

# From a Safe Distance

by bigboobedcanuck

Cynthia drums her fingers on my desk until I finally look up and acknowledge her. "Can I help you?"

"When are you going home? It's almost midnight. I'm leaving, and you are, too." Her tone is firm, and she's looking at me like she's just daring me to argue.

"I'm off my deathbed, Cynthia, I'm allowed to stay up as late as I want, just like all the other big boys." A broken collarbone sure as hell isn't going to keep me from doing my work. I look back down at the Brown Athletics ad that I'm rewriting, and wonder why I even bother hiring copywriters and art directors when no one can do it as well as I can.

She turns out my desk lamp and grabs the paper out of my hand. "The office is closing."

Now, I have two options: I can get mad and be a bigger prick than I usually am to her, or I can roll my eyes and piss and moan, but capitulate. Truth is, I'm tired. So I do my eye-rolling routine and gather up my shit.

On the street, she hails a cab for me before heading to her own car. She asks me again if I want a ride, but it's out of her way, so I refuse. She tells me to get some sleep and squeezes my elbow as the cab pulls up. I never told her I have cancer, but nothing gets by Cynthia for long, and I know she knows.

Wait. Had cancer, I mean. Past tense.

In the taxi, I consider heading over to Babylon. Justin said he was going, and I haven't really seen him much since the ride. Fuck, has it been a week already? We've both been busy with work, school, all that shit. Not to mention the movie. He's not sure when they're going to start production, but he said the meeting went well. Maybe he can go visit the set when they're filming. I could come, too. Never really been to L.A., just once on business, so it doesn't count.

Screw it, I'm tired. I give the driver the address and sit back, eyes closed. I may not be sick anymore, but I still need to get a good night's sleep once in a while, especially with this broken bone. I'm tired of having my arm in this goddamned sling. It makes everything harder; all those little things you take for granted most of the time, like driving and eating and pissing and fucking. Not that I've been doing much fucking lately.

Yeah, things have been crazy since the race.

At home, I try to shrug out of my clothes without causing myself too much pain. I really want a shower, but I can't be bothered with my arm like this. Once a day will have to do for now. As I go to hang my suit up, I stop and pull open the bottom drawer in the dresser with my foot.

Still empty.

As I walk to the kitchen to find something to eat, it seems like the floor echoes more than usual.

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I wake slowly, small and soft noises gathering together to eventually penetrate the darkness of my dreams. The numbers on the digital clock glow too brightly, and I blink wearily. Almost four o'clock.

He's late.

I can hear him quietly tip-toeing into the bedroom, shedding his clothes. I consider rolling over and asking him how Babylon was, but the bathroom door closes. A minute later, the shower is running, and I don't need to ask.

At least one of us got lucky.

When he slides into bed, trying not to wake me, I wait for him to curl up behind me. Wait for his lips to touch the back of my neck gently. For his breath to float by my ear. For his body to meld to mine.

I lie still for long minutes. Finally, I look over my shoulder to see him curled up on the other side of the bed, away from me.

The minutes seem to go by even more slowly after that.

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"Just try not to screw it up too badly, okay?" Sebastian nods rapidly and turns back to his computer. The ad looks good so far, but I'll tell him that when he's done.

I leave work on time for once and head over to pick up Gus. It's been two weeks and I can finally drive again, so I figure we can go out for burgers and fries. I'm sure he's up to his eyeballs in granola.

At the munchers', my knuckles barely graze the door before Gus flings it open and grabs me around my legs.

"Daddy!" He clings to me and bounces excitedly.

It's hard to believe that I thought I wouldn't love him.

"Hey, Sonny Boy," I say, as I crouch down to hug him. My arm's out of the sling, but the bone will take at least another month to heal, so there's no way I can pick him up. "You all ready to go?"

He nods eagerly. "All ready, Daddy. I just get my coat."

"Okay, let's say bye to Mommy." He runs back inside and I close the door behind me. "Lindz?" "She went out." I walk around the corner into the living room and find Melanie sitting on the couch, Jenny asleep in her arms. "Checking out a few...places." She looks at Gus and then back down at the baby.

Christ. They're really going through with it.

I clear my throat. "Gus, why don't you go upstairs for a minute and get your bear." He nods and toddles off, one arm in his coat, the rest dragging behind.

"Make sure you have him back on time, he needs to be in bed by nine."

"I know, I heard you and Lindz the first five times you said it." I sit on the arm of the couch and peer down at Jenny. She really is a cute baby, Mikey did good. And I guess Mel had something to do with it, too.

"Well you've been known in the past to have selective hearing." Mel shifts, and Jenny gurgles and opens her eyes. We sit in silence for a minute, watching her.

Sighing, I tell her, "It doesn't have to be this way." Even an asshole like me can see that Lindsay and Melanie still love each other. Mel doesn't say anything, just rocks the baby. Then she sniffs, and Jesus fucking Christ, she's crying.

She sniffs again, loudly. "Goddamned hormones." She wipes her cheeks and keeps her head low. "Not everything can be fixed, Brian."

"Yes it can. You just have to want it badly enough."

She laughs ruefully. "Yeah, and sometimes that's the problem. Knowing what exactly it is you want. It's harder than it looks."

I reach down and Jenny grasps my finger with her little fist. "Well, I know one thing for sure."

"Oh, please do enlighten me."

"That's one beautiful fucking baby." Jenny coos and I smile at her.

Mel blinks up at me in surprise, then looks down at Jenny. "You're damn right she is."

Gus barrels back downstairs with his bear in hand, and I help him finish putting on his coat. He kisses Mel goodbye and then kisses the baby's cheek, too.

"Don't let him have any Coke, just juice," Mel orders.

I roll my eyes and nod. "Aye-aye, captain."

We go around the corner into the doorway, and she calls Gus back. "Be good for your Daddy, Gus."

He says he will, and I shut the door quietly behind us.

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The fridge closes with a thwap. I really don't know what I'm looking for, since I already stuffed myself full of fat and carbohydrates with Gus. I also drank a Coke the size of an ice bucket, and can't sleep. Justin's out again.

The drawer is still empty.

Well, to be fair, it does have a t-shirt and some underwear and socks in it. But I know that these are just tokens, and he hasn't actually answered me one way or the other. At first, I didn't really notice. I was busy, I was in pain, and there's no way he would say no.

Not after all this. Not now.

I'm in bed when he comes home, sheets tangled around my legs. I can't get comfortable, and that fucking Coke is keeping me awake. I should be at Babylon, doing coke that will at least give me a high while it keeps me up.

"Hey," he says, as he heads into the bathroom.

"Hey."

When he comes back out, his cell phone rings and he fishes it out of his pocket. "Hello? Oh, hi." He walks into the living room, and I can only hear bits and pieces of the conversation. "...Not now...yeah...okay...I don't know...Bye." He takes his shirt off as he returns.

"Who was that?"

"Oh, no one." He steps out of his pants and slides into bed.

It hits me, and for a few seconds, I can't breathe. I should have known. I should have fucking known. Little goddamned liar. That's it, time to get it out in the open.

I keep my tone neutral. "You want me to drive you to Daphne's tomorrow to pick up your stuff?"

"That's okay, you don't need to go out of your way." He smiles and looks away.

"It's really no problem, Justin."

"Well, I've got a late class and..." He trails off, and I've had enough. I kick the sheets away and heave myself up as quickly as I can.

"Brian? Where are you going?" He sits up and watches me get dressed, confused.

"Out." I pull a t-shirt over my head and grimace at the pain.

"Out where? Why?"

I don't answer, just walk to the door and jam my feet into my shoes.

"Brian?" He's yanking his track pants on and hurrying towards me.

I pull my jacket around my shoulders. "I may be a lot of things, Justin. But I'm not stupid." With that, I slam out of the loft and into the elevator, shutting the grate with a satisfying bang. I can faintly hear him calling me as I descend.

I've just lifted up the elevator door when he careens around the corner, still shirtless and with bare feet. Breathing hard, he blocks my way. "Brian, wait!"

"Wait for what?"

"Wait for me to explain. Look, I know I've been weird the past couple of weeks, but...something happened in L.A."

I snort derisively. "What is he this time, a poet? No, let me guess, a beautiful actor, starving for his craft."

"What?" To his credit, he looks genuinely perplexed. Then he shakes his head and says, "No. NO. Brian, there's no one. I swear to god. Only you."

"Justin, I know how this song goes. We've played it before, remember?" Shit, I really need to get in control. I bite the inside of my cheek.

"Only. You." He punctuates his words by grasping my arms and squeezing. I say nothing, but he's pretty convincing. Maybe I was wrong.

"Brian, just listen, okay? Are you listening?" I finally nod, and he continues. "Brett asked me to work on the movie. Art direction. I'd have to go out there for six months, maybe more."

It takes me a few moments to process what the stupid little twat is saying. The movie? This is about the movie? "Why the fuck didn't you tell me?"

He raises his hands and then they drop to his sides. "I wanted to, but then you asked me to move in and...I don't know. I didn't know what to do. After everything that's happened, I...I don't want to hurt you."

"Christ, Justin, you're such a drama queen."

He raises his eyebrows. "Uh, look who's talking."

"Shut up." Asshole. "So, when do you start?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided if I'm going to go."

I look at him evenly, and quietly say, "Yes you have."

He takes a deep breath and blows it out. "But I want to be with you. I want to live together, I want...I want it all." He stands there on the cold tiles, the chilly air in the foyer giving him goosebumps all over his arms and chest.

Shrugging, I tell him, "I don't seem to be going anywhere. Neither does the loft."

"But it's a long time, Brian."

"Time flies, you'll be back before you know it." Christ, I wasn't expecting this. "But you'll have to drop out again."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "The Dean said I could take a leave of absence."

A leave of absence. It's a nice way to put it. "Well, it's all set, then."

He steps closer and wraps his arms around my waist. "But I'm going to miss you so much."

I'm going to fucking miss him, too, but that's life. I knew it would happen eventually. "You'll regret it if you don't go. You'll always wonder 'what if' and then you'll be an even bigger queen about it. Besides, you know how I feel about regrets."

He sighs and steps up onto my shoes, his arms firm around my back for balance. "Next time I chase after you, remind me to at least put socks on." We both smile and I hold him tightly, even though my collarbone aches. He watches me closely. "You promise you'll be here when I get back?"

My throat is dry, and I swallow hard. "Just go and have fun." I kiss him softly. "No rules." Best to be realistic about this.

He pulls back, stepping onto the floor again. "No rules?"

"L.A.'s awfully far away, Sunshine." I kiss him again and lean our foreheads together. "Go and have fun. Opportunities like this don't come along every day." He finally nods and holds me close once more.

Upstairs, he lays me out on the bed, his lips moving over my body, tasting me all over. His tongue

dips into every crevice and his hands roam over me in an endless pattern. I close my eyes as he swallows me deep into his throat, my fingers twisting in his hair. I roll the strands around and wonder how long they'll be the next time I see him. I pull him up and we kiss, his tongue winding around mine. He reaches for a condom and rolls it onto me as he sucks my neck, his mouth warm and wet.

Justin rides me slow and long, both of us wanting it to last. His eyes are closed and he holds my hand tightly where it rests on his hip. My muscles flex and I arch up into him in a measured rhythm. His skin glistens and I memorize every detail. When he finally comes, he opens his mouth and gasps my name, and I reach up to touch his lips.

It'll be better this way. No rules, no promises, no bullshit. Justin can't just stay here with me and miss out on the whole fucking world out there. Let him go to L.A. and have his big adventure, he deserves it.

And maybe he'll come back.

The loft is dark, and I reach for the light switch as the trick fumbles with my zipper. He giggles and I roll my eyes. Christ, he's older than I am, and he sounds like some fucking kid.

"Wow, you've got a great cock," he says, as he opens my jeans and grabs me roughly.

"Tell me something I don't already know." He leans in to kiss me and I twist away.

"Come on, man." He manages to get his lips on mine for a moment. They feel cold and clammy and wrong.

I push him away firmly, my hand on his chest. "Do it again, and you're gone."

"Okay, okay. Can't blame a guy for trying." He smirks and I consider kicking him out anyway. But I haven't fucked anyone in a week.

"Just take your clothes off, let's go." I unbutton my shirt and slide it from my shoulders, wincing a bit. The collarbone's still sore, but it's getting better.

"Whatever you say. You're the boss."

"You've got that right." Jesus, let's just get this over with. He seemed much hotter at Babylon; it must have been the lighting. Or possibly temporary insanity. He grabs the flap of my jeans and pulls me towards the bedroom. At the top of the stairs, I stop suddenly. The light is gone from above the bed, and the wall seems bare. I'm not used to it yet.

"What's wrong?"

The answer to that question is far too complicated to share with this simpleton. He tries to tug me forward, but I step back forcefully and return to the living room. Stopping at the windows, I stare out into the night.

After a minute, he says, "So, are we going to fuck, or what?"

I turn and grab his chest, clutching the material of his shirt as I propel him towards the door. As I spin him around and press him against the cold metal, he groans. I fuck him roughly and he noisily pays tribute to God, Jesus and whomever else is listening.

When I'm finished, I pull out and yank my jeans back up. His pants are still around his ankles when I open the door and shove him into the hallway, slamming the door shut behind him. After some muffled, sputtering protest, all is quiet. I flick the switch back off, and moonlight slants through the windows and across the floor.

It doesn't quite reach the bedroom.

