximum volume.

The truth of the words themselves is questionable, because I don’t know if I believe them as much as I feel them right in this moment. Quickly the anger fades back into the hollowness of my misery.

Rolling onto my side, I close my eyes and press my face into the worn cushion of the couch. “You fucking liar.” The words come out muffled and broken this time, without tears to accompany them. Just like when I was a kid still living under my father’s roof, I’ll allow myself this one day to grieve, to wallow in the pen of my self-pity, letting it coat me like the stench of filth, and tomorrow I’ll wake up and I’ll go on as if what happened has not hurt me at all. It’s how I’ve survived this far, and it’s how I’ll keep on surviving. What choice do I have?

“Words can be beautiful, meaningful, and true, but the emotion they hold can sometimes be lost in translation from heart, to mind, to mouth.”
- Allie Q. -

Tuesday, September 24, 2019
3:01pm

Grady's POV

Dejection, disappointment, guilt, failure...love, I immerse myself in these emotions until I'm drowning. They permeate my skin, and absorb into my blood stream. They pulsate through my veins, down my arms, and into my fingers until they are purged from my body by way of paint on canvas. The canvas becomes more than a painting; it becomes a reflection of everything that has congregated inside me. Every thought and feeling bleeds out of me and onto the canvas. It's an ugly, brutal, emotional battle where every thing is raped and pillaged until the last thing remaining is nothing more than a visual representation with a tragic Shakespearean end. No one survives this battle, not even the storyteller...especially not the storyteller.

Yellow and brown become one to resemble flesh on the once white 40x40 canvas. Small red veins, barely visible from a distance, break the monotony of flesh tones. Crossing the middle of the landscape from one edge to the other is a wound. Red tints, tones, and shades color the exposed tendons and muscle still attached to yellow-white bone. The wound weeps azure laced with incandescent accents creating crystalline tears. Six canvases of this same image are leaning against the walls of the dining room. Each canvas is a bigger more detailed version of the last. It makes me feel like the kid from that old horror movie *The Ring* when he kept drawing that same black spiral circle over and over. I step back from the canvas, brush in hand. This is my biggest piece, in all senses of the word, to date. It might even be the best painting that I've ever created. Pieces of what I have been feeling since Saturday morning has flowed out of my body and onto these canvases. This last one, however, holds everything that I've been desperately trying to eradicate from deep within the caverns of my body. I trade my flat brush for a thin tip and sign my name in the bottom right hand corner. This is the first painting I've ever done that I can't give a name. It's not that there isn't a word to associate with it; it's that there are too many.

As I step back from the painting, I feel the tightness of dry paint on my skin. I'm covered in it from the tips of my fingers, all along my arms, across my torso, and stomach. The grey sweats hanging loosely on my hips are ruined, but no matter how hard I scrub. It will take days for the paint that stains my skin to fade. Maybe some of it will simply be absorbed remaining always there, always inside me, just like his touch. I desperately shove that thought away. I close my eyes and tell myself the same things I've told myself

for the last four days, *I never really knew him, never really needed him, never really loved him.* My eyes snap open when someone knocks on my front door. I turn my head towards the sound and stare at the door as if I'm expecting it to open all on its own.

"Grady, it's Marci. I know you're in there."

Laying my brush aside, I cross the room. I met Marci my sophomore year at SVA. She was this living life balls-to-the-wall kind of person. She was so much of everything that I wasn't that I liked her before I even knew her name. We hit it off right away mostly because we balanced out each other's personalities. I open the door to see Marci standing in the hallway. Her long dirty blonde hair is pulled back from her heart-shaped face in a messy ponytail. She's dressed in an unbuttoned oversized green plaid shirt over a white tank top, a short blue jean skirt, black fishnets, and green Dr. Martens. On one shoulder hangs an oversized bag, the plaid shirt is falling off the other shoulder revealing her lightly tanned skin. Marci is convinced that someday Grunge will make a comeback.

Her dark green eyes narrow as they sweep over my body. "You look like shit."

She kisses my cheek in passing as she enters my apartment. "Thanks," I mumble as I close the door. "What are you doing here?"

She throws her bag on the couch, turns around, and crosses her arms over her chest. "I want to go to Unload."

I lean back against the door and shrug. "So?"

"So," She raises her eyebrows. "You're going with me."

