

EASING DOWN HARD - I

By London

Late August morning sun sizzled through the Loft's front windows. Stretched naked on one side of the bed, Brian opened his eyes only to squint them shut against the sting of a sweat drop. "Fuck," he palmed his eye and swung his legs over the edge with enough force to rouse Justin, also spread on his back and with a pillow over his head.

Brian grabbed the digital clock, slammed it down and stood up.

Justin raised the pillow. "Easy on the noise? I've got a bitch of a headache."

"The fucking alarm didn't go off. And it's a hundred and twenty degrees in here."

"It's also Saturday. As in we-don't-work-today." Justin watched Brian stagger to a stand, groaned, "What the fuck were we drinking last night," and pulled the pillow back over his head.

"Probably some homemade shit Babylon hypes when the crowd is too high to notice." Brian crawled across the mattress, lifted the pillow, kissed Justin's lips and whispered, "We were supposed to meet Mikey at the Comic Shop an hour ago. You can stay here or get your ass up," then backed off.

"I think I had my ass up most of the night," Justin shifted slowly so his head would keep up with the rest of him, "At least I knew where you were." He sat and winced from an E-alcohol marathon fuck, pushed to a stand. "I can't tell which end hurts more."

Brian stood up too quickly and palmed his own head against the woozies. "If it's any consolation, we both had a fabulous time," then grumbled, "Now we get to fry in hell," as he thumped down the stairs toward the living room thermostat while Justin dragged to the bathroom.

In the shower, Justin set an aspirin bottle on the lube-condom shelf, leaned his cheek and chest against the cool wall and let warm water sooth down his back. Kept his eyes closed and hardly flinched when he heard the toilet flush, Brian enter and snap the door shut behind him. "We need a bathtub."

"Wouldn't it look odd in here?" Brian leaned back against the wall beside Justin, his eyes shut as water pulsed down his chest, cock and legs.

Justin cracked his eyes open. "No worse than two guys leaning up against a wall to soak. And YOU'RE the one who said we needed a Jacuzzi. I'm merely proposing a reasonable alternative. This shower is big enough."

"A tub in a shower stall. Now I KNOW I fucked your brains out."

“I meant remodel,” Justin slapped Brian’s wet leg, “...and the celebration was worth it.” He watched Brian’s head roll his way, large eyes soft above a smile. “You did it, Brian. Broke even this month.”

“WE did it.”

They turned toward each other, shoulders to the wall, arms around waists until they closed into a kiss in the fringe of the spray.

Brian combed his fingers through Justin’s damp hair, brushing it from his face. “How’s your head?”

“I’ll live. Yours?”

Brian glanced at his semi-hard cock, watched Justin’s eyes follow and tilt back a plea. “We could soap up and rub together.”

Justin smiled at one of many little compromises from the former unshakable Kinney. Could a bathtub be far behind. Provided there were enough spare funds after renovating...

...Tales From the Crypt. A second-story equivalent to an unfinished basement complete with dusty boxes, support posts and a heating-cooling duct like a large aluminum chimney up the center of the room.

Michael watched Brian wave a hand in front of the high duct vents. “It should get cooler. I just opened the vents an hour ago.”

An HOUR ago? At least it was cooler than the Loft. “What about electrical outlets?”

“There’s one,” Michael moved to a dark corner. “Buzzy kept his office over here.”

“I didn’t know Buzzy could write.”

Justin, hand to his chin in thought, stood before the grimy windows overlooking Liberty - “I could paint our sign right on the glass,” - while Brian and Michael cased the walls.

“Here’s another one,” Michael moved a box, coughed from the resulting dust stir.

“That makes three,” Brian stood center room, hands on hips, brows furrowed. “So far, we can support a coffee maker and two lamps.”

Justin eyed Brian, “Is it okay if I set up graphics beside these windows?”

“Why not? We can run a fifty foot extension cord and give up the coffee maker.”

Michael brushed off his hands, joined Brian. “When Ben and I thought about living here, we had a contractor check it out. He said the wiring probably couldn’t handle any heavy appliances. Computers aren’t heavy appliances, are they?”

“In THAT case... YOU can move them up here,” Brian grinned.

Michael studied the look for a long moment, finally ventured, “No?”

“You get an A,” Brian beamed.

“Thanks,” Michael drolly relaxed, “I guess my effort in Sleeper Couch One-O-One paid off,” faltered when Brian rolled wide eyes straight at him. “But I’ll still move the computers up, though, if you want.”

“You are so pathetic.”

Justin moved beside Brian and hinted to Michael, “You’re supposed to wait until he asks for your help...which might be a cold day in hell...so in my own interests, I graciously accept your offer.” When he caught Brian’s fuck-you stare, “Is school out yet? Can we get down to some serious issues?”

Brian calmly added to Michael, “Impatient little brat, isn’t he?”

“You picked him,” Michael grinned, making the conversation almost a private exchange.

Justin leaned against Brian, stared into his eyes. “Because you so love me,” smile, slow blink. You two wanna play around me? Try it.

Michael tensed at the bold move. NOBODY backed Brian into a corner like that. “I...need to check on Ben.” And he eased to the stairs, froze a moment when he saw Brian kiss Justin’s lips. Michael shook his head as he thumped down the steps. Whoever thought Brian Kinney would be in whatever the fuck he didn’t believe in. Not like nobody knew. Just a surprise that Brian confirmed it.

Off guard and shocked that Brian’s silent kiss was as potent as admission – in front of Michael – Justin gripped Brian’s neck and planted a hot return kiss, backed off with a blush. “I didn’t say that because...I thought...” he stared at Brian’s raised brows, half smile. “The more I learn about you, the more I think I’ll keep you around.”

“I think I’ll let you think that.”

They wrapped together for another kiss. A little longer. Remembering a time when some words were too volatile even as a joke, and attempts at emotional touch were perceived as manipulation. Trust had come a long way.

Downstairs, Michael moved behind the counter to join Ben in specs, seated and reading student papers. "I don't know. Justin's ready to move in, but Brian's not happy with the power setup, and it hasn't cooled down much."

"Won't get any cooler with the two of them up there alone," Ben kept reading, hardly interested.

Michael pulled the papers from Ben's hand and frowned at his okay-I'm-listening stare above his glass rims. "You know, we could use some help on the lease and I'd rather have somebody we can trust. Maybe YOU can go up and talk to them -"

The ceiling thumped and they both glanced up before Ben drolled, "After the moaning stops?" watched Michael's eyes narrow. "Just kidding," Ben set his glasses on the counter, stood and kissed Michael's cheek as he passed.

Upstairs, Brian stood hands on hips watching Justin on his knees and shuffling through the contents of a cardboard box. "Has your thirst for prehistoric relics been appeased?"

"Nothing from your date of birth," Justin sensed movement and smacked away Brian's foot before it hit his ass, refocused on a handful of brochures. "Must've been a travel agency before the Comic Shop moved in." He handed one to Brian.

Ben's trudge up the steps and into view drew their attention. "So. Have you two made a decision yet?"

Justin raised yes eyes to Brian; Brian turned to Ben. "If you update the wiring."

Ben's brows furrowed in thought, "One of my students owns a small business...yeah. We can do that."

"Well then. I'd say we have a deal."

"Good. I'll let you know what legal details the Bank needs, and we can go from there," he smiled and left to share the news with Michael.

"Knowing how THAT works," Brian pulled a pen from his shirt pocket, started a rough draft on the brochure, "I'd say we have plenty of time to decide what we need where."

Justin stood and wandered to the windows. "It's in walking distance...it'll be real convenient for working on Rage," he smiled down at a gay couple strolling, holding hands. "It's a great location."

“It’s a questionable location,” Ruder’s hand clenched a binder while enduring Brian’s stare and Rheinholdt’s dour concern. “I mean,” he shook his head, “That area is...it’s...”

“What?” Brian raised a brow from his seat beside Rheinholdt’s desk, watched the standing Creative Director’s grope for PC. “Diverse? Liberal? Uniquely dynamic?”

“It has a lot of clubs and bars,” Ruder appealed to Rheinholdt.

“So does every swank hotel on the convention circuit,” Brian cut in, “That never stopped the high rollers from checking in,” eyed Rheinholdt, “Nobody cares about the address on the business card. They care about favorable impact and nominal cost. But...” he leaned back, “...if you think I need a trendy high-priced rest stop between sales calls, I’m all for it. Just pick one out and pay the rent.”

Ruder, more teetotaler than homophobe, held quiet and sullen. He’d played toward being Rheinholdt’s right hand man to secure his position, but that last line clinched it – Rheinholdt answered BRIAN.

“A dedicated office IS more appropriate.”

Especially when I’m paying for it. “I’ll have the file update on your desk after the move. And,” Brian stood to leave, “RegionAir’s about to pick up a new route, so we’ll be getting a bonus for getting the word out.” Just a little icing.

“Good work,” Rheinholdt toned more expectation than elation. As long as the agency made money - no waves, no expense, no argument.

Brian nodded to Ruder, left with a little victory grin.

Next came the tricky part...

Announcing it to the gang. Which wasn’t much, considering that Michael was at the official sublease signing, he’d tell Debbie, and it would be all over Liberty before lunch.

When Brian and Justin walked into the Diner, Debbie barreled over, arms wide and a cheery, “Con-GRA-tu-LA-tions!” as she crushed Brian into a hug, then a softer “Sunshine” when she switched to Justin and kissed his cheek loud enough to make him blush. “My boys. Working together. In our community.” Eyes glazed, she turned like a parade Field Marshall up the aisle, “Come on. Lunch is on me,” pointed to the far end then swerved behind the register to service three in line. “I’ll meet you with a fresh pot.”

At their usual booth, Michael sat with Ben to the outside, Hunter alone across from them. In the next booth, Emmett sat sideways with an arm along the seatback behind Michael, heralded the newcomers with a broad wave and gusty, “Hi Sweeties!”

Ben saw Hunter crane back and beam at Brian, jumped to a stand. “Brian. Right here,” he waved to the spot beside Michael then plopped next to glaring Hunter.

Brian sat, grinned, “If it isn’t the happy family.”

“Happiness is subject to interpretation,” Hunter winked.

“I admire a versatile mind,” Brian blinked back, heard Ben sternly clear his throat.

“Hey,” Justin passed to Emmett’s table and swung to the seat across from him, could see Hunter’s lusty, smug he-picked-ME shot at him through the space between shoulders. So Justin stuck his tongue out, got a same return from Hunter.

Emmett noticed. “Uh...mature conversation?”

“Sometimes you have to speak their language,” Justin picked up a menu, mumbled, “And he started it,” as he read.

Quick to other thoughts, Emmett leaned forward, hands clasped on the table, grand smile, “This is so exciting! I can’t WAIT to see the new office. You ARE having an open house party, aren’t you?”

“Well...it’ll probably BE awhile before -”

“Say nothing more. You know little ole me,” Emmett leaned back and swished a hand, “I’d be GLAD to take care of it,” without reading Justin’s stiff smile.

At the family booth, Hunter leaned against the wall with eyes trying mental telepathy on Brian who was pointing out details of his brochure sketch to Ben and Michael.

“We need at least one outlet at each of these x’s.”

“I’ve already got that covered,” Ben assured. “They’ll have a man out for an estimate after five today. But one of you should be there.”

Coffee pot in hand, Debbie sailed in, poured and chattered from Brian to Justin, “You boys are gonna need some extra furniture and I got EXACTLY what you’ll want in the basement.”

Michael cringed, “Mom, not that old white -”

“It’s a good solid desk, and they can paint it any color they want,” she gleamed at Brian, “And a Queen Anne chair looks good in ANY queen’s office, right Emmett?”

“You have a Queen Anne chair?” Emmett’s mouth dropped. “I LOVE those!”

“As for YOU,” she pointed at Hunter, set down the pot and pulled out her checkbook. “You’re having the Special, you’re eating the green beans, and I don’t want to hear a word about it.”

Brian’s “I’ll have the Special, too,” got Hunter’s big smile and a grateful nod from Ben.

“Same here,” Michael added to a chorus from Justin and Emmett.

“This’ll be the easiest check I ever wrote,” Debbie chirped, grabbed the pot and hustled to the cook’s station.

Hunter complained low to Ben, “When are you gonna get me OUTTA there? She’s driving me insane.”

“If she hadn’t worked so hard to be your foster mother, you’d probably still be at Youth Services. We started the adoption process, but I told you it takes time.”

“She means well,” Michael smiled. “She asked you what your favorite color was and painted the room green, didn’t she?”

“Lime?” Hunter huffed. “If I don’t get outta there, I’ll go blind.”

Brian leaned back, “At least it won’t be from lack of sex,” got Hunter’s eternal love but lost earlier points gained with Ben and Michael, now in stereo smolder.

Behind them, Justin had his hands full with Emmett.

“Em, I’m not sure smoked salmon pate is -”

“You’re right,” Emmett fingered his chin in deep thought, “We ARE more the tuna salad crowd,” brightened, “But if I can’t find a way to glorify tuna salad, how EVER can I call myself a professional. And if I can’t come up with a FABULOUS party for a...for a...” Emmett skipped back to a dark crystal memory.

“You okay, Em?” Justin touched Emmett’s hand.

“For a...friends,” Em forced a smile, drifted again. “I seem to have lost my train of thought.”

“Tuna salad,” Justin raised a little smile. “And I think that’s a great idea.”

“Really?” Emmett revived, new bulb lit. “Wait. Wait. A cake. Shaped like a computer...if I can make gray icing look appetizing...”

Justin sipped his coffee, leaned a cheek on a raised hand and nodded.

Later, Brian slid into the Honda driver’s seat and Justin took shotgun. Both slammed doors hard and sank back relieved despite the heated interior.

“Now I know the meaning of smothered by affection,” Justin leaned back.

Brian started the car and turned the air up full. “Everybody loves a winner.”

“I think it’s more than that. We’re a Liberty Avenue success story.”

“I wouldn’t exactly classify us in that category.”

Justin leaned over and kissed Brian’s cheek. “I do. Not because we made it big somewhere else...because we made it at ALL, and brought it back HERE.”

“Don’t forget about the low rent and walking distance.”

“You’re not gonna admit it, are you?” Justin cranked a sly smile, saw Brian’s brows rise and answered, “You care about this place.”

“Actually,” Brian dodged, geared to first and cut into traffic, “I was thinking of a little project for you,” felt Justin’s hand slowly undo his belt buckle. “After that one.”

Justin eased down Brian’s fly and pressed kisses over the thick bulge beneath dark cotton. A waft of body heat, earthy scent...keep it slow. Feeling Brian’s fingers tangling in his hair, riding down his back. Not going for a car wreck. Just a little appetizer.

Later, in the office above the Comic Shop, Justin and Michael, on folding chairs at a card table collected sketches and pages of print. Michael slid his pile into a folder, checked his watch.

“It’s almost six. I guess we’ve been stood up.”

“Go ahead home,” Justin zipped his sketches into a small portfolio, “I can hang around a few more minutes.”

Michael headed to a rear doorway, “The store’s all locked up but I told them to come around to this fire escape,” opened the steel door and stepped onto the landing. “If they show up, call me at home if they have any questions.”

“Okay.”

“And leave through here. It’s set to lock when you shut the door. See ya.”

“See ya.” Justin watched the door close then stretched his legs out, grunted and ran his palms from his temples to the back of his head, laced fingers and did a shoulder stretch. Some project. Sitting alone, waiting for the service crew. How suburban. He opened his eyes and passed the time by imagining the layout turning real. Desks, lights, plants, compu-

He jumped to three hard knocks, sprinted to the door, whipped it open and gaped.

“Oh god. It’s you.”

“Try the other end of the scale,” Scott Turner smiled, little chuckle catching in his throat. This was supposed to be a quick side job, but think I’ll plan a little overtime on this one.

Alone with Scott. Not as bad as Brian alone with Scott. After Justin shut the door, he ran a mental list – We’re adults...This is business...

“So you’ve got a playroom of your own,” Scott grinned.

Okay. So ONE of us is an adult. Justin turned to see him slouched on a chair, one leg bent, the other stretched long so his jeans pulled tight leaving little to imagine. “There’s a printout on the table. I asked for blueprints, but Michael didn’t have any.”

“Novotny?”

“You know Michael?”

“I know this is supposed to be the Novotny job. So you’re hooked up with HIM now?”

Sparked the chest-buster scene from Alien. “No, I’m still with Brian. We’re working together and this is our new office.”

“How IS the old sonuvabich?” Scott snatched Justin’s paper.

“Busy.” Keep to business.

Scott shook his head. “You know what they say about all work. I’ll be sure to remind him.”

Shit. Anything but that. “Are YOU doing this job?”

“Just the estimate,” Scott saw Justin smile, “But I’ll throw a bid in for the helluvit,” eyed the paper and missed Justin’s freezer glare. “This is pretty good scale. YOU do this?” He stood and panned the room, matching it to the drawing. Impressive work was second only to an impressive fuck.

Justin felt a level of sincerity, a noticeable change as Scott slid into work mode and roamed to check the lighting, wall outlets. “Yeah.”

“Ever think about mechanical drafting?”

“Not really,” Justin relaxed, barely aware he was following Scott around the room. “I’m pretty satisfied with where I’m at.”

Sensing Justin’s lower guard, “You should try a change,” Scott smiled beneath intense eyes. “You might find out you like it.” That’s it. Little closer. Nothing against Kinney, but all you have to do is say so, and I’ll let you sample some real heat.

Justin stopped still. Fuck. He’s doing it AGAIN. On purpose? Or natural habit? Regardless... “Is this gonna take long? Because I really have to get going,” Justin checked his watch for effect.

“Few more minutes,” Scott turned off the look. Still not ready to play? Your loss. He took a small screwdriver from his shirt pocket and removed an outlet plate - What fucking crackhead did this wiring.

Seated at his desk, Brian tented the front of his white tee and fanned some air over his sweaty chest, sipped wine from a plain glass then leaned out for a look when he heard the Loft door. “How did it go?”

“Okay,” Justin paced over, grumbled, “Why’s it so hot in here?” He stopped beside Brian, glanced at RegionAir’s home page onscreen, the open front window, curtains dead still against traffic noise.

“Fucking air is out. Maintenance says they’ll have it fixed by tomorrow. At least YOU were in a cooler part of town.”

“You think?” Justin watched Brian swivel to face him with the okay-spill-it raised brow. “Scott Turner showed up to do the estimate.”

“No doubt with his usual charm.”

“He said he might bid on the job, but nothing definite.”

“He’s one of the best in the area.”

“Not ALL areas,” Justin added a touch of bored sophistication, “He came on to me. But I don’t go for the shallow, macho, fuck-anything type.”

“I guess that means my days are numbered.”

“You’re not that shallow.”

Brian reached out, took Justin’s hips and drew him between splayed legs. “Do I detect a note of discord?”

Justin towered, set his hands on Brian’s shoulders. “It’s like he stays one step ahead of trouble while anybody around him gets caught right up IN it.” Not to mention how you two act when you get together.

Brian locked his hands behind Justin’s thighs. “I wouldn’t worry about it. There’s no way Mikey can afford him.”

“You’ll never guess who we got to do the work,” Michael beamed at Brian. They were standing at one end of the Comic Shop counter, Justin at the other end beside Brian’s open briefcase. “Scott Turner.”

Justin slammed the case shut loud enough to draw looks. “Sorry.”

Michael continued unfazed as Brian slouched on an elbow and Justin rustled through a comic. “We really lucked out on that. He’s established and credible, so the Bank won’t give us a hassle.”

“ONE good thing,” Justin dead-toned.

“That IS a lucky break,” Brian casually agreed. Note to self: check out Scott’s real angle.

“He says he can start next week.”

Justin’s eyes narrowed. “He’s doing it himself? Not sending a work crew?”

“It isn’t Turner Electrical. They only do big commercial jobs. But Ben’s student...the one who owns that new contractor service?...he called Scott and worked out a deal so good, they must be doing it under the table.”

“Scott gets it where he can,” Brian tongued his cheek. Revised note to self: check out Ben’s student.

Justin reasoned to Michael, “Technically, he’s working for YOU, so you’re handling all the details, right?”

“Pretty much,” Michael answered Justin’s satisfied nod, then back to Brian, “But I made sure he knows you have final say, so you should spend a couple days with him just to get things started.”

“I’ll be ready when HE is.”

Justin cleared his throat and slapped the comic on the counter. Thanks, Mikey.

Two weeks later...

On the drive back from WaveLight, Justin flipped through a CD case and considered Queen when Brian mentioned, “Mikey called while you were at Graphics. Scott’s finally ready to start.”

“About time.”

“That beats the standard formula...take what they say, multiply by two and add three.”

“When?”

“I’m going over to meet him after I drop you off and change clothes.”

“Today?” Justin flipped to Nine Inch Nails, lowered his chin, rolled eyes up. “I thought we were doing that together.”

“Don’t you have plans tonight?”

Justin winced, “Daphne’ll spit on my grave if I cancel out again.”

“And Scott might tack on two more weeks if we don’t nail him NOW.” Brian glanced aside at Justin’s indecisive lip bite. “Don’t you think Mikey and I can handle it?”

“Mikey’ll be there?” Justin side-eyed. Like having a minnow to fend off a shark. Still, he could be one tough minnow when it came to Brian.

“He’s the money. If you want to be there for creative advice, that’s up to YOU.”

Justin exhaled slowly. “Just drop me off. You can fill me in when you get home.” Justin watched Brian’s brows rise, lusty grand smile. Lightened his own mood. Good. Hold that thought.

A new eatery on the North Side. Lots of young folks crowded around small tables of pizza and soda pitchers, lite rock thumping in the background. Daphne, in a wild-print sleeveless tank chatted to Justin, in a white tee and leaning on crossed arms, wristwatch in sight.

“...and I heard they have the most awesome pizza, so I just HAD to try it, but you know how it is...the personal taste thing...so I can’t wait to get your opinion.” She waved a hand in front of his face. “Are you listening to me? Don’t answer, ‘cause I know you’re not and don’t think I haven’t seen you check your watch like five hundred times.”

“Sorry, Daph.” Busted.

“Brian.”

“No, it’s not,” he leaned back, sneaked an eye on her smug face. “Well SORT of. It’s just that...there’s this guy -”

“Is he hot?” She dropped on her arms, saw Justin blush and grinned, “Mmm. Totally.”

Justin recovered with a flip, “It’s not like I don’t notice other guys.”

“Only when they notice Brian. That’s the risk you take with a hottie. But you’re a hottie, too,” she leaned close, big smiley reminder. What’re best friends FOR. “You know? The only thing you talked about lately is work. You should get away for awhile.”

“Like Vermont? Don’t remind me.”

“With BRIAN, you jerk. TELL him.”

“Maybe after the office is up and running.” Not making that play-vs-work mistake again.

“So where’s he at now?”

“At the Comic Shop. Working with that guy I just told you about. Thought I’d never say this, but I’m glad Mikey’s with him.”

They were startled by a robust, “Hi, Babies! Isn’t THIS a surprise,” as Emmett swished a wave, Torso shopping bag swaying from his arm.

“Hi, Em!” Daphne shined.

“Here,” Justin pointed to an empty chair as Emmett turned back, arm flagging. “You brought a date?” His smile drooped when Em sat down, leaving clear view of Hunter and Michael approaching.

“Don’t I wi-ish,” Emmett drolled oblivious. “But when your date card’s like mine? Pizza with friends takes on new meaning.” As if on cue, a waitress rushed a large pie onto their table. “My. That DOES look yummy.”