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"Asshole!" I flip the bird at the idiot in the Toyota who thinks he's driving a Porsche. Fucker thinks he can cut me off, does he? I consider following him and staying on his ass, but I take a deep breath and unclench my fingers from the wheel as I stop for a yellow light.

My collarbone aches and I rotate my shoulder gently, cursing myself for being a stupid show-off during the race. Sometimes I think this hurts more than the radiation did. Then I remember all those days and nights huddled by the toilet, the tiles cool beneath my cheek. Justin murmuring and wiping my fevered skin with a damp cloth.

The light turns green and I step on the gas.

The airport parking slip from last week still sits on my dashboard, reminding me that I spent \$18.50 to say goodbye to him at the gate. He told me I could just drop him off at the departures level, and not to bother paying the exorbitant parking fees. I told him to get off the cross, because someone needed the wood. His eyebrows wrinkled for a second and then he grinned and swatted me on the arm.

I pretended that he hurt my sore shoulder and he fussed over me and apologized until I couldn't stop from smiling. Then he hit me again, and it really did hurt, and he told me that's what happened to boys who cry wolf. But he still ran his fingers gently through my hair, and kissed me until I stopped thinking about the pain.

At the next light, I flip the radio stations, going by ad after ad. Christ, no one plays any music any more; it's all fucking commercials. You'd think I'd be happy about that. I stop on the classical station, and when violins fill the air, I reflexively reach to turn it to the next channel. But I stop and return my hand to the wheel. It's nice, this Mozart or whatever the hell it is.

At the gate, Justin pledged to call and email every day and I told him to relax and just have a good time. We kissed and I hugged him, not caring what the rest of his fellow travellers thought. We stood



there for what seemed like a very long time, just holding each other close. Finally, he stepped away and tried to smile, and I did the same.

He was just about to go through the metal detector when he rushed back. He kissed me again and held onto my hand so tightly that I thought there'd be bruises the next day. I was almost disappointed when there weren't.

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The pink plate special grows cold in front of me as I push my fries around half-heartedly. Cynthia was getting sushi, but it's been a few days since I've had time to go to the diner, so I figured I'd stop in for lunch. Of course, no one's here. Debbie has a rare day off, and everyone else seems to have gotten a life.

"Um, hi." Hunter stands by my booth, hands in his pockets.

Well, not everyone, I guess. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

He shrugs. "I've got a free period."

"So, shouldn't you be hanging out with your little friends, then?"

He looks around, trying to be casual. "I felt like a burger."

"Well, pull up some vinyl." I like Hunter, he's a good kid. Had a pretty fucking bad time of it with that mother of his, but he's still a feisty little shit. Although he's not acting so full of piss and vinegar today.

"Thanks." He plops down across from me. "So, what's new?"

"Not much." Aside from Justin being three thousand miles away, I guess that's true.

"You miss him?"

I take a bite of my sandwich and regret telling him he could join me. I shrug nonchalantly.

"You're not fooling anyone, for the record."

I give him one of my patented death stares, but he remains unfazed, and orders his lunch from the drag queen waitress. She refills my coffee and I eat another cold fry.

"Well, if you need some company, let me know." He waggles his eyebrows.

Snorting, I say, "I thought you'd decided to join the ranks of the breeders."

The smile leaves his face. "I don't know. Maybe." His milkshake arrives and he takes a noisy slurp. "But you know, you guys sure do seem to do a lot of breeding yourselves."

"It's not the same thing." Just because I have a kid doesn't make me like straight people.

"Mmm hmm. Whatever you say, Brian." He eats one of my fries and takes another sip of his shake.

I try not to smile, but the kid is incorrigible. And, Christ, I'm officially old for even *thinking* that word. "So why aren't you sure?"

"Huh?"

"About girls. What's the problem?"

The smile's definitely a distant memory now. He looks down and mumbles, "No girl is ever going to like me once she knows."

Shit. I can't even make a sarcastic comment now. "That's not true. You just have to meet the right one." God, I sound like Oprah.

He raises his head and his eyes look hollow. "I did meet the right girl, and now she won't even talk to me. Not after she found out about the stuff I did. She could handle the HIV, but not that."

"You're young. Just be...patient." I don't know what else to say, and it's frustrating.

Hunter's lunch arrives and for a few minutes we eat, not talking. Finally, he says, "Even though I'm straight, I'd still fuck you."

I raise my eyebrow and smirk. "Everyone would fuck me."

He grins and during the rest of lunch I tell him stories about what a dork Michael was when he was a kid. He listens eagerly and laughs with abandon, and I half expect him to start taking notes so he can make fun of Mikey later. I give him a ride back to school in the 'Vette, and he says he'll be at the diner tomorrow if I want to have lunch again.

Strangely enough, I do.

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The phone rings, startling me out of my examination of the faint cracks on the ceiling. I reach for the cordless beside the bed. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Who?" I always feel compelled to fuck with him.

"Briiaan."

"This is Brian calling? And who are you trying to reach?"

He huffs out a breath in exasperation. "Okay, enough."

I chuckle softly. "Okay."

"Sorry it's so late. But you didn't sound like you were sleeping."

I look over at the nightstand. Three o'clock. "No, just got in." A total lie, of course.

He sighs and it sounds wistful. "How was Babylon? Lots of hot guys to dance with?"

"Not as many as there are in Hollywood, I'm sure."

"Yeah, I guess not."

I can hear background noise, a rhythm that I can't place. "Where are you?"

"Santa Monica Pier. I got a little place down the street. It's nice. It's...different."

"I thought you were staying in Brett's guest cottage. Trouble in paradise already?" Part of me is glad to hear it, and I shove the feeling away.

"No, Brett's cool."

"But?"

"I figured I'm going to see enough of him on the set. I need my own space, you know?"

What every growing boy needs. "Yeah, I know. Best not to mix business and pleasure too much."

"Brian, it wasn't like I was fucking him."

"Well, strange things can happen over the breakfast table. On it, under it, whatever."

He laughs. "He looks too much like a monkey."

This is true; Justin can do much better. "How did you find the new place?"

"Someone from the studio got it for me. They, like, do everything. It's nice, just a one-bedroom, but I can see the ocean."

"Well, it sounds like you've got it all worked out."

"Suppose so." He's quiet, his voice low.

"Are you at the end of the pier?"

"Yeah. It's peaceful out here, not too many people around."

"Can you taste the salt in the air?"

He laughs, and I can imagine his eyes crinkling. "I guess so. I never thought about it."

"Well, just close your eyes and take a deep breath." I hear him breathe in, and then out, slowly. "Can you taste it?"

He's silent for a moment, then he says, "Yeah."

"Good." We're both quiet, and my eyes start to droop.

"Brian?"

"Hmm?" I roll over and cradle the phone against the pillow.

"Will you come and ride the ferris wheel here with me one day?"

"I thought you were scared of heights."

"I am." The ocean rumbles beyond him. "So, will you? Ride it with me?"

"Okay."

After that, he tells me all about what happened during the two days since I talked to him last. About how hot and smoggy it is and how there really are more beautiful people in L.A. than anywhere else he's been. Not that he's been anywhere else, really. As he talks, his voice becomes more animated, and I'm glad to hear his excitement, the pleasure he takes in the little things, like having production assistants who bring him frappuccinos.

When he says goodbye, he tells me he loves me. Then the only sound is the dial tone, and I put the phone back on the nightstand. I close my eyes and concentrate. In the stillness, I can hear the ocean again.

As I surf the chat room for someone who seems like they're not a stupid teenager playing around on Mommy and Daddy's computer, there's a knock at the door. I curse the broken buzzer in the lobby and stay at my desk. The knock sounds again, and I bet it's Mikey, coming to drag me out to Woody's.

"Brian?" It's muffled through the door, but I recognize Daphne's voice immediately. I haven't heard from him in days, and now she's here, uninvited. But if something happened, someone would have

called.

I'm at the door a few seconds later, mask of indifference in place as I slide it open. Daphne stands before me in pigtails and a ridiculously pink jacket. If you looked up "cute" in the dictionary, there she'd be.

"Well, if it isn't the lovely Ms. Chanders. To what do I owe the pleasure?" I imbue the last word with extra meaning and she giggles as she rolls her eyes. Good. Giggling and eye-rolling means that he's okay.

She holds up an envelope and says, "This came from the Institute. It's from the bursar's office, so I thought you might need it."

I take it from her. "Thanks." Then I step aside, saying, "Care to join me for a nightcap?"

She smiles and nods and comes in, shrugging out of her pink coat. As she surveys the loft, she says, "So, nothing much has changed in here. Wait, where's the blue light in the bedroom?" She cranes her neck.

"Daphne, is my bedroom always the first thing on your mind?"

"Oh, shut up." She walks up the steps and stands in the doorway. "Wow, where did you get that painting? It's amazing."

"I have my ways." I join her on the steps and admire the space over my bed. "Lindsay got a hell of a commission, let's put it that way." I saw the painting at the gallery and had to have it. It depicts the ceiling of an old church in Rome, and Lindz says the figures are supposed to be angels. They don't look like it to me, but they're beautiful, nonetheless.

Daphne smiles and nudges me with her elbow. "Justin's going to love it."

"Maybe," I say, shrugging.

She scrunches her face up. "You're not, like, going to break up, are you?"

A small tendril of dread uncurls in my stomach. "Why would you say that?"

"Oh, it's nothing." She hesitates, and then continues, "It's just, he's only been gone a month, but...I don't know. Have you talked to him this week? I called him last night and he didn't sound like himself."

So he answered the phone for her. I had finally broken down and called him myself last night, but he didn't pick up. "I'm sure he's fine. Just having fun. Besides, there are no locks on our doors, we're not—"

"Oh, please, Brian. Sell it to someone who's buying." With that, she pivots on her heel and goes back

into the living room. "Now, where's my drink?"

Chuckling, I head over to the bar. "What does the lady desire?"

"Whatever you're having."

I make us two martinis – shaken, not stirred (naturally). "Sure you can handle a man's drink, Daphne?" When she doesn't answer I look up to see her sitting in my computer chair, laughing softly. "Ah, I see you're in the market for some cock."

She grins as she clicks the mouse and watches the screen. "You bet I am."

I bring our drinks over and pull up another chair. Daphne cringes after her first sip, but she chugs her martini like a trooper as we surf the chat room, making fun of profiles and pictures. A few martinis later, she's pretending to be me and is chatting with "HungHunk69" as I help her think of raunchy things to say. A couple of joints later, we're lying on the floor cushion and I'm offering pointers on giving head. The funny thing about spending time with Daphne is that soon you end up giggling just as much as she does.

I wake just before dawn, my back stiff from sleeping on the cushion and not my top-of-the-line mattress. She's curled up beside me, and I watch her sleep, remembering the last time we spent a night together.

The fluorescent lights had been harsh against the ugly linoleum, even though they turned them down at night. After a bottle of Jack and various other substances, any light was too much. I'd been slouching in the hard plastic chair when I saw a pair of platform running shoes appear before me.

She'd had a nightmare about Justin dying, and had felt the need to drive to the hospital in the middle of the night to make sure that he was still alive. She didn't seem surprised to see me. After watching Justin sleep through the window for a minute, she sank into the chair next to me and started talking quietly. She rambled on about God knows what, but I made no move to silence her.

Later, she helped me to her car and then she was putting me to bed. It's all a haze, but I remember reaching out and touching her arm, telling her not to go. Then there was warmth beside me, and I slept. She was gone when I woke up in the morning, and I was grateful.

I look down at her now, the rising sun brightening her face, her lips parted softly. I think Justin has good taste in friends.

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Cynthia rolls her eyes and tells me that I'm not allowed to fire the new account coordinator, a chubby blonde girl who is fresh out of college and doesn't know what the hell she's doing. "There was a time when you didn't know what you were doing either, Brian."

"That's a boldfaced lie." Of course I'm not going to fire the girl, she's smart and eager and willing to work for almost nothing. But I don't want people to think I'm getting soft.

"You want Thai for lunch? I'm going to pick some up."

I consider it, but shake my head. "No thanks." Cynthia leaves and I stare at the dial pad on my phone. I reach my hand out, but then snatch it back again. I need to focus on the figures for the new Dandy Lube campaign, but as I try reading the file again, my eyes keep drifting back to the phone.

Finally, I give up and punch in the digits rapidly. I don't have his L.A. number on speed dial, and every time I tell myself I should commit the numbers to the phone's memory, something else comes up.

I tried his cell about an hour ago, so I figure he might be sleeping in. It's almost nine o'clock there, but I'm not sure what time he has to go to the set – he said it depends on the shooting schedule. The phone rings repeatedly, finally stopping after a minute and disconnecting. He doesn't have an answering machine, because it's only going to be a temporary home.

Besides, I can leave a message on his cell. I haven't, but I could if I wanted to.

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The diner bustles with the lunchtime crowd, and I decide to get my sandwich and salad to go.

"Hey, honey!" Deb barrels out of the kitchen and gives me a quick kiss. I brace myself for the inevitable question. "How's Sunshine enjoying the sunshine?"

If one more person asks me how he is, I swear I'll scream. We've talked, we've emailed, we've had phone sex that made me come harder than any of the pathetic tricks who have stumbled into my path. But I don't know how he is, and the silence of the last few days gnaws at me again.

"He's loving it, Deb." She smiles and pats my cheek as she goes to serve her tables. I wait at the counter for my order, and as I'm paying and collecting my brown paper bag, Hunter sidles up beside me.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey yourself."

He leans in close and says in a low tone, "I don't have to be back at school for almost an hour."