Furrowing my brow, I push myself away from the door and walk towards the kitchen. "Why would I do that?" I look over my shoulder as she follows me. "Where's Beth?"

She sighs. "Beth is in Boston." Marci hops up on the counter. "With her *mother*."

I roll my eyes. "You broke up again?"

"We're just not marinating in the same juices, you know?"

I cringe and open the fridge. "Marci, I really don't want to hear about your juices." I pull out two cans of Big Red and hand her one as I shut the fridge.

She smirks as she opens her soda. As I open mine and take a drink she says, "See my juices subconsciously made you thirsty."

I roll my eyes as I lower the can. "Can we please stop talking about your juices?"

She smiles and looks around my apartment as she takes a sip of her soda. "You've been

busy.”

I shrug. “Found my muse.”

Her eyes slowly come back to me and her eyebrows rise slightly. “You never lose your muse.”

I bark out a laugh. “Right, I forgot.” I slam the soda can on the counter and walk back towards the dining room. “I’m perfect.”

She jumps off the counter and follows me. “What’s wrong?”

I carefully removed the completed piece from the easel and set it against the back wall of the dining room, away from the others. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Mm-hm. So...where’s your boy-toy?”

I close my eyes briefly, thankful that my back is to her. “He’s not my boy-toy, and he isn’t here.” I grab a blank canvas and turn around. Marci is sitting down at the table, watching me suspiciously. “What?”

She shrugs. “Nothing, I’m surprised, that’s all.”

I set the blank canvas on the easel and face her. “Why?”

She chuckles and wraps a loose strand of her hair around her finger. “*Why?* How about the fact that since you’ve met him the two of you have been attached at the hip.”

I scoff as I grab a large flat brush from a jar on the table. “That’s not true.”

“Oh right, it must be my other best friend that kept telling me, ‘Sorry Marc, Gus and I are...’” She waves her hand in the air. “Fill-in-the-blank.”

I open a tube of yellow ocher and squeeze a dollop onto my palette. “I’m just giving you a taste of your own medicine.” I mimic her voice. “I’m sorry, Grady; I can’t come out with you. Beth and I are...” I lower my voice back to normal and wave my brush around. “Fill-in-the-blank.”

She raises her can of soda in mock salute. “Touché.” She takes a drink of Big Red. “So, seriously, where is he?”

I avert my eyes by way of loading paint onto my brush. “He’s in Canada...with his *mothers*.”

She sets her near empty can down on the table and leans back in the chair. “Well, aren’t we just a pair?” I shrug as I start to lay the background paint on the canvas.

I can feel Marci's eyes on me, watching me. I'm trying not to give anything away. It's not that I'm hiding what happened between Gus and I, it's just that I'm not ready to admit it...out loud. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Marci stand up. She walks around me towards my finished paintings.

"These are disturbing."

"They're supposed to be."

"Mm."

Before I have time to react, she reaches around me and yanks the paint brush from my hand. I turn around to face her. "Hey!"

She points the brush at me. "You and I are going out. We are going to have fun, and we are not going to think about Beth or Gus. So go get in the shower and start scrubbing all that paint off of your skin."

I sigh. "I don't want to go out." I grab my paint brush back from her. "Besides, why the hell do you want to go to Unload anyway? Like I don't spend enough time there as it is."

She smiles and leans forward slightly. "I have just two words for you: Free. Drinks."

Tuesday, September 24, 2019
5:40pm

Gus' POV

I'm alone, sitting in the club house that my childhood friend, Danny Bertram, and I built when we were eight. The club house is located in the woods that surround the back of the subdivision where we both lived, where my moms still live. I can't remember the last time I was here. It feels like I should remember, and I wonder why I can't. Maybe I was high. Maybe Ash was with me. Maybe we fucked.

I lean back against the rotting wood, look out the gaping hole on the opposite side of the small space where an oversized door once was (apparently, eight years olds are clueless when it comes to making things proportional to size), and light a cigarette. What I do remember is that sometimes I'd come here by myself to get away from my moms when they were fighting, or JR when she was bugging the shit out of me. I remember that even though I was alone I liked it. I would block out the sounds of the city that surrounded me on all sides and pretend that it was just me, alone, in my little make-shift home. It made me want to grow up and move to the country, to someplace no one could find me. I wouldn't be lonely because I'd finally be able to get that dog I always wanted, the one I couldn't get because of JR's allergies.