“Can you bring us three more glasses?” Justin asked. She nodded and left just as Hunter and Michael arrived.

“Hey,” Michael greeted Justin and Daphne. “Hunter told me all the hot young things would be here.”

“You’re too sweet,” Emmett patted Michael’s hand.

Hunter spied Justin, whispered to Michael, “Can we sit somewhere else?” then noticed Daphne and ogled a smile despite her plastic return.

“Is Brian here, too?” Justin craned past Michael.

“No, he and Scott are still at the Shop.”

Daphne caught Justin’s tension, quickly stood with a cheery, “Why don’t you guys sit HERE? Justin and I were just leaving.” She met his shocked look with a wide-eyed GO-with-it, watched him slowly stand.

“But your pizza just GOT here,” Emmett’s brow crinkled.

“The service was really slow,” she twisted a frown, “And I’ve got a date tonight.” Then to Justin, “Come on,” grabbed his hand, gave a smiley, “Enjoy the pizza. Bye.”

“See ya,” Justin shot as Daphne whisked him past Hunter.

“Who’s the babe?” Hunter grinned at Michael, got flared eyes back.

“Who’s the nerd?” Daphne glanced past Justin’s shoulder, released his hand on their way out.

“That’s Hunter and he’s untrainable. Daph, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Do what? After I leave you at the Comic Shop, I’ll have extra time to get ready for my date, and I’ll make HIM take me out to eat.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“For true love.”

Justin watched her flip back her hair as she went out the door. Someday, you’ll find it. And when you do, I hope we’ll still make time for each other.

Brian in jeans and a black tank tee, found the Shop fire door unlocked and Scott inside thumping down two rolls of thick white wire.

“If it isn’t the Queen of Liberty Avenue,” Scott snarked, walked over, extended a hand.

“And the Closet Queen of Boone County,” Brian matched, met halfway and their hands locked on forearms in non-traditional recognition, squeezed hard then dropped away.

“Since you came dressed to work -” Scott looked him over.

“What. The fuck. are you doing here?” Brian stood no-nonsense.

“Could always use a little extra cash,” Scott raised a brow.

“Sell me the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“A friend needed a favor...here I am.”

“What does it have to do with Michael Novotny?” Brian low-toned, watched Scott’s eyes, “Because he’s a good friend of MINE and I’d like to know.”

“Nothing to do with him,” Scott toughened. “A man’s starting a business and doing it right...spending money to MAKE money, and making sure his reputation starts pretty.”

“Under the table?”

“Some people pay ten grand for a used truck but only put five on the title.”

“So you’re doing this for pocket change, a tax break, and sainthood,” Brian stared hard, unblinking.

Scott smiled. Always admired Brian’s x-ray eyes. “I’m working on a little project at home. Problem is, I’m zoned for farming, so I need a variance. Puts me up against some genuine breeders – dairy men on both sides of my ranch.”

Better. “What kind of project?”

“Private Clubhouse.”

Brian relaxed, satisfied, “And your new friend is connected to the local zoning board.”

“I choose my friends wisely.”

“Decent fuck?”

“Rates a plus eight, give or take a tenth. Never turn down a bonus. Speaking of which,” Scott pointed to another removed outlet, wires hanging free, “Go pull that wire so I can tell what’s going on without having to rip the whole fucking wall off.”

Brian dropped to a knee, “Reminds me of the first time we met. We were...what? Nine? Ten?” he grabbed a wire and pulled slowly, glanced at Scott in similar stance fifteen feet down the wall.

“The Union Local Picnic,” Scott grinned, watched the wires. “It was hate at first sight.”

They were both tall and gangly for their age, beyond a KEEP OUT – DANGER sign near a stream bordered by old electric poles with sagging dead wires. Scott for adventure, Brian to be alone.

Scott was more bored, more verbal. “Bet you can’t reach the top as fast as me.”

Brian wordlessly headed to a pole, stopped and shouted, “Say when.”

Scott stopped at his choice, smiled at its crossbeamed top and yelled, “Go!”

They shimmied fast up perilous rusty foot pegs, bare hands catching slivers, all the while spotting each other’s progress until they hit top at the same time.

They both looked down when they heard Claire shout, “I’m tellin’ POP!” and watched her dash through the trees to the main picnic area.

Not sure what to expect, both boys hustled to the ground just as Matt Turner barreled through the trees and headed for Scott. “Hey. What’re you doing here?”

“Climbed to the top,” Scott said with a cocky raised chin.

Matt glowed, big smile, “Don’t bullshit me, boy. Let me see ya’ do it again.”

Standing forgotten at his pole, Brian could hear Jack angrily shouting his name. He took a last look at Scott halfway up the pole with Matt beaming and urging him on then slipped away so they wouldn’t see him take Jack’s wrath.

“Shame it took twenty years to hook up again.” Scott saw his end of the wire move and grabbed it, “Hold up,” then paused and stared at Brian. “I wanted to be a linesman, and I was looking for any excuse to climb that pole. Why’d YOU do it?”

“If all you wanted was to climb that pole, you didn’t need ME as an excuse. I had no idea what I wanted to be. But whatever it was, I wasn’t about to let anybody beat me at it.”

Scott smiled a little evil, “Care to put that to a test?”

Justin barged in, drew attention with a low, “Hey,” eyed Brian, Scott.

“Back so soon?” Brian stood up.

“Daph had some things to do, so we cut it short. Need any more help?”

“Yeah. Grab us a couple beers from that cooler.” Scott nodded to a styro box on the table, stood and brushed off his hands. “Help yourself, too.”

“Oh you’re too kind,” Justin grit a smile made only grittier by Brian’s amused expression and Scott’s leer. He moved ice packs, dug out two bottles, twisted off caps and listened.

Brian leaned back on the wall beside Scott. “So what did you have in mind?”

“Tonight. Orgy pit. Agree on one, split up, turn it on and wait. Loser buys a round.”

Justin cleared his throat, tried to interrupt by handing Scott a beer – choke on it – and one to Brian – tell him to fuck off – leaned on the wall beside Brian to send positive vibes. But it didn’t work.

Intrigued, Brian suggested to Scott, “Liberty?”

“Python. New place that just opened southeast of Cleveland. Game?”

No way to fight fire with reason, Justin anted up, eyed Scott and smiled, “Sure. I’m game,” smiled at Brian in time to see a replay of the Vanguard-internship-day look.

Scott’s smile split wide, “This just keeps getting better,” then he toasted to each and took a deep drink, set the bottle on the floor. “I’m going down to get some hardware out of the truck. Maybe get some work done before we lose the light.”

Justin watched Scott leave, saw Brian eye him with suspicion and had an afterthought. “If you don’t think I should go -”

New place, new faces, no advantages, no preconceptions. You got balls all right. “Why not?” Brian twisted back decided. “Ever been to the Baths on your own?”

“No. Haven’t even thought about it.” For myself, though I often wondered about YOU.

“Half the fun is something different. No strings, no promises. When we walk in tonight, we’re individuals doing whatever comes natural, whatever feels good. And don’t get hung up on what or who I’m doing, because I sure the fuck won’t worry about you. That’s the OTHER half – the right to be as free and hot as you want, for yourself.” Brian handed over the beer to let Justin drink first.

Justin accepted with a confident return smile. At least I know a little more about why you sometimes go off by yourself.

Scott broke the trance when he returned with a large brown paper bag, dumped it on the table. Packaged outlets, electrical boxes, small white envelope he snatched and held up, “A little mood setter for later. Quality guaranteed,” slid it into his back pocket, reclaimed his bottle and lazed against the wall beside them.

“That’s generous, considering you’re buying the first round,” Brian grinned.

Scott answered with a deep chuckle. All depends on how you define winning.

Justin was pumped by Brian’s giving him an edge over Scott. Until realistic thought made his gut churn like the first night he shut the Loft door. Fuck. I just challenged the two sexiest hunks to a pickup game. The only thing that could’ve made this worse is having BEN in on it, too.

Three men in jeans, drinking beer, leaning on a wall...

Python’s Orgy Pit. Passion Purple walls. Cool blue and violet lights. Air thick, heady and male. With tribal techno heavy on the bass so that it rode on the blood pulse and heartbeats and ragged breaths.

Justin eyed the two men ahead on either side of him, renditions of “David”. Brian’s sleek long lines and elegant stance of Donatello; Scott with the stronger definition and form of Michelangelo. Both bronzed in blue light and awe inspiring as the art they resembled. And who am I. I’m Justin Taylor. A work of my own. Justin closed his eyes and slowly rolled his head from one side to the other to loosen up. Ran a hand up his neck then down across to his shoulder. Feeling warmth and velvet with his hand, feeling the slow soft glide of a hand on his skin, the stealthy drift of E.

Brian resolved to ignore Justin except for an occasional glance, as much as he gave to other movement in the room. Tonight they weren’t together. More into prowling for his choice, he fended off two hopefuls by turning his head aside. Saw Scott do the same, deflect some dud’s hand away from his chest – knew it was just as tough on him to stand around and wait.

A Tall, built Man cruised into view. Brooding dark and challenging. Brian and Scott saw him at once, caught each other's eyes and signaled with discreet nods. They glanced at Justin to see if he was in. But a Young Stud cutting off an Old Queen moving toward Justin blocked their view.

Competition linked to other purpose, and Tall Man looked like he could meet it well. Scott hooked his towel lower until his cockhead previewed his stiff length. Brian bent his leg and braced a bare foot on the wall, towel slit open, one hand leisurely stroking his full hard bulge.

Justin felt a foreign hand wander down his chest, opened his eyes to a dim view of Young Stud's requesting gaze. Found his own hands on the guy's chest, and another hand rode up his thigh. Closed his eyes and blocked out the face. Focused on the feeling...of muscle under damp, tight skin...of unfamiliar cock...of a different style of rhythm on his own heating shaft. Held off thoughts of Brian, but they crept in anyway. I want to feel. Know why you want this. Why you think I would.

Tall Man slowed his pace, eyed Brian first. So Brian lowered his chin, eyes a wide invitation – I'm the best you'll find in this place tonight, and I won't be available for long – radiating full power.

Tall Man slipped a blink of interest, but aware of his own worth, he stopped between the two and glanced at Scott. Scott paused movement on his cock, closed his eyes to slits and glanced aside. I'm not interested.

Brian raised a smile as Tall Man moved his way. Shot a glance past his shoulder and saw Scott smile back with a brief military salute. Brian was beyond caring about the game. I fucking know what you just did. But all's fair, all's game at the Baths. Flamed on E and at full mast, he was anxious to move on, and getting Tall Man to suck him off was his prime goal. As their hands explored each other, Brian kept their eyes locked. Set both hands on Tall's shoulders and pressed. You fucking want it. More than anything else.

Scott stopped next to Young Stud, set to go down on Justin. Threatening with his closeness, he stared the guy into retreat and moved to fill the void.

Eyes still shut, Justin was ready to decline Young Stud's next move. Despite the E, it didn't feel right and his breaths came more from tension than pleasure. Then he felt a tower loom over him. Hungry lips on his neck. Large hands coursing down his arms, waist, hips. It almost seemed like Brian. He smiled and raised his hands to trace those shoulders.

Eyes closed, head back and mouth open in shallow pants, Brian immersed himself in Tall Man's attention to his dick. Cracked his eyes to see the Old Queen in Scott's former post. Rolled his head toward Justin. And saw Scott's hands on the move. Justin's arms rising over his shoulders. Brian was near the edge. Closed his eyes hard to get back to the feeling. Back to...fuck...individuals...free...whatever feels good...

When Justin's arms settled, he knew it didn't feel right. Opened his eyes to Scott's lusty gaze and was more let down than angry. Because in this place, men didn't walk in without expecting to get what they wouldn't outside. Sex a'la carte. Impersonal. No strings, no promises. It's just not me. Not me. "I'm...not interested," he whispered and drew his arms away.

Scott pulled back with a nod and stepped aside, watched Justin slow with a smile at Brian before he left, though Brian didn't notice...too charged and close from Tall Man's shift to higher gear. Scott himself was hot to prowl when he felt a hand on his arm and looked down at Young Stud's eager eyes. Not bad. Scott saw a brick-built Cruiser burning a look and nodded to him. You too. The night's still young and I got plenty to go around.

Justin wandered up the corridor until he reached a glass wall, looked down at a large rectangular pool, whirlpool and steam rooms. Three nude couples sprawled on loungers at the diving end. Only four men swam the deep water. One hulky Attendant in shorts and a Python tee looked bored and not on the make. A good place to kill some time before checking on Brian. Justin looked around, saw a CHILL-OUT sign and arrow pointing to a stairwell. Must be the way - he opened the door and thumped down.

Minutes later, other eyes looked through the same window. Watched Justin's back as he stepped to the shallow end of the pool, undid his towel and let it fall. Watched him take the stairs, test the water with a slow swing of his leg then step down into the aqua light until he was in to the waist, and his lower half just a liquid distortion of his slender form. Watched him dive and flow and rise dripping. Alone. Like he was in a private world. One that felt good.

Down at the pool...balmy air, warm water, a tint of chlorine...hardly the erotic atmosphere upstairs, but sensual in its way. Justin challenged himself to an underwater swim across the width, barely made it and broke surface like a rocket. Gasping for air, he clung to the safety bar and looked back to where he'd started.

At first he thought it was the chlorine in his eyes, and palmed away drips to be sure. But when he looked again, Donatello's David was still there. Standing naked on the edge. Then he dove in with a little splash and disappeared.

Justin's smile lit as he watched a long swimmer torpedo his way, played nonchalant when Brian sprang up beside him, sucked air and palmed off streams. "I thought you'd be tied up for awhile."

"I haven't found that room yet," Brian grinned, "But I heard a rumor that there was a hot blond in the pool and thought I'd check it out." He looked around, flicked a brow, "Guess they were wrong."

Justin grabbed Brian's shoulders, bolted up and dunked him. But Brian snared him around the waist and they both went down before popping up, spitting water and wiping faces.

Justin's smile faded when their eyes met. "You can go back if you want. I'll be okay here."

Brian gripped the bar, eased to a back float and let go. "It's also okay for you to try something else. Including Scott."

"What?" Justin choked a laugh. "You think..." he shook his head and rolled serious eyes back. "If I DID want something different, I'd try it. But I didn't. And I didn't leave because of you. I left because...it wasn't for me." He watched Brian blink it in then lightened with, "So. Who won?"

"You."

"Yeah right," Justin chuckled, "I wasn't even playing."

"That's why the best man won. He realized he wasn't getting anything out of it, and instead of going through motions, he walked away and found what he REALLY wanted."

Justin moved closer, pulse rising. "Is that why you're here?"

Still floating easy, Brian flipped a matter-of-fact look at the ceiling. "I TOLD you...there was a rumor that a hot -" he splashed a hand down at the unexpected lift from Justin's arm under his back, another under his thighs. And he swung one arm up Justin's back, hooked it on a shoulder and laughed at how ridiculous it seemed.

Brian buoyant light in his arms, Justin whirled him in a slow circle, watched his chin high in a hearty laugh as water churned up a wake. Whispered so low that only he himself could hear, "I love you, Brian Kinney."

Leveraging on Justin's shoulder, Brian forced a leg down and felt Justin's arms drop away. He stood up, stooped and wrapped his arms around Justin's hips, lifted him quick enough to get a loud gasp. He felt Justin's arms collar his neck, legs flow and lock around his submerged waist. Held him near weightless with hands laced on Justin's ass, cocks pressed between them.

Faces level, they kissed then split to just a forehead touch. Brian rolled his lips in, little mischief in his eyes, and he bounced Justin against his cock a couple times.

A loud grunt made them look at the Attendant's acid stare before he decided they got the hint and moved on.

Justin wrinkled a face at Brian, a quiet, "We're not allowed to fuck in the pool."

“No wonder nobody’s here. Let’s leave.”

“What about Scott?”

“They’ll throw him out at closing time.”

Justin let his legs float down until his feet touched bottom. Then they waded to the stairs, arms around each other. They snatched up towels, shagged them through hair before toweling off each other’s backs then facing to finish.

“It’s a long ride home,” Brian rubbed his towel over pubes and semi while watching Justin do the same.

Justin’s eyes sparkled, tongue tip in his smile. “Lot of country on the way here, and you said there was plenty of leg room in the trunk.” He smiled wider at the glint in Brian’s eyes.

By morning, Brian was dressed casual with pen in hand and at his desk. He saw Justin, in college informal, skip down the bedroom stairs. “Off to the Coffee Shop with the Old Gang?”

“Out for some spray paint,” Justin swung around the desk and kissed Brian’s cheek.

“Are you planning a new political campaign?”

“Redecorating?” Justin gave a brassy grin, sighed, “There ARE other kinds of change besides a night at the Baths,” saw Brian’s tongue peek through parted lips, dove in, licked it and snapped back. “Later.” He spun away and headed for the door.

Brian gazed his direction long after he heard the door shut, tapped his pen on his notes then snatched his phone and hit a button. Waited. Waited. “Brian Kinney. Glad I caught you,” he smiled and leaned back, “Did you make a decision yet?” Bigger smile, he bent forward and flipped four pages into his day planner. “Good. I’ll do that. Thanks.”

He hung up, noticed the old brochure on which he’d sketched a crude office layout, picked up and studied the plan...the ad under it. Slouching back in thought, he tapped the brochure on his chin then tossed it aside. Stood and stretched, paced to Justin’s desk and his graphic clutter. I’d miss that if I didn’t know I’ll be seeing it in TWO places instead of just here.

Stacks of papers, discs...

...a dozen cans of spray paint, gallon can of thinner, huge pieces of cardboard and a pile of rags. More than Brian could take. Shirtless, coffee cup in hand, he scaled the barrier to reach the front window, knocked over a poster board.

“Careful,” Justin scolded, set an orange juice carton in the fridge, slammed the door and walked his glass to Brian. “I’m using that.”

“You said that three days ago,” Brian grumbled, replaced the fallen board. “Seven AM is too early for mountain climbing. And if the EPA knew about this waste dump-”

“I told you I had to wait for the right weather. Well, today’s your lucky day. And you’re just in a piss-poor mood because RegionAir didn’t call yet.” He took Brian’s coffee, replaced it with his juice. “Here. Maybe the carbs will do you better than the caffeine,” he sipped Brian’s coffee, scrunched a face, “Or sugar.”

“I’d like to get that deal locked in before going on to other ones.”

“Like what?”

“Our office move?” Brian switched the subject and their drinks, smiled a more civil, “Stock up on carbs. You’ll need the energy. Now I’d better get over to pick up the truck.”

“On your way you can drop me AND the waste dump off at...”

...Debbie’s back yard.

Bright early morning sun, calm air. Justin wiped his hands on a color-stained white towel, snapped a look over his shoulder when he heard her booming voice approach.

“Sunshine! That is fucking BEAUTIFUL! Where did you get the idea?”

Michael stopped beside her, stared in shock. “I thought Acid was a sixties thing.”

Justin mocked a silent laugh, turned back to his work. Sitting on a blanket with spray cans and used stencils was Debbie’s former old white desk. Shiny black lacquer top - sides and drawers a visual symphony of transparent circles, squares, metallic squiggles and lines overlapped for depth and interest. “Actually, I got the idea at school. Most of the students personalized their hard drives and monitors. Good theft deterrent, too.”

Brian’s unexpected voice cheeked, “I think I’ll just use ‘The Club’ on mine,” as he stopped beside Justin, deliberately donned sunglasses to eye the piece.

Justin pulled off the sunglasses. “Admit it. You love it.”

Ignoring the desk, Brian studied Justin a long moment before pecking a kiss.

On to Brian, Debbie swooned a quiet, "Aren't they cute" that drew Michael's side-eyed wince. He couldn't picture Brian lumped with Easter bunnies and stuffed animals.

"Just so you know," Justin twirled the glasses, "My OTHER choice was decoupage comic book cutouts all over it."

"What a great idea!" Michael sparked and moved beside Justin. "We could do the counters...and I've got all kinds of posters for BIGGER cutouts -"

"Mikey," Brian grabbed his shoulder, "First things first. I have the Rent-A-Truck out front." He glanced around. "Is this all we have for a moving party?"

Emmett rounded the fence and waved, "Don't start without me!" red print workman's handkerchief bandana, lavender overalls with gold piping and a hot pink muscle shirt.

Brian grabbed his sunglasses from Justin's hand and put them back on.

Two hours later...

Brian carrying a hard drive, and Michael holding a monitor, hiked up the inside stairs from the Comic Shop to the new Lightwave Office.

"I'm glad it's almost over," Michael huffed. "Three days of pounding, drilling and having the power shut off ninety times was wearing a little thin. Almost as bad as that put-slot-A-in-slot-B desk set of yours."

"As a future father, you should be thanking me for the experience." Brian cleared the top step and saw Justin razor-scraping paint specks off the window around a backwards Lightwave sign.

"Hey," Justin turned to Michael and Brian setting computer parts on Brian's desk. "You think this is enough? I thought about putting our phone number on it but I didn't want it to look like a For Sale sign," looked off in thought, "Although that COULD bring in more contacts."

"You've been studying the Heidi Fleiss business manual," Brian grinned, got Justin's sunny wink before he finished window-wiping.

Michael tackled a computer cable bird nest. "Scott ran out to pick up a part. He should be back any minute. Want me to ask him to hook all this up?"

“I thought he was done,” Justin’s brows furrowed. “We’re supposed to open for business tomorrow.”

“He’s done up HERE,” Michael clarified, “But he said something about replacing a bus bar, whatever THAT is. I think his exact words were ‘This looks like -’”

“Shit,” Justin squinted at thunderheads building in the blue sky. “Is it supposed to rain today? I left all my stuff out in the yard and Deb’s at work.”

A muffled cell ring spurred all three to their pockets. Brian raised a hand as he answered, “Brian Kinney,” turned aside as Michael and Justin exchanged looks. “That’s great news. We can meet over lunch if you’d like. Across from the Airport? Yes, I’m familiar with it. See you there. Bye.” He slipped his phone away, faced Justin with a calm, “They got the route award.”

“What is that? Like the Clio or something?” Michael looked from Brian to Justin.

“Better,” Justin beamed. “It means we eat next month.”

Brian added, “It also means I have to return the truck, transform into Prada Man and meet a Sales Rep for some details,” then to Justin, “I can drop you at Debbie’s. Will you be okay from there?” as he headed for the stairs.

“Sure,” Justin answered, leading Michael after Brian.

At lunch in a finer restaurant, Brian sat at a table, “To the new Vancouver nonstop,” and toasted a white wine with a well-dressed, gray-coiffured Mr. Rep. “We’ll give you enough splash to beat the competition for those advance bookings.”

In the Diner, Justin sat between Ted and Emmett at the counter and toasted water glasses, “To Lightwave, future crown jewel of the Liberty Business District.”

After lunch, threatening skies made 1 PM look more like 6. Justin hesitated inside the Diner front door, checked out dark clouds, vibes of thunder. He saw a paper napkin toss in the wind, swiveled back when he heard Debbie.

“Sunshine,” she closed from behind, “If you’re thinking of making a run for it...” She held out a folded black trash bag, watched him take and study it. “It ain’t fucking Armani, but it’ll keep you dry.”

Justin crunched the bag in his hand, “Thanks, Deb” and whisked out the door.

He hiked up Liberty in the thick warm air, felt drops, looked back and saw a veil of heavy rain rolling like fog up the street. Shit. Best to find a doorway and hang out until it passed. He flicked the bag open. It flapped and crackled in the wind, whipped loose and caught on the opening door of Scott's silver truck angling to a stop.