"This is the problem with education today, they give you brats too much free time."

He smiles slowly and leans closer. "Come on, you know you want to."

I pocket my change and thank the waitress. "I've got work to do."

With practiced ease, he turns on the seductive charm. "Come on. You won't be sorry."

I take a deep breath and then cast a quick glance around the diner, noting that Deb is busy with a table in the back. "Let's go."

He's quiet as we drive to the empty parking lot behind the old sugar refinery. It's not far from his school, so I can drop him off easily after we're through. I pull into the lot, relieved to see that it's deserted. I turn the key and the engine's silent.

"You remember the rules." It's a statement, not a question.

He sighs. "I know, I know. I tell anyone, and you'll kill me. I got it." He takes his seatbelt off. "Come on, I've been dying for this all week."

Kids. Always so impatient.

I open my door and he does the same, practically skipping around the front of the car as we exchange places. Once he's settled in the driver's seat, he dutifully snaps the seatbelt into place and waits for me to do the same.

"Okay, what's the first thing you do?" I pop a stick of gum into my mouth to combat my hunger, and I hope the waitress remembered to put my salad dressing on the side.

"First, I put the clutch in. Then I turn the key. Then I take off the emergency brake, which isn't on anyway."

I nod and he executes the instructions as the 'Vette roars to life. "Okay, now ease it into second." The engine shudders a bit, but he gives it more juice and successfully makes the transition.

"Okay, now third." He's actually proving to be a good driver, and he grins as he shifts gears. "Now fourth, and that's as high as you go." The lot's not big enough to be roaming around any faster than that.

"Sweeeeeeeet! This car is fucking awesome."

"I know," I say, but I can't stop from smiling. A boy needs to know how to drive, and he's sure as hell not going to learn from Mikey and the Professor and their ten speeds. I figure I can teach him the basics before those Driver's Ed idiots get their hands on him. This is the third time we've been out, and he's picking it up pretty well. The kid's a fast learner.

"When can we go out on the road?"

"When hell freezes over."

He smirks, like he knows I'll cave eventually. I imagine Gus in his place, thirteen years down the road.



God, I'll be...best not to think about it. We cruise around the parking lot for a while longer, until I tell him it's time for him to run along back to school. He reluctantly relinquishes the driver's seat.

When I drop him off, he freezes as he opens the car door. I follow his gaze and see a young girl with short hair sitting by herself on the steps, a book open on her lap. Hunter gulps and thanks me for the lesson before getting out and closing the door behind him. He walks by her, the easy gait gone, his limbs wound tight with tension. The girl tries to pretend that she doesn't notice him but, after he passes, she looks towards the car, squinting to get a better view of me.

\*\*\*\*

Babylon is packed, and I cruise the crowd, looking for someone or something interesting. I spot Emmett on the dance floor, grinding up against a pretty hot guy who looks like he might be a cowboy in the outside world. I consider saying hello, but I don't want to answer any questions about Justin.

I touch the cell phone in my pocket and consider calling again. Christ, I'm acting like a 16-year-old girl after her first fucking date. I've called him three times today, I'm not calling again. He's just busy with work. I slam down a shot at the bar, and head into the backroom.

I need to get my dick sucked, and I need it now.

The air is thick with sweat and sex and I walk slowly down the dark hallway, brushing by two guys straining and moaning together against the wall. When I walk into the main room, eyes turn on me and a dark-haired man approaches. I look him up and down and keep walking. Too...something. Skinny, maybe.

As I go deeper into the room, a hand moves up my back. Turning, I see a blond who smiles and says, "I wanna suck your cock."

I look him over and nod, leading him into one of the dark corners. Leaning against the wall, I evade his attempt at a kiss and push him onto his knees. He's young, probably in college. But it sure as hell isn't his first time doing this, since he makes quick work of my zipper and is soon sucking me deep into his throat.

I watch his head bobbing back and forth, and reach down to touch his hair. It's not quite the right shade, and when I rub the strands between my fingers, they feel coarse and sticky with too much gel. I pull my hand away and reach back for the wall. It's slick and oily, and I stand up straight, fucking his mouth now. He takes me all in and the pleasure builds.

When I come, he swallows eagerly. It feels hollow, and the relief is over before it really begins.

\*\*\*\*

I stand under the hot shower for long minutes, stream rising around me. I try not to think about the

fact that Justin still isn't picking up his phone, and remember the same anxiety when he was running around with that Cody and the ridiculous Pink Posse. I tell myself that this isn't the same, but part of me feels unconvinced.

The expensive soap lathers in my hand and I rub it over my body. It's time I left a message for him, and I debate which tactic to use: Nonchalance or joking irritation. I settle on the latter, and rinse off for a few more minutes. Maybe it's time to go visit him, too. I want to give him his space, let him experience this on his own, but...I'll just fly down for a weekend. Yeah, no harm in that.

As I turn the shower off, I hear a voice coming from the living room. Leaving the towel on the rack, I open the bathroom door all the way. For a foolish moment as I walk into the bedroom, I think he's here, that I'll see his smile and feel him warm and soft against me.

But his voice has a tinny quality I hadn't noticed at first, and he hasn't come for a surprise visit. I stop at the top of the stairs and listen to him speak through the answering machine. I move to go to the phone, but something in his tone stops me, and I focus on the words he's saying.

"....I need some time on my own. I'm sorry, I know I'm probably freaking you out. I just need to figure some stuff out. It's...it's weird here. But I...I love you, Brian. Okay? I'll call you. You know, in a while. Bye."

The dial tone sounds, and the machine whirs off. Water pools at my feet on the hardwood, the cool air of the loft raising goosebumps on my naked skin. Shivering, I retreat to the bathroom and close the door.

The cook hammers his palm down on the kitchen bell, jolting me to attention. "Pick up!" The waitress mutters under her breath as she refills my coffee cup before hurrying off. I stir the murky, brown liquid listlessly, and Michael slides into the other side of the booth.

"Hey. How's it going?"

His cheerfulness is forced and I sigh inwardly. He knows. "Fine."

"Good. That's good."

He's watching me intently, like he expects me to burst into tears at any moment. "Look, Michael—"

"So I was thinking we could go to Babylon tonight. Ben's busy grading papers and Hunter needs to do his homework. So it could just be you and me. You know, like the good old days."

"I don't need your fucking pity, Mikey."

"What? Brian, I just wanna hang out."

He looks at me with those big eyes and I know that he cares about me and I shouldn't be such an asshole. "Okay, we'll go to Babylon." I look back down at my coffee. I know it's coming, but I just

don't want to deal with it.

"So...I talked to Justin."

"I know." I put some sugar in my cup, even though I don't usually take it. It's been two weeks since Justin left the message, and I knew it was just a matter of time before he said something to Michael.

"You know? Did you talk to him?" His voice rises eagerly.

"No, I just know."

"Oh." He deflates. "Brian, what the fuck is going on?"

"Why are you asking me? You're the one who talked to him last." I'm dying to give him a barrage of questions, find out what he knows, what Justin said. But I don't.

"He just said that he needed to figure out something on his own. I tried to get him to tell me what, but he wouldn't."

Good old Mikey. He always answers the questions I can't ask.

"He doesn't sound very good, even though he's pretending he's fine," Michael adds.

He's concerned, and the acid in my stomach rises up and makes itself known. "I'm sure he's fine. He's in Hollywood, he's having fun." The words aren't convincing, and I know Michael won't be fooled for a moment.

He sighs and then Ben walks in, all smiles, with Hunter in tow. Hunter looks miserable, and he slouches into the booth beside me when I move over to make room for him. Ben starts yammering on about something boring, so I talk to Hunter quietly.

"All ready for another fun day of school?"

He shrugs and flatly says, "Yee haw."

"That's the spirit."

"School sucks ass. And not in a good way." He keeps his head low, eyes on the table.

I have half a mind to reassure him that things will get better, but the lies die on my tongue. Ben and Mikey get up to greet some guy, and I ask, "What are you doing for lunch?"

He looks up, a spark of excitement in his eyes. "Nothing. Why?"

"I'll pick you up at noon."

"Really?" He grins, and I can't help but smile back.

"Really."

\*\*\*\*

I've just settled down at my desk when Cynthia strides in. "Jennifer Taylor's here to see you."

No, no, no. "Tell her—"

"Hello, Brian." Jennifer is right on Cynthia's heels.

"Hello." Shit, there's no way out now. "Can I offer you something to drink? Coffee, tea, juice?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you." Cynthia leaves us and Jennifer sits down, smiling tightly. "I just wanted to see how you were enjoying the new office space. Looks like you're all settled in."

I don't want to have this conversation. "Yeah, everything's going great. Thanks again."

"You're welcome. Just doing my job." She smiles again, still strained.

All right, let's just do this. "Look, Jennifer, we both know why we're here."

She looks at me evenly. "What's going on, Brian?"

I lean back in my chair, fiddling with a pen. "Why are you asking me?" Bitterness has crept into my voice, and I cringe inwardly.

"Because you know him better than anyone."

"Do I?"

She sighs impatiently. "Of course you do. You always have."

I tap the pen on the side of my desk, a short, staccato rhythm. "I haven't talked to him in two weeks. He left a message. Said he needed some time on his own." I'm not sure what the rest of it says, since I erased it the next night in a drunken haze.

"Well, did you call him?"

I give her a withering look, but she is unfazed. I'll have to work on that. "I need to let him live his life, Jennifer."

"And did you ever think that maybe he wants to talk to you, but...I don't know what. Something's wrong, he doesn't sound like himself."

"If he wants to talk to me, he knows my number." Doesn't she understand? I can't smother him. If he wants to be alone, I need to respect that.

"Oh, you really are stubborn, you know that?"

"Yes, I know," I say, smirking. Then, quietly, "He doesn't want to talk to me, Jennifer. He doesn't want...." I don't finish my thought.

She reaches across the desk and puts her hand on my arm. "Brian, Justin's wanted you from the day you met, and even when you were apart, he never stopped. I don't think he'll stop now." I shrug, and she sits back in her chair, hands in her lap. "Well, I should go." As she stands, she says, "Just call him."

Jennifer's almost out the door when I tell her, "Don't worry. He'll work it out." She nods and is gone. I'm still sitting at my desk, staring into space when Cynthia comes in later to get me for a meeting with a new client. She gives me a penetrating look, and I walk quickly to the boardroom before she can ask the question.

\*\*\*\*

The tab of E dissolves on my tongue and Michael grins at me as we dance. I close my eyes as the lights pulse in time to the beat, the fog machine emitting a welcome burst of cool air. Babylon is packed and my shirt is already sticking to my back.

The day was a blur after Jennifer's visit. The meeting with the president of Liberty beer, who is too stupid to live; then driving with Hunter, then more meetings. Hunter hadn't even argued with me when I told him again that he couldn't go on the roads. His quiet acceptance pissed me off, because I knew he must have heard something about Justin. When he got out of the car at school, he leaned back in and simply said, "He'll come back."

"It's been too long!" Mikey shouts above the music.

I snap back to the present and smile and nod. He's right, it has been too long since we've been dancing at Babylon together. I remember when we used to come here practically every night to sweat and score, to get lost in oblivion.

I'm not sure when that changed.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts, trying to push everything out of my mind. Then the song changes to an old track about being forever young, and I close my eyes and see him. Blond hair shining under the lights, confetti raining down. I remember the taste of his lips, the feel of his skin. But it's all faded in my mind, the colours pale and watery.

I told him there was no turning back.

I think I was right.

\*\*\*\*

The sidewalk bustles with Saturday activity and Gus runs and skips in front of me, his energy apparently boundless. We've already been to the diner and the park and the toy store, where I bought him a ridiculously expensive Lego set. I have to carry it, of course, but we're almost back to the loft. I've discovered it's better to walk with Gus instead of drive, because it tires him out. Eventually.

I honestly don't know how Lindsay and Melanie can keep up with him every single day. Of course, Lindz is in an apartment now, so it's mostly her running after Gus these days. But Mel has her hands full with the baby, no doubt.

We get to Tremont and I reach for him. "Gus, hold my hand, we're crossing the street."

He shakes his head and says, "No!" as he scurries away from me. I reach out again and grab his hand at the curb, but he yanks free and suddenly he's running into the street.

The SUV honks and the squeal of brakes pierce the air.

Everything happens in slow motion.

The Lego crashes down as I run, scooping Gus up into my arms as the vehicle stops a foot away. He shrieks with fright and as we return to the safety of the sidewalk, I want to scream, too. The shaken-looking driver continues on his way after I wave him off and I set Gus on his feet. Turning him around roughly, I spank him. Hard.

"I told you to hold my hand! Don't you EVER run into the street again!" I'm shaking with rage and fear and relief, and I drop to my knees, pulling him close. He sobs and clings to me for long minutes.

Finally I pick him up again and remember to grab the Lego set, which was luckily already broken into a million pieces. Gus snuffles and whimpers and holds me tight as we return to the loft, only letting go when I tell him I need to unlock the door. Even then, he holds onto my leg.

I drop my keys on the counter and he stands in front of me, red and runny eyes on the floor. I know he's sorry, but...I don't know how to deal with this. Shit, maybe I should call Lindz.

"Do you have to use the bathroom?" He nods, eyes still downcast. "Okay, go do it and don't forget to wash your hands. The step stool's under the sink, remember?" He nods again and hurries off, sniffing loudly.

Christ, I need a drink.