Then I went to visit my dad in Pittsburgh and we went to New York for a week to visit Justin. Justin had already been in New York for three years by then. I'd been to visit Dad every year since we'd moved to Canada, and sometimes Justin would come down and visit, but that was the first time Dad took me to New York to see Justin. On the plane ride there, I remember I was so scared. I'd heard my mom's talking about New York, and it always seemed like such a dangerous place. As soon as my feet hit the pavement, one hand in Dad's and the other in Justin's, I knew that I didn't want a quiet life of seclusion in the country, I wanted New York. I wanted loud traffic, crowded streets, and most of all the noise because it made me feel more alive than I ever had before.

It was a complete contrast to the quiet suburban life of Canada, and I wanted it. Just like I knew the moment I held a camera in my hands I wanted to be a photographer and go to art school somewhere. Just like I knew when I kissed Missy Johansson behind an old oak tree in the sixth grade that I didn't like girls like that. Just like I knew the second I saw Ash I wanted to be friends with him, and the moment when I knew I wanted more. Not so long ago, I knew exactly what I wanted and I knew exactly how I was going to get it. I had plans. I had my whole life worked out down to the last minuet detail. That's how I used to live my life, by my plans. Then, I woke up from a coma, and my world shifted on its axis, and all my plans, well, they were all gone. They were more than gone, they were destroyed and I couldn't bring myself to make new plans. For the first time in my life, I didn't know what I wanted.

Eventually, I realized that New York and living with my Dad was something I still wanted to do, but I had no idea how I'd get there, or even what I would do once I did. I just flew blindly and let life happen. Maybe that's how I got myself into the mess I seem to be in now, where I ran away from the one place I'd always wanted to live, the school I'd always wanted to go to, from my dad and Justin, and from the person who claimed not even four days ago that he loved me.

As I smoke the remainder of my cigarette, it begins to rain. I watch as the light sprinkle turns into a steady downpour. Absently, I wonder how it is that a place built by two eight year olds eleven years ago doesn't have any leaks in the roof or hell, how it's even still standing at all.

I know there are things I should be feeling. Emotions that should be provoked by my thoughts, but the emptiness, the hollow feeling of nothingness maintains it's hold. For the last few days I've tried breaking through the walls of my own emotional ineptitude in various ways. I unlocked the cedar box that holds all my physical memories of Ash, I finally read every single one of Grace's letters, and I went to Ash's grave. No matter where I went or what I did, I still wound up walking away feeling just as emotionally stunted as when I'd started.

"Jesus, it's pouring down." JR stumbles into the clubhouse. Her hair (minus any dye what-so-ever) is slightly wavy and dripping wet, her pale yellow Glam Rock t-shirt and jeans are soaked, and her canary yellow converse shoes are muddy.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I ask as I drop my cigarette into an old soda can.

She shoves her long wet hair out of her face and scowls. “Oh, you know, I just thought I’d go for a little stroll through the woods in the fucking rain.” She wipes the water off her arms as she walks over and sits down next to me. When I look over at her, she rolls her eyes. “Obviously, I was looking for you, asshole.”

I look back out at the rain and shrug. “Well, you found me.”

She sighs. “What are you doing here?”

“Reminiscing.”

“Cut the bullshit.” I look over at her. “I don’t mean *here*.” She waves her hand in the air. “I mean back home.”

I nudge her shoulder and grin. “What? You sick of me already?”

“No, I’m worried about you.”

I roll my eyes as I push myself to my feet. “I’m fine,” I say as I walk towards the doorway.

“You are so not fine.” She gets up from the floor and crosses the room to stand next to me in the doorway. “Is it Grady? Did you two have a fight or something?”

I furrow my brow. “I don’t want to talk about Grady.”

“Is it because of Ash?”

I narrow my eyes and look down at her. “And I’m definitely *not* talking about Ash.”

When her eyes start to search mine, I look away. She’s too perceptive for her own fucking good sometimes. “You know,” she says so softly the rain on the roof nearly washes out her words. “You can love someone, and not be *in* love with them.”

I scoff. “That’s such a fucking cliché.”

“Yeah, well, most clichés are true.” She pauses long enough to draw a look from me. “You love Grady, but you feel like you shouldn’t because of Ash.”

I shake my head and look back out at the rain now coming down in sheets. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Then tell me I’m wrong and I’ll shut up.”

I look over at her, reach out, tug at a strand of her still wet hair, and say nothing.