"Get in."

Deluge on them, Justin grabbed the bag, sprang into the passenger seat, yanked the door shut and brushed drops off his face, hair. "Thanks," he mumbled, side-eyed Scott weaving back into slowed traffic. "I thought you were working at the Shop."

"Took a lunch break," he grinned before checking his rearview mirror and taillights ahead, the quick slap of wipers over Lovett's - You Can't Resist It - low on the speakers.

"Um-hm," Justin saw Scott's open jeans' button, and "You missed a belt loop," fell out before realization made him wince.

"You noticed." Real big grin. "And I thought you didn't care."

"Can you drop me off at the Loft?" Justin sighed and leaned back, clarified with "On your way back to the Shop." But Scott didn't answer. Justin saw his eyes track the side mirror, rearview, straight ahead, back to the rearview. An oddity cut short by a sudden chill from cold air blowing on his damp skin. "Can I turn this down a little?" Justin reached for the fan knob.

"Or you could sit closer," Scott hinted and watched Justin's hand kill the fan with an emphatic snap. Hard-to-get always piqued his interest.

When the truck stopped in front of the Loft, Justin shot out with a "Thanks for the ride" and darted through light rain to the door. He tried his key but it wouldn't go in. On closer inspection he saw another key broken off in the lock. "Shit," he turned the knob, smacked the door – and it opened – piece of duct tape over the latch. At least **SOMEBODY** was considerate. Before entering, he glanced back and hissed a breath when he saw Scott moving toward him. But Scott was looking up the street. Curious, Justin almost leaned out to check the point of interest when Scott stopped close. "Somebody following you?"

"Wouldn't be the first time. Mind if I come in for a few minutes?"

Justin studied Scott's smile. It seemed more concerned than carnal. Against initial gut reaction, he said, "C'mon," headed up the stairs and said over a shoulder, "You think it has anything to do with the Adonis deal?"

"Don't know anything about that deal," Scott raised a can-it-NOW brow. "Truth is, I'd rather watch your ass on the stairs."

Justin plastered his back to the wall, narrowed his eyes and waved a hand ahead. “After YOU.”

“Well,” Scott renewed his lusty persona, “If you’d rather have the better view...”

“Go before I change my mind about letting you in here,” Justin waved him ahead, followed and tried not to look. Should’ve taken the goddamned elevator. And of COURSE I’d rather have the better view. But Brian’s not home.

Inside the Loft, Justin walked through the kitchen, “You want something to drink?” opened the fridge.

“No thanks,” Scott wandered to the front windows, casually parted a sheer and perused the rainy street below.

Scott turned from the Loft front window back to Justin sipping from a water bottle as he approached. “I COULD use a quick shower,” with eyes wide and smile turned up a notch. The Official Turner Invitation.

Wise to it, Justin set the water bottle on his computer desk, crossed his arms and nodded to the bathroom. “You know where it is.” The Official Taylor Decline.

Scott blinked a no-fault-in-trying, started unbuttoning his shirt and turned away when Justin turned his back and looked out the window. Okay. Understood.

In the closed bathroom, the shower ran but Scott wasn’t in it yet. He stood naked with a notepad and scribbled as his eyes roamed the room. Then he shoved the pad into a shirt pocket of his folded clothing on the sink counter, looked at the closed door and heaved a sigh before hitting the shower. Would’ve been so much more fun running his hands over Justin.

Seated at his computer, Justin viewed a graphic of the Lightwave office floor plan, heard the shower stop and glanced up before returning to the screen. If Scott intended to hang around, their sole discussion would be about business. That’s all. Then Scott hiked down the steps to the living room and Justin sneaked a stare. Shirt open, hand flicking through damp hair, Scott had that wild, sexy look that stirred even the most resistant cock. But not Brian’s magnetic deep eyes. Once Scott’s superficial browns turned on him, Justin lost interest. “Before you go back over -”

Three knocks on the front door.

“I’ll get it,” Scott volunteered. He was halfway there anyway. With the strong move of an arm, he swept the door open and stared wide.

She was tall, hands in her pockets, long auburn hair damp and tangled beneath her raincoat hood, her modelesque beauty spoiled by long frown lines and the puffy red eyes of a night's cry. Her voice was low with guarded anger and hurt. "You animal. You disgusting animal."

Scott swallowed, eyes catching movement as her hand whipped up a small silver pistol. Aimed at his chest. Shaking in her hand. "Shit."

When muffled voices went silent, Justin leaned back, stared toward the foyer, stood up to investigate when he saw Scott slowly backing into view, arms out from his sides. Then the gun barrel advancing. Straight-armed out in a two-hand hold.

Shitshitshitshitshit. Justin dropped low, scrambled behind his desk, his back to the panel, eyes shut tight. Mind racing in the slo-mo seconds between panic and reaction – thoughts a mix of hero and folly. What to do. Depends on who screams first. If it's Scott, he's shot and the other person is still out there with a loaded gun. Or if they shoot and miss, it'll hit the bedroom glass and Brian'll have a shit fit. Stay low. Hide? And let Scott...

Chest heaving, Justin crushed his eyes shut and yelled, "Hey Scott, could you come over here a minute?" then pulled his limbs into a tight ball. Don't shoot. Don't shoot. Don't shoot.

Scott almost had her hypnotized with his gaze. When the lady's head snapped toward Justin, Scott eased his hands over hers, slowly dislodged the shaking gun and shoved it in his jeans pocket. She wasn't going to shoot. He knew from her eyes. A lot of pain, but nothing lethal. Still didn't discount a possible reflex accident saved by Justin's distraction. Now she was shaking and sobbing "I hate you. I hate you" at the floor.

Justin peeked around the corner of the desk, saw Scott take the crying lady's arm and guide her to the door. "Should I call the police?"

Scott mouthed a No and shook his head. Then disappeared.

Justin heard the door scrape shut. No more voices. They were gone. He wanted to get up and lock the door, but the strain drain left him feeling weak and sick, and all he could do was slide to the floor and breath.

Scott hit the emergency stop on the elevator, suspending him and his zombie-eyed friend between floors.

"Now what's going on?" he stared, voice low and stern.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she edged out.

“Tell you what?”

“I followed you,” she strengthened, “To work, to those gay places...why didn’t you TELL ME?” She saw his face stay hard and silent. “I was supposed to get married. And the blood test came...” she bit a lip, looked away and back with venom. “I have HIV. I’m positive, Scott.”

“Whoa. WAIT a minute,” he flared, shrinking her into a corner. “We had one thing a MONTH ago, and you’re blaming ME? Well you’d better hunt up whoever the hell came before me, because I’m negative,” he watched her eyes widen, “I got tested a couple weeks ago. And if you don’t believe me, I’ll take you down to the fucking County Health Center and let you read it for yourself. As for where I go, that’s MY goddamned business.”

Scott started the elevator, pulled her pistol from his pocket and held it grip out. “I’m not the guy.”

With dream state lethargy, she took and pocketed the gun as the elevator stopped and Scott shoved the doors apart. Her last look at him was agonized, mouth open but silent before she rushed out.

He watched her go, his face hard, eyes hollow.

An hour later, Brian shuffled into the Loft, already had his suit jacket, tie and raincoat draped on an arm, shirt unbuttoned. One thought in mind. A cool shower with the Art Director. Until he saw Justin on the floor behind the desk, arm stretched out in the unnatural pose of a fallen crime victim. “Justin!” he raced over, dropped to his knees and grabbed the arm. His heart kept pounding despite Justin’s stir and struggle to sit up.

“Shit,” Justin brushed a hand through his hair, propped his back against the desk.

Brian gripped Justin’s arm, touched his cheek then forehead. “What the fuck happened?”

“I’m okay,” Justin brushed Brian’s hand aside. “You just missed all the excitement. Scott stopped in and one of his admirers showed up with a gun.” He saw Brian’s eyes comb his body. “Nobody got hurt.”

“That’s why you’re on the floor?”

“I think I passed out,” Justin grumbled, winced and rubbed a tingling leg. Passed out. Fuck.

“And he LEFT you here?” Brian railed. Have to talk to that asshole.

“Believe me, it was a godsend.” Justin worked to a stand with Brian’s help, reached back for the water bottle. “Some woman followed him here, and she wasn’t too happy,” he took a long drink.

“She caught you fucking. That’ll DO it to a woman.”

Justin smacked the bottle against Brian’s chest, “It wasn’t funny,” turned and limped to the bedroom. “Remind me not to let him in here again. I had visions of you coming home and finding both of us splattered all over the Loft.”

Brian trailed, face drawn serious as Justin’s tone. Whether the incident dredged old wounds or created new ones, flip comments were out. He watched Justin sit on the edge of the bed, inward-retreat look, water bottle on his lap. Like the old days after the bashing. I was no more fucking good THEN than I am now, but I’ll try.

Brian sat beside Justin, set a hand on his thigh. “Were you scared?”

“Shitless. And I fucking HATE that feeling.”

“There’s nothing wrong with fear. The smart thing is using it to separate courage from recklessness.”

“What IS that?” Justin corner-eyed, “Some mantra from your high-volume tricking days?”

“Okay,” Brian scowled, pulled his hand away, “You’re some spineless little fairy who hid himself and prayed for some Greek god to intervene and save him.”

“That’s NOT how it happened,” Justin flared. “I yelled to get her attention and Scott took the gun away from her.”

Brian raised a brow. “Good. I knew you must’ve done SOMETHing.” And he got up and strolled into the bathroom.

Justin thought a moment, exhaled a long breath and didn’t feel so insignificantly helpless. Didn’t stop raw anger over Scott’s dragging his problems into the Loft.

In the bathroom, pants off and draped on the sink counter, Brian leaned stiff-armed beside them and looked at his mirror face with its heavy brow and thought lines. Was I that smart? Or that reckless? His musing halted when Justin backed butt snug against the clothing.

“Hey. I didn’t mean it to sound like that,” Justin met his eyes, fidgeted locked hands low on his outstretched legs.

“You said what was on your mind.”

“So what did you hear? Because I don’t want you to think I meant you can’t do what you want. I know you’re careful.”

Brian’s arms relaxed, shoulders loosened. I might have heard that. A few years ago. But I know you better now. “You don’t want advice I wouldn’t take myself.”

“Something like that.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.”

Justin watched Brian turn and open the shower door and guessed it was a cue to leave. You want to chill by yourself? Fine. At least you got the message.

Brian twisted a look over his shoulder, stopped Justin’s departure with a low, “If you’re not joining me, would you mind hanging that up?” and nodded at his pants.

“Hang your OWN shit up,” Justin grinned and stripped while Brian adjusted the shower. He stepped inside and under the tepid spray and they stood facing each other with eyes closed, heads tilted back to welcome a drain-off of sweat and tension.

Brian shagged his wet hair, Justin spit a mouthful of water at Brian’s chest then Brian took Justin’s wrists, wrapped them around his neck, circled his arms around Justin’s back and they closed the gap between them, tented their foreheads together so water wouldn’t drown their words.

Something Brian had been planning. And what better time than now. “RegionAir wants to meet about a new ad. We’ve got one day to piece something together and take it to the Windy City.”

“You’re going to Chicago?”

“WE’RE going to Chicago.”

“Can we afford it?”

“We got super discounted tickets.”

“From Miss Brit? Who can’t wait to get in your pants?”

“From Miss Brit’s manager? And we’ve never met, but he DID sound -” He cut short when Justin pushed off. Brian yanked Justin back and reconnected foreheads. “Then we’re taking a little two-day side trip to Denver.”

“What’s in Denver?”

“Nobody we know.”

“Um-hm. New hunting grounds.”

“Nope. Just us.”

“Are you serious?”

Brian stepped them out of the spray and dove into a serious kiss. Justin answered with equal understanding. Details seemed less important than the fact they were finally going away together. Just the two of them.

After the kiss became an embrace, Brian rested his head over Justin’s shoulder and stared off. “I have one more call to make. Why don’t you decide what you’d like for dinner, and we’ll go out when I get back.”

At Scott’s front porch, Brian idled the Honda beside the parked truck. Thought about what to say, how to say it. When he saw Scott open the front door and step out to investigate, Brian killed the engine and left the car, shut the door hard.

“Kinney.” Scott half-smiled. “You called...I’m here. Is it for business or pleasure?”

Brian hiked the steps, face tight and humorless, “What the fuck happened at the Loft today?” He stopped beside the porch railing, one clenched hand hooked on his jeans pocket, the other fisted against his leg as he drilled a stare at Scott standing a couple steps outside his door.

“A little unplanned event. But it’s over.”

“Do ALL your intimate friends ‘pack’ for house calls?”

“I had her under control.”

“Why was she there in the FIRST place, and why the FUCK did you involve Justin?”

“Hey,” Scott blazed back, “I didn’t invite her, and if your fuck-mate can’t handle -”

Brian lunged forward, thrust his palms into Scott’s shoulders and slammed him against the door. Scott rammed his hands into Brian’s chest and hurled him back onto the railing where a fast post grab kept him from sailing over. Brian launched off the post for another hit when Scott stopped him with a raised hand and raw shout.

“You want my blood? Go ahead and try it! Just make goddamn sure you got no open cuts.”

Brian froze stunned, saw Scott panting heavy with eyes a glassy mix of thunder and pain. Nothing he'd ever seen in Scott before. Or ever expected to see. Then the words sank in with clarity that drained off anger and left a strange numbness. "Is it confirmed?"

"Won't know for a couple more months." Scott moved his raised hand to his shoulder, rubbed at the dull soreness. "I...uh...forget what I said about Justin. Wasn't thinking." He flexed his shoulder, shuffled past Brian and sat down on the top step, his back against a pillar.

Brian joined Scott on the step, grimaced and rubbed his battered back before leaning on the other pillar. "He's not a fuck-mate. We're partners. In more than one sense."

"You made that clear," Scott gripped his shoulder. "And since I'm a reasonable man, I won't sweep off my porch with your damn carcass." When Brian didn't snark back, Scott stared a dagger. "You know what you can do with your fucking pity."

"Fuck you, Scott. You don't have results, but you're that sure?"

"Maybe YOU can go through life wearing a raincoat in the shower, but not me," Scott glared, "Not me."

"You KNOW goddamned well what's OUT there."

Scott steamed up, "I was ALWAYS careful! Always careful with the boys." Then he looked off, voice fading like a wave sliding back to sea, "Fucking Broad...fucking Broad...fucking broad."

Brian swallowed hard, toned down. "It's not a given. And even if it is, there's a lot you can do to fight it. Mikey's partner Ben can tell you all about that."

"What's he do for a living?"

"He's a college professor."

"A fucking school teacher," Scott snorted. "I'm out in the rain, down in tunnels, get cut, stung, shocked and jabbed, and I STILL fucking love everything about what I do. I give that up, I might as well put a gun to my head."

"Then why even worry about it?" Brian snapped. "If you're gonna do whatever you want ANYWAY."

Scott stood up, looked across the yard at stands of oak and maple, rich summer green still glistening with rain from southbound thunderheads against a luminous blue sky. "In two months, it'll be a helluva view. Always is in fall." He looked down at Brian, voice open and simple, "You don't know how lucky you are."

“Meaning what?”

“Having someone,” Scott looked out again. “Of all the family, fucks and friends I have...there’s only one I could even come CLOSE to trusting. A bad-ass trick I picked up a few years ago,” he shook his head as if at some bizarre joke, “A fucking trick.” Then he gazed down at Brian with serious, steady eyes. “I want you to buy my ranch.”

Brian’s mind blanked, he gasped a breath through a shocked smile and stared at the steps before slowly working to a stand. Fucking WHAT? “Buy your ranch?” he almost laughed, “I can offer you a hundred bucks and a used Honda,” saw grave eyes and turned solemn. “I can’t afford it. This must be worth -”

“I know what it’s worth,” Scott scanned the porch, doors, surroundings. “It took ten years of work, money. Put everything I had into it. And I’ll be goddamned if I have to lose it on somebody else’s terms. So keep the Honda. This whole place is yours for a hundred bucks in love and trust...on one condition.”

“What?”

“If I test negative twice in the next four months, you sell it back to me for a thousand.”

“If...” Brian breathed out, “If you don’t?”

“There’s a five year look-back period on inheritance tax. I’ll last that long just to keep the fucking State from getting part of it. And you get to keep it all.”

“What about Dave? Or the rest of your family?”

“You think if they knew I fucked men, they wouldn’t leave me to rot in some hellhole? One thing I know for fact. I could fuck women and still be a man on Liberty Avenue. But I can’t fuck men and still be one in Boone County. They’re not getting my ranch.” Scott held out his hand, eyes tense, “Do we have a deal?”

Brian’s lips thinned. If I take it, you fucking well know I’ll end up taking you with it. If I don’t, it’s another victory and a small fortune for the homophobes. “Deal,” Brian clasped Scott’s hand, saw life return. “And just for the record? That bad-ass stud picked YOU up.”

“Whatever you wanna believe,” Scott regained his brazen smile, gripped Brian’s hand then let go. “Keep your datebook clear tomorrow. I already have my attorney drawing up the papers. Now get the fuck outta here.”

Brian watched Scott turn and go inside without a backward glance. Knew what it was like to risk losing everything, to lose so much. With one exception. A young, one-time trick he picked up a few years ago.

On the long drive home, Brian convinced himself that initial reaction had overemphasized the worst-case scenario. By tomorrow, rational and practical would prevail and he wouldn't hear any more about it.

But the incident spawned a morose daydream anyway. He was at the Loft grieving Justin's loss when Craig barged in and started taking everything that was Justin. Paintings, drawings, CD's – and Brian, cased in unbreakable glass, could only stand there and watch. "He's my son and you're nothing," as Craig picked out images of Brian, piled them on the living room floor and set them on fire.

Brian blinked off the daymare, only to play another. Justin helpless in that same glass case, watching Joan, Claire and her two sons piling intimate memories into trash bags, Joan insisting, "I don't want anything left of his horrid lifestyle." Then Claire sitting on his bed. "Mom, I think this will go perfect in my room."

A Psycho-scene flare jolted Brian back to reality but didn't stop a nagging sensation that ludicrous as those fantasies were, base truth was – he and Justin were related only by a simple paper that claimed they were partners. Nothing giving them the universally recognized emotional connection of family.

At a small Downtown restaurant bar, Brian sat across from Justin in a corner booth and watched their Waitress place a check on their cleared table. Justin reached for it, found his hand on Brian's and stroked the top of his hand. "Would you let ME get it this time? I'm starting to feel like a freeloader."

"Then get the tip and be a philanthropist."

"Finally. A tart comment. I was beginning to think I walked in with somebody else," Justin leaned on crossed arms. "Mind telling me what's going on?"

Brian stared at the rocks glass turning in his hand. "I've been thinking of making out a will."

"A will." Justin stared down then back with alarm. "A will? As in, planning for death?"

"It isn't about death. It's about a right to decide what happens to your life's worth. And last minute choices don't always count." He took a drink, looked off quietly, "We don't have rights like straight people. So we have to take every one we have."

Justin wasn't convinced. "Brian, is something wrong with you? And don't give me that bullshit answer 'everything'."

"What's wrong with being smart and practical in case something happens?"

“What could happen? Are you in some kind of trouble?” Justin pressed.

“No, I’m not in any trouble,” Brian gulped his drink, clinked the glass down. “Scott had a little scare -”

“Like he’s not USED to it by now.”

“- and it made me think,” Brian finished with an indignant stare.

“If this is how you plan to spend the rest of the evening, I might as well go to the Baths.”

“THAT’S new. The Sex Card.”

“If it trumps you over the head, yeah. I don’t wanna talk about YOU gone, or ME gone...not when we hardly talk about BETWEEN here and there,” Justin slung back his own drink, tossed a five on the table and slid off the bench seat. “Are you ready to go?”

Brian exhaled a long breath, snatched the check and followed Justin already heading for the exit.

Walking through the lamp lit darkness along Forbes Avenue, Justin slowed to check the line of parked cars. Where the fuck DID we park. He was halted by Brian’s arms sliding over his shoulders from behind and holding him firm, Brian’s head against his and a brush of air on his ear.

“We passed it four cars ago.”

Justin cleared his throat, turned in Brian’s hold and looked up, voice almost lost against the whiz of passing traffic. “It’s not that you didn’t make sense. It’s just too close to something I don’t want to remember right now. Okay?”

Brian studied his eyes. The Between comment. “What would you like to see in Denver?”

Justin revived a smile, stretched up and kissed Brian’s lips then locked one arm around his waist, discreetly ran the other hand up Brian’s cock.

Brian blinked his eyes slow. “That’s a given. Anything else?”

“Vancouver.”

“That’s not in Denver.”

“No, but it’s sitting on our desk and waiting for a Miracle Worker.”

Brian leaned back, “Where did you hear that term?”

“Cynthia,” Justin raised his brows, turned back with his arm guiding Brian by the waist. “In my old days, I was quite adept at digging up stuff on you.”

“Were you that determined?”

“No, YOU were, and I needed all the help I could get.”

Brian stopped them at the car, pinned Justin’s back against the passenger door. “I had no idea you were so devious.”

“You always have a way of bringing out the best in me.” Justin sucked a breath when he felt Brian’s hand stroke his cock. “Two ways.”

Brian nudged Justin aside, dug his keys out, unlocked the passenger door then dashed to the driver’s seat, his mind more into a way than a will.

Lightwave’s first day in the new office. A tribute to Murphy’s Law – Anything that CAN go wrong, WILL go wrong – starting with...

“SURPRI-SE!” from a gang of familiar voices, all the lights coming on followed by a blinding flash from a camera and a whirlwind of “Congratulations!” “Over HERE!” “Hope you like it.” “Nothing too good for our boys.” “Careful with that.” “Watch the cake. Watch the cake.”

When Brian regained his sight, he had nowhere to set his briefcase. His desk was a loaded buffet table, computer shoved precariously to one end. He stared at a fish mold tuna salad surrounded by cut fruit and vegetables, at Michael and Ben hustling plastic glasses while Ted poured champagne, “I know it’s nine AM, but there’s never a wrong time for champagne at a celebration.”

Justin finally focused, headed to HIS desk where...another computer? crowded beside his own with Debbie, Vic and Emmett smiling under a saggy Liberty Lightwave Kicks Ass banner. On closer scrutiny, Justin got Emmett’s proud, “The cake turned out exactly like I thought it would...” he glanced off, “...except for the screen logo, which is a liiiittle bit shaky...” saw Justin aim a finger at the cake keyboard and deflected with a gentle hand. “Uh..not that part, Sweetie.”

“It looks so real.”

“It IS,” Vic drolled, “We ran out of time, so we glazed Michael’s old one.”

Debbie fired up, “Everybody grab a glass,” saw Ben goose Michael, “I said GLASS,” turned to Justin, “Go over by Brian,” and yelled to Brian, “Can you two stand together?”

“Every chance we get.”

“Gay men,” Debbie grumbled over background snickers, grabbed her camera in one hand, Vic’s offered glass in the other.

Glasses in hand all around, Michael took over. “Okay everybody...everybody. Here’s to success, profits,” what else, “And any other good shit that can happen for two great guys.”

They cheered and drank, Debbie snapped a picture. “Now for the unveiling,” she stepped close to Brian and Justin, “Since we knew you’d end up with leftovers today, we all pitched in and got you a special office gift,” nodded to the back wall and all eyes turned to Ben, standing beside a blanket-covered item the size of a short file cabinet.