Instead, I head into the bedroom and flop down on the bed. Staring at the ceiling, I consider the fact

that I just hit my son. I didn't even think twice about it before I did it. I know there's a difference between spanking your child and what my old man did to me, but I don't like this feeling.

That I could hurt him.

But I know that kids don't understand reason, and that Gus will sure as hell stop and think before he tries to cross the street alone again. He'd better. My stomach clenches when I think about what would have happened if that driver hadn't had such good brakes, or had been distracted, or.... I close my eyes, trying to ward off the images.

The bathroom door opens and I hear Gus climb up onto the platform around the bed. I look at him, and he stands there for a while, watching me. His eyes are big and round and sorrowful and when I open my arms, he clambers on top of me. I hold him close, his head resting on my chest.

"I'm sorry, Daddy." He still can't say the letter 'r', and I smile despite myself.

"I'm sorry, too. But you can never cross the street unless you're holding an adult's hand. You know that. Your mommies and I just want to make sure you're safe. You understand?" He nods, and I run my fingers gently through his hair. He eventually falls asleep, and I think about shifting him off me so I can get some things for work done.

A couple of hours later, Lindsay rings the buzzer, waking us from our slumber.

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Long after Gus has gone home, I sit at my computer, finishing up a pitch for more new business. Even though the agency is busy as it is, I'm always looking for something else. You never know when a client will up and leave you for another agency. There's no loyalty in business – and there's even less in advertising.

I pick up the phone again, hold the weight of the cordless in my hand. I run my thumb over the numbers for a few seconds before I put it back down and look at the screen once more. After another half an hour, I shut the computer off.

Walking through the loft, I turn the lights out one by one. Once I'm lying in bed, I try to put it out of my mind, but finally I have to get up and take the phone off the desk. I pad back across the floor to the bedroom, the buttons strangely comforting beneath my touch.

In bed again, I finally dial the numbers that my fingers have been tracing for days, weeks. The other line rings endlessly. Still no answering machine, and I'm comforted slightly. I should try his cell phone, but it's midnight his time, and he's probably out at a club or a bar or somewhere he can't talk.

As I'm running through all the possibilities in my mind, the phone rings. I jerk and drop it onto the mattress like it's on fire. It rings again and I pick it up, my thumb hovering over the talk button.

I press it.

"Hello?"

There's only silence.

"Hello?" I raise my voice this time.

More silence.

As I strain to hear anything, I make out the sound of his breathing. I'd recognize it anywhere, I think. He takes a deep breath, and I hold mine.

Finally, I speak again. "Just talk to me, Justin."

After more silence, he does.

"Brett's latest movie tanked."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that." I'm not, though. That guy always kinda bugged me.

"No you're not. He bugs you."

"So is poor Brett crying in his martini?"

"No, but...I don't know what's going to happen to our movie. You know, it's Hollywood, you're only as good as your last hit. Suddenly the studio is visiting the set and making all these demands. Fucking suits."

"Like what?"

"Take a wild guess," he huffs. "They want us to gay it down."

Naturally. "But you knew that would happen."

"No, I didn't."

He should have. "The studio's just concerned about the bottom line. It's business."

"Fuck that, Brian. They want us to take all the sex out, even the kissing."

"All the kissing?"

"Yeah. Like, every last little kiss. How the fuck can you have a love story without kissing?"

"With great difficulty."



"It's just...nothing's what it seems here. There are all these people telling you things, whispering in your ear...I...I don't know."

I wish he were here beside me, I hate this void between us, this static and nothingness. "Justin—"

"I miss you, Brian."

"I miss you, too." Strange. The words come so easily.

For a moment, there's nothing, then he takes a ragged breath. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"What? Justin—"

"I'll talk to you later, okay? Thanks for calling. I...thanks. Later." He hangs up.

I listen to the dial tone until it starts beeping loudly. Sleep won't come and eventually I walk around the dark loft, the wood cool beneath my feet, phone still warm in my hand.

As the plane ascends, my ears pop painfully and I suck harder on my complimentary mint. I flip aimlessly through the in-flight magazine and eagerly await the ding that marks the end of takeoff and the beginning of happy hour.

I'll be arriving in the late afternoon L.A. time, and if I'm going to make it out to the studio in rush hour, I need some fortification. Luckily I won't have to drive, since I told Brett I was coming for a surprise visit and he's sending a car for me. He started yammering on about how the cast and crew will be thrilled to meet the real Rage, and I uh-huhed a few times before telling him I had another call.

The ding sounds, and there is an almost-palpable sigh of relief from my fellow passengers. It's happened on pretty much every flight I've ever been on, but I don't think most people realize that they're holding their breath until the seatbelts come off and the flight attendants start circulating the drink cart.

I leave my seatbelt fastened. I once saw a home video on the news of people on a perfectly calm flight that suddenly hit an air pocket. One second, they were in their seats, reading or watching the movie. The next, they were slamming into the ceiling of the plane. My seatbelt has always stayed on after seeing that. I'll still get up to go to the bathroom and walk around, but I figure if I can prevent massive head trauma for most of the flight, it's not a bad idea.

"Care for a drink, sir?" I look up to find a flight attendant leaning over me. Blue eyes, brown hair, and firmly defined muscles that I can see under his polyester uniform.

"Jim Beam, straight up." He nods and retreats to the first-class prep area. He returns in a minute with my drink and a bag of pretzels.

"A light meal will be served shortly. But if there's anything else I can get you in the meantime, please let me know." I look him up and down, slowly, then nod.

Later, when everyone is eating, I find him in the little kitchen and close the accordeon door behind me. He drops to his knees eagerly, sucking me with practiced ease. I look at my watch.

Three hours left.

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The sun glares off every available surface, and I fish my sunglasses out of my carry-on bag as I follow the driver to the car. Being the massive geek that he is, Brett has sent a limo. But as I settle myself into the cool, dark interior, I'm grateful.

The driver informs me that we're going to the valley and that it could take two hours. He tells me to make myself at home and I'm already pouring a drink as he pulls out of the airport and onto the freeway.

My cell rings. "Hello?"

"Brian?"

"Were you expecting someone else?"

Daphne clucks her tongue and I can imagine her rolling her eyes. I smile. "Very funny. Are you there?"

"Where?" There's no way she could know about my trip.

She sighs long-sufferingly. "In L.A., of course."

"Why would you think I'm in L.A.?"

"Because I called your office and Cynthia told me."

Christ. "I really need to fire her one of these days."

"As if! You'd be lost without her."

I know she's right, so I don't bother arguing. "So, what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Have you seen him yet?"

"No, I'm on my way. Jesus, Daphne, I just got here five minutes ago."

"Sorry. I just...I'm worried, Brian."

"Everything will be fine." I'm not sure if I believe it.

"I know you'll fix it. That's, like, your job. You know that, right?"

I'm silent for a moment. "Yeah, I know."

"So, is it nice and sunny there?"

"Of course. How's the Pitts? I seem to recall some lovely spring snow falling as I left."

"Go to hell, Brian." She laughs and so do I. As we say goodbye, the limo comes to a full stop. I look out the window at the sea of cars and take a gulp of my drink.

Sitting back, I close my eyes, remembering the last conversation I had with Justin. He'd started calling me during the day at the loft, when he knew I'd be at work. He left long messages detailing all the battles they were having with the studio suits over the gay content, and how Brett was being a pussy and caving. He'd tell me he missed me and loved me and that L.A. was a weird place.

Last week, I started working at home in the afternoons. I told myself that it was one of the perks of being boss, and that I wasn't just staying home to catch his call. But even I can't lie to myself that much.

When the phone rang yesterday, my heart pounded and I swore that if it were some fucking telemarketer, I was going to drive down to their office and beat them to death with a phone book.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Justin?"

I heard him suck in a breath and then he said, "Hey. I was expecting the machine."

"Yeah, I'm working at home today. Had to be here to let the plumber in."

"Oh. So, how's work?"

"Fine. How are things with you?"

"Fine. Everything's fine."

"That's not what you said the other day."

He laughed shakily. "Well, you can't fight city hall, right? The studio's going to get their way, so I

might as well just accept it.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Justin Taylor I know.” He didn’t say anything, and I listened to him breathe for a minute. “Justin, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Brian, I gotta go. I love you.”

“Justin—” The dial tone buzzed in my ear, and I hung up. As I looked up the number for a travel agent, the phone rang again. The woman said something about *The Financial Post* and I swore so loudly that she hung up without another word.

\*\*\*\*

The drive to the studio takes forever, and it’s almost seven o’clock when we finally get there. Clouds have rolled in, and the sun dips low in the sky. The driver makes a call and a PA comes out to greet me and take my bags. He leads me into a cavernous building where inside, Rage’s lair has been brought to life.

It’s strange to see it all laid out and real, when it was only a drawing on a page before. I spot Justin off to the side, talking with someone and studying what looks like a large map on a table. I shrink back, away from all the bustling activity, and watch him for a few minutes.

He’s thinner, and I can see right away that he’s tired. For some reason a memory of Ted at his drugged-out worst flits through my mind. I force it away and tell myself that it’s not drugs. Justin rubs his right hand absently, and I’m about to walk over to him when Brett approaches.

“Brian! I’m so glad you could make it.” He shakes my hand enthusiastically.

“Thanks. You didn’t tell Justin, right?”

“Of course not. He’ll be thrilled that you’re here. And there are a lot of people who want to meet you.”

Christ. Just what I need. “I’m pretty worn out from the flight, maybe tomorrow.”

Brett is all smiles. “Of course, there’s plenty of time. I made reservations for you and Justin at One Pico in Santa Monica. I’m sure you want to have some time alone.”

I nod. “Thanks, that’ll be great.”

“You’d better get going, the traffic to Santa Monica will still be pretty heavy.”

I thank him again and head off towards Justin. I skirt the darkness on the edge of the set and I’m about twenty feet away when he turns and sees me. He squints, his face crinkling up in confusion. I smile, and when he does, too, I feel a thrill in my veins. But a moment later, a shadow crosses his

face, and I can see the tension return to his body.

He smiles again as he walks towards me, but there's a stiffness to it now. I meet him halfway and pull him into my arms. He hugs me as I squeeze him tightly.

"Brian." He leans back and looks up at me. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to check out the new, improved Armani store on Rodeo."

He laughs half-heartedly. "Of course."

"Figured I might as well stop by." I trail my hands up his arms and run my fingers through his hair. As he leans into my touch, I kiss him softly.

"Brian..." He kisses me back and we stand together in the shadows as the crew buzzes around us. I slide my tongue into his mouth and he sighs, the tension melting away. I realize how much I missed him: his smell, his taste, the little sounds he makes when we kiss. When we break away for air, I press my forehead to his.

"I missed you." I don't even have to struggle to say it, and I wonder if that will ever stop surprising me.

"I missed you, too."

"Justin—"

He steps away. "Come on, you have to meet everyone." He tugs my hand, but I resist.

"Brett made reservations for us for dinner. I'll do the meet and greet tomorrow."

He says goodbye to a few people who look at us curiously on our way out, and holds my hand the whole time. After getting my bags from the PA, we head back onto the freeway in his company car. It feels strange not to be the one driving. He goes too fast on an off-ramp, but I make an effort not to say anything.

"So, how was your flight?"

"Fine. Saw a crappy movie with one of those teenaged girls who are everywhere." I don't mention the flight attendant, and I'm not sure why.

"How long are you staying?"

"Trying to get rid of me already?"

"No," he says, rolling his eyes. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Until Sunday."

"You took two days off work. That's...not like you."

"Aren't you always saying I work too much?" Jesus, if he wants me to go, I'll go.

"Yeah." He exits the freeway and weaves his way towards the right-hand turn lane. "You definitely work too much. I'm...it's good to see you."

I nod and look out the window. He turns the radio on, flipping the stations aimlessly. He says he knows where the restaurant is and soon enough, we're there. He kills the engine and we sit in silence. I can hear the ocean pounding against the beach in the darkness, and it feels like rain is on its way. I stare out at the grim waves, and it occurs to me that I've never swum in the Pacific.

"You must be hungry. With the time change and everything."

I don't answer and instead reach across the small space to draw his mouth to mine. He hesitates for a second, then kisses me back slowly. Our lips are soft and unhurried. I hold the back of his neck, pressing him closer. I missed him so much and I fucking hate this feeling. My fingers gently twist through his hair and I lean back slightly. We stay like that for a minute, our mouths close, just breathing.

"Tell me."

My voice is soft and he blinks in surprise, trying to pull away as I tighten my grip. He looks away and takes a deep breath, but says nothing.

"Tell me," I say again, still quiet. He looks at me with wide eyes and for a second I think he's going to confess whatever it is he thinks is so awful. I run my hand down his back and I can feel the knots of his spine beneath my fingers.

Suddenly he opens the car door and pulls away from me. "We're going to miss our reservation. We'd better go." He shuts the door quietly behind him.

Sighing heavily, I follow him into the restaurant. He pastes on a fake smile as we sit down at our table and peruse the menu. I have to hand it to Brett, he got us an ocean-view table and the restaurant is beautiful.

"The 'House Smoked Salmon with Warm Hushpuppies and Crème Fraiche' sounds good," he says.

"If you like eating droopy dogs, I guess." I smile at my own lame joke, and he smiles back.

"So, um, what exactly is a hushpuppy? I mean, in the eating sense." He scrunches up his nose.

"You mean you don't know?" I give him a condescending look.

"I guess I just haven't been going to the right places," he says with a shrug.

"Clearly not."

"So, what is it?"