Wednesday, September 25, 2019

1:01am

Grady's POV

As I take a sip of my beer, I notice that the man at the end of the bar is watching me again. Without being obvious about it, my eyes quickly take him in. He's probably about my height, short black hair that he spikes with gel or something similar, cupid bow lips, and a lean build. I've seen him in here a few times when I've been working. He always orders a vodka tonic, and sits at the bar as if he has nothing better to do on any given night. Tonight, he's wearing a white dress shirt, the three top buttons undone revealing his smooth hairless chest, and tight blue jeans with black boots. There is no denying that he's hot, or that he's interested. The entire situation breathes an air of familiarity that has been lacking in my life for the last several months. Before Gus, it was always like this. I was never the pursuer. I turn away from the man, as my thoughts drift back to Gus. I've tried to stop thinking about him. I've tried every possible way to push him out of my mind. No matter what avenue I take to banish thoughts of him, I'm never successful. It seems as if every thought, no matter how random, leads back to Gus. It makes me angry and depressed at the same time.

I lean back against the bar and search the dance floor for Marci. She's pressed up against some hot muscular, obviously bi, guy. When she sees me looking, she grins. I roll my eyes and lift my beer in mock toast before taking a drink. When the current song fades out and the next song fades in without dropping the beat, Marci kisses the guy on the cheek and saunters towards me.

When she reaches me, I yell, "You're so drunk."

She grins and reaches for my beer. "Yes, yes I am, and let me tell you, it's a *beeeautiful* thing." As she takes a drink of her beer, her eyes survey the club. She looks back at me and lower the bottle from her mouth. "Some hottie is checking you out."

"The guy at the end of the bar in the white shirt?"

She laughs. "You noticed."

"It's kinda hard not too." She wiggles her eyebrows and I roll my eyes. "He's been cruising me all night."

"You should go talk to him."

I scoff. "What for?"

She hands me back my beer, and says over her shoulder as she heads back to the dance floor, “Why not?”

Casually, I look back over at the guy. He catches me looking and smile before pushing away from the bar and heading towards me. I look anywhere but at him and mumble, “Fuck.”

He leans against the bar right next to me. “Hey.” When he pauses, I take a long drink of my beer. “I’ve been trying to think of a way to approach you.”

I glance over at him, briefly noting that his eyes are light blue in color, or maybe it’s just the colored lights flashing in his eyes. “And this is what you decided on?”

He shrugs and smiles, showing his straight white teeth. “Yeah.” He laughs to himself. “I guess.” There is a long pause before he says anything else. “I’m Tobias, by the way.”

“Grady,” I reply without looking at him.

“So, you live close?”

I laugh as I take another drink of my beer. “Is that your pick-up line?”

“Uh...pretty much.”

I shake my head. “Smooth.”

“Well, I usually don’t pick up guys at clubs. It’s not really my scene.”

I look over at him and raise my eyebrows. “Oh? Haven’t I seen you here before?”

“Well...actually the first night I was with a friend and-”

“You know what usually works?” He shrugs. “Just coming out and saying it.”

He laughs. “Oh, so, something like, ‘You’re the hottest guy I’ve seen, want to come over to my place?’”

I smirk, and look away. “Yeah, something like that.”

“So, is that a yes or a no?”

The half-smile fades from my face as my thoughts scatter and fragment before coming back together to form the image of Gus. I close my eyes briefly, and open them. There is a part of me that wants to tell this really hot guy, that yeah, that is a yes, but there is another part, a part of me that despise myself, is still trying to hold on to Gus, that can’t

even think of saying yes. I can allow the hurt that has been slowly building in me since Gus left, to make this decision for me. There is a part of me that says I'm allowed to have fun. I'm allowed this, because Gus left me. He left me, so what would he care that I went home with some random stranger. In the grand scheme of things, what would it really matter?

Wednesday, September 25, 2019
9:18am

Justin's POV

I look up at Hawk, and shake my head. "You can't be serious."

He lifts his broad shoulders, and then leans forward, hands clasped on top of his desk. "I know they've brought other offers to the table, and I've agreed with you in regards to dismissing them, but this one." He waves to the paper in my hand. "I think you should take it." He leans back in the chair and I look down at the paper, almost in disbelief of what is written there. "I'm not arm-twisting you on this, and I know you'll want to talk to Brian, but the truth is," I look back up at him. "This is a guarantee, and if we see this thing through, we might not get a cent from them."