Ben pulled the blanket off.

“It’s a refrigerator,” Justin smiled.

Michael coaxed, “Well? Go on over and turn it on. There’s a dial above the top shelf.”

Justin looked at Brian, Brian waved a hand, Ben opened the door, Justin turned the knob, the compressor kicked on.

And all the lights blinked out.

Party over, guests gone, Brian fished through papers spread across his desk, rolled his chair back and bumped into the refrigerator. “Fuck this,” he glared at the fridge, swiveled from his seat and stood up. “It’s going on YOUR side.”

Justin had his own problems. “Mikey should’ve paid Scott to rewire that back outlet, too.” He tilted his head at his screen, “Shit,” dropped his face into raised hands, “Think.” Could anything stifle creativity or congeniality more than a short deadline.

They heard a cell phone ring and Brian had to shuffle through papers to find it. “It WOULD be nice if the fucking phone company would get around to putting in our line,” then all-pro answered, “Lightwave. Brian Ki -” He sat back on his desk. “Yeah. I’ll be there in about...forty-five minutes.”

Justin looked at Brian’s back, cell phone on his leg, head low. “Who was it?”

“Scott,” Brian stood up and pocketed his phone. “I have to meet him about a business deal. Can you hold down the fort for awhile?”

“Don’t forget our deadline, and we already lost two hours. What kind of deal?”

“Real estate,” Brian answered on his way out. “I’ll tell you all about it when I get back.” Fuck. Scott could’ve thought it over a little longer than THIS.

Justin watched the door shut, spun back to his screen and ended up staring past it, concentration further blown.

Steele Attorneys Professional Building. Standing beside Scott’s truck parked in the lot, Brian read through a packet of papers and looked at Scott leaning back against a front fender. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Just lay the hundred on the table and sign your fucking name.”

Guess so.

They walked together into the building.

Brian left alone.

Finally back at Lightwave, Brian, holding a large envelope, opened the fire door, dodged a paper plane, saw Justin’s floor area littered with crumpled papers and Justin cross-arm surly in his chair. “A new three-dimensional concept?” he scanned the strewn planes.

“I thought it would make a great fold-out. Now what’s the deal?”

Brian pulled the contract from the envelope, walked it over and handed it to Justin. “I bought Scott’s ranch.”

“You...” Justin’s eyes bugged wide, “You don’t have that kind of money. NOBODY has that kind of money.” He pored over the cover page as Brian sat back on his desk.

“How...fuck,” he stared up at Brian, “A hundred dollars?” narrowed eyes at him, tension building. “What did he get from YOU?” Justin slapped the papers on the desk, “Love and trust?”

“That’s just a legal term,” Brian stayed calm, watched Justin shake his head and sniff back agitation. “He had a positive contact, and not the electrical kind,” got a return look of concern. “If he turns up clear, I’ll sell it back to him.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“It’s ours.”

“Where’s Scott gonna go?”

“He doesn’t.”

Justin gaped, glanced away to form a thought before looking back. “You KNOW how he is...all the shit he gets into. And we’re gonna be responsible for him?”

“Scott’ll take care of himself on his own terms if he has to. Nothing else is definite yet.”

“Then what the fuck is THIS?” Justin snatched the contract and bolted to a stand, tossed it on the desk and paced, “Or is this how you think about ALL contracts? Just sign it for temporary convenience.”

They both turned to the stairwell when Michael appeared and called, “Hey...would you mind keeping down your...” spotted the paper planes, “...creative differences?” Seeing their stormy faces and getting no answer, he added “Thanks,” and quickly disappeared.

Diffused by the interruption, they lowered voices and kept eye contact – Brian stiffly seated on Justin’s desk, Justin standing near him, one hand clenched on a hip.

Brian firmly started, “I think very seriously before I sign anything.”

“Then why didn’t you talk to me first? We’re supposed to be partners.”

“Being partners doesn’t mean we give up being ourselves. I made the decision, and I’ll handle anything that comes out of it.”

“Brian, anything that’s part of you becomes a part of me. You decided to bring him into our...MY life, and never gave me a say in it.”

Brian shut his eyes and exhaled a long breath. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Why is it so fucking hard to cover all the angles when someone else is involved. I could revert to the alternative. But was it really that much better. He stared at Justin’s eyes, reached out, hooked Justin’s bent elbow and pulled him close between spread legs until their chins nested on each other’s shoulders and arms rode around in a tight hug. “Does being partners...include supporting decisions...that were made with good intent?”

“Only if one remembers not to leave the other out.”

“The thing with Scott didn’t seem like something meant for anyone else. I never talked much about you to Mikey. Or about Mikey to YOU. But we weren’t partners then.”

Brian kissed Justin's neck and whispered, "I'll remember that. As for the ranch, more than likely I'll be selling it back to him in a couple months."

Waning adrenaline left Justin in low gear. "Can we...take a break at Woody's for a little while? I can't work right now."

"Good idea," Brian rubbed Justin's back. "After we're drunk and loose, we'll knock off RegionAir, wow them in Chicago. Then from there to Denver and two days away from all the bullshit."

Justin's eyes opened. "We're going right from Chicago to Denver?"

"That's the way they wrote our tickets."

"When were you gonna tell me that?"

"Fuck. I WAS planning to get around to it."

"It's okay," Justin patted Brian's back. "I'm sure you had good intent."

They drew back to face each other, kissed then left to regroup.

All-Nighter. Defined as cramming for finals while tweaked on No-Doz and caffeine. Or hanging out till dawn with friends, shit-faced and trading secrets nobody'll remember anyway. Maybe rediscovering sexual attraction even after the drugs wear off.

Or brainstorming ideas until the masterpiece finally evolves.

Their office lights were still burning, a strip of azure sky above buildings through the windows. Cross-legged on the floor amidst sketches and copy, Justin sniffed back fatigue, held a graphic in one hand and blinked hard to focus on it.

Sitting back on his knees beside him, half-filled coffee pot and used cups to one side, Brian pen-crossed a word off a page of copy, pressed a palm to an eye and snorted back a breath.

They simultaneously grunted, "What do you think?" as they handed over sheets with arms crossing like fencing foils, free hands accepting, eyes scanning without noticing their fluid choreography.

Brian nodded at the graphic, pleased, "This is -"

“Genius,” Justin finished, looked up to see Brian’s wry brow. “I was referring to YOUR work?” he flashed Brian’s copy, saw him grin then added a brassy, “I already KNOW that MY stuff is genius,” and bobbed from a play punch to his shoulder.

An alarm clock rang from the desktop. Brian staggered up and shut it off. “We have three hours to finish, get back to the Loft and make our flight.” No sex innuendo. Justin looked drained and Brian grudgingly accepted that he himself was too beat to be horny.

The day flashed by in a blur.

...On the flight to Chicago, they assembled proposals, stopped only for another coffee.

...In the cab to RegionAir’s headquarters, they studied copies of the airline’s inflight magazine. “Full page?” Justin pointed to a similar ad. “Fold-out,” Brian decided.

...Sitting at a conference table, they traded discreet smiles while three Execs paged through their proposal. All favor and nods. Sold.

...By 2PM they were still in suits, Brian with a briefcase, Justin empty-handed, both trapped in a flood of bodies at O’Hare’s security screeners.

“Good thing our flight’s late,” Justin tossed dress shoes into a plastic bin. “The ticket agent said MOST of them were running late. Is it ALWAYS like this at O’Hare?”

“Somebody must have spit on a runway,” Brian set his briefcase on the belt, shoes on top, glimpsed the next belt where a tall, well-dressed Asian Man argued with a Security Agent over confiscated medical tools, his shorter Interpreter struggling to explain so they wouldn’t be arrested. Fucking glad we picked THIS line.

Finally through security and loping to the gate, Brian caught Justin’s yawn. Made his own eyes feel dry and heavy. “Slow down. We have forty minutes yet.”

“The faster we get there, the longer we can veg.”

Standing down the hall beside the crowded gate area, a uniformed Guy Agent spied them, streaked past a podium beside a black screen that suddenly lit a bright red DENVER – DELAYED. He sprinted up the loading bridge and grabbed his Girl partner’s arm as she started to shut the aircraft door. “Hold up. They’re just outside.”

“They’ll have to hurry. Captain says if he misses this window, we’re stuck with another hour flow control hold.” She reopened the door, called to the Flight Attendant in mid destination speech. “Two more running!”

Justin and Brian turned the corner into the gate area, almost collided with harried Guy.

“You on this flight?”

Brian glanced at the DENVER sign, “Yeah.”

“Give me your boarding passes quick. You almost missed it.”

“They said it was late,” Brian barely had the cards from his pocket when Guy snatched them from his hand, ripped and shoved the stubs back into the same hand.

“We got an okay to leave, but we have to go NOW. Come on,” Guy raced up the bridge.

No time to think, Brian and Justin tracked close behind, through the doorway where a smiley Flight Attendant ushered them left into the premium cabin as the door thud shut.

“Right here,” she waved. To two large seats, centered by themselves against the back wall and almost privately removed from the rows ahead.

While they buckled in, she rattled them a fast version of the oxygen-flotation-emergency speech over the Captain’s - Flight Attendants, please take your seats for departure - then scurried up front to strap in as the plane backed from the gate.

Justin side-eyed a smile at Brian. “First Class?”

Brian stared at the Coach boarding stubs in his hand, held them across the consol between them and under Justin’s gaze. “We might as well sit back and enjoy it until they figure it out,” he grinned and pocketed the stubs.

At the gate window, Guy Agent was watching the next plane whine into place when Asian Man’s winded Interpreter called, “Excuse me. Can we still make it?” and thrust two boarding cards at him.

Guy took and eyed the cards, his eyes widened and he dashed to the podium. Grabbed Brian’s ripped pieces, read them and blurted a low, “Oh shit.”

Coffee burnout, takeoff G force and 36 hours without sleep – by the time the plane leveled off, Justin had already discovered full recline. Brian stood, yanked pillows and blankets from the overhead then folded their suit jackets away.

“Here,” he tossed a pillow on Justin’s lap, set one on his own headrest, sat and stripped the plastic off a blanket while Justin settled into a pillow.

The Flight Attendant stooped beside Brian. “Would you like a cocktail?”

Brian turned to Justin, eyes closed, chest in slow rise and fall. “Maybe later.” After she nodded and moved on, he fluttered the blanket over Justin, resisted a kiss and wondered how the fuck anybody could sleep on an airplane.

It was the last clear thought he had.

Until a dream that he was falling sent his stomach into his throat and startled him awake. A doorbell chime. Then somebody’s TV playing “Ladies and Gentlemen, we’ve encountered some light chop, so we’d like you to keep your seatbelts fastened. We’ll be back to clear sailing in a few minutes.”

Justin’s eyes sprang open at the same time and he found himself staring at Brian’s eyes in a mutual where-the-fuck-ARE-we moment before reality dawned.

The Flight Attendant stopped beside Brian. “Mr. Wang?”

“She KNOWS you?” Justin grinned, got Brian’s haughty raised brows before Brian looked at the Attendant.

“It’s Mr. Kinney,” he corrected. Guess they found us.

“Oh. Mr. Kinney,” she smiled stiffly, scanned a roster in her hand, tried to stay blasé professional. “And Mr...” she looked at Justin.

“Taylor,” Justin raised his seatback, pushed the blanket aside and stretched to a stand, leaned close to Brian, “I have to take a walk.”

Brian saw him look both ways, “Up front,” watched Justin head for the lavs then casually eyed the Attendant, writing.

She coolly finished adding their names. “Have you decided what you’d like for dinner?”

“Can you run through the choices again?” Good. We stay.

Refreshed and more awake, Justin walked back, glanced at a half-filled cabin. Mostly businessmen asleep or decked in audio headsets while tapping laptops. An older hetero couple dressed like Debbie. He casually glanced out the windows. One then another. Crossed past a refreshment table and continued up Brian’s side, checking the view.

At their row, he straddled Brian’s outstretched legs and gasped when Brian ran a hand up his inner thigh. “Perv,” he bat Brian’s hand, stepped over and sank into his seat, serious look. “Brian, we’re flying over water. I don’t remember any big lakes in Colorado.”

Brian had his own serious issue. A standard waking response undaunted by inhospitable surroundings. Justin's approach and landing didn't help. "Wanna take another walk?"

Justin was more into his wristwatch. "We must've slept five hours."

"What?" Brian straightened, gripped Justin's offered wrist as Justin stopped the Attendant with a full cocktail tray and coming up his aisle.

"Excuse me. What time are we landing?"

"We should be in Hilo in about four more hours," she set two pineapple-décor napkins on their consol, topped them with glasses of pink juice.

"Hawaii," Justin stared to confirm.

She nodded at Justin's brightening eyes and Brian's frozen half smile then hurried back to the galley.

Justin shifted to lean close, rubbed Brian's shoulder and didn't care who the fuck was watching. "Brian. You planned this, didn't you?"

Snarky wry, "No I didn't. We're on the wrong goddamned flight."

"You're kidding."

Brian sank back in his seat, stared at the overhead bin. "And I was just about to compliment RegionAir for having guava juice."

Justin glanced at another Flight Attendant adding to the front table. "Shouldn't we tell someone?"

"So they can politely drop us off? Did you notice any aircraft carriers down there?"

Justin glowed an optimistic, "We're going to Hawaii."

Brian squirmed, pulled a wallet from his back pocket and fished out two squares of paper, held them up to Justin.

Justin read the large DEN and breathed out, "Our luggage checks."

"We're going to Hawaii with seventy dollars in cash and a Gold Card running on fumes."

"Let's hope condoms are cheap," Justin whispered. THAT ought to cheer you up.

Brian's face relaxed. "I've got that part covered. Just don't let my briefcase out of your sight. I have to take a walk." He slid out, started up the aisle, glanced through windows -

lot of fucking water out there – and contemplated their next move. If nothing else, it downed his momentum enough to be able to piss.

Brian away, Justin did a fly-by at the front table, gathered a few snacks and noticed an approval smile from the lady half of the Debbie couple. Must be a grandma thing – watching people get enough to eat. He headed back, disposed of his haul and had just reclaimed his seat when their Attendant stopped beside him, fancy tray in her hand. “Sorry,” he smiled and awkwardly looked around.

“Here,” she flipped up his armrest, lifted and unfolded a table across his lap, set his tray. “I’ll be back with Mr. Kinney’s,” and she disappeared again.

Brian returned with a few snacks, slid his briefcase out. “This may have to hold us between meals.” He opened the case, saw the stash already there, added his items, shut them away and side-eyed Justin’s clever grin. Then he sat and deftly drew out his table for his arriving tray.

Justin picked a white asparagus spear from his salad and held it up to Brian. “Wanna eat mine?”

“Behave.”

“Can I eat yours?”

Brian gripped Justin’s collar, pulled him close and seductively whispered, “There’s nothing more I’d like to eat than your hot little ass right before I shove my throbbing dick into it.” He let go, watched Justin wince and tug at his crotch as he resettled. “Now have we learned that it’s not a good idea to tease on airplanes?”

“No. We learned that if you’re gonna do it, do it better than the other guy.”

Brian didn’t share the drawback. Just discreetly rearranged the napkin on his lap.

After dinner and a couple hours from Hilo. A little drowsy, a little buzzed on Chivas.

Justin, holding half of a magazine page in one hand, picked a green apple off the front table, eyed their travel mates in various stages of slumber. He hiked back to his seat, saw Brian reading the inflight magazine and snatched it away. “Nothing work related. We’re on vacation. Here.” He pushed their scotches aside, set his torn page on the consol then knelt to open Brian’s briefcase.

Brian took the page and jeered the header. Aphrodite. “A dyke rag? My, you ARE getting bored.”

Justin removed a sheet of lined paper and pens, closed the apple away and plopped back into his seat. "It's a questionnaire. I thought we could answer it." He creased and tore the paper, laid half on Brian's thigh.

Brian read the first question, turned the sheet over. Fucking lipstick ad. "Where's the rest?"

"I just took the questions. There're only twelve. And it's one-to-five strongly disagree to strongly agree. You don't even have to think much." Justin watched Brian lean forward to discard it, grabbed his arm. "Oh come on. It'll be fun."

Brian read out loud, " 'I sometimes chat to strangers when standing in a supermarket or bank queue'?" cocked his head at Justin. "What's the point?" I'll bet a shrink did this.

"The point is..." Justin leaned close with a flirty blink, "...we talk."

"And we'll be totally honest?"

Justin soured at the implication, took the sheet back and grumbled, "Forget it. I just thought it'd be an interesting thing to do." Be honest about how we feel. But it'll always be a guessing game with you, won't it?

Brian grabbed the sheet and placed it back on the console. "Okay...if YOU answer the way you think I would, and I'll do the same. That way we'll HAVE to be honest." Can't believe I'm doing this. Must be the stale air.

"Sure," Justin nodded, big smile. "I can do that in ten minutes."

"You know me that well? All I need is five," Brian grinned. "You're more obvious."

After fifteen minutes of knit brows, shifting eyes, chin or neck or forehead rubbing, Brian DID finish first, sat back. "Still stuck on the supermarket one?"

Justin cleared his throat and wrote a last number. "I rated you one on that. You'd turn on the body language, but you wouldn't say anything. So what'd you rate ME?"

Brian held his answers next to the questionnaire. "Five. Anybody who'd lean on a lamppost at a sex Club and talk to a stranger -"

"Try two," Justin's lips thinned. "You were the exception. Was I right about YOU?" he held his answers next to Brian's.

"Yeah. I usually do business and leave," Brian was equally flat. "My life is not just one big back room," he mumbled as he read another answer. "You rated me five on 'I often listen to my inner voice'?"

“You do things on your own terms,” Justin stated.

“I listen to you at about a three,” Brian corrected.

Justin frowned when he read Brian’s answer. “Why’d you rate me a one?”

“I think you listen to a lot of people before you form an opinion. Which is probably a wise thing to do.” He watched Justin’s mouth twist to one side. “Do you see the problem with words? They’re all open to misinterpretation.”

“The problem with misinterpretation is you don’t realize it until you talk about it.” Justin held a smirk, knew he scored a point when Brian’s eyes locked to the side.

Brian conceded with a cocky, “Care to go on now?”

Justin read with a quiet tone. “This one. ‘I nearly always expect good things to happen to me in the future’.” He turned a serious eye on Brian. “Why’d you rate me a five?”

“Was I that far off?” Brian raised a brow, got a silent shrug. “You’ve always had a defined goal. To be an artist.” He watched Justin rub a palm over one eye, a clue to drowsiness settling on both of them. “Don’t you still want that for yourself?” Brian reached over, reclined Justin’s seat, watched him settle back then lowered his own to match.

“Sure I wanna succeed for myself.” He thought deeper and stared off. “Maybe a little for my Dad. Even though things are different now, I can’t forget how much he did for us...for me. Pushing me to stand up for myself, always being there...” he stopped to quell a distant ache.

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Brian said as much to himself, “Pop was gone more than he was home, but when he WAS around....” he filled in a sarcastic snort. Maybe it was the comfortable seat, or engine lull, or altitude on alcohol or lack of distraction that turned memories to words. “I learned how to fix a door hinge, a leaky faucet.” His lips curled in a silent laugh. “The fuck if Claire remembers who taught her how to make a sandwich, and got her up for school when Mom was too hungover to do it.” Then his lids drifted halfway down darkened eyes. “I got my first job at thirteen, paid some of the bills when Pop overdid a Friday night. Didn’t fucking care if they knew or not. It was one less thing they had to fight about. That’s all I wanted out of it.”

Justin swallowed, turned his head, “Were you ever a kid?”

Brian recovered with a deceptive wide smile, “Every chance I get. Mikey and I had some great adventures back then.”

“Mikey didn’t have a father.”

“Something we had in common.”

“I don’t think he made it his responsibility to hold his family together.”

“He didn’t HAVE to,” Brian stared off. “He wasn’t the reason why they split.” Meaning changed when he saw Justin’s downcast eyes. “And you weren’t the reason either.”

Justin edged closer, kept his tone low. “I wasn’t rehashing the divorce. I didn’t have any more power over my parents’ split than YOU had over yours staying together. But what you said...” Careful. This could blow up. “...I think I understand a little more about why you act like you do...sometimes. But it makes me wonder if...” Jesus. What.

Brian abruptly ended the session. “I’ll take a rain check on any more discussion.” I think I know where you’re going. Don’t. Fucking don’t. Not here. Not now.

Justin read Brian’s withdrawal. “Okay,” he whispered, collected the papers, slowly folded them. He slid to the floor, maneuvered around Brian’s footrest for the briefcase when that footrest went down. “I can get it,” Justin looked up, saw Brian eying the papers. I’m not giving up on this. “You said a rain check.”

“And I meant it.” Brian dropped onto his knees, took the papers from Justin’s hand and put them in a file pocket, shut the case. I just can’t do this now. Then he briefly kissed Justin’s lips. In First Class. With a Flight Attendant passing. He saw her glance off with a little grin, Justin’s head swivel. “She’s seen it before.”

Justin smiled relief, more over Brian’s return than the stewardess. “We’d better get back in our seats. Anymore meaning, and they WILL throw us off the plane.”

After they resettled, the Attendant came by and passed out small zippered cases.

Justin foraged through his, held up a folded toothbrush. “One less thing we’ll have to buy. There’s a razor in here, too,” he dug around, “And shaving cream.”

“Second only to kitchen cleanser. But we can always pick up what we need. I didn’t guarantee that room in Denver, so the plastic’s still good.” Brian reclined and considered the next move. “We’ll also have to rent a car and find a hotel.”

“If you ask ME, I’d say let THEM find us a hotel. THEY’RE the ones who put us on the wrong airplane. My Dad was bumped off an oversold flight once, got stuck in St. Louis and missed his meeting. He said the airline picked up the tab for everything. Including meals.”

“I doubt he was on a free ticket,” Brian reminded. “However...” he thought more seriously about Justin’s rant, smile rising, mind in motion.

Hilo Airport.

Leaving Brian on a phone at RegionAir's tiny ticket counter, Justin wandered to a nearby shop window and studied its display of shells, jade, sharks' teeth and coral trinkets - designs carved with such intricate detail. He looked at and flexed his weak right hand. If I wanted to, I could have done that easy. Before.

Business deal closing, Brian saw Justin at the shop. That look of fascination over someone's creativity, the darker realization that his own was still compromised.

A tropical dressed, lei-adorned Lady Supervisor interrupted, "Is there anything else we can do to help you?"

Brian turned back, eyed her garb. "Yeah. There IS."

Justin fought back his moment of self-consciousness and was about to sight out Brian when a flimsy ring dropped over his head. He startled, touched the ruffled white plastic and spun his head back to see Brian's smile. "Where'd you get THIS?"

"The Hawaiian Welcoming Committee For Stowaways." Brian swung an arm around Justin's shoulders and steered him to the sunny outdoors. "Our car should be here in a few minutes. And we have a room with an ocean view, compliments of Mr. Wang."

"How'd you manage THAT?"

"I called RegionAir Sales. They already knew what happened and booked us on tonight's redeye for the West Coast. But when I mentioned that they'll probably end up paying for Mr. Wang's guaranteed room -"

"Wonder who thought of THAT," Justin squeezed Brian's waist.

"- and car, I suggested that WE use it. Toward marketing research for a future campaign."

"Did you hit them up for an expense account?"

Brian stopped outside on the curb. "I had to make SOME concessions to get the extra night's stay. Denver, Hilo...what's the difference? We're already here."