"Hmmm?" I feign deep interest in the menu.

He laughs genuinely. "You have no idea, do you?"

"None whatsoever." We both laugh, and it feels good.

"I know what you're going to have." He looks at me with twinkling eyes.

"Come on, then, amaze me with your powers of perception."

"You're going to have 'Oysters with Citrus-Cucumber Mignonette' to start. Then 'Colorado Lamb Loin with Fire Roasted Squash, Grilled Eggplant and Oregano.' For dessert, you'll say you don't want anything, then you'll eat half my cheesecake."

I roll my tongue into my cheek and try not to grin. "Actually, I was going to start with the Roasted Santa Barbara Mussels."

"Uh huh." He looks back at his menu, and knows that he guessed right. Little bastard, thinks he knows me so well.

Only problem is, he does.

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We're halfway through our main courses when he starts to look queasy. He gets pale, and starts just pushing his food around. He only ate half his appetizer, which is unheard of for Justin.

We've talked about the movie and I've updated him on everyone back in the Pitts. Conversation has been surprisingly easy, considering the fact that we're having dinner with a thousand-pound pink elephant at the table.

Beads of sweat have broken out on his forehead. "Justin, are you feeling okay?"

He drinks some water and tries to smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. I don't know, maybe that crab salad wasn't such a good idea. Lucky you had the oysters."

Somehow, I don't think the salad has anything to do with this, and less than a minute later he scrapes his chair back. "I'll be back in a minute," he says, and makes a beeline for the bathroom. I take another bite of my lamb, trying to resist the urge to follow him. I concentrate on chewing, but soon

give up and my fork hits my plate with a clatter.

The bathroom is tastefully decorated and spacious, and if it were another time, I'd be thinking about fucking him in here. He's in the far stall, retching. He coughs and wheezes and I hover outside the door uselessly. He finally stops, and it sounds like he's catching his breath.

"Don't tell me you've become bulimic to fit in with the Hollywood crowd."

"Go away, Brian." His voice is strained.

"Stop being a princess and open the door. I'll get you some water."

"I'm fine, just leave me alone, okay?"

I swear under my breath and try to keep my cool. "You're most demonstrably not fine. Just open the door." He doesn't answer, and I softly add, "It must have been the crab salad," even though I don't believe it for a second. I don't know what it is, but I'm sure as hell going to find out.

He coughs a few times, and sniffs loudly. "Go back to the table, I'll be out in a minute."

I have half a mind to just crawl under the stall door, but the heavy wooden dividers almost reach the floor and there isn't enough room. "Sure you don't want some water?"

"I'm fine." He sounds weary and his voice is scratchy.

"If you're not back in five minutes, I'm coming back in here." With that, I leave the bathroom. The restaurant hums around me and I hover by the bar, unwilling to return to cold food and an empty table.

With sudden purpose, I turn and head out the front doors, into the parking lot. The memory of cold steel in my hand spurs me on, and I feel certain that the answers I need are within my reach. When I found the gun that night, I understood that the problem was worse than I'd imagined.

I need to understand now.

I yank open the car door, grateful that in his rush to get into the restaurant, Justin hadn't locked up. The dome light casts the interior in a soft glow and I kneel on the passenger seat as I reach around into the back for his messenger bag. The worn canvas is familiar beneath my fingers, and the buckles open easily.

Fat drops of rain begin to fall. As the wind off the ocean picks up, I take a deep breath and reach in.

I'm not sure how long I stand in the open doorway of the car. Justin's bag is on the seat, but the rest of its contents are unimportant. Rain spits down and I lean on the cool metal roof, trying to process what I'm holding in my hand.



It's not possible.

This is not happening.

When I finally look back at the restaurant, Justin is on the steps, frozen. For long moments, he's like a deer in the headlights, until he suddenly bolts towards the beach, walking quickly. I slam the car door and follow him, the pill bottle clutched tightly in my grasp.

As my feet hit the sand, I call out his name. He looks over his shoulder and speeds up, and I stride towards him, anger fuelling my steps. "Don't you fucking run away from me!"

At this, he finally turns. He's too goddamned pale and part of me just wants to get him back inside before the rain really begins to fall. I stop a few feet away and we stare at each other.

"What the fuck is this?" I lift the pills up, still clenched in my fist.

"Zidovudine. It's an antiretroviral."

My teeth clench. "I know what it is. I mean what are you doing taking it? And why the fuck didn't you tell me? This isn't possible, Justin." He's barely been here two months, he can't have tested positive. Because that would mean he was probably infected before he left, and he would tell me if I could be, too.

He tries to speak, and needs a moment to get his breathing under control. I know he's trying not to cry. "Something happened last month." He hugs himself and looks anywhere but at me.

"Tell me."

"Brian—"

"Tell. Me." I'm not going to put up with any more of this evasion.

He takes another breath and blows it out. "I went to a party, and it was pretty wild. I mean, there was cocaine and all these drugs just lying around like snacks. That's how it is in Hollywood. At least in some parts, I guess. I figured what the hell, and did some coke. Then a guy offered me a bump. I figured what the hell again, and I did it. I was so fucked up, I barely remember it." He stops and wipes splatters of rain from his face. "And then...." He swallows hard, still trying to keep the tears at bay.

"Did someone...." I trail off, unable to finish the thought. My stomach churns and I swear to god, if someone hurt Justin I'll hunt him down and make him wish he were dead.

"It was my fault, Brian. There was this guy...he was really hot and we started hanging out. Eventually we ended up in the pool and he started jerking me off. It felt so good and then he said he wanted to fuck me, and I let him. I kinda remember thinking that it felt really different under water. God, I'm so stupid."

“He wasn’t wearing a condom.” Justin shakes his head and he’s right, he is stupid. But my anger dissipates in the face of his misery. “Okay, so you made a mistake. The odds that he’s positive—”

“He is. I talked to him the next morning. He said he assumed I was, too, because I was at Matt’s party.” Justin laughs hollowly. “I don’t even know who Matt is. Hell of an assumption to make, huh?”

I can’t answer. The rain is still spitting down, and I’m surprised at how cold the wind coming off the ocean is. “The odds that you’re infected are still slim.” I put the pills in my pocket, like somehow that will help make this all go away.

He nods. “I know; the doctor told me, but I still wanted the drugs. He said the side effects might be bad, but I don’t care. If you take the drugs right after exposure, they think it might stop the virus from taking hold. I know all the odds, all the statistics, all the scientific crap that the experts have come up with. I know.”

Anger returns to me like a bolt of lightning. “Well, isn’t that nice. So, why the FUCK didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Don’t you understand? I just couldn’t! I didn’t want to lie to you; I didn’t want to tell you that everything was fine when it wasn’t. So I figured I’d just...put things on hold for a while until I knew I was clean. I mean, I’m out here anyway, and....” He looks away from me, towards the crashing waves. “There are no rules, I figured you were doing what you wanted back home, and I could just deal with this.”

“What, you thought I wouldn’t care? You thought I’d be so busy fucking everything that moves that I would just go along with whatever you wanted?”

“I don’t know what I thought. I wasn’t really thinking,” he says, kicking the sand with his toe.

“I only said there were no rules for your benefit.”

He looks up, confused. “What? What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want to hold you back. I wanted you to come out here and have fun, and...I want you to be happy. If that means not being with me, then that’s the way it is.”

“But I don’t want anyone else, don’t you know that?”

“Things change, Sunshine.”

“But Brian—”

“Look, Justin, it still doesn’t explain why you didn’t tell me what was going on.” He’s not getting off the hook. Not after everything we’ve been through.

He looks back out at the water and shivers, the rain beginning to soak through his shirt. “I didn’t want

to disappoint you. You taught me to always be safe, and I'm gone for one month before I fuck everything up." He stops and sniffs and folds his arms tightly. "Things here just seem unreal; it's like everything's fake and you were so far away. And this doesn't just affect my life, it affects you. I was afraid."

Christ, can't he learn from my mistakes? "So you basically did the same thing I did when I found out I had cancer."

His head snaps back around. "No! It's not the same. Don't you get it?"

"Apparently I don't!"

"I'm always a fucking victim, Brian," he says, gesturing violently. "Poor little Justin with his bashed-in head and his post-traumatic stress and his gimp hand. I thought I was finally finished with all that. I just wanted to be able to handle this and not make it a big deal like everything else."

"Justin, you're not a victim." He opens his mouth to argue but I cut him off. "When bad things happen to people, they get upset. It doesn't make you a victim. It makes you normal." He shakes his head, and it hits me that he's never going to get over the bashing, not really. He may have faced Chris Hobbes, and he may not have nightmares about it anymore, but it's always going to be a part of him.

"I should be smarter, I should be able to handle things better. I should be stronger."

"So, if the cancer came back, and I had to go through chemo again, and I spent another couple of months puking my guts up, would you think I was weak?"

He steps towards me, glistening eyes wide. "Brian, it's not...it hasn't..." He grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my flesh.

"No, it hasn't." His hand falls away and he sighs in relief. "But would you think less of me if I got sick again?"

"Of course not! That's crazy."

"Yeah, I know. It is." I look at him pointedly and raise my eyebrows to emphasis my point.

The fight drains out of him, and he runs his hand through his hair. "But it's not the same. This was my fault."

"You made a mistake." I soften my voice, adding, "And you're a motherfucking piece of shit for not telling me."

He looks at me for what seems like a lifetime, and finally huffs out a weak laugh. "I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted."

“Really?” He half smiles, but there’s no humour in it. “You’d still want me after I’ve been such a dumbass?” He shakes his head and wipes his eyes.

I tell him the truth. “I’ll always want you.”

He stares at me in shock, and with a look of gratitude that fills me with shame for never having told him before. He takes a shaky breath and then he’s in my arms. I hold him tightly as he clings to me.

“I’m scared.” I can barely hear him, his voice muffled against my neck, the rain intensifying.

I feel so powerless.

But at least he’s here with me, warm and breathing and alive, and he’s going to be fine. I’ll make sure of it.

“I know how you feel,” I tell him, pressing my face into his hair. I want to climb into his skin, I want to make everything all right. “I know what it’s like to be afraid.”

He loosens his grip a tiny bit, and looks up at me. “Brian, if I’m positive—”

“You’re not.” I won’t allow it.

“Brian....” He reaches up and touches my cheek. He tries to say something, but he can’t get the words out.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, Justin.”

He looks at me with regret. “I never would have let him if I hadn’t been so high. You’re the only one....”

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t let him kiss me. Not him, or anyone.” Rain drips down his face and I wipe the moisture away.

The truth is that I haven’t kissed anyone but him for two years. Even after he left with the fiddler.

“Me, either.”

He smiles and presses his lips to mine. I run my fingers through the back of his hair as my tongue sweeps through his mouth, and he sighs into me. We kiss until thunder cracks in the distance, making us both jump.

“I guess we should get off the beach, don’t want to get struck by lightning.”

“No, wouldn’t want that,” I say, smiling. I grab his hand and we run back to the car, even though we’re already soaked. Justin gets behind the wheel and fumbles for the keys in his pocket. His hands are shaking, and I reach over and take them in mine, rubbing them gently. We sit in silence, listening

to the rain.

Then he says, "Nothing seems real here. It was like, if I just didn't tell you, then it wouldn't be happening. And I could go back to Pittsburgh in six months and it would all be like a bad dream."

I nod. "I understand. And everything's going to be okay. Just don't lie to me."

"I won't. I promise." He leans over, kissing me softly. A second later he bolts upright. "I guess we should go pay the bill, huh?"

Shit, I'd totally forgotten. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll go."

"Can you grab my jacket, too? I left it on the back of my chair." I nod and my hand closes around the door handle. But I don't move. The rain drums on the roof, coming down harder and harder. The lights from the restaurant reflect off the wet glass of the side mirror, and I keep my eyes glued to it.

"Don't ever think that I don't love you, Justin."

A second later I'm out of the car and hurrying across the lot into the restaurant, heart pounding in my chest. I take a few deep breaths and pay the anxious waiter, who was probably afraid our meal would be coming out of his pocket, and grab Justin's jacket as I go into the bathroom. I look like shit, and even though I'm already wet, I splash some cold water on my face to try and get back in control.

I hardly recognize the man looking back at me in the mirror.

When I return to the car, Justin has the engine on. I toss his jacket into the back and do up my seatbelt. Sweat prickles my spine, and I try to think of something to say.

As he backs out of the spot, Justin asks, "Did you give the guy a big tip?"

"Yeah."

"Cool." He heads along the road by the boardwalk. He drives slowly through the rain, and along the way to his apartment, he points out the sights, telling me that we have to go to Venice Beach tomorrow to see all the buff guys.

After a few minutes, I can breathe again.

Later, we fall into bed, too drained to do anything but sleep. We strip our clothes off and I pull him to me tightly, my chest pressing into his back. Within minutes, I'm out. I dream of nothing, just a perfect feeling of warmth.

I wake slowly, my eyes drifting open as I stretch my legs languidly. Justin's beside me, watching, and a small smile crosses his lips. For a moment, I'm not sure where we are and then it all comes back to me in a sickening instant, and I remember.

Justin sees, and rolls away, moving to sit up. I reach out and pull him back, sliding my body on top of his. We fit together still, and I'm ludicrously relieved, as if I expected we'd be all elbows and confusion. I run my hands over his skin, trying not to notice the weight he's already lost. As if he can read my mind, he looks away. Disengages.