I shake my head, and stare at the paper in my hands, then back at Hawk. "What about Amy?"

"She's not backing down, but her position will definitely be weakened if you and Hardtford settle out of court, especially if they're the ones *paying you*."

The only thing I can think about right now is that this shit can be mostly over. This whole deal with Hardtford and the twenty million dollar lawsuit can just be fucking *over*. Not only would it be over, but they'll be paying *me* ten million dollars. Sure, Amy is still out for blood, but she doesn't have a case, Hawk's told me that more than once, and now, with Hardtford making a deal in *my* favor, she'll have even less of a chance of winning in court. For the first time, since this whole shit hit the fan, it feels like it's a win-win situation.

I look up at Hawk. "I'll talk to Brian, but I think I'm going to take the deal."

"I am in complete agreement with you. If Brian has any issues or questions have him call me."

I nod, and hand the paper back over to Hawk. "So, I'll call you after I talk to Brian and then I'll see you again on Friday to go over the contract with Penny and her lawyer?"

Hawk stands when I do, and stretches out his hand. "Ten AM sharp, and if for some reason my kid decides to make his appearance a day early, I've already briefed Anita, just

in case.”

I shake his hand and laugh. “Okay.” For the first time in months it feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I sling my bag over my shoulder and tell Hawk I’ll call him as soon as I talk to Brian. I don’t know how Brian will feel about the deal, but not even a month ago Hardtford wanted *me* to pay *them* ten million dollars. I wave good-bye to Cassidy as I exit the offices of Mathis and Clark. It’s a good deal, and hopefully Brian will see it that way as well.

Wednesday, September 25, 2019

10:06am

Brian’s POV

I gather up the file on the Mercedes account, the mock-ups for a variety of different commercial ideas, every single thing that has to do with this fucking account, and set it all on the table on the other side of my office. I’ve been thinking about it way too fucking much. That’s what my problem is, and the more I think about it, the worse it seems to get. Not only that, but this morning I got a call from Teri who heads up a small electronics company, and she expressed that she’s been less than satisfied as of late with the service we’re providing her company. That account is small, their marketing budget is less than a million dollars, but it’s that account, and the many others like it that allowed me to even get my foot in the door of big market accounts in the first place. Neglecting those smaller accounts now is just bad fucking business, and I can’t believe I allowed the Mercedes account to distract me from running my business efficiently. No account, not even Mercedes, is worth running my business into the ground. I’ve worked too hard and too fucking long to make this all happen, to make Kinnetik, both here and in Pittsburgh, a success. Fuck the Mercedes account. I made it all work before I signed them, and if I can’t find a way to keep their account, well I’ll fucking deal.

I walk back across my office just as the phone rings. I sit down in my chair, check the caller ID, and answer it. “Did you set up that meeting with the project managers?”

Cynthia doesn’t miss a beat. “4 PM today. I already adjusted your calendar.”

“Excellent.” I pause. “Anything else?”

“Yes, there is a young man in the lobby who says he’s here to see you.”

I smirk. “Is Justin fucking with the new girl?”

“No, he says his name is...” I hear the shuffling of papers. “Grady O’Toole.”

Shit. “Send him in.” I hang up the phone before she has a chance to ask any questions. It’s not that I haven’t been wondering what happened to make Gus run back to Canada, to

skip out on school, it's not like I haven't missed him, but what can I really do about it? I don't know what's going on with him, he won't tell me, or Justin, or his mother's apparently since Lindsey called last night because she wanted to know what's wrong with Gus. I just don't know, and if Gus refuses to let anyone in-

"Brian?" Cynthia pushes open the door to my office, her perfectly shaped eyebrows raised slightly on her forehead, as steps back to allow Grady in. He stands awkwardly near the door after Cynthia leaves. He looks like shit. His hair is messy and falling in his face, there are dark circles under his eyes, paint stains are visible on his skin, and he looks like he slept in the jeans and t-shirt he's wearing they're so wrinkled.

I raise an eyebrow and nod to the chair in front of my desk. He moves across the room, and sits down, his eyes never leaving mine. I lean back in my chair. "What can I do for you?"

He takes a deep breath. "It's about Gus."

It's not a surprise that is his reason for coming here. "What about him?"