"So," Justin chided, "When you said research, was that in reference to clubs, bars and au-naturel establishments?"

"If THAT'S all we plan to do, we could've stayed in Pittsburgh."

Justin smiled his satisfaction at the same time a tiny blue hatchback pulled up in front of them and a young Hawaiian Guy jumped out. "Mr. Kinney?"

“Right here,” Brian answered.

“Can I help with...” Guy looked around perplexed, “...your luggage?”

Brian eyed the size of the car. “Fortunately it’s heading back to Pittsburgh.” He ignored Guy’s befuddled stare and fished out a couple dollars tip.

Justin saw Brian hesitate before he handed it over and acknowledged Guy’s sunny “Mahalo!” with a bare nod. Like some disappointment that it wasn’t the ten or twenty he would’ve easily donated in the past without a thought. To change stream, Justin opened the passenger door and grabbed a map off the dash. “Want me to be the navigator?”

“Why not?” Brian recovered, “It’s an island. The worst we could do is end up right back here.” He smiled at the quick tongue flick before Justin slid into his seat.

A few contortions and adjustments, roof brushing his hair, Brian finally settled in the driver’s seat. “This is a first. A car we can’t fuck in.”

“It’s also the first time we ever went away together,” Justin rubbed Brian’s thigh and got an unexpected kiss, side-glanced the blank stares of a nearby Golf Couple. “I think we just freaked out two people from the Geritol set.”

“Who gives a fuck,” Brian kissed him again, softly added. “We’re not on Liberty Avenue, but we’re still gay. And nobody told them to look.” Brian started the car.

“Speaking of Liberty Avenue,” Justin wrinkled a thought, “Shouldn’t we tell somebody where we are?”

The bedroom was night dark, two men lightly snoring, phone ringing.

Ben rolled over, snapped on a lamp, muttered, “Hello,” then tapped the cordless on Michael’s rustling shoulder.

“Wha...? Oh,” Michael yawned, answered, “We’re early risers. This better be good.” Then his eyes sprang wide. “You’re fucking WHERE? Wait a minute,” he swung his legs down and sat up, scrounged his nightstand for a pad and pen. “Go ahead.”

Ben wordlessly struggled up, slowly donned his sweat pants and tee shirt while listening to Michael’s -

“Well I KNEW you had to be out of the Loft for a few days, but isn’t that a little extreme?” he braced elbows on his thighs, free hand on his forehead. “Yeah. I will. Bye.” Michael twisted to hand the phone back to Ben. “Where’re YOU going?”

“To get Brian?”

“Not unless you can bike across the Pacific,” Michael grumbled, crawled back under the covers.

“Michael, you’re not making any sense.”

“He and Justin are in Hawaii.”

“What’re they doing THERE?”

“Probably the same thing they do anywhere else.” Michael displayed the notepad, “If you’re that interested, he left his number in case of an emergency,” set it on the nightstand, relaxed into his pillow and yawned. “Ever since they got back together, nothing surprises me. Go back to sleep.” He turned on his side as Ben rejoined him, mumbled through a close-eyed smile, “They’re probably in some lush tropical paradise...”

Budget Islander wasn’t Hilo Hilton. More like Motel 6 in pastel floral fabrics. Brian set his briefcase on a mini dresser, lifted the Pay-Per-View card off a small TV and plopped it back. “Mr. Wang and Mr. Rheinholdt would love each other.” He zipped off his jacket and shirt.

“It’s not like he planned to stay here all day,” Justin reminded, unbuttoned his shirt, “And neither should WE.” He snapped on the bathroom light and stared at a mini shower stall, made a face at Brian, down to briefs and hanging his suit in a tiny closet. “Why don’t you grab a shower while I go downstairs for directions to the nearest mall?”

Brian watched Justin rebutton his shirt. “Is it that impressive?”

“It’s clean. Just don’t make any sudden moves,” Justin tossed on his way out.

Before the door shut, Brian saw Justin touch a back pocket in the classic got-my-wallet? confirmation. Brought a jab of dereliction and a snap comment. “If you have to buy something, I’ve got enough -”

Justin shot a hand against the door, held it open and smiled, “I don’t need or want to depend on you. We’ll take care of each other, okay?” And he let the door shut before Brian could answer, strode to the steps and rumbled down. You don’t have to be the only one to hold this family together. And I have faith you’ll figure that out.

While Justin explored, Brian maneuvered in the tight shower, cleansed the physical and mental strains. He stepped out, dried off, loosely fastened on a thin terry robe and

wandered to the large windows, noticed latches and zipped the sheers aside to open all three casements. A breeze washed in with the sound of crashing waves. No beach. But also no other buildings or people on the large jagged rocks. A view of freedom.

Justin stepped in, breathed relief at Brian's calmer look. "There's a little drug store in the lobby. But they didn't have your shaving cream," he opened a plastic bag, dumped the contents on the bed. A flock of brochures, bottle of mouthwash, a box. He gathered the papers, handed them to Brian. "Pick something out while you're waiting."

Brian watched Justin take the box and bottle, head for the bathroom. "THAT'S sexist. They don't have shaving cream but they stock douche."

"Not exactly," Justin wrinkled a smile. "But I just need the bottle."

As Justin disappeared into the bathroom, Brian felt a warm rush stiffen his cock. The invitation was obvious. The wait would be too fucking long. Brian flipped through the papers. Luau, Hula show - tourist shit. In tacky, common collage photos. He tossed them back onto the bed, went to the window, braced against arms on the ledge and followed the coastline as far as he could.

Justin returned in the other robe, saw Brian pensive and decided to let him move at his own pace. He crawled onto the bed, settled on his side facing away and casually opened a brochure. "So. Anything special you wanna do?" Little smirk. Purposely loaded that.

Brian turned, studied the dips and angles of Justin's body. Where the robe draped loose. Where it clung snug. He knew that body so well, yet found its hidden mystery arousing. "I thought we might just tour the coast." He shucked his own robe onto a chair, picked a tube and condom off the desk and sat on the bed. Twisted on a hip and eyed the curve of Justin's ass to the line of his slightly bent legs. Reached for the robe hem and crept it up in gathers so he could admire each pale inch.

"I'd like that," Justin also heated, pushed the brochures off the bed and eased his chest down, slid his top knee forward, arched his hips. Something sensual about the slow ride up his legs. It stopped on his hips, and his cock surged with the exciting nasty pleasure. Cover over most of him hyper-sensed bare skin. And he moaned softly from the brush of light kisses, breaths on his ass.

Brian knew this foreplay could excite Justin as well as any rim. Not that the taste, soft give under his lips, vocal answers weren't driving himself to bursting as well. The sight alone – Justin's ass framed in white and ready. "Then I thought we might drive inland..." he uncapped the lube, warmed a dab on his finger.

"Oh yeah. That sounds good," Justin inhaled at the touch of a hand exposing him.

Brian didn't do it often – actually watch the small hole. Watch it react and synch with moans as Brian drifted his finger around, around, not touching it yet. Teasing himself

with the anticipation. Until he centered his fingertip. Pressed in a couple inches, slid out. Then back. Feeling the grip and silk. He saw Justin's leg move wider, hips rise. Felt the breeze cooler on his own back, on the breaking sweat. Any more play would be too much.

Justin felt Brian's touch leave, his body shift...smiled when he heard the foil rip. Always like Brian...take it to the right point and know the right time. Then he felt Brian's hand slip into the robe collar and work it off one shoulder. "That's good. Leave it there."

"You'll overheat."

"Let ME worry about that?"

Brian hesitated, bent down and kissed the exposed shoulder. It DID look sexy. He took a moment to smooth the gathered fabric, positioned himself between Justin's legs and guided his cock tip to rest against Justin's hole. Just sit there. Until the short break in focus passed, and feeling heightened again. I want you. Need you...so...fucking...much.

Justin's breaths shortened. Cock ached for the promised push. Want to take you. Need you. Now...in me...NOW.

Before Justin could press back, Brian drove in, making him cry out. Always amazing. That first moment. That burn. Shockwaves through his system. And Brian was going slow and steady. Expanding inside him, over the spot that sent a charge through his cock stroked by folds of robe with each move.

Brian involuntarily shivered from adjustment pulses on his dick. Went almost giddy high from the sensation. Pulled out slow. To the tip. Want to feel it all again. Feel you take me, all the way up my cock again.

Justin's senses reeled from Brian's long strokes. He knew what Brian wanted. How he wanted it. And he himself could change the tempo anytime. But this was too good. Had to get even closer. He slid his hands down to his own ass and opened full access. I want to feel you all over. All the way. DO it.

On his next push, Brian felt his cock sink to the base. His balls into a steamy crease. Groin to taut skin. He ran a hand over Justin's and learned why. Leaned down, nipped and kissed Justin's shoulder, buried his lips against Justin's neck and kissed him there. Then planted his arms and geared up. Driving deep and hard. Until they shook the bed with convulsions and the walls with their voices.

Splash down. Recovery. Brian had wrapped his arms around Justin during the peak, and now they spooned tight, still connected, spent and sweaty. Brian ran his hand across Justin's warm temple. Too warm. He palmed Justin's hip and gripped the condom for clean retreat.

“You can stay,” Justin’s lips moved, little else.

Brian left anyway, had the condom tied off and pitched aside then rolled Justin face down, “Arms back,” and stripped off the robe.

“It felt good,” Justin twisted a smile at Brian.

Brian used the robe to towel off Justin’s back. “If you start fucking with your clothes on, you’ll give me a complex.”

“You’re complex enough as it is.”

Brian swatted Justin’s ass, finished wiping his own chest. “After YOU,” he nodded to the bathroom.

Justin sighed and dragged himself off the bed. “If I have to put that suit on again, I swear to god I’m burning it when we get home. The desk clerk told me there’s a shopping center up the road.”

“Good work, Tonto,” Brian quipped, answered Justin’s quizzed look with, “It’s a...partner term.” Saw Justin’s whatever nod as he stepped into the bathroom. Last thing Brian wanted was to give Justin more age ammunition.

Next to last thing he wanted was to disgrace his Armani suit at...

...a Sale rack in Thrift Mart.

Justin plowed through a shirt carousel, stole a glance at Brian, bit back a laugh when Brian held up a wild shirt with gaudy flowers and stared like it was a used diaper. “Oh, that’s definitely you.”

Brian mouthed a silent Fuck You and slapped it back on the rack.

“What about THIS?” Justin held a large gray tee shirt over his chest.

“It looks like a dress on you. Go anywhere NEAR wearing a dress and I’m history.”

“Not for me. You.”

“Doesn’t anybody in Hawaii wear black?”

“Um-hm. Like you never went to the White Party.”

“I’ll think about it,” Brian resigned, shuffled through the rack and found a smaller light blue tee, held it up and raised a brow to Justin.

“Sold,” Justin agreed, pushed another tee aside and lifted a khaki safari shirt. “Hey,” he held it up to his neck, wide grin. “We could cut the sleeves off.”

Brian eyed it with a nod; Justin hooked it over an arm.

They left the store in recycled jeans, casual shirts, no socks and plain white tennis shoes, their suits draped over their arms and dress shoes in plastic bags. Still, there was a certain freedom in the image...no concerns about a grease spot or wrinkles...or professional scrutiny.

“Where do you wanna eat?” Justin flung his suit and shoes in the trunk, rolled his eyes when Brian removed the suit and laid it flat before adding his own.

Brian slammed the trunk, surveyed the mall lot and saw a couple tractor-trailer trucks parked near a Japanese restaurant. “Truckers always know where to eat cheap and hearty. Want to check it out?”

“Something tells me that in a past life you were a scrounger.”

“Yeah,” Brian’s eyes darkened. “But that was a past life.”

Justin felt the chill, didn’t comment again until they were seated at a booth in the near-empty place. Small but rich with carved woods and mute oriental colors. A petite Asian Girl handed them one-page menus, poured tea and left. Justin cleared his throat, looked over the top of his menu. “My folks always gave me things...but I didn’t get to choose a lot of them.” Then he looked down. “That was stupid. Forget it.” Comparing privilege to lack thereof.

“Feeling obligated with no choice? I guess we’ve gone that same route.” Brian stared until Justin flickered him a smile. “Don’t ever call yourself stupid in front of me. You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

“Yeah. I’m with YOU.”

“Even smart people do dumb things.”

“If I thought you were throwing a line, I’d laugh. But I don’t think you are.”

“I’m not an easy person to live with.”

“I know.”

“I’m tense, demanding, short on explanation...”

“Go on.”

“Like to be in charge -”

“GOOD one.”

Brian paused and blinked. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Proving you can’t scare me off,” Justin blinked back and returned to his menu. “Keep going with your nasty qualities. Eventually you’ll run out and have to start using the good ones.”

Brian ran his tongue against his cheek, “I could kiss you, fuck you and smack you all at the same time.”

“See?” Justin gleamed back, “You’re getting to your talents already. I think the Szechwan noodles look good.”

Brian paused, considered, “You’re the one buying.”

Justin smiled over the top of his menu. “You can leave the tip.”

“We’ll get to that after dinner.”

By then the little Asian Waitress returned with checkbook poised and ready, hampering anything more risqué.

After dinner, dusk looming – too late to do much more than stop at the hotel. Most of the guests were out in search of grass-skirt nightlife or slack guitar concerts or luaus. Anything more exciting than the beachless coast and wave-whipped jagged rocks – the very things Brian found most attractive.

While Justin folded back the bed’s heavier covers, Brian emptied his briefcase onto a hand towel spread on the dresser. Enough fruit for a gift basket. Pretzels. Cookies. Mini liquor bottles. “Raiding the Coach galley?” Brian waved a vodka. “They don’t use these in First Class.”

“If you’re already IN First Class, they give them to you if you ask,” Justin winked, fluffed a pillow.

“Ah. Country-Club Rule Number One. Flaunt your status.”

“Something you know absolutely nothing about,” Justin ribbed, flung the pillow at Brian and caught it after Brian fired it back. Then he set it in place and moved on to emptying the overnight kits.

Closing his briefcase, Brian saw a corner of the questionnaire sticking from a file slot, slipped the folded sheets out and spread them in the case. Scanned the questions and pushed the page aside to Justin’s answers. He rolled his lips in, exhaled a breath and turned toward the windows, the muffled slosh of waves. “Think I’ll take a walk outside.”

Justin, sitting on the bed and separating needs from junk, stopped when he saw Brian’s distant eyes. “Alone?”

Brian paused before he passed, reached down and clasped Justin’s hand. No more words, they left together, down the steps to the lobby, out the back door, across a small patio slab. Three stone steps down, they crossed a strip of rocky sand to larger rocks then separated and skirted like adventurous kids toward the surf, Justin following Brian’s careful lead over sharp rises and menacing crevices until Brian stopped on a flat rock near the water-plumes’ farthest reach.

Brian gazed at dark ocean, white-capped curtains ramming and exploding over the rocks. Something soothing in the erratic rhythm of power to passive as spent waves slipped quietly away.

Justin kept a short distance until he saw Brian stoop to test a spot, sit with one knee raised, arm hung over it, other arm stiffly bracing him up, other leg stretched out long. Staring off in a thinker’s pose. So Justin stepped closer, sat on a hip and leaned on a straight arm with his hand beside Brian’s, knees folded to one side and a hand around one ankle.

“It’s a little damp,” Brian smiled, steady light breeze and salty mist mussing his hair so he had to brush it aside

“It’s okay.”

“You left a question mark on Number Six. About good things happening in the future?”

Off guard, Justin stared silent before it jelled. “I had no idea how you’d answer that.”

“And you said you understood why I act like I do sometimes. That it made you wonder if…” Brian dropped his chin and rolled his eyes up wide, an invitation to finish. “If?”

Justin cleared his throat, stared in his lap and wrung the hand around his ankle. He didn’t have tactful words then, and certainly not now. But it was Brian’s low voice that filled them in, between rounds of crashing waves.

“If I keep you around to satisfy some kind of surrogate father complex?” Brian watched Justin’s eyes meet his in a mix of affirmation and anxiety. So Brian softened even more. “Picked up a teenager because it made me feel more like BEING one?”

“I’d rate that a four,” Justin raised a weak smile, “On each.”

Brian forwent sarcasm to respect Justin’s honesty and its insight. “So what?” Brian stared unblinking. “Is there some dogma of RIGHT reasons we have to follow to be partners?”

“I’m not thinking about here and now. I’m just wondering if going forward to you...is like going backward. To a place you hated,” Justin exhaled defeat at Brian’s puzzled stare, looked away, “Because we never talk about our future. So I’m not sure I should expect one. But...I want to think there is. And I want to think it involves more than just tolerating our faults.”

Brian exhaled long to clear his thoughts. “I can’t and won’t make predictions. But I do know...that when you’re around, I think more about what we’ll do tomorrow. Is that good enough?”

Justin stared a moment, “If you think we can stretch that out for a few more years,” looked away and quickly added, “I know. It’s up to me.”

“I didn’t say that,” Brian toughened to regain Justin’s eyes, smiled when he did, “You didn’t ask me for YOUR opinion. You asked me for mine.”

Brian raised his hand, fingers spread, waved his thumb. “This one counts for two.” He moved his support hand next to Justin’s until their smallest fingers locked. Then they kissed soft and brief before Brian pulled back. “Let’s not assume that all the fucked up reasons are the only ones.”

Justin released his ankle, raised his hand to Brian’s cheek and kissed him again.

Sparked with arousal, Brian rose to a stand. “We’d better head back before it gets too dark to scale these peaks.”

Justin stood in agreement. “I’d rather not spend our first night in a trauma center in separate beds.” And he took the lead back with more carefree lighter steps than those that brought him out.

Back in their room, Brian had just set the chain lock when Justin’s shirt hit his neck and hung on his shoulder. He snatched it off, turned to see Justin stepping from dropped jeans and shorts, that come-on smile. “Ever stuff a phone booth?” Brian stripped off his shirt, pants.

Crammed into the shower. From outside, abstract moving shapes pressed flat on the frosted, dripping glass as they slithered around each other. Brian’s thigh and shoulder.

Justin's shoulder blades and ass. Two hips and thighs. Brian's chest and cock. The hazy forms of kissing and fondling, the echo of chuckles and running water.

Inside, sardined face to face and too revved to wait, they locked arms around each other and ground it out, Brian clenching Justin's thrusting cock between his thighs, Justin rolling his hips to keep Brian's cock pinned and kneaded by their working abs. Heating in their tight confines until Justin nailed his cheek to Brian, clawed his back and muffled two sharp cries against Brian's chest. Chin clamped over Justin's shoulder, Brian drove at Justin's hip before his hot burst and long groan caught them up.

They stood holding each other, rain pouring over them, until Brian blew in Justin's ear, "We could fall asleep in here and not fall over, but I vote we try the bed."

"If we can make it out of here."

A quick towel-dry later, they were side to side under a thin sheet lit by moonlight through the large window – Brian stretched on his back, one arm bent behind his head, the other tunneling under Justin's pillow so a hand cupped his shoulder – Justin with his arm across the sheet on Brian's hip, hand spread and resting on a thigh. Time difference, the lull of waves, air foreign and fresh – their eyes, thoughts drifting.

Brian gazed at Justin's half-closed eyes, chest, outline through the sheets. You're not that same twink kid. And I DID notice the looks at the Baths. If you turned it on, you would've had anyone. I taught you...fuck...everything I could.

"What are you thinking?" Justin smiled. That you're glad we hitched on the wrong plane? That we didn't get a chance to line up all the gay hot spots but you'd rather just be together?

"You really don't need me anymore."

WHAT? Justin punched Brian's leg, heard him yelp and cringe but didn't care. "You asshole," he sprang off the bed and headed to the closet, speared a look, "Go to sleep and wake up when you're sane."

Brian sat up, still rubbing. Fuck. It's the fucking TRUTH. "There's a whole world around us and you've barely SEEN it. But you SHOULD...while you're -"

"Young?" Justin stared, got Brian's silence, shook his head and snatched a couple dark items off the floor. "Like you're eighty and I'm a goddamned five-year-old."

Brian watched Justin thump to the bathroom, flick the light and swing the door partially closed. Fuck. He pressed a palm to the bridge of his nose, paused when he heard the running sink, strange splashing. Then he breathed out long and went to the door, pushed it open just short of hitting Justin. "What the fuck are you doing? It's three o'clock in the morning Pittsburgh time."

Justin cleared his throat. Loud. Kept eyes on his sink work. "I told you I love you. But since you don't get it, I must've gone about it the wrong way. So I'm hand-washing your underwear," Justin glared straight at him. "Does THAT mean anything to you?"

Brian answered quietly serious. "How can you be so sure I'm what you want?"

"Why are you so sure you're NOT?" Justin drained cloudy water, turned on the rinse, "Give me some credit for knowing my own mind," stirred the wash water, "Like that ranch deal -"

"I can't promise you that every move I make is up for discussion or approval from you. If that's your idea of partnership -"

"I don't expect that," Justin matched tone. "You always let me stand up for myself...treat me like a man. Except when it comes to sharing parts of you. Just let me know you trust me with that. Give me a chance to show I trust YOU. Maybe I have something to say worth considering. Maybe not. But whatever happens...we work it out." Justin tightly wrung the shorts, flinched and stopped to shake his cramping right hand. "Shit."

"Here," Brian edged inside, took the wet bundle, noticed another in the sink, hesitated and corner-eyed Justin.

Stepping aside to let Brian take over, Justin wrinkled, "I figured I'd do mine too, so if you STILL didn't get it, at least I'd gain SOMETHING out of this little demo."

"An honest, self-serving motivation. I'm impressed." Brian squeezed out his pair, took Justin's and did the same, drained the sink. I can't believe I'm doing this. Washing your fucking underwear. But that's how you asked...so this is my answer.

Justin watched Brian roll the items in a towel, twist hard then unroll and hang them over a towel bar. Seeing a man he doubted even Mikey was privileged to see. "I need you," Justin softened, saw Brian's eyes hold on him. "To remind me I can be more than just one kind of man. And I'm not about to throw you back for something better. I won't be that stupid again."

Brian stayed silent, hidden sore spot hit and balmed. Fucking little queen. He took and caressed Justin's right hand. "Is it better now?"

"It still gets shaky, but always comes around."

Brian shut off the light, led Justin back to bed and under the sheet. They stretched on their sides facing each other, arms and legs tangled, light kisses and eye talk, no words until Brian whispered, "Roll over."

Unwinding limbs, Justin shifted to his stomach, faced away and waited. Felt Brian's hand across his back, shoulders, into his hair. Skimming with the sound of waves.

Still on his side and watching, Brian let his hand travel over Justin. I don't want to fuck you. I want...no...I need to tell you...

Justin felt Brian's hand flow over him. Not like an erotic prelude, or sculptor admiring a work. Like one long continuous kiss. Until it settled on the small of his back, its lightness turning heavy. His eyes closed in the comfort of its presence.

When Brian heard the hushed rhythm of Justin's breaths, he settled on his back. Drifted off with the flavor of security, a mere shadow thread of doubt. And a tiny voice still trapped and muffled somewhere deep inside.

On a black sand beach. Desolate at 7 AM except for two Eastern Standard risers.

"A little more," Brian stood focusing an imaginary camera on Justin, who backed toward the ocean. "Okay. Hold it there."