I turn his face back to me. My fingers move through his hair as I kiss him gently, and when I suck his bottom lip into my mouth, he sighs. My lips move to his neck, and I feel him stir against my belly as I find the spot just below his ear that never fails to make him quiver. I discovered it that first night, when he was so nervous and unsure under my hands.

"Brian...." His voice is barely more than a moan.

I lick the hollow of his throat, revel in the taste of his skin. It's been too long. My lips find his again, and our tongues move together in perfect symmetry. I wonder how I can take it for granted and never cease to be amazed by it at the same time.

My hand dances over his chest and stomach as we kiss, and I move my hips against his. When I reach down and stroke him, suddenly he breaks away, his hands on my shoulders.

"No, wait." Breathing heavily, he swallows hard.

I brush his hair back from his forehead. "It's okay."

"No, it's not." He squirms back, trying to get out from under me. I shift my weight a bit, but I still don't let him run away.

"Justin, what's wrong?" A dark thought tugs at my brain, and I try to banish it.

"Just stop, okay?" He looks at my chest, and his hands still curl around my shoulders.

"Okay, I stopped. See? I stopped." I caress his hair gently.

He nods, unable to meet my eyes. "I just can't...."

Shit. "Look, Justin...about that party." His hands fall away and he lies still, his body filled with tension. "That guy. You said...you said you let him...." Fuck, I don't want to ask this.

"I'm sorry, Brian. I don't know what else to say." He still won't look at me.

"Are you telling the truth?"

His gaze snaps back to me. "What, you don't believe me? You don't think I'm sorry? Fuck you, Brian." He shoves at me and his eyes blaze and I'm doing this all wrong.

"No, of course I believe you. Justin, I know you're sorry. And you need to stop beating yourself up for

this. I'm just...are you sure it happened like you said?"

"What do you mean?"

Christ, I'm so bad at this. "He didn't...he didn't make you do anything? You can tell me, you know. You can tell me."

I feel him relax and his fingers graze my cheek. "He didn't force me or anything. Honestly."

Exhaling, I realize I was holding my breath. "Then what it is? You're jumpy. It's like before." I don't say anything more and he knows what I mean.

"I just...I just can't," he says, blinking rapidly.

"That's okay. I just thought...I was afraid...but it's okay. Everything's okay, Justin." A complete lie.

He shakes his head and smiles slightly. "You're such a shitty liar, Brian."

"Well, we all can't be experts."

I see the hurt in his eyes as he pushes me away and rolls over to sit on the edge of the bed. I sling my arm around his stomach before he can get up, and rest my forehead between his shoulder blades.

"I didn't mean it like that. I didn't mean you."

"Yes, you did. And why not, I've lied enough times." He stands up, and I let him.

"Don't tell me what I meant. Justin, I wasn't talking about you. It was just a stupid joke."

He opens and closes drawers, shrugs into a pair of briefs. "Okay. It's fine."

I sigh loudly. "Look, just come back to bed."

"I need to get to the studio sometime today before I get fired." I glance at the clock and am surprised to see that it's already nine a.m.

"Justin, I wasn't talking about you."

He steps into his pants and looks at me. After a few seconds, he relaxes, and says, "Okay."

"So come back here for a minute. You're already late." I reach my arm out, and he puts his hand in mine as he sits down on the side of the bed.

"I really do have to go. I don't know why I'm getting dressed, I still have to have a shower."

"So do I. Come on, let's conserve some water."

"Brian, I told you, I can't." He pulls his hand free.

Time to figure this out. "Justin—"

"Brian, I can't have sex with you until I know that I'm clean."

Wait.

What the fuck did he just say?

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I must be going deaf."

He stands up again and faces me. "I can't put you at risk."

Jesus, this is ridiculous. "Justin, we're always safe. It's fine. Besides, you're fine." He is. He's fine.

"Brian, I can't risk you. Not you."

I get up and he backs up a few steps. "Justin, come here."

"No, I can't."

"Justin, it doesn't make a difference. I don't understand—"

"Don't you get it? I have to know, I can't risk you." He's agitated now, pacing around.

"And what if you're positive?" The words are like acid on my tongue, and they hang in the air between us. It will not happen, but I need to make him see sense.

"Then...."

"Then what, Justin? Are you going to leave me?"

He shakes his head. "No...."

"Because I'm not leaving you. So, if you have other plans, just tell me."

"You'd *really* still want to be with me? Even if I were positive?"

"Yes."



"But what about the risk? I could infect you. I couldn't live with it, Brian. I don't want to hurt you."

"I could get hit by a bus tomorrow. So could you. Who the fuck knows how it's all going to turn out? But it's bullshit to run away because of something that *might* happen. People deal with it, Justin. Mikey and the Professor, for starters."

"I know. I just...the thought of giving it to you is a lot to deal with."

"But we'll deal with it."

He nods finally and I fold him into my arms. I try to tell him with my body all the things that don't come out the way they should. He wraps his arms around my waist and rests his head on my shoulder.

I know he won't be positive.

He can't be. For a fleeting moment, I think that if he is, I want him to infect me. I want to share the burden, I want to take it from him. I've never understood how people could feel that way, but now I think I do.

It passes, and I whisper, "Come on, I'll scrub your back. That's all." He needs time, and I understand. Well, I don't understand, not really.

But I'll give it to him.

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The sky is still overcast as we drive back to the studio. I wear my sunglasses anyway – I'm in California, for fuck's sake. Justin has Coldplay in the CD player and he sings along quietly. Usually I'd make a disparaging remark, but I don't. If he's singing he must be feeling okay.

I had just been finishing my hair when I glanced out into the bedroom and saw him rummaging through the pockets of my discarded pants from last night. Right. The pills. He took them and I looked back in the mirror, not wanting him to see me watching.

He pulls up to a stoplight. "So, do you want to go shopping tomorrow? Hit Rodeo Drive and spend lots of money?"

"I'm sorry, we must not have met. I'm Brian Kinney," I say, with faux sincerity.

He laughs. "I'll take that as a yes."

"First I have to meet the admiring masses. It's hard work being an icon."

"Tell me about it." His smile is wide and it's amazing how I still feel that little thrill in my veins when

it's directed at me.

Christ, now that Mel and Lindz are on the outs, I've apparently turned into a lesbian romantic to fill the vacuum.

"Everyone always asks me about you, and if you're really as amazing as you seem in the comics," he says.

"And what do you tell them?"

He shrugs. "I tell them you're okay." I give him a Look until he can't keep a straight face anymore. "I tell them you're a god who has fallen to earth."

"Flew too close to the sun, I guess."

He scrunches up his face. "Huh?"

"Icarus? Wax wings? We really need to get you a proper education at some point," I say, sighing heavily.

"Shut up. Wait, this sounds familiar. Icarus' father told him not to fly too close to the sun because of the wax, or too close to the ocean because of the feathers, right?"

"Right."

"He was just supposed to take the middle ground."

"Yeah." Shit, I can see where this is going.

He's quiet, and I shouldn't have brought it up because now I know he's applying it to what's happened and that's bullshit. "Justin, it's a myth. It doesn't mean anything."

"I know." He smiles again, but the tension is back. A few minutes later we pull into the studio parking lot and he kills the engine. He moves to open the door but I lean over to kiss him. His lips are soft and they part under mine as I kiss him slowly, trying to erase everything else from his mind.

A knock at the window makes us both jump, and I look up to see Brett smiling down at us. "You two just gonna make out all day?"

I'm about to tell Monkey Boy that yes, that's exactly what we're fucking going to do, but Justin clamps his hand over my mouth.

"We're coming, Brett!" He waits until Brett and his trailing entourage of PAs move away before he takes his hand away. "Sorry, but I know what you were going to say, and he's my boss."

"You have no idea what I was going to say."

His eyebrows shoot up and he laughs. "I think I have a pretty good idea." His laugh is hearty, and as we walk into the studio, he takes my hand, all thoughts of the sun and sea forgotten.

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It turns out that making a movie is really fucking tedious and boring as hell. It takes forever to set up one little scene, and then they do it over and over and over again. A lot of standing around, and if I don't get away from the food table, I'm going to gain ten pounds this weekend.

Justin is busy talking with the lighting director, and it's really amazing to watch him work. He knows what he wants, and he's not afraid to give his opinions. I don't know why I'm surprised, given our history.

After one too many frappacappawhateverthefucks, I go and find the bathroom. I'm just zipping up when Connor walks in, decked out in his Rage costume.

"Hey, how's it going," he says as he sidles up. It's not really a question.

"Fine." I finish doing up my jeans and turn to the sinks, but Connor has positioned himself in front of them.

"So, you're the famous Brian Kinney. Inspiration for Rage." He sizes me up and I have to admit, he's hot.

"That's right."

He leans in. "I don't have to be back on set for another fifteen minutes," he says, watching me hungrily and rubbing the bulge in his tights.

I look him up and down in his costume. "Been there, done that." I step around to the sink and wash my hands, Connor staring at me in disbelief. As I turn to go, I add, "But thanks for the offer."

I'm almost out the door when he angrily shouts, "Don't you know who I am?"

I can't stop laughing about it all day, and when I tell Justin, he giggles and tells me that I didn't miss a thing.

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"Feeling okay?"

Justin looks up from the Chinese food he's pushing around his plate with chopsticks. "Yeah, today was a good day. Not too many side effects. I'm just tired, I guess."

"You should try to eat a bit more." Lord, I sound like Debbie. Actually, Debbie would just screech and pile more food on his plate.

He takes one more chunk of pork and chews it slowly. "Okay, I'm done. You?" I nod and he takes our plates into the kitchen. The apartment is small, but it's beachfront, so it's hard to complain. There's no dishwasher, and he fills the sink up.

I grab a dishtowel and start drying, asking him where everything goes. It's strange to be in an apartment that's just his. Not his and Daphne's, and not mine. Just his. Speaking of Daphne, I need to remind him to call her, tell her what's going on. Or at least tell her something so she won't worry.

He's almost done, and I wrap my arms around him from behind as I sink my hands into the warm, soapy water.

"What are you doing?" He smiles as he looks at me askance.

"You're going to get dishpan hands, you know." I move my hands over his under the water, massaging them slowly. My lips find his neck, and I suck his skin lazily. He exhales a long, low breath and I rub his hands under the water, my fingers kneading his.

He closes his eyes and I know he's as turned on as I am. God, I want to tear his pants down and bend him over the sink and fuck him until we're both coming so hard that the neighbours will call 911. I need to touch him. I know I can't fuck him, but I need him.

And he needs me. I kiss and nibble and lick his neck as I pull one hand from the sink. In an instant his pants are undone, and I pull out his hard cock.

"Brian, no." His eyes pop open and he freezes up. I stop, my wet hand just grasping him. Not moving.

"It's safe, it's just my hand," I whisper in his ear, before sucking on the lobe gently. "You need this, Justin. Stop punishing yourself."

I still don't move, because I'm not going to make him do anything he doesn't want to. But I know he wants to, and I know that he needs to stop thinking of himself like some kind of fucking leper.

Finally, he puts his hand over mine on his cock, and starts moving it up and down. I take over, and he leans back against me as I stroke him rapidly, my thumb flicking over the head, my other hand moving around to touch his balls. He pants, his eyes closed again, and before long he's coming hard, shuddering and moaning quietly.

I let him catch his breath, and then clean up and get him zipped up again. I'm still hard, but I ignore it.

Justin turns around and kisses me, holding me close. "Thank you," he whispers.

"I always did give good hand."

He presses his cheek against mine. "For telling me."

I hold my breath.

What am I supposed to say now? Does he expect me to start making declarations all the time now? I fumble for the right words in my mind, but then he kisses me again, and I don't have to say anything.

We finish cleaning up, and I tell that I'm beat. I'm not, but he should get to bed, and I know he'll stay up with me otherwise. I leave my underwear on and slide beneath the sheets. He joins me, clad in boxers and one of my old t-shirts that he must have brought with him.

He snaps the light off and moonlight filters in through the gauzy curtains. The window is open and the sea air smells tangy and sweet.

"It was cool going to the set today. Seeing how it all works."

"It was not, you were bored as hell!" Justin chuckles.

"Well, yeah, but it was still cool. Seeing you in your element."

He shakes his head and I know he's blushing. "Come on, Brian."

"What? You looked good. And you're having fun with this job."

"Well, yeah. I mean, things out here haven't been exactly what I expected, but...there's been some pretty good stuff."

He seems ashamed of it. "You're in sunny California working on your dream job, I should hope so."

"It's cool. I mean, people actually listen to me, you know?"

"Of course they listen to you. You're fucking good at this, Justin."

"But I mean, it's so...grown-up, or something."

"Welcome to the real world, Sunshine."

He smiles. "Yeah. But they think I know what I'm talking about."

"I always said you were a genius."

He elbows me in the ribs. "No, you didn't!"

"Well, maybe not *always*, but clearly I'm right."

"Of course," he says, smiling.

"Now you're catching on."

Justin kisses me and puts his head on my chest. "Yep, I've got you all figured out."

I run the tips of his hair through my fingers and soon he's asleep, still curled into my side. I stay awake for a long time, listening to the ocean, the curtains swaying gently in the breeze.

Sometimes, I think I could get used to this.

The phone shrieks to life and I fumble for it on the nightstand, my hand reaching out blindly. "Hello?"

"Hey. Did I wake you?"

"No," I lie, as I quickly get up and duck into the dark living room.

"Yes I did."

"Well, it is after midnight, Justin."

"Okay, old man. Do you need to put your teeth back in now?"