"I told him...that I love him, and now..." He shrugs as he runs a hand through his hair in frustration. He lowers his eyes to the floor and doesn't say anything for a minute or two. "I don't even know why I'm here." He finally says, more to himself than to me. He stands up abruptly and looks at me. "If...just if you talk to him, just...tell him...tell him I'm sorry."

He crosses the room, but when he reaches the door, I say, "Sorry's bullshit, and so is this." He turns to look at me. "If you want him, go get him, otherwise just move the fuck on." He narrows his eyes, but I ignore his contempt. "Stop bitching about it, and *do* something." I pause, and soften my voice. "He's not going to come to you."

My son is like me in too many ways, and I wonder how I've managed to influence that in him even without being around him as much as I should have, could have, been when he was growing up. Of course, it's not only my influence that's shaped the man he's become, and anyone who's been around Gus for longer than a day should know that. The person, who claims to love him, should know that.

I walk around my desk and move to stand in front of Grady. "Love is just a word. That's all it is. The sooner you learn that the better."

He scoffs. "Is that what you tell Gus, that love is just a word?"

I smirk. "I don't have to tell him." I lean forward. "Because he already knows."

Grady just shakes his head, opens the door, and leaves. He can be pissed at me if he wants, but what I said is nothing but the truth. Saying you love someone doesn't prove shit, showing them that you do, in whatever way, well, that's a different fucking story.

Wednesday, September 25, 2019

7:45pm

Justin's POV

I step back from the canvas, my hand sore but not cramping, and drip the fine tipped signature brush into a jar of turpentine. Finally, after a week and a half, the painting of Paris is done. I wipe the brush off with a rag to dry it, and set it down among the others. There has been a lot on my mind as of late, and painting has allowed me to escape, and in a way, allowed me to think about everything rationally. I had to take a step back from the euphoria I felt when I left Hawk's office. I came to the gallery, worked out setting up a date for a show I want to do at TK next month, and took a detour to Gus' studio before finally coming upstairs to work on my painting. I had to just relax and let my mind go. I had to really think about the deal Hardtford is offering from all angles. I had to ask myself if it is really as good a deal as it seems. In the end, I realized that maybe it's not the *best* deal, but that I'm just tired of it all. Tired of the whole fucking thing, and settling out of court with Hardtford, especially if they're the one's dishing out the money, well, I'm happy with that, and more than ready for it to be over. Brian may not see it that way, but then again maybe he's ready for it to be over as well.

As I painted, I thought about Gus. I thought about what he's going through, about why he might be in Canada right now instead of here with us in New York. I know he thinks no one can understand what he's going through, and even though it's not true, I get it. He's scared, of what I'm not really sure. I know he's running away from something, even if I'm not sure exactly what it is. Maybe I don't understand that, because I don't remember running from anything. At least in the beginning, during my stay in the hospital and as soon as I was released, I was always running towards something, towards Brian. I needed him, needed that bone-deep connection we shared, needed whatever he was willing to give. If I'd run away... I pause to smile, thinking about the first time I came to New York alone. Well, okay, maybe he would have found me again, but he was so fucked up at the time, maybe he wouldn't have. In one way or another, I spent the first five years with Brian running towards him, or after him. No, I don't know exactly what's going on with Gus, no one really does, and if it's about Grady, well, I hope Grady knows that Kinney men don't come away easy.

I step back from the painting, and smile again when I feel Brian enter the room. "Come here."

He scoffs behind me, but crosses the room nonetheless. When he is standing next to me, he wraps his arm around my waist, ignoring the fact that I'm covered in paint, and he's ruining another expensive shirt. "It's done?"

I lean into him. "It's done. What do you think?"

He doesn't say anything for a moment. I know he's taking it in, maybe even reminiscing a little, even if he claims not to do that. "I want to hang this in the loft."

I look up at him, not even trying to hide the wide smile on my face. I wrap my arms around his waist as I turn him to face me, lean up on the tips of my toes, and kiss him soft, slow, and easy.

When I pull away he smiles, just the corner of one side of his mouth turning up. I don't say anything else, just grab his hand, and lead him towards the bathroom. We can talk later about Hardtford and their offer, about what went on at Kinnetik today, about Gus, but for now, I just want to show the person I love how much I love him. I pause and look over my shoulder at him. He raises an eyebrow. "What?"

I shake my head. "Nothing." Some times words really aren't enough, and saying nothing at all, says everything.