Justin in rolled-up jean cuffs stood forever, patience waning, "It's just a play shot. Are you done yet?" when he was suddenly hit from behind by a cold wave that grabbed him to the knees and sucked the sand from under his bare feet so he stumbled against its receding tow. Mouth wide open in shock, he heard Brian clapping applause, saw him double with laughter and drop onto the sand. "Fuck you, Brian! You're paying for this!"

Still laughing, Brian took the tackle hit that flattened him, Justin's weight straddling his chest and a suggestive tongue flick as Justin reached back, unzipped his fly. Until Brian caught a flash movement – Justin grabbing a handful of sand. "No you – FUCK!" Brian flung Justin off and sat up cringing from coarse sand in sensitive places, stood and dropped his jeans to brush off before re-dressing.

Justin laughed so hard he wheezed, "Full Moon over Hawaii," froze in alarm when he saw Brian produce and roll a condom down three fingers, dip it in sand. "You wouldn't."

"Not right now," Brian grinned, peeled it off inside-out, packed it in its wrapper and into his pocket. "Ready to move on?"

He ended the joke by tossing it in a trashcan beside the car so Justin wouldn't have second thoughts about the right moment and would stop eyeing him like he was deranged.

Later they answered two of nature's calls by driving on an access road into a field of seven-foot sugar cane stalks. Got off, got lost on the maze of trails with Justin driving while Brian played hood ornament to see over the acres of cane tops. They were rescued by a truckload of harvesters who led them out while chattering in Hawaiian about what Brian surmised was ignorant tourists.

At 3PM, Brian stood at the front desk arranging advance checkout while Justin circled the lobby for a last look at a student art display on the lobby walls. Jabbed a little - watching Justin's interest. You deserve to be a painter in your own right. Not selling your soul to advertising. But it's just a stepping-stone. Keep your fire burning.

"Mr. Kinney?" Clerk slid a checkout slip across the counter.

"What?" Brian turned back. "Oh. Thanks." He scanned the Bill-To line, smiled at RegionAir Marketing, spoke as he signed. "What's the most exciting thing to see around here?"

"The Park just reopened. It was shut down for a week because of the eruption."

"Eruption?"

"Kilauea went for three days. Really put a dent in business. But I suppose once everyone knows the Park's open again, things'll pick up."

"Do you have a map?" Brian's eyes lit.

"Right here," Clerk smiled wide, pulled a brochure from under the counter and handed it to Brian. Happy tourists made repeat tourists. "I don't think all the roads are open yet, but you can get to the caldera."

Justin was back, curious about Brian's smile. "Find something interesting?"

"Something you'll never find in Pittsburgh."

Brian shoved the map in his pocket, swung an arm around Justin's shoulder and led him to the door. An active volcano. Imposing power. Artistic inspiration. What could be more appropriate.

Lush tropicals changed to scrubby trees further into the Park. Overcast skies made the hour seem much later. Only one car passed – on its way out.

Justin concentrated on the map. "I think we turn right here."

Brian made the turn, drove about a mile before they reached a roadblock. He stopped the car and left to investigate. "Are you coming?" he called to Justin, still seated, and watched him slowly leave the car.

“What is it?” Justin warily scanned the foot-high broad solid dark layer, puffs of steam like ghosts all around. Bite of sulfur in the air.

“Part of the lava flow,” Brian also looked around, headed for a steam hole and dropped to a knee, waved his hand near it and quickly pulled back. “It’s hot as hell and still bright orange in there. Take a look.”

“I...” Justin cleared his throat, “...think we should take another road.” And he got back into the car.

Brian’s brows knit. Not like Justin to shy away. Whatever. Brian jogged back, dropped into the driver’s seat, slammed the door, leaned on the steering wheel and watched Justin silently trace a finger on the map. “Does the sulfur bother you?”

“No, I’m okay,” Justin snapped with a sharp-edged smile, cleared his throat again. “We can turn around and try the next right.” I’m okay.

Driving on the main road, Brian noted fresh black top bordered by craggy cooled lava. “It looks like they repaved over a river of it,” he smiled, eyes moving across lakes of dark crust that in places resembled cake frosting. Seemed a little dangerous. A little thrilling. He glanced at Justin, staring out the passenger window. Thought he was awed by the view until Justin swiveled a serious eye on him.

“Do you have some death wish you haven’t told me about?”

“What the fuck does THAT mean?”

“Every road we took has been covered with lava,” Justin looked off, hand twitching, “What if it erupts again. How do we get outta here,” he rubbed the scar on his temple.

Alarmed by the display, Brian saw a fenced entrance ahead, quickly turned into the empty lot and stopped near an information stand. “Lean back and breathe slow,” he brushed a hand on Justin’s temple. “Panic attack?” Haven’t seen one of those in -

Justin flung Brian’s hand aside. “Just give me a minute, okay?”

Brian swallowed, tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, tripped the trunk lever and sailed out the door in one move.

“Brian?” Justin called, shut his eyes tight. Shitshitshit. Now HE’S pissed. Then he heard Brian climb back inside, turned to apologize and saw Brian’s hands extended toward him, one holding a bottled water, the other with a vodka mini, head tilting a question from one to the other. Made Justin exhale, smile and snatch the mini.

“Excellent choice,” Brian uncapped the water, watched Justin down half the mini and offer him the rest. “What happened?” Brian traded the water and finished the vodka.

“Got scared,” Justin sipped, leaned back. “I fucking HATE that feeling.”

“It’s a fucking volcano,” Brian leaned back, eyes on him. “I doubt the Park would be open if there was any real danger.”

“That’s not it,” Justin’s half-open eyes stared out unfocused. He kept silent for several seconds before letting out a hesitant, “You know what real fear is? It’s pointing a gun at a guy’s face...knowing you can pull the trigger...and not feel a thing,” he faded to a whisper, “That there’s a part of you that can DO that...and not feel a thing.”

Brian swallowed, tried to keep the tension from his voice. “Have you...been thinking about it?” Fuck. FUCK. What the fuck should I do.

“I’ve dreamt about it.”

“So...did you ever...” Brian glanced off. Say this fucking right. “In that dream. Did you ever do it?”

Justin bowed and shook his head, eyes to his lap, voice a whisper, “No.”

“You won’t,” Brian let a silent breath. “Not in a dream...not ever. Every man has a dark side. It doesn’t make us evil,” he added a self-conscious, “Fuck. It’s been my claim to fame for years,” felt a slap on his thigh and knew Justin was back, though his head still drooped. “After what he did to you, you have every right to be mad and make him pay. But if it ever came down to the real thing, you’re too strong to be like him.” Brian lifted Justin’s chin to meet his eyes. “You won’t.”

Justin twisted his head away, “I wasn’t sure I should tell anybody that,” rubbed both hands over his face, “I should just forget it.”

“You never forget. But you can tell him, every time he pops into your mind...I won’t waste my time thinking about you, or what I want to do to you...you’re nothing to me. I won’t let you run my life.”

Justin turned his head and saw Brian staring off in the direction of the dash, could almost see past shadows in his eyes. “It doesn’t always work, does it?”

Brian centered on Justin, bare smile, “It gets you through the moment.”

“So could having something BETTER to think about...if you had something better to think about.”

Brian took in Justin’s eyes, wider, waiting. “Yeah. I do.” Saw those eyes narrow with a smile and more life. “I’ll try it if YOU will.”

“I’ll let you know how it works.”

Brian blinked agreement then straightened up, keyed the ignition and started the car.

“What’re you doing?”

“I thought we’d go back to the hotel. We’ve got an early flight tomorrow.”

“Fuck the hotel,” Justin reached over and shut the car down. “We came all this way to see a volcano and we’re gonna SEE it.”

Justin left the car, shut the door and stood waiting.

Brian watched a second longer. Will you always have to fight that demon in your head? I’d pull that trigger FOR you...but I’m stronger than him, too. Brian slid out, locked the door, hiked toward the main trail and snatched Justin’s hand along the way.

Justin stayed firm, halting him at the end of tightroped arms. Brian looked back worried that Justin freaked again. What he saw were calm eyes above a warm smile. Then Justin moved in, stretched up and kissed him. Lightly, deeper with arms circling Brian’s waist, holding tight. Brian ran his arms around Justin’s back and leaned into the kiss, pressing Justin down off his toes so their bodies fell against each other comfortably when the kiss became a hug.

“Care for a stroll up Devastation Trail?” Brian asked the top of Justin’s head.

“You’re such a romantic,” Justin gave a cheeky a blink.

Brian rolled bland eyes. “Come on.”

They moved apart still holding hands and followed the most worn path to a flight of stone steps. Determined for better thoughts.

Kilauea Crater, post eruption. Like a drained lake with its gray crust bed. Centered on the crust, the firepit – a pyramid of jagged rocks with the hot glow of its molten heart peeking through its cracks. Above, inverted gray clouds born from heat and steam with weak flashes of heat lightning. All around, steam spewed from small vents edged in white minerals and yellow sulfur. Beauty or Hell – all in the eye of the beholder.

Resting from the long walk, Brian and Justin leaned shoulder-to-shoulder, forearms on the safety rail at the crater rim. No one else around.

“It’s a lot bigger than I thought,” Justin gazed out.

“I’ve always liked that compliment,” Brian grinned, got a hard nudge and stood up.

Justin leaned his cheek on arms crossed on the railing, looked up at Brian staring across the crater. Tall and magnificent against a turbulent sky of steel blue-gray lit with periodic flashes, placid rumbles, tint of bronze from the fire pit below, a mild breeze tousling his hair.

“This is you, Brian.” He watched Brian’s head twist toward him, eyes wide and quizzical. “Fire. Lightning...”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“...energy. Heat. Depth.” Justin turned, leaned his back and elbows on the rail, eyes glowing. And Brian’s comments wouldn’t make him stop. “I knew it the first time I saw you.” His eyes followed Brian’s slouch onto a forearm on the rail, eyes staying on him, and Justin saw he was listening. “I knew it the first time you held Gus. There was this...” Justin looked off, tried again, “...this...”

“No word for it?” Brian softly added.

Justin stared direct, “This...capacity for such great things. And nobody in my life could ever be that same way. I love that about you.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because sometimes it’s just nice to hear,” – you bonehead. He expected a one-liner, sarcastic snort, some show of disapproval. But none of that happened. Only Brian’s steady gaze. Like he was feeling the words instead of discounting them. It gave Justin the lift to go on, and he had to smile the rest. Because this was a man who didn’t volunteer certain things, but could answer if asked. “Brian...what do you like most about me?”

Brian locked onto Justin’s eyes. One, then the other...scanning, stalling. How to answer that when all that came were flashes of color. Visions of paintings and drawings. The sound of life drumming through his veins. A taste he couldn’t describe because it didn’t match anything else he knew. Or a scent unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Saying – just you – would be too trite. And saying – everything – too much like a cop out. What was left...that wouldn’t sound like a rip-off of Justin’s own words – Fuck, I wish I’d come up with that first – or an ad campaign, or military honor, or pickup line at a sleaze bar.

Justin waited, saw Brian edge toward him and knew those lips would answer. In their own way. And through the palms and fingers of his hands. And the press of hard cock to his belly. But didn’t this setting call for just a little more? When Justin felt Brian’s lips slide a damp trail across his cheek and burrow into his neck, he whispered, “We’re in Hawaii. Probably never be back here again. Surely there’s something special we could do to make it memorable.”

Brian backed off, hint of amusement, "Like what? Carve our initials in a tree?" he looked around and back, "Sorry. There aren't any trees up here."

"There're a lot of rocks," Justin raised a grin. "We could build a little rock altar like the ones along the highway. You could set the top one if you like."

Brian considered with a smirk, reached down and picked up a piece of dark lava rock. "I'll give you what you want."

"It's legend that the goddess Pele puts a curse on anyone who takes part of the island."

"You wanted something special," Brian grinned, turned and scouted a site.

"Brian," Justin shook his head and followed, saw Brian drop to one knee at a large rock then knelt beside him to investigate. He smiled as he watched Brian's crude writing take form in black on light gray. Frowned as the writing continued, grabbed Brian's wrist to interrupt.

Brian stopped and studied Justin's expression...head tilted, eyes narrowed. A silent Taylor request. All right, Brian breathed out through a smile.

Point taken, Justin radiated a return as he watched Brian finish the graffiti.

"There," Brian dropped the rock, rubbed his hand on his jeans and leaned almost nose-to-nose. "Does THAT meet with your approval?"

"Very much," Justin lightly kissed.

"Then don't make a liar out of me."

"I won't. And we can get as loud as we want. There's just us."

Brian took Justin's hand as he rose to a stand, guided him back to the rail overlooking the fire pit, broke eye contact only once when he lifted Justin's tee shirt over his head and draped the shirt on the rail.

They toed off tied tennis shoes as Justin deftly unbuttoned Brian's shirt and Brian slid the zipper down Justin's jeans. Justin watched Brian's shirt float off his shoulders to the ground while he undid the buttons trapping Brian's rigid cock, moaned once when he felt Brian's hands slide over his ass, thumbs hooked outside his waistband and pushing his jeans until they dropped to his ankles.

Brian felt Justin's hands slide up the small of his back then creep into his waistband, flow over his ass, hips and thighs until his jeans fell. They each stepped from pools of denim, hands moving over the curves and angles of their bodies. Holding the urge to grind their

cocks together. Choosing to excite the largest of human sense organs, skin to skin... letting the fever build, teasing the need.

Until the urge to kiss made them weld together and the frantic movements signaled... Now. No words. Brian drifted kisses down Justin's chest, into the mound of hair around the swollen cock as his hand searched rumpled jeans for the staples of sex.

Hands roaming the width of Brian's shoulders, filtering through the softness of his hair, Justin felt Brian's hand ride up between his thighs. Spread his legs. He closed his eyes and exhaled a hot, open-mouthed breath when that palm rode under his balls and a finger pad traced around his hole in smaller and smaller circles. Until it penetrated with smooth ease. Just enough, long enough to prep comfort without dulling the thrill of entry. All the while, soft sucks and kisses covered his balls. Brian's lips and tongue burned over his cock and he dug his fingers into Brian's shoulders.

The rip of foil. Pinch and roll and generous spread of lube. Brian braced his hands on Justin's hips, rose slowly, kissed a nipple and caressed the tight nub with his tongue. No nipping. This exploration would be gentle.

Justin framed Brian's head in both hands and coaxed him up for a kiss. Threw his arms in a tight circle around Brian's neck, heard and felt him moan into his mouth. Felt their bodies mesh and cocks meet and it was all too goddamned much to sustain. He slowly turned in Brian's arms until the heat of Brian's body slid down his back and he could feel his balls riding on Brian's hard shaft sliding between his thighs.

Brian leaned forward, pressing Justin with him until Justin gripped the shirt-covered rail and spread his other hand on Brian's quad. Brian circled an arm around Justin's hip and closed it on his cock. Then he took and led his own cock tip along a warm nest of hair and taut skin to a tiny spot of give...and pushed. And groaned when the tight ring let him through and he felt the hot walls inside. He conjured all the control he had to keep from driving full force...so good, he wanted it all at once. But it wasn't all about just his wants anymore. And this new feeling was so MUCH more.

Justin cried out through a smile, eyes closed to focus on the stretch and burn of Brian pouring into him. Slow and sexy. Hand firm and expert on his cock. Every erotic part of him touched by Brian and ready to respond. Justin pulled Brian's thigh. Pushed back until he'd taken all Brian had before their bodies wedged together.

Then they rocked each other easy. With the exquisite rhythm that came from more than just timing, practice and familiarity. More than the sensual high from E that sometimes fooled senses into feeling ultimate pleasure. The sky still rumbled as flashes of heat lightning sprinted through the clouds. The ground itself sent low vibrations from its stormy depths. But on the edge of the rim, voices echoed across the crater in a finish that dwarfed it all.

Afterwards they held each other. Finding a sort of peace on the barren rim. Brian noticed hot spots take on more intense glow and reluctantly moved his hand from Justin's bare back to the shirt on the rail.

"We'd better head back before it gets too dark." He handed Justin the shirt, stooped and grabbed his jeans.

Justin worked the shirt on, popped his head through the collar in time to see Brian round the edge of the rail and stand on the unprotected ledge. "Brian, be careful!" he rifled arms through sleeves, rushed to join him, stopped when he saw the urinal action. "You're pissing on Pele?" he groaned, "Now we're gonna die. Decades from now archeologists will find our bones under layers of lava and try to carbon date if we're related to Cro Magnon man."

"Try Homo Sapiens," Brian turned with jeans flapped open, gripped Justin's shoulder and steered them behind the rail. "Have I ever told you how captivating you are when you queen out?"

"Fuck you."

"Hey. You wanted me to tell you what I like about you."

"For some demented reason, I thought I'd get a serious answer."

Brian thought a moment, reached into his pocket, held his open palm to Justin. "Still want it?"

Justin looked from the tube and packet, up to Brian's eyes. No smile. Yeah. I do. His fingers raked Brian's palm as they closed around the offer. And he raised his chin when Brian stepped close. Closed his eyes and felt Brian's tongue on his mouth. Opened to let him in, felt Brian's hand cup his balls, rub his cock and his sigh was sealed in their lips.

Brian felt the heat of Justin's hands on his hips, turning him to the rail. Reformatted senses to expect a different kind of pleasure. Like those self-indulgent times he wanted a change, or to sample another top's technique? No. It was different with Justin. I won't take the driver's seat. Or get so lost I forget you're there.

Justin removed his shirt, dropped it beside them, tossed the condom and lube on it. Then kissed a trail down Brian's back, hooked the jeans and slid them down to stay on course. Across and over the swell of Brian's ass, to the border of his thighs, back up to the height of the crease. Gently pressed Brian's back until he saw Brian lean on outstretched arms against the rail, lift one foot from his jeans and take a wider stance.

Brian wet his lips, dry with breaths from Justin's tease. His cock was angled hard and wanting throat or ass or fucking INTO something. Then he heard the foil rip, gasped at the fingertips under the base of his balls...drifting back and scouting, finding his hole.

Circling until he almost shouted – fucking put it IN already. It was then that Justin's cock drove in with perfect timing. Slow and steady.

Justin hissed against Brian's back and kissed it when their bodies came together. He was inside hot, tight tremors. Had to start his motion. Dropped his arms low around Brian and wrapped both hands on Brian's cock. Gripped and pulled it with the feeling on his own cock. Knowing what worked best for Brian and adding that for him. For both of them.

Fever building from the clamping, jerking on his dick timed to the push and pull inside, Brian swung one hand back onto Justin's ass. To ride with the waves of one who gave cock like he took it – not with detached piston action, but with heart-driven grace. He felt Justin's hand grab his and pull it further back. Knew he needed more. Slid his hand down Justin's crack and easily pushed a finger into a hole still slick.

Justin panted through a smile against the sweat on Brian's back, resumed his two-hand stretch and pull on Brian's shaft. Hips gaining force. Going at Brian's trigger. Hitting the edge, driving harder – cock clenched with each forward thrust, ass reamed each retreat.

Urgent moans, balls tightening – burn so hot, the need to shoot – to fucking let go. Let GO. Their bodies mashed together as Justin rammed a last thrust, two of Brian's fingers hooked and pulling up his hole. And he came loud, arching back, face to the sky.

Brian shouted, pulsing cum past the stricture of Justin's hold. Quads going slightly numb, he dropped against both forearms on the rail, head drooped and vaguely aware of Justin's slipping free, limp weight on his back, arms riding up his chest. The pounding in his veins calmed and he stared at the fire pit. And still couldn't think of the right words.

When they returned to their room, Justin flopped back on the bed and pulled Brian on top of him. "I had a great time."

"So did I. More than once," Brian kissed him, backed off just to see Justin's glow then kissed him and pulled up again.

Justin ran his arms up Brian's shoulders to haul in a third, longer contact, but Brian looked past him and lifted away. "What?" Justin turned his head to follow.

"We have a phone message," Brian grabbed the receiver, touched a button beside a blinking red light. "I left Mikey our number in case of an emergency."

Justin rolled to Brian's side, sat up and watched Brian frown as he listened. Waited until Brian hung up. "Did something happen?"

“That was the front desk,” Brian chopped, hurried to his briefcase and shuffled for their tickets. “Our flight cancelled and he wanted to know if we plan to stay another night.”

“So we’ll take the NEXT one,” Justin shrugged, watched Brian check a timetable, glance at the nightstand digital clock.

“We can’t lose a day and still make the Microburst presentation,” Brian sped out of his shirt, dropped his jeans. “Get dressed. Next flight leaves in two hours.”

“Two hours?” Justin removed his shirt in slow motion. No, not yet. Not now.

Brian gathered his clothes, gave Justin’s forehead a quick kiss. “You’ll have to move faster than THAT.”

Justin cleared his throat, stepped up gear and watched Brian toss his clothes and shoes in the trash. “Aren’t we taking those?” he asked, eyes tracking Brian to the closet.

Brian flung their suits on the bed, rifled into underwear, “What for? They served their purpose and it’ll be less to carry.” He saw Justin hesitate before dropping his own outfit into the trash. Fuck. Means something. Not sure what the fuck it IS, but... “Maybe just the shirts. We can put them in that,” Brian nodded to the plastic shoe bag on the dresser.

“Okay,” Justin beamed and pulled the shirts from the trash. Then he dressed in a flash, gathered the bathroom items into the bag and answered Brian’s stare with, “We can’t take a shower but we’ll have eight hours to shave.”

“You don’t like the rugged beach bum look?” Brian rubbed his five o’clock.

“Only on a beach bum. Can I put this in your case?” Justin held out the white lei. “So it doesn’t get crushed.”

Brian opened his case, let Justin drop the lei inside, shut it and took a last look out the window. So dark he could only hear the waves, see brief glimmers of window lights on the breakers. Felt Justin touch his arm, heard his guarded question.

“When we leave, do we leave it all behind? I mean...it was like we were just getting started...”

“And I’ll forget about it when we get back to the boys, bars and deadlines?” Brian watched Justin’s silent blink. “Didn’t I tell you once you can never go back? Neither will I.”

They kissed then left to leave the island...each taking the best part with him – the other.

At Hilo Airport...

Flight already boarded, gate room empty, Brian stood at the gate counter and accepted two passes from a stone-faced Lady Agent while Justin pleaded one last time.

“Are you sure there’s no way we can sit together?”

She answered with a dead stare, “We’re full because of the cancellation and you have the last two seats. Now if you would’ve gotten here EARLIER -”

“Thank you,” Brian cut in, hooked Justin’s arm and ignored his drilling look. One more thought. “This flight IS going to Chicago, right?”

“Yes, Mr. Kinney,” she hissed through a smile. “Now you’d better hurry. We’re about to close the doors.”

Justin muttered, “I don’t think she likes us,” as they walked down the jet bridge.

“We’re unbooked standby suits with PM S – that’s Afternoon Stubble -” to Justin’s quirky look, “- and natural musk, who showed up right at departure demanding certain seats and questioning if she knows where this flight goes. Since that fits a lot of traveling execs, I’ll guess it’s past her lunch time.”

Brian let Justin enter first then followed him into...

...the scourge of all men over 5’6”. Economy Class.

Brian reclined and tried dozing despite his knees against the seat in front, a six-year-old boy’s energy on one side and the bickering of a young hetero couple on the other. Fifteen rows back, Justin contorted to sketch on a legal pad while wedged between two large men whose meaty arms and spread knees claimed both armrests and half of his legroom.

There were moments when they met at the back lavs to escape their confines, stretch out and stand close. But little else with other company always in line with them.

By noon they were back in the bustle of O’Hare and dragging to their 1:30 PM connection two buildings away.