"Shut up, you little asshole." I can't help but laugh. I move to the window and look out into the night, the streets of Pittsburgh gleaming in the rain.

"So, guess what happened today?"

"You saw Mickey Mouse giving Donald Duck a blowjob."

He giggles. "How did you know?"

"Well, clearly those two are queers. Minnie is the quintessential fag hag. And Donald's always wandering around without any pants on. He's such a slut."

"It's true, he is. Just last week he propositioned me."

"Well you knew Hollywood would be full of temptation."

"Yeah." The laughter's gone from his voice. Shit. Gotta distract him.

"So what happened today?"

"Oh, right. Brian, you're not going to believe it."

"Still waiting." My breath fogs up the window and I run my finger over it.

"I got tricked into going to a big Church of Scientology brainwashing session."

Fucking L.A. "Great, next thing I know you'll be telling me about the evil aliens possessing you."

"Thetans. And they're the souls of people murdered by Xenu, this really evil alien overlord. He put all the people on earth and killed them with a hydrogen bomb."

"And when was this?"

"75 million years ago or something."

"Wow, how very...anachronistic of him."

"Brian, you don't know the half of it. But you see, Xenu is still controlling us with these thetans, so we have to cleanse ourselves."

"Ah. And how do we go about this?" Jesus, Tom Cruise really is as dumb as he looks.

"By giving the church a fuckload of money. You have to take all these courses and they don't tell you about all the alien stuff until you're totally brainwashed. I only found out about it by Googling it when I got home."

"So can I safely assume that you won't be joining?"

He laughs, and I can't help but smile. "Brian, I may make some bad decisions sometimes, but you can rest assured that I won't become a Sunnie, either."

"Moonie."

"Huh?"

"They're called Moonies, not Sunnies."

"Oh, right. Close enough."

"Stay away from the Hare Krishnas while you're at it, okay?"

"Okay," he says. "So, what are you wearing?" He laughs again, but I can tell that he's hoping we can indulge in some more phone sex. I haven't seen him for almost two months now, but we've talked every day, usually more than once.

"Look, Justin...."

"Because I'm not wearing anything." His voice is low now and my cock twitches. He was ridiculously

shy the first time we did it on the phone, but now he's really into it, and it's good for him right now. I know he's still feeling guilty and weird about sex in general, so phone sex is a good start.

"Justin, it's not a good time."

Silence.

"Justin?"

"Yeah. Sorry if I called at a bad time. Is someone there?"

"Yeah, someone's here. It's—"

"Look, I should go anyway. I've got an early call tomorrow."

"Justin—"

"Love you. Bye."

"Justin!"

The dial tone echoes in my ear and I curse as I dial his number. It rings and rings, but he doesn't pick up. For fuck's sake. I hit redial. He better not have just turned the phone off. Finally he picks up.

"Hey," he says.

"Could you not hang up on me in the future?"

"Well, I didn't want to keep you." He sounds distant now.

"Oh stop being such a fucking drama queen, Justin."

There's more silence, then he says, "Sorry." He laughs ruefully. "I just miss you, Brian."

"I miss you, too," I say, quietly.

"Yeah, I know you do."

"Good."

There are a few seconds of silence and then he says, "Well, if someone's there, you should go. Have fun, okay?"

Truth is, no tricks have been here since I got back from L.A. I haven't even gotten blown at Babylon. Aside from the phone sex and whacking off, I haven't gone this long without sex since I started having it. I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me.



I hear a noise from the bedroom and Gus appears at the top of the steps, rubbing his eyes. "Daddy?"

I wave him over and he toddles towards me, the cape of his Spider-man pajamas trailing behind him.

"Justin, he wants to say hello, hold on."

"What? Ha ha, very funny."

I crouch down and hand Gus the phone. "Say hi to Justin."

He takes it eagerly and squeaks, "Justin!" Gus listens to him intently and nods and smiles and at one point bounces on his toes excitedly. Then he tells him that we're having a sleepover and that we watched *Spongebob* all night.

I sigh heavily. Having a kid is hell on your reputation sometimes.

Finally, Gus says goodbye and hands the phone back to me. I pick him up and take him back to bed, cradling the phone between my ear and my shoulder.

"So now you know my secret. I spent all night watching cartoons and running around after Gus."

"He sounds great. Has he grown? I bet he's grown."

"A bit, I guess. I'll take some pictures for you." I put Gus down on the bed and he crawls under the sheets as I sit back against the wall.

"Cool. You know, you could have just told me Gus was there."

I roll my tongue into my cheek. "I was trying to when you hung up on me, remember?"

"Oh yeah. Good point." He laughs. "Sorry, I'm just...you know."

"Yeah, I know."

We're quiet and then he says, "So, I should go."

"Right. I'd better get back to sleep. Gus'll probably be up at the crack of dawn knowing him."

"Undoubtedly. It was great to talk to him tonight. Give him a big hug and kiss for me, okay?"

"Yeah, okay. So...." I trail off. Neither of us are talking about it, but we both know that the three-month mark since exposure is next week, and that he's getting tested. I know he's going to be fine, though. He will be.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow, right?"

"Right."

"Okay. 'Night, Brian."

"Later." I wait until he hangs up and then I set the phone down. Gus is peering up at me from his side of the bed with wide eyes.

"When's Justin coming home?"

"Soon. Now let's get to back sleep." I climb under the sheets and tuck him in. Before long he's snoring softly, his mouth agape. I close my eyes, but sleep takes a long time to come.

\*\*\*\*

Pulling up to the front of the school, I shift into neutral. I promised Hunter a driving lesson, since it's been a few weeks. Mikey and Ben finally found out and Ben got all puffed up with self-importance, saying that he should be the one to teach Hunter. I reminded him that he doesn't have a fucking car, so it would be kind of difficult. That shut him up pretty fast, and shutting up Ben is always enjoyable.

I look up and notice a girl watching me from the steps. I'm pretty sure it's Hunter's old girlfriend, the one I saw before. The poor kid's still hurting over it, and it's been months.

Oh, what the hell.

I get out and cross over to where she's sitting. She stares down at her textbook resolutely, trying to pretend that I'm not there.

"Excuse me."

She reluctantly looks up. "Um, yeah?"

"You're Hunter's friend, right? Or, should I say that you *used* to be Hunter's friend."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a current friend."

She snorts. "Yeah, I just bet you are." She packs up her books and stands up. "If Hunter wants to...do what he does, then that's his choice. I don't need to hear about it."

"Look, I'm his...uncle, or whatever. I know his dads. I'm teaching him to drive. That's all."

She looks at me suspiciously. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because Hunter's fucking miserable and I think you probably are, too."

"You don't know anything about me."

"Well, I know that Hunter had a really shitty childhood and that everything that happened wasn't his fault. He didn't choose that life."

She waves her arm around. "I didn't say he did. But when I think about—"

"Don't think about it."

"It's easy for you to say."

"Yeah, it is. He's a good kid, and he deserves a fresh start."

"What's going on?" Hunter stops a few feet away and looks back and forth between us, confusion and something that looks like fear in his eyes.

"I was just saying hello to your friend," I tell him. He doesn't know what to say, and the girl just bites her lip. "Come on, you need to learn to parallel park." We head towards the car.

She calls out, "Hunter."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe we can go to the mall or something after school."

"Yeah, okay," he says.

"Okay. Come by my locker later."

He nods and she walks back into the school. We get in the car and I drive us over to a side street a few blocks away. Hunter doesn't say anything until I stop and go to open the door.

"Thanks, Brian."

I shrug casually. "Everyone needs driving lessons, right?"

He looks down. "Yeah." He takes a deep breath and then grins as he pops out of the car. "Prepare for the student to become the master!"

I smile and decide to take a long lunch.

\*\*\*\*

“Come here and give me a hug, you asshole.”

“Gosh, Debbie, I missed you, too.”

Debbie wraps me in a big bear hug that makes breathing difficult. I guess she and good ol’ Carl must have had fun on their not-honeymoon. Debbie’s being all political by not getting legally married, but she said she was damned if she was going to miss out on a vacation.

“So, what do you think of my tan?”

I survey her red nose and splotchy skin. “Looks great, Deb.” Carl shakes my hand and then Gus barrels out of Deb’s kitchen.

“Daddy!” I swing him up in my arms and Mel smiles despite herself as she trails along behind him.

“Hey Sonny Boy.” He kisses me on the cheek and I kiss him back.

Ted and Emmett bicker in the living room about something stupid like Colin Farrell’s dick size, and Lindsay is trying to look casual in the kitchen, chopping up something and pretending that she’s not rattled by Mel’s presence. I guess the gang’s all here.

Well, almost.

I’ve missed Justin pretty much every day since he left, but today I really wish he were here. I need him to be here. Emmett asks how he is, and if there are any more star sightings to report. Everyone listens eagerly, and I tell them Justin’s story about running into Ashton Kutcher at Starbucks.

“Oh, probably getting a latte for Demi!” Emmett coos.

Everyone chatters and Debbie pulls out the pictures from Mexico. Gus sits on my lap as we all gather around to hear about Debbie and Horvath’s big adventure with Montezuma’s Revenge and drinks that were 90% rum, 10% Coke.

Today’s the day, and he still hasn’t called.

I try not to over-analyze it or think the worst, but it’s proving difficult. I’ve left two messages, but I haven’t heard a word. I’m starting to get pissed off, and if he doesn’t call me soon I’m just going to turn my phone off and to hell with him.

I check my watch again. It’s 6 p.m., which means it’s 3 in L.A. Not sure what time his appointment was, he was vague about it. I double-check my cell phone to make sure it’s on.

“And here’s Carl in the pool at the swim-up bar. They have a bar right in the pool, can you believe that?”

Debbie’s eyes twinkle and I nod and smile in all the right places. I check my watch again.

6:01.

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I jolt awake and pick up the phone from where it lies beside me on the bed. It's not ringing, and I drop it back on the mattress. The days are long again, but it's dark now. I begged off early from Deb's and came back here to wait for Justin's call, and I guess I fell asleep eventually. It was a welcome escape, but I shake my head to try and get oriented.

Then I hear it.

Someone's walking towards the bedroom. It must have been the door closing that woke me.

My whole body tenses, but when I look up, he's standing there. I think I must still be fucking asleep, but he's here, and it's real. He walks over and sinks onto the bed on his knees. As he reaches out and touches my face, I look at his smile and I don't need to ask what the test results were.

We kiss for a long time, just content to breath the same air, our tongues dancing together slowly. I cup the back of his head and play with the ends of his hair as he sighs softly into my mouth.

He pulls away and looks at me intently. We both take deep breaths and then we're kissing again, our hands pulling at each other's clothing. I need him naked, I need to feel his skin beneath my hands, beneath my tongue, my lips.

God, I missed him so fucking much.

I kick the last of my clothes off and pull him beneath me. We rub our bodies together and my mouth never leaves his, my tongue thrusting deeply. I'd almost forgotten how good he tastes, how kissing anyone else will never be good enough again.

Our cocks are hard and Justin arches up off the mattress, pressing into me. I reach into the drawer for condoms and lube and he wriggles around, putting his legs up on my shoulders. The lube is cold and he gasps, despite himself, then smiles. I press my lips to his as I slide into him slowly.

God, it's been too long.

I moan low in my throat and Justin licks my neck with a long stroke. He's so tight and hot around me and for a few moments I don't move. My muscles shake as he flexes his legs and squeezes his ass even tighter.

Then I'm moving in and out, bending down to kiss him, sweat beading on my forehead. He grunts and takes little gasps of air as we move together. I go deeper inside him and he grabs my hand, holding it tightly, our fingers straining together.

It's been just over four months since I've been inside him, and I never want to let him go again. I should tell him that, but the only sounds I make are quiet moans. I lick his lips and thrust my tongue into his mouth once more.

My balls start to tighten and I know that I can't last too much longer. Justin knows, and when I jerk his cock three times he comes hard, clenching his ass around me. I thrust once more and come with a shudder and a long groan.

As I collapse on top of him, his legs flop down from my shoulders. We stay joined together for long minutes, our skin slick and our breathing heavy, my face pressed into the hollow of his neck. Eventually, I shift and kiss him gently.

"You could have called."

"I wanted to celebrate in person." His fingers trail lazily up my spine.

"I know, but...I was worried." I glance away, but he presses his palm to my cheek, making me look at him.

"I'm sorry. I just got in a cab and went to the airport; it was kinda spur of the moment. I wanted to surprise you, I guess. I didn't even bring any clothes with me."

"Well, I'm pretty sure there are still a few of your things hiding around here. Besides," I say, grinning wickedly, "You won't be needing your clothes."

He laughs and kisses me, his lips swollen already. Soon, I'm hard for a second time, and he shifts down, his hot, wet mouth closing around me. The third time, I fuck him again, our bodies slick with sweat, his back glistening before me.

By the time dawn breaks, I've stopped counting.

The lights of L.A. spread out around me and I can see the Hollywood Hills in the distance. The night is warm and up here, high above it all, a gentle breeze blows. I sip my whiskey as a waitress with painfully fake breasts ventures over to offer me a scallop wrapped in bacon. She assures me that it's Atkins-friendly, a conspiratorial smile on her face.

I thank her and turn back to the view, popping the scallop in my mouth, savouring the buttery flavour. There may not be many carbs in it, but I can feel my arteries hardening before I've even finished swallowing.