“At least we’re sitting together,” Justin trudged wearily. “I just want to get home, grab a shower and sleep flat.”

“Next time we go away, let’s make it Scranton. Or Latrobe.”

Justin did a double take, expecting the tongue-cheek thing. But Brian's eyes were steady, smile sincere. "Next time," Justin confirmed.

At the Turner Ranch...

Scott sat at his computer and analyzed a wiring schematic. The lights blinked, his power backup unit beeped. In the second it took to look around, all systems recovered. Back to work. Then another brief power failure. WHAT the FUCK. Scott shut down his computer. When the lights blinked again, Scott went to his office window, squinted at a distant electric pole down the drive, snatched field glasses off a credenza and focused on the pole top. The magnified view showed a large, swaying branch wishboned over the main line near the transformer.

He grabbed his phone, pressed three numbers, stalled and hung up. Walked to his stairway display case, smiled at three trophies on the low shelf – Valley Pole Cat Tournament – each with an engraved plate "First Place – Scott Turner"...for three consecutive years. I'm STILL the fucking best there is.

He strode to his hall closet, scanned an array of work gear, dug out a set of leather leg braces fit with thick steel spikes. Hard hat. Goggles. A pair of heavy yellow gloves. A sturdy wide utility belt. Would only take a few minutes. Piece of cake.

Final descent toward Pittsburgh. Brian awoke from a sudden mach-one drop in altitude and Justin's grip on his arm, the rev of engines and shudder of recovery lift. He looked at Justin's eyes, wide as the Bear's beside him white-knuckling the armrest. Another jolt made a toddler whimper, an older girl ask, "Mom? Are the wings supposed to bend that way?"

Speakers tinned with the Captain's drab routine, "Uh...Folks, we...uh...we're about sixty miles west of Pittsburgh and we've been advised that due to some strong winds in the area, we'll -" another sharp dip "- we'll...uh...things may get a little bumpy. So relax...keep your seatbelts fastened. Flight Attendants, take your seats."

Justin whispered to Brian, "I thought they only took their seats for takeoffs and landings."

"If it was that bad, we'd be landing somewhere else," Brian assured, buckled his seatbelt.

Scott snapped his utility belt around the top of the pole and leaned suspended by its support and deep-set climber spikes until his hand reached the branch. After a few awkward attempts, he dislodged and let it fall, heard the drone of an airplane, spied its

landing lights and tracked its roaring progress overhead before he released his belt and started down. Flying fucking low today.

On final approach, the plane jostled so much, a Flight Attendant had to grab seatbacks as she made a last belt check up the aisle, swayed and bumped back to her seat.

-Brian and Justin locked hands.

-Scott's hands gripped the pole.

-Seconds from landing, the plane caught a gust, dipped right, shook and rattled.

-Halfway down, Scott jammed his right spike solid, threw all his weight onto it to reset the left, felt a give. A twelve-inch strip slivered out from under his spike so fast, his own falling weight ripped his hold away.

-Wing flaps full out and bucking on the wind, the plane dropped fast and hit the runway hard, blowing a back tire and churning black strips in the engine wake.

"Welcome to Pittsburgh," a Flight Attendant smiled while wiping a wild lock from her eyes and huffing breaths between words, "We ask that you please remain in your seats and keep your seatbelts fastened until we're stopped at the gate." Only the crew knew about the tire as the plane rolled along fine on what was left.

On the ground beside the pole, nothing moved but thoughts as Scott stared up in pain, shock and denial

The Loft door slid open and Justin shuffled in, left his suitcase in the foyer and stripped a trail of clothing across the living room. "Never thought I'd be so glad to see this place."

Behind him, Brian shut the door, eyed the pieces. Fuck it. I'll sweep it up later. He removed his own jacket and draped it over his suitcase, yanked off his tie and unbuttoned his shirt as he followed Justin up the bedroom steps.

Justin flicked on the bathroom light, walked in and stared. A glass block wall instead of a linen closet? When he checked the shower, the fixtures were moved to the left. On the right, a deep built-in tub took up half the stall and all the closet space. Justin lit a smile, shook his head and stepped out to find Brian shirtless and leaning on the doorframe. As exhausted as excited, Justin opted to not freak like an idiot.

"Is THIS why you planned the trip?"

“It was really a well thought-out process.”

“Of course.”

“If we DIDN’T leave, I’d be crass and irritable about men tearing up the Loft in a nonsexual way, we’d argue because you’d feel responsible and insist we stop the project, then our sex life would be shot to shit, not to mention showering at Ben and Mikey’s given your great relationship with Hunter. Should I go on?”

“You wanted it to be a surprise.”

“Well?”

“It’s alright.”

“HOW alright?”

Justin moved against Brian, grabbed his shoulders and backed him into the bedroom, flopped him on the bed, settled onto him and kissed a short one. “It’s incredibly well thought-out.”

“It’s also not the only reason I planned the trip,” Brian scanned Justin’s eyes to clarify the translation.

“I figured that,” Justin kissed him again. “Wanna take it for a test drive?”

“I’m still a shower man. But I’ll wash your back,” Brian ran his hands across Justin’s back then rolled him under. “AFTER I call Mikey and let him know we’re here or he’ll see the lights on and call the cops.”

Brian stood up, pulled Justin’s raised arms to boost HIM, snatched the cordless, keyed a number and watched Justin slip off his shorts in the bathroom, disappear into the shower stall. Brian almost dropped the phone when “I LOVE IT!” burst and echoed in the room.

Outside the Comic Shop, hair whipping in a wind gust, two Punk teens sharing a jay stopped at the window. Punk One coughed smoke, “Think the new X-Men’s out yet?” and handed off.

Punk Two dragged deep, husked out smoke, “Dunno. Come on,” and quick-tamped the roach on the glass, sparks flaring in the wind.

Inside, Michael held the phone in one hand, smiled at the Rage Vol.One. Issue One in his other. “Brian...good to hear you’re back,” he checked his watch, “Hey. Wanna hook up at Woody’s tonight? Is seven too late? Good. See ya there.” He hung up, unlocked the

counter display case, glanced at the jingling door. “Hey guys? We close in five minutes,” he hinted, got the Punks’ giggly nods as they headed to the New Releases rack.

The bells rang again. A Tall Police Officer and his Stout Partner with all-business faces.

Seeing them, Punk Two slipped the roach into a racked X-Men and nudged wide-eyed One. “We’re outta here.”

Michael set Rage on a clear plastic protector and rounded the counter to meet the Officers. “Help you with anything?” What the fuck do THEY want.

Tall started, “You know you got boxes piled outside your dumpster and they’re blowing all over the alley?”

They swiveled to the ringing door, ignored the Punks’ dash out before Tall finished, “You might wanna get that cleaned up or we’ll have to cite you.”

“It only happens when the new stock comes in, and I break them up after closing,” Michael checked his watch, “Which is right about now,” he smiled his congenial best, one eye on Stout at the New Releases and reaching for an X-Men.

“See that you do that,” Tall flat-toned, halted Stout’s hand with, “Let’s go,” then to Michael, “We’ll check back later,” as both Officers headed out.

Michael followed, stood watching at the door, plastic smile fading after they drove off. How long did you Stockwell sympathizers have to case my place to find something wrong. He flipped the CLOSED sign, turned off the lights and hustled to the rear door.

Brian saw a card envelope addressed “Kinney” standing beside the phone charger, picked it up. He stripped it open, pulled out the card and caught an extra folded paper before it fell to the floor. An invoice for Liberty Contractors stamped Paid in Full.

Brian viewed the card. A computer graphic of two drunken doves with wings around each other and holding champagne glasses. The inside was blank except for precise handprint: To the happy couple. Tub’s on me – and signed with a flamboyant “ST”. PS. If (crossed out) When he gets bored, give me a call.

I’d make you take this back, Brian smiled, but it’d be easier to cap a volcano.

In the bathroom and lazing neck deep in tub water, Justin smiled at Brian’s naked lines fractured through the glass block and marveled at his sinewy movement into the shower.

“Don’t fall asleep in there,” Brian started the water hissing. “I’d hate to tell your Mommy you drowned while I had my back turned a few minutes.”

Justin sat up, leaned crossed arms on the edge and watched Brian suds his hair, soap his body in perfunctory but erotic moves. “So how much did this set us back?”

“It’s not polite to ask the cost of a gift,” Brian rinsed and shagged his hair. “Scott took care of it.”

“He bought us this?”

Brian paused and smiled without words. Us? He knows I’m a shower man. And it’s just like Scott to give an expensive gift. Along with the price tag. And a warning he’s waiting in the wings. Dream on, Scott. Brian cut the water reached for a towel and ruffed it over his hair. Justin’s call stopped him from stepping out.

“Hey. Forget something?”

Brian took a second. “You saved me your back?”

“Ever since we got back together,” Justin blinked.

Brian wrapped the towel around his waist, sat on the mat, grabbed and dampened a washcloth then worked a soap bar into it. Stared at Justin’s bright eyes and kissed him.

“That was a fast shower,” Justin leaned his chin on his hands, closed his eyes as Brian flowed the soapy cloth over his shoulders.

“I’m meeting Mikey at Woody’s in an hour,” Brian circled the cloth like he was smoothing fine silk. “You’re welcomed to join us.”

“No,” Justin wrinkled his nose. “You two will have to play without me tonight.” He felt Brian’s chest against his head, the cloth moving below water and over his ass, between his thighs. “Keep THAT up and I’ll make sure you’re late.”

“I think I’ll like this tub,” Brian kissed Justin’s ear, moved the cloth up to rinse. Any more washing and his stirring cock WOULD forget time.

Woody’s at seven had only a few patrons in quiet conversation, 80’s music.

Beating the heat in a sleeveless vest and jeans, Brian saw Michael’s back at the bar, crept up and whispered “Aloha” in his ear.

“Brian!” Michael spun as Brian took the stool beside him. “When you told me you were in Hawaii, I thought you were fucking around.”

“I WAS,” Brian grinned.

“Yeah. Pictures don’t lie,” Michael smirked, took a folded sheet from his pocket, opened and handed it over. “One of Ben’s students was on vacation, saw this and couldn’t resist using it for the cover page of his Gay Culture assignment. It was in Ben’s email this afternoon.”

Brian silently chuckled at the digital 8x10 gray rock with Justin + Brian Made Love Here - in black lava stone. “You mean there’s another Justin and Brian on the planet?”

“That crooked M looks suspiciously like it used to be an F. Vintage Kinney slightly Taylored?” Michael narrowed-eyed his smile, held up a hand to halt Brian’s return. “Keep it. AND the bullshit.” It’s ME you’re talking to.

Brian rolled his lips in a moment then leaned over and kissed Michael’s. “Thanks for the memories.” He folded the sheet and slid it into his back pocket, lifted Michael’s beer bottle to get the Bartender’s attention and held up two fingers.

“So how the fuck did you end up in Hawaii?” Michael asked over the 80’s music and the wail of a siren outside.

At the Loft, TV playing low just for noise, Justin added their Thrift Mart shirts to a cleaner bag with a black tee and white tee, hung it at the remote end of closet and spread the array of suits back into place. Then he opened his bottom drawer, removed the lid from a shoebox, took out the unused Vermont ticket. Smiling wide, he ripped it up, trashed the pieces and replaced it with the Denver stubs.

Close sirens and a blaring horn made him bolt to the window and look out, but he didn’t see any action so he turned back and lifted the white lei from his bare desktop. A souvenir for a friend. He pulled his cell, hit a key – and got a busy signal. “Come on, Daph,” he grumbled out loud, shut the phone. “Well I KNOW you read your email.”

Justin wandered to Brian’s desk, sat down and plugged in Brian’s laptop. Fired it up, censored to the Browser icon beside a document icon titled LegalW1. Curious, he clicked on the page – we’re partners...it’s allowed – and up popped a Will and Testament.

He read only the first page, downed the system and slapped it shut, sank back in the chair and closed his eyes over a torrent of thoughts. The renovation. The trip together. Now a Will. Something’s wrong. He’s not telling me, but something’s wrong.

A little apprehensive, a little angry, Justin hustled to the closet, pulled out cargo pants and a tee shirt good enough for...

Woody’s.

Ben burst wide-eyed and panting through the front doorway, saw Michael and ran up shouting, “Michael! The Shop’s on fire!”

“WHAT?” Michael spun and jumped up.

“Come on! We’ve gotta go!” Ben grabbed Michael’s arm and towed fast.

Brian sprinted after them, past mumbles of “Fire?” “Where? WHAT shop?” as the Bartender surfed TV channels for any update.

At the Comic Shop in summer’s late daylight, flashing patrol car and fire truck barricades already blocked that section of Liberty. Officers held gawkers at bay. A cameraman’s lens scouting the scene past an Anchorwoman’s, “...the fire broke out shortly after six...” played on a small TV screen inside an OnTheSpot News van and...

Rheinholdt’s living room TV.

...in the predominantly gay area of Liberty Avenue. Fortunately no one was inside at the time. Firefighters have yet to determine the cause of the blaze, but it’s believed to have started in a storage area. Damage estimates won’t be known until the extent of damage to the Comic Shop and a second-floor Advertising firm are fully investigated...

Seated on the couch with his Martha Stewart wife and finishing an ice cream dessert, Rheinholdt stopped mid-bite when the screen filled with the Comic Shop second-floor window and painted Lightwave logo.

“Isn’t that the new division you’ve been working on?” she asked.

Rheinholdt’s only response was the sharp clink of his spoon dropping into his dish.

On Liberty, Michael, Ben and Brian slalomed through bodies toward the Shop, saw flames and dark smoke licking from the shattered front windows, Firemen aiming a high-power stream inside.

A Fireman grabbed Michael by the arms. “Hey. HEY! You can’t go IN there!”

“But I’m the owner!” Michael ripped free only to have the Fireman step in front of him.

Ben clamped onto Michael’s arm, “He’s right,” hugged him tightly from behind and they both stood helpless, shocked and bewildered, Brian beside them and lost for what to do.

Seeing the chaos near the Shop, Justin plowed through crowd traffic until he recognized the gang. “Brian!” he shouted, saw Brian spin a look and ran up to him, froze stunned when he saw the Shop. “Oh god,” he gaped, felt Brian’s arms around him and in his foggy state, clung loose, eyes on the blackened hole left by the dying flames.

By morning, investigators, police and fire crew gone, the blocked-off Comic Shop was just a curiosity for passers-by.

Not so for Michael inside behind the counter, eyes damp and heart skewered by blackened cone and ash that once housed the Popular section, comics strewn soggy and wrinkling in water meant to save them. Michael viewed his collection, damp and littered with glass from the shattered top. In his hands – Rage, Issue One, soaked and mangled.

Justin quietly entered through the front door, saw Michael brush an eye. “Hey,” he said with a somber look around as he slowly rounded the counter. “Brian would’ve been here, too, but WaveLight called him for an urgent meeting.”

“Ben and Mom are on their way,” Michael looked toward the stairs. “It still smells real smoky up there but everything else looked okay.”

“Do they have any idea how it happened?”

“They’re looking for two kids who came in right before we closed,” Michael weakly managed. “And they’re checking to see if Scott might’ve stopped by last night.”

Justin struggled to find something...ANYTHING to say. “The insurance should cover most of this,” he looked around and sank inside, watching Michael’s eyes glaze at Rage in his hand.

“Most of it,” was all he said, set the copy on the missing counter and watched it plop onto the others.

It didn’t come natural for two rivals for one man – to hug and truly mean it. But it happened anyway, between two artists...partners of a different sense...mourning the loss of an irreplaceable part of one man’s lifelong passion...

Upstairs in the Lightwave office, Michael struggled to open a window, was about to whack it with a hand when Justin’s “Hey, Michael,” made him turn.

“I thought you had a presentation.”

“This afternoon,” Justin moved closer, set a large brown envelope on his desk, “Any word on how it started yet?” pushed on one side of the casement while Michael budged the other.

“They traced the origin to the racks where the kids were, and they found the kids,” he grunted a push; Justin pressed; the window swung open. “Thanks,” Michael brushed off his hands. “I didn’t think Brian was too keen on this place BEFORE. And now -”

“I’m not sure WHAT Brian’s thinking anymore,” Justin sat on his desk, festering concern hitting surface. “He made out a Will. Like he may not be around long.”

When initial shock gave way to what he knew about Brian, Michael pondered how distant Brian suddenly seemed. How far he was willing to go - “To YOU?”

“Yeah,” Justin blew it off, “But he doesn’t owe me anything. You have to tell me if you know,” he stared solid, “Is he in some kind of serious trouble?”

“You’re the genius and you haven’t figured it out?” Michael’s eyes narrowed, “He just told you he’s planning you for the long haul...and longer.”

Justin stared, recalling Brian’s words from a new perspective without conventional screens, without the anxiety they generated. Fuck. “I...fuck,” Justin ran a hand through his hair.

“Don’t thank me,” Michael moved to the next window, “It took me all your lifetime to guess him right even ten percent of the time.” He glanced out the window, saw two Gray Suits with a briefcases duck under barrier tape and head for the door. “Then again, that’s the least of my worries. Looks like the Inspector and a claims adjustor twelve-o’clock high and closing.” He started for the stairway but Justin stood and intercepted.

“Michael?” he held out the envelope. “Here.”

Michael quizzed brows, took the offer and pulled out Rage Volume One, brushed his fingers over it and swallowed.

Justin shrugged, “I know it’s the SECOND one out of the box, but -”

“For inside information on Brian?” Michael looked skeptical.

“No!” Justin blasted, calmed. Why WOULD you think I’d give you anything. “No. It was the main reason I stopped back...because I thought YOU should have it.”

Seeing Justin’s sincerity, Michael tried to return it but Justin shook a no. “I can’t take this. It’s just as important to you.” Why would you give this to ME.

“It was my lucky break,” Justin smiled, “But the dream was always YOURS. Keep it, or I’ll leave it somewhere in the racks and you’ll go crazy tearing them apart to find it.”

“How to drive Mikey insane,” Michael snorted through a smile. “So Brian’s telling you all my secrets, too.”

“No,” Justin assured, “He keeps a lock on a lot of stuff. But I guess if he really wants me to know something, I’ll know.”

Michael re-enveloped Rage, lightly rapped it on Justin’s arm with. “Thanks.” If Brian ever got one lucky break in his fucked up life, I never guessed it would be you. Or that I’d ever find myself glad about it, sometimes despite myself.

Justin watched him turn and hurry down the stairs. You don’t have to downplay yourself to me. I know what you and Brian have is a special connection I don’t. But I’m past being threatened by you, Michael. And because you’ll always be important to HIM, I can care about you...more than I thought I ever could.

Justin took a last look out the open window then left through the rear fire door.

In WaveLight’s CEO office, on opposite sides of the desk, Rheinholdt and Brian stood like thunderheads ready to arc lightning.

“So what are you saying, Klaus?”

“If Bernie King hadn’t had the quick presence of mind -”

Brian grinned aside, “He was probably planning it for months.”

“- to notify Microburst that Lightwave’s location was only temporary, they might not have rescheduled the presentation.”

“So he LIED to them?”

“No,” Rheinholdt gruffly stated, “Bernie submitted a proposal concerning Lightwave and I’m convinced it’s the direction I need to go. To keep the image upscale, the way it was intended, not above a comic book shop.”

“Did I miss that meeting?” Brian grit through a smile.

Rheinholdt continued like a speaker ignoring unruly students in an auditorium. “Effective next Monday, Lightwave will operate from Bernie King’s office.”

“I’m sure we could all share one desk comfortably.”

“Also effective Monday, I’m promoting Bernie to Manager of Lightwave.”

Brian blinked down, recovered, “Does that make me Vice-President?” knowing what was coming.

“Brian,” Rheinholdt leaned on stiff arms, square tone, “Your ideas are clever and successful, but always on the edge of risk. You’re a maverick. Not a team player. That’s not the way I run this Company. So I’m giving you the option to resign.”

“Option? As opposed to firing me?” Brian stayed cool, “I’m afraid you’ll just have to fire me and go through the expensive legal process of a wrongful discharge lawsuit,” he watched Rheinholdt’s jaw tense, “Or maybe you would consider a THIRD option.”

Rheinholdt stood straight up. Suspicious but ready to listen.

The Loft was empty when Brian drifted inside. He expected it. Justin had work to finish. He himself had to start all over again. With a grim face, heavy sigh and equally heavy steps up to the bedroom, he stripped off his tie, jacket, went to the closet to hang it and noticed Justin’s open bottom drawer.

He sat on the bed, kicked off his shoes and studied Justin’s topless shoebox. Locking sandwich bags lined like files. He lifted out a plastic bag with a stapled post note: Vic’s Glass. Glass? he shook the bag of pulverized crystals. Another bag marked: Bird of Paradise contained pieces of flat, dried flower.

Justin breezed in and ran up the stairs so fast, he got Brian’s startled eyes. “Brian! What’re you DOING here?” he hurried to the closet for a sport jacket. “You’re supposed to be at WaveLight for the presentation.” He abruptly stopped when he saw the bag in Brian’s hand, felt a little invaded, a little defensive, “That’s mine.”

Brian replaced the packet. “I wasn’t looking. It was open.”

“Yeah, well...” Justin toed the drawer shut, “I took something out...forgot to close it.” Then he went back to the closet, mumbled, “I suppose you’ll have some crack about a Lezzy fetish.”

“What a great idea!” Brian stood and closed on Justin, set his hands on Justin’s hips. “Then YOU could knock my shell bracelet, and we could solve it all by giving up anything of personal value.”

Justin stopped, exhaled a breath, slowly turned. “You don’t think it’s silly sentimental?”

“It’s not exactly MY speed, but...I think it’s...sweet.” Did I dodge that fucking bullet?

“Sweet?” Justin parked a hand on his hip, “It HAS a purpose. I was thinking of doing a painting for us. ABOUT us,” then looked off, faltering at the thought Brian would find it ridiculous. “I was gonna mix the pieces with the paint. That way...” he turned back to the closet, “Forget it.”

Brian grabbed Justin’s shoulders and bent toward his ear. “I’m an expert at stirring up shit. Just let me know when you want to start.”

Justin nuzzled his head against Brian’s cheek, had to smile. You still manage to amaze me. “It’s a deal, Mixmaster. Now if we don’t get moving, we’ll be late.”

Brian’s hold went stiff, eyes to nowhere in the closet. “Microburst cancelled.”

“What?” Justin spun around. “When did THAT happen?”

“I guess our fiery logo on the evening news didn’t make a good impression,” Brian’s forced smile didn’t stop Justin’s sunken stare. “Rheinholdt decided to move Lightwave to Bernie King’s office and...appoint him the new manager.”

“He can’t DO that,” Justin fired.

“He CAN, and effective Monday, it’s done. I had the option to resign or be fired -”

“Fucking ASSHOLE! After all you did -” Justin passed Brian and sat hard on the bed.

“- so I appealed to his dollar sense,” Brian joined him. “I bought out my contract. That way, I can still work in Pittsburgh,” he hung an arm around Justin’s shoulders and rubbed his arm.

“How much did it cost?”

Brian looked off with a nonchalant shrug, “The bonus cuts from all the accounts, plus salary still due...and a signed agreement not to steal any of the clients I brought in,” Brian snorted, “Which means shit because after Bernie King gets through with them, they’ll be begging me to take them back.”

“All your bonus cuts and salary?” Justin’s jaw dropped, “That means you’re right back where -”

“It means a new starting point,” Brian raised a smile, “But you’ll be all right. Rheinholdt likes your work, and you won’t let Ruder fuck with you.” Brian kissed Justin’s lips, got little response. “Despite its blissful beginnings, the divorce was inevitable. It’s time to move on.”