We're on top of the trendiest hotel in L.A., and anyone who's anyone is here, hobnobbing and angling to have their pictures taken at the *Rage* wrap party to show how hip they are. Never mind that half of them are closet cases with fabricated relationships designed by their PR managers.

"Hey," Justin says as he approaches.

“Hey.”

He kisses me and joins me at the railing, looking out over the city. “Nice view, huh?”

“Sure don’t see anything like this in the Pitts.”

“Not so much.” He smiles and nudges me with his hip. “You’re being very antisocial.”

“If one more person asks me to tell them what Rage is really like, I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

He grimaces. “Sorry, everyone and their brother comes out for the wrap parties. I guess it’s new to a lot of them.”

“Justin!”

Great. Monkey Boy.

“Hey Brett, what’s up?” Justin puts on his business smile.

“Can I steal you away to talk to some investors? They’re right over there, with Samantha.”

“Sure. Brian, I’ll be back in a sec, okay?”

I nod and he crosses the rooftop. I attempt to ignore the fact that Brett is lingering, but finally he clears his throat.

“So, Brian....”

“So, Brett.”

“I guess you’ll be glad not to have to fly out here every other weekend, huh?”

“I guess.” Truth is, I’m going to miss it a bit. Not the constant flying, but there’s something to be said for the California sun and sand.

“Well, it’s too bad Justin won’t be here for post-production. He really is talented.”

“Yes, he is. But school started last month, and the dean’s only going to let him miss so much of the semester,” I say, as I rattle the ice cubes in my glass absently.

“Right. But it’s a shame he’ll miss watching the movie come together.”

“You mean when the studio suits get scared and edit the shit out of it? And then take creative control away from you if it tests badly?”

His face tightens and he tries to smile. "Well, let's think positively."

"Yes, let's."

Justin returns and Brett beats a hasty retreat. I smile to myself.

"What are you smiling at?" Justin asks, as he settles in next to me again.

"Nothing."

He shakes his head with a knowing look and we're quiet for a minute, just looking out at the lights. Then he says, "So, I've been thinking."

"Hmm?" I raise my eyebrow and wait.

"I'm not going back to school."

Oh, for the love of fucking Christ. When he is going to get it through his head that an education's important? I had a bad feeling when he took this job that he wouldn't want to go back.

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"What do you want me to say? It's your decision, Justin." I could say quite a lot, but...he needs to make his own choices. I'm not his father.

"So that's it?"

"Well, I think you're making a mistake. But it's your life."

He nods. "Thanks."

Doesn't he realize that school is only a couple more years? It goes by so fast, it's nothing when you look back. And it's hard enough for artists to get commercial jobs. Hollywood may not always be knocking on his door, and a degree could help him get a good job somewhere else. Maybe at an agency, or who the hell knows, but it can't fucking hurt.

Out of the corner of my eye I see him bite back a grin. He clears his throat and takes a chug of his beer. I look at him fully and he won't meet my eyes, a smile tugging at his lips.

"What's so funny?" Now he's just pissing me off.

He bursts out laughing. "You're practically gnawing your tongue off to stop yourself from saying something. I was kidding; I'm totally going back to school. I just wanted to see what you'd say."

Little. Asshole.



"Very funny," I snap.

"Yeah, it totally was!" He sobers a bit when he sees that I'm not amused, and lowers his voice. "I love that you treat me like a man, even when you think I'm wrong."

"Well, last time I checked you are a man," I say, glancing down at his crotch.

"You know what I mean."

I shrug and he sidles closer to me. "I'm sorry." He bites my earlobe and whispers, "I should really be punished."

My cock twitches as he licks up the side of my neck. "Yes, you really should." Our eyes are locked as he slides my hand into his pocket. I feel two rings of cool steel beneath my fingertips. He wets his lips and takes the key out, slipping it into my pocket.

"Time to go," I tell him.

"I should say goodbye to—"

"No," I say, as I drag him towards the exit. The elevator is empty and we lunge at each other before the doors are even closed. We're both panting by the time we reach the lobby, and the valet smirks knowingly.

Later, his arms strain over his head and he begs me to fuck him. I don't use any lube and it's rough as I slam into him. I jam his knees further into his chest and he tells me to fuck him harder, harder, harder.

I do, and we both grunt with exertion as I thrust into him again and again. His cock is rigid between us, and he begs me to jack him off. I refuse and angle even deeper inside him as he pants and moans. He's so hot and tight around me and I kiss him hard, our teeth banging together. When I finally let him come, we're both covered in sweat and I collapse on top of him in a heap.

After a few minutes, I get up to throw the condom out and I search around for my jeans, which I find flung over the coffee table in the living room. Back in the bedroom, Justin lies with his eyes closed, arms still cuffed to the headboard.

"I can't find the key."

He drowsily opens his eyes. "Hmm?"

"The key. I can't find it."

"Yes you can." He closes his eyes again, unconcerned.

"Justin, I'm telling you—"

His eyes stay closed and he yawns. "If you really couldn't find the key, you'd be worried. And you're not."

"Well, actually—"

"You're not. I know you, Brian."

Bastard. I sigh and crawl across the bed to unlock him. He curls on his side, and I press my body up against him, his back warm against my chest. I rub his wrists lightly and close my eyes.

In the morning, he makes me breakfast in bed and I try to scowl.

\*\*\*\*

As Justin navigates the freeway on-ramp, I flip through the spa brochure. "You'll find a little piece of paradise in...O-something."

"It's pronounced oh-hi."

"The Ojai Country Club has been pampering guests for decades, and blah blah blah. As long as there's a good masseuse, I'm happy."

"And by 'good,' you mean hot."

"Naturally."

He laughs and we drive in comfortable silence, except for the radio, which plays mindless pop songs that Justin hums along to. As we make our way out of L.A., the view along the coast is pretty amazing. We stop near Santa Barbara at a lookout and I take a few pictures of Justin with the clear blue water behind him.

We're going back home tomorrow, and I'm not sure how to feel about it. It's going to be good to have him back in the loft. Back in my bed. If I'm being honest with myself, I never thought I could miss someone so much.

I'm being honest with myself a lot lately.

"Hey, see the seals on the beach?" He points to a bunch of rocks on the sand, which aren't rocks at all. One of them sits up and he watches in fascination. After a while, I find myself looking at him instead of the seals.

Last week he had a six-month check-up, just to be absolutely sure, and he tested negative again. I

knew he would, but there's always that tiny sliver of doubt. He called me right away and told me. He hadn't even gotten in the car yet, and I think he still felt guilty over making me worry before. He always remembers things like that, even when it's not a big deal anymore.

Back in the car, we turn off the main highway and head inland. Justin asks, "How much vacation time do you have next year?"

"As much as I want, Sunshine. That's one of the many perks of being your own boss."

"Right, I guess so," he says, smiling.

"Why?"

"I was just thinking maybe we could come back next year and drive up the coast. You know, Big Sur, Carmel, all the way up to San Francisco. It's supposed to be really amazing. I was going to go last month with a couple of the crew guys, but...."

"But?"

He shrugs. "I thought it would be fun to do it together."

"It would be."

He smiles and glances over. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. It's about time we took a fucking vacation. Not just a weekend."

"Cool." A new song comes on and he turns up the volume, singing along and tapping his fingers on the wheel as he turns into the valley where Ojai lies.

A few hours later, we leave the spa sufficiently relaxed, especially after our quick fuck in the dressing room. We're spending the night in Santa Barbara, and I'm ready to get going, but Justin drags me into one new-age store after another.

Finally we get in the car and head up the winding road out of the valley. About halfway up, he pulls into a lookout and kills the engine.

"I think I've seen enough scenery, Justin. I'm getting hungry."

"What, my cock wasn't enough for you?" I roll my eyes and he goes on, "I just thought we could check out the view before we left." He gets out, and I follow reluctantly.

I have to admit, it's beautiful and since it's fall, we're the only tourists around.

"You know, this is where they filmed that old movie *Lost Horizon*. This valley was Shangri-La."

"You're certainly a font of cinematic information these days, aren't you?"

He shoves me playfully. "Yes I am, thank you very much."

The sun is descending and I think about dinner as my stomach growls. "Come on, time to leave paradise behind."

As I turn, he reaches out and grabs my hand. "Let's just stay a bit longer." He plops down on the hood of the car and scoots back a bit, pulling me along to sit between his legs. He wraps his arms around my chest and leans his chin on my shoulder as his thighs squeeze my hips. He sucks on my neck gently.

He whispers in my ear, "Close your eyes."

I shoot him a skeptical look over my shoulder. "You're not going to get down on one knee when I'm not looking, are you?"

"Oh shut up and close your goddamned eyes!" He smacks my arm, laughing.

I do, and he puts his hands over my eyes for good measure. What feels like an eternity passes, and I shift restlessly. "Okay, anytime now."

"Patience, Grasshopper." He keeps his hands firmly in place and starts sucking on my neck again. He always manages to find the same perfect spot, and I bite back a soft moan. Finally, he takes his hands away.

"Okay, you can open them."

I do, and blink in wonder at the pink glow that fills the valley and sweeps across the mountains.

"They call it the 'pink moment.'"

"How very queer of them."

Justin chuckles and squeezes his arms around me tightly. "It's this natural phenomenon that only happens here. Something about the sun reflecting off the ocean onto the mountains."

We watch in silence for a minute, and it really is amazing. I'm glad he made me stay. "It's beautiful, Justin."

"Glad you liked it." He kisses my cheek. "I love you, Brian."

My heart skips a beat, like it always does. Looking over my shoulder, I lift my chin and do my best Harrison Ford impression, which isn't very good. "I know."

He grins and we both laugh. "Glad to see you're enjoying the new *Star Wars* DVDs that you wouldn't

be caught dead watching, since they're for geeks like Mikey."

I kiss him soundly to shut him up, and his mouth opens under mine.

Works every time.

I stroke his tongue and he moans low in his throat. When I lean back and look at him, the pink light from the valley casts a soft glow on his face and he smiles again.

I should say something. "I...." The words don't come easily, and I doubt they ever will. "Justin—"

He puts his finger to my lips and whispers, "I know."

Our lips meet again and I swivel all the way around, pressing him back onto the hood. His hands wind up beneath my shirt and I grind into him as we kiss deeply. Every once in a while, a car passes on the road, but neither of us bother to look up.

By the time we leave, the sun has long set.

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Justin tapes up the last box and looks around at his apartment. He didn't collect too much crap while he was here, but there's enough.

"Well, I guess that's about it."

"I guess so." Our flight's not until this evening, so we have a few more hours to kill before we head to the airport.

"Okay, there's one more thing we have to do." He grabs his keys and ushers me out the door. The sun is high in the sky and it's a beautiful day. We walk along the palm-tree-lined street, and I don't ask where we're going, because I'm pretty sure I know.

"So, I've been thinking."

"Justin, if this is another one of your little jokes, you can shove it up your ass."

"No, I swear, this is for real," he says, smiling.

"Okay, but if it's not...."

He grins wickedly. "You'll have to punish me again. Maybe I should make something up."

I can't help but smile when I remember how hot last night was. He always manages to turn me on

like no one else can. "Maybe you should."

"Okay, but seriously. Brett talked to me about working on his next movie."

"Uh huh." My stomach tenses, and I try to relax.

"He's going to be in post-production for ages with *Rage*, so it won't be until next summer, he thinks. I said I can only come for two months, and he said that would be fine, it's going to be a way smaller shoot."

"Sounds good." Maybe I could look for some clients out here. Expand my business a bit.

"And, I mean, it's not set in stone, the movie could go into turnaround. It's Hollywood, there are no guarantees. But...I don't know, I really liked the work. And if I can keep my connections and still finish school, that would be cool."

"Yeah. It would."

"And maybe...maybe you could come, too. I mean, you could do conference calls, and with computers, it's not like you can't work from outside the office." He's talking fast, and I know he's been rehearsing this in his head.

I nod. "It would be good to get out of the Pitts once in a while. I am the boss, after all. And it's amazing what you can do with email nowadays."

He stops and looks at me. "Really? You'd consider it?"

"Yeah. I think it could be great. For both of us. Broaden our horizons."

"And we'll always go home again. I mean, as much fun as it can be out here...it's weird how sometimes you have to go away to figure out where home really is. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean." I kiss him softly and then he hugs me close. When he pulls away, he's beaming, and he practically skips as we near the ocean.

We walk onto the Santa Monica Pier, and I take his hand. Fuck anyone who doesn't like it. We stroll past the cotton-candy vendors and various carnival games, and Justin babbles on about the historical aspects of some of the rides. He really did spend a lot of time out here, I guess.

As we approach the ferris wheel, I squeeze his hand. "Ready?"

He looks at me, surprised. "You remembered?"

I shrug. "You didn't answer my question. Are you ready?"

He squeezes my hand back. "Yep."

I have to admit, it's a big fucking ferris wheel. The round compartments seat four, but since there aren't too many people around, we get one to ourselves. As we arc up into the sky, Justin grips my thigh and I sling my arm over his shoulders. We go around a couple of times before stopping at the very top, where we swing lazily, back and forth.

Damn, we're high. I look down and can't help but inch a bit closer into the middle of the seat. After a few moments, Justin releases my leg and snakes his arm around my waist.

"Don't worry, Brian, I've got you." He smiles tremulously, and I know he's fucking scared to death. I kiss him and rest our foreheads together, my fingers lightly massaging the back of his neck. When I finally pull back, the fear is gone from his eyes, and he grins as he exhales slowly.

With a clang of machinery, the ferris wheel jolts into motion, and we're off again.