Justin did an emphatic nod. “Only YOU could turn getting fired into a controlled philosophical experience,” Justin eyed him. “Rheinholdt threw a hissy and you fucking GAVE UP!” he bolted off the bed, headed for the kitchen.

Brian winced from the smart, trailed after and stood in the doorway, freezing Justin with, “Going out on top and rolling over are two different things. Now what’s the REAL issue?” he stepped down slowly, “Do you think I sold out on you? That I should have conjured some last minute miracle to make it work?” met Justin’s flat stare and edged closer, “Like I should have done after Hobbs got off?”

Direct hit, Justin jet a breath, looked down and rubbed his temple. “There’s nothing you could’ve done,” thin and shaky despite resolve to sound convinced. Shit. “Yeah. I AM mad about that,” he forcefully admitted, “Because I know how you do things...for people you care about...and I didn’t see that happen...when it came to ME.”

Brian looked off pained, raised and flopped an arm at his side. “I...never held you to the same standard as other people. The truth is, I filed it away as one of life’s fucked up lessons...that dragging it out and keeping it fresh would only stop you from getting past it.” He looked off and snorted, “So much for back room psychology,” stepped close and cupped Justin’s shoulders with stretched-out hands. “I can’t go back. And even if I could, I don’t know if I would have done things any differently.” He closed in, voice fading, “But here and now...all I can say is...if I didn’t give you what you needed at the time,” he circled his arms around Justin, pulled him close and whispered into his ear, “I’m sorry.”

Justin closed his eyes, ran his hands up Brian’s back and hugged. “You told me sorry’s bullshit.”

“Not THIS time,” Brian kissed Justin’s neck, “As for Lightwave -”

“I told you in Hilo – I don’t expect you to talk to me about every decision you have to make for yourself...as long as you let me know what’s going on, so I can make my OWN decision on how to handle it,” wrinkled his nose to curb the angst, “Even if it means queening out occasionally.”

Brian framed Justin’s face in his hands, studied his eyes - You ARE a standard of your own – dipped his head for a kiss.

The doorbell razzed. Halting them an inch apart.

“Want me to get that?” Justin breathed out.

Brian changed the kiss to a light peck and headed for the door com, “It can’t be a bill collector. News of my status hasn’t hit the streets yet,” pressed the button. “Door’s broken. If you’re nine or over -”

“Is that years or inches?” Michael’s voice tinned back.

“Or less...”

“Fuck you.”

“...come on up.”

“What’s Michael doing here?” Justin questioned on his way to the kitchen.

“Soliciting a cleaning crew,” Brian yanked open the door, saw Michael trudge up the stairs and looking like Ben left him. “YOU look like shit,” Brian straight-faced.

“You would, TOO if your business almost burned down, then you had to press charges against two scared, dumb kids,” Michael shook his head, walked right past Brian and into the Loft.

“Hey,” Justin yelled from the kitchen, “Want some coffee?” fished an extra cup from a cabinet and poured.

“I’m not staying long,” Michael shook his head leaned against the counter. “It’s just...well...since you knew each other...” his eyes followed Brian behind the counter toward Justin, “I thought it’d be better if I stopped out instead of calling.”

“Knew WHO?” Brian dumped sugar into his cup and stirred.

“The Fire Inspector went out to Turner’s ranch to question him yesterday, but he never got the chance. Scott Turner’s dead.”

“What?” Justin clinked his cup down, coffee spilling.

Brian dropped the spoon into his cup, pinched the bridge of his nose like he had an instant headache. *I might as well put a gun to my head.* Fucking back room psychology. Why the FUCK didn’t I LISTEN. “How.”

“He didn’t show up for work this morning, so a couple of his crew went out to his place and found him.” Michael saw Brian’s face drain, went on, “From what they saw, he must’ve been up working on an electric pole and fell. He was always a stickler for not working alone and his men couldn’t figure out why he got careless.”

“Must’ve been something on his mind,” Brian numbly answered.

“Anyway...he hit a branch. Broke off...pierced his heart. They said he died instantly.”

“Eleven seconds,” Justin whispered, eyes glazing.

“What?” Michael stared.

Justin cleared his throat. “Something I heard in the hospital,” he feebly shrugged. “The brain has its own reserve blood supply...so even after the heart stops...the brain can still function for up to eleven seconds.”

Mortified, Michael stood up. “I...uh...gotta get back to the shop. Just thought you should know.” And he walked to the door, Brian trailing, opened it to let himself out.

“Thanks,” Brian nodded, got a sad flicker of a return smile, watched Michael scamper down the stairs then slammed the door so hard it shook. Shut his eyes a moment to recompose before returning to Justin, dazed and bent over the counter, cheek on his crossed arms. Like he was someplace dark and secluded.

Brian, hesitant at first, set a hand on his back, slowly skimmed it across his shoulders.

“I don’t know what anybody could think about in eleven seconds,” Justin edged out. “Because I can’t remember. But I know I’ve been there.”

Brian’s skin prickled, he grabbed Justin tightly around the waist and buried his face over his shoulder. All the shit you keep inside. All the fucking shit. Did I really stop you so you could get over it? Or because I didn’t want to hear it. I want to know now. “Anything. Everything you can remember. I want to hear it. Anytime.” I’ll never let you be alone in that again.

The next few hours passed with few words. They shared a couple drinks, showered together without antics and barbs, cuddled fully dressed on the bed until Brian got restless and rolled out, slipped on shoes.

“Where are you going?” Justin ventured. The Baths? Back room?

“A little office work,” Brian said low. Life goes on.

Justin craned to see Brian at his desk. Saw him open a file drawer, stop and stare. Just stare. So he got up and into sneakers, went over to investigate, leaned on the desk and watched Brian’s brows knit over an unmarked folder. “Want me to fix you a sandwich?”

“Later,” Brian opened the folder, drummed his fingers on a plain envelope. Decision made, he snapped up the envelope, closed the folder and shut it away, stood up and gave Justin a quick kiss over the desk. “I’m taking a ride to Scott’s.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Justin grimaced. Walking through a ghost town.

“We had a deal,” was all Brian said as he rounded the desk for the door.

“I’m going with you,” Justin grabbed his arm, recognized the anguished look. “I can handle it.” And I won’t let you do that alone.

Brian sucked in his bottom lip, considered Justin’s stoic eyes. “Come on.”

Scott’s place. Still light at 5 PM in late summer’s lower sun.

First to enter, Brian stood motionless in the doorway. Behind him, Justin squeezed a shoulder past his, looked at his eyes, “What’s wrong?” and panned the room. “jesus.”

Brian walked in slowly with Justin on his arm, both shocked by the emptiness. Indents in the carpet replaced the leather furniture. The built-in entertainment center was gutted to bare shelves. The living room desk remained without its computer system, file drawers partially open. “Scott’s family must be very happy that he returned everything he borrowed before he died.”

Justin glanced at Brian’s face of stone-masked simmer. “Looks like they took everything valuable,” he paced with Brian to the stairway.

“Not everything,” Brian stopped at the showcase in the wall beside the stairs. Scott’s climbing trophies, recognition plaques and awards sat undisturbed. “Come on.” He looked up and saw the balcony, all the French doors open, grasped the railing and started up. Saw...

Scott ahead of him, unbuttoning his shirt as he climbed, turned back with that cocky grin, “Enjoying the view? It only gets better,” as he whipped off his shirt and flung it to land on Brian’s face, momentarily blinding him, until Brian pulled it off to see...

An empty stairway.

Justin saw Brian stall, grabbed his hand. “What is it?”

Brian smiled back, squeezed, “Nothing,” and held on. Across the balcony, through the doorway to Scott’s bedroom where they stopped inside the door. Bedding strewn, mirrored lamps gone, drawers open, but basically intact. “I guess the truck ran out of room.”

“You think they’ll be back?” Justin looked around as Brian towed him to the dresser.

“I’m sure Scott’ll return this bedroom set. It’s solid oak.” He released Justin’s hand, saw open drawers of tee shirts, underwear. One filled with sex toys made him grin, imagining the looks from those who found them first. Wedged on the side was a bulky brown envelope. Curious, Brian pulled it out.

Justin opened a patio door, stepped outside and leaned on the rail. Looked at the lake, the trees. An artist's dream. Then he turned his head and sucked a breath, heart jumping when he saw Scott on the railing beside him, eyes on him, smile, hair tousling in the breeze. A blink, and it was Brian. "Oh god. You scared me."

"I wasn't sure where you went." Brian wrapped an arm around Justin, kissed his hair.

"What's that?" Justin spied the envelope in Brian's other hand.

"It was in the toy drawer. I doubt anyone touched it," Brian took Justin's hand and led him back inside then sat on the bed and dumped the contents. A worn folded yellow paper, olive pit rosary, airline ticket wallet - a photo.

Justin eyed the items. "What IS that stuff? I never pictured Scott as sentimental."

"He wasn't." Brian took and studied the half-shot of a young priest in black with that white telltale collar - sub-par looks with his short blond hair, thin face and dark horn-rimmed glasses. And Scott in a blue graduation gown, with the same smile that in later life became his bedroom draw. Close, faces almost touching.

Justin picked up the ticket wallet, climbed onto the bed, knelt behind Brian and looked over his shoulder. "High school?"

Brian turned the photo over and they both silently read a date. "Grade school."

"Who would keep a grade school picture? With a PRIEST in it."

"Maybe someone with a secret, who found someone else to let him know it was okay."

Justin opened the wallet, saw a post-it on the inside cover, bit his bottom lip. "I think it was a little more than that. Listen to this. 'I've been asked to leave the Order and I have to go away. If you come, I'll be there. If not, I'll understand. Father S'." He handed it over Brian's shoulder. "That must be Father S."

Brian read the post-it, looked at the photo, pulled the aged airline ticket. "It's a one-way to San Francisco."

"Look at the date. He was seventeen."

"I always thought he learned about sex in a hay loft," came out more grim than light.

"He didn't go. But he kept all this," Justin looked over the items beside them. "He should have gone."

Brian stared at the ticket, "Turners are a high-power family. There's no telling what they might have done. Scott probably knew that," then quietly surmised, "Or maybe he just made a choice between two Fathers."

"It's a mistake," Justin stared off. "Thinking that the first one is just the first, and you'll meet the right one later on. Maybe it happens that way for a lot of people. But sometimes, the first time...you just know." He slid his arms down Brian's chest, leaned on his back and pressed a cheek to his hair. "I'm glad I didn't let you go. Because I'm pretty sure that if I did, I'd spend the rest of my life looking for you in some way."

Brian swallowed, caressed Justin's hands locked on his chest then gripped them tight, gut twisting with thoughts of a near miss. I'm glad you hung on. I would have let you go. Back then. Brian stared at the note, lightly stroked Justin's hands. I won't fuck with the way you want to see this, Justin, because that's special about you. But this wasn't a love note. It was an offer of a way out.

The sound of a car and thudding slam came through the open patio door.

"Somebody's here," Justin bolted off the bed and headed over to check.

Brian stopped him with, "Let's head 'em off at the pass." He stood, eyed Scott's memoirs. Quick decision, he gathered them back into the envelope and slid it into his open shirt. This is none of their fucking business.

Justin caught up to Brian rumbling down the stairs and they hit bottom just as Dave came through the front door.

"Kinney? What're YOU doing here?" Dave's plastic smile hardly covered his ire.

"Scott left me a key to check up on things once in awhile," Brian looked around. "Shouldn't we call the cops? I think he's been fucking robbed," eyes convincingly wide over drilling accusation.

Dave faltered to friendly, "We had to protect his assets. He would have wanted that," changed the subject, "And it's good to know he has friends looking out for him, but..." he nodded like a true-heart brother, "We'll take care of it."

"That's very loving," Brian crossed his arms, leaned on the showcase frame with Justin one step up behind him and chomping back his spit. "Let me know if there's anything I can do."

Buying the surface and greasing his own agenda, Dave stepped closer. "We're having a private Requiem Mass on Saturday. You're welcomed to say a few words if you want."

"Your parents never met me. Are you sure they won't mind?"

“Mom and Dad are on a bridge project in Africa. There’s some political issue and they can’t leave right now.”

Justin spouted, “They’re not coming to their own son’s funeral?” He blinked at Dave’s something-wrong-with-that? eyes, exhaled disgust aside and turned back when Brian lightly bat his chest.

“It’s business,” Brian raised a brow at Justin, hinted cool down, I’m getting there.

“Losing a big deal won’t help matters.” They’d sooner put guns to their heads.

“That’s exactly how we all see it,” Dave justified. “Why don’t you go ahead and leave. I’ve got everything under control.”

“Thanks,” Brian nodded, “But YOU’RE the one leaving.” He straightened, felt Justin go supportive rigid behind him.

Dave’s smile flattened. “Whaddya mean by that?”

“If Scott left a Will, you wouldn’t be worrying about probate or scrounging around here to find it. But he DID leave a valid, detailed sales contract. I own this ranch and everything IN it, and I’m sure you know that. So you’d better get it all back where it belongs before I have the fucking Sheriff pick it up FOR me.”

Dave’s jaw grit, eyes blazed. “Don’t be so sure. Do you really think the courts will recognize that deal? With a nobody he met at a BAR? Scott was too sharp for that. I don’t know what kinda drink you slipped him to suck him into selling a one point two mil estate -”

“Nice round guess.”

“- for a hundred dollars, but I know ONE thing. His attorney smelled something wrong and held off recording it to give Scott his three-day window to think it over.”

Justin shot back, “They had a deal.”

“Then TAKE it to court,” Dave slung. “I’ll guarantee you, I’ll have the backing, money and time to fight this out for as long as it takes. We Turners take care of our own. And I won’t let Scott’s life’s work go for nothing.”

“So that’s why these are still here?” Brian tapped the display case. “Surely there’s some Turner Hall Of Fame for Scott’s. Life’s. Work,” he snarled, glanced at the living room and saw a fireplace he hadn’t noticed earlier.

“Get outta here now,” Dave growled.

With Justin following, Brian, stormed across the living room to the fireplace, reached up and yanked Justin's painting off the wall.

"Hey!" Dave thumped after them while pulling his cell phone, "You can't touch anything in here." He opened the phone, keyed a number. "Jerry? Put Glen on."

"It was on loan," Brian snapped as he hooked it under his arm and strode to the door, Justin close behind. Fuck you. FUCK you!

Dave answered the phone, "Glen...send a couple officers. We got a problem at Scott's. Hold on a minute," then yelled, "Put that back!" as Brian disappeared out the door.

Justin stopped and turned, "Is YOUR name on it? Because mine IS. Justin Taylor?" he watched Dave hiss, "Disregard" and shut the phone. "The one who did the painting in your office. And you know what? The guys WERE right. You ARE a fucking twat!" He thundered out and slammed the door.

The Honda took off down the drive, Brian and Justin staring ahead in grim silence until Justin slapped the dash.

"How can people BE like that."

"It happens every day."

Justin pulled his cell phone, quickly dialed a number.

Brian side glanced, "Who are you calling?"

"Mel."

"For what?"

"You still have a copy of that contract. If we hurry up, we can file it ourselves."

Brian stopped the car, whipped the cell from Justin's hand, closed it and tossed it on the dash. "It's too late for that."

"It's not too late," Justin glared, "You mean, you're not gonna do ANYTHING?" saw Brian exhale at the steering wheel then looked away. "I can't believe this."

"Justin -"

"I mean, YOU. Of all people. You've always got a plan -"

“Justin -”

“- and you dazzle big money clients every -”

“Justin,” Brian grabbed his shoulder and moved into his face. “We can’t win this.”

“Not if we don’t even TRY. If we just call Mel, I’m sure -”

“WE CAN’T WIN THIS,” Brian shouted. “With all the money involved -”

“FUCK the money!” Justin thud his back to the seat, closed his eyes. “It just seems so wrong. It’s not what Scott wanted.”

Brian drifted his hand to Justin’s arm, “I thought you didn’t like Scott.”

“That was before...before I knew we had something in common. I wish he didn’t have to lose everything to THEM,” Justin palmed his temple like he was fighting a headache. “I’m tired of it. Fucking TIRED of the bad guys getting away with shit.”

“Welcome to the real world.”

“So that’s it?” Justin seethed, “We give up?”

Brian exhaled long, squeezed Justin’s arm. “Sometimes you have to define your battles not by what you’re fighting AGAINST, but what you’re fighting FOR. There’s one piece they won’t get,” saw Justin’s questioning look then twisted to view the sunset painting angled in the back seat. “You captured what meant a lot to him. That’s all he had, and all he really didn’t want to lose.”

With Justin quietly pondering, Brian hit the gearshift and drove away from the ranch for the last time.

“It’s a little late for a picnic,” Justin tried to quip as he and Brian hiked past a deserted park shelter, down a hill to a narrow overgrown path into the woods.

“Ever skip stones on a stream?” Brian glanced back, blazing the trail and holding low branches from snapping back against Justin.

“The only thing I ever skipped was gym class once in awhile. It was a little deflating to be one of the last picked for a team,” Justin brushed a snagging briar off one leg.

“The smart ones usually were.”

“And the gay ones.”

“Not the smart gay ones who knew how to play the game.”

They cleared the woods onto the stony remains of a long-gone railroad track, passed a weathered DANGER KEEP OUT sign until Brian stopped at the stream, looked both ways at two phone poles...wires gone, foot pegs missing...but still standing. He picked up a flat shale rock, flung it spinning so that it skipped off the surface a couple times before it plunked and sank.

Justin tried a piece, “I think it sucks. His parents not coming,” hurled it out, watched it arc and plop close to shore.

“I saw his father once,” Brian’s eyes darted to the pole, “And I remember walking away wishing MY father could be like that,” he snatched another stone, “You know what they say about grass...” He pursed his lips, flung hard. The stone skipped center stream, bounced high and cracked against a rock on the other side.

Determined, Justin tried again with the same dismal result.

“Here,” Brian selected a rock, placed it in Justin’s right hand. “You have to put a spin on it. Like a discus. Snap it from the...wrist...” Brian trailed off realizing Justin’s limits.

So Justin picked up a large round rock in his left hand, underhanded it high and smiled when its noisy splash sent ripples across the surface. “I think I’d rather do it like this,” and handed back the shale. “You can do the spinning. I’ll just make the waves.”

Brian gazed with deep feeling. “One of the last things Scott said to me was, I didn’t know how lucky I was to have someone. He was right.”

“Wrong,” Justin picked a large stone. “It’s not luck. It’s a lot of constant work.” He threw the rock to splash and plume.

“A little bit of both,” Brian lunged, flung the shale low so it kissed the tops of two ripples. Then he turned to Justin. “Does it always seem like work?”

Justin answered soft and serious, “Not when you love what you do,” and closed in for a kiss. If you need the reassurance, take it. I can always make more.

Brian held him tight, caressed his neck and spread fingers through his hair, held the back of his head. And they stayed locked until sporadic high-pitched buzzing made them part. “The joy of the great outdoors,” Brian whisked a hand over his face.

“I think we’re under attack,” Justin swatted his neck. “Run for it?”

Brian dashed for the woods, Justin close behind. They didn’t stop until they reached the car then darted in and sat back panting.

“Why did you wanna stop here?” Justin blew a breath.

Brian started the car, glanced at the brown envelope in the door pocket. “Pain management.” I couldn’t keep the deal. But I’ll think of something else.

Next morning outside the Comic Shop...

Brian stopped to admire the plywood window stapled with colorful posters along with Michael’s own sense of humor – a large white poster hand-lettered with a flaming: Fire Sale.

Doorbell ringing, Michael turned from the sparsely stocked racks, saw Brian look around and wrinkle his nose. “My first customer!” Michael strolled over.

“What’s still burning?”

“Ben thought sandalwood incense would improve the atmosphere.”

“Hasn’t he ever heard of apple pie candles?”

“Burnt apple pie. Reminds me of my Mom,” Michael pecked a platonic kiss. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I came to give you this...help with the recovery effort,” Brian pulled a folded check from his jeans, handed it over. “And to scrape Lightwave off the window.”

“The good news is the insurance company is covering most of it. The bad news is when,” Michael read. “A whole year’s lease payment? And what’s wrong with the sign?”

“I don’t own the rights to the name, and since I’ve opted for other employment -”

“Yeah?” Michael smiled, “Where?”

“I’m not sure yet, but Justin will probably still work upstairs until the lease runs out.”

“Don’t give me that flip shit,” Michael darkened. “What the fuck happened?”

“Moving ahead,” Brian slapped Michael’s arm, turned and looked around, “Things are looking better,” headed for the stairs.

“Hey,” Michael stopped him. “Wanna grab lunch at the Diner?” You don’t fool me. You’re out of work again, and I’ll be there if you need me.

“Make it dinner. I have some things to do,” Brian tossed a grin and jogged up the steps. Been here, done this. More than once. Only this time, my terms.

At WaveLight Graphics...

Justin spread completed Microburst mounts across a table, cornered a wary eye on Ruder who said little but periodically shadowed him.

“Is there a problem with these?” Justin asked.

“Not at all,” Ruder stepped away with a crusty, “If you really want to GO with that.”

Justin stacked the boards, clamped them under an arm and started for the door until Ruder stopped him.

“Where are you taking those?”

“The presentation? It’s in twenty minutes.”

“Let me remind you, you’re not an Art Director anymore,” Ruder smiled sweet venom, stepped up and calmly removed the boards from Justin’s arm. “And you needn’t worry about your work. Bernie and I ARE professionals.” And he whisked out the door.

Justin looked over the crew of middle-aged faces and got one Granny’s kind, “He’s always like that. You’ll get used to it. After awhile, you’ll fit right in,” she smiled to her co-artist, “Isn’t that right, Madge?” then back to Justin, “You do such lovely work.”

He smiled a stiff, “Thanks,” rolled his lips in, turned and walked out.

At the Bank...

Brian smiled at the brochure-sized folder in his hand and titled simply, Will. He unlocked the safe deposit box, opened it and gazed at the copy of their contract. One more month and they could send for official registry. AFTER consulting with Justin. A tricky edge to walk in partnership...when to act alone, when to act together.

Brian lifted the contract to slide the Will under it, but it caught against something. Probably Gus’s trust fund packet. He lifted out the contract to reorganize. There beneath it, was an identical folder marked Will.

Setting his papers on the ledge, Brian lifted out the other Will. Opened it and read only a few lines before he closed it and set it back, blinked to clear his eyes. It was easy for me to do this. But...fuck...it had to be hell for you. And you did it anyway.

Brian laid his copy on Justin's, replaced the contract, locked the box and quickly hurried out before the urge to call Justin overtook reason.

Later at the Diner...

Brian came an hour early just to sit and think. He was staring at a menu, not really reading it when Justin's sprite voice interrupted.

"Get you anything, sir?"

Amused, Brian expected him to sit down until the apron and check pad in Justin's hand said it was no joke. "If you start moonlighting, when will we have time to fuck?"

"I'm not at Lightwave anymore," he said all serious. "I tried to buy my own contract out with the eight-thousand left from school, but Rheinholdt wouldn't hear it. So I quit," he lightly shrugged.

"Just like that?" Brian felt a twinge. Because of ME? "What happened to building your reputation? Clearing your record from the school deal?"

Justin leaned on outstretched arms, face close to Brian's. "I could've done that...spent years pretending I was satisfied and convincing myself it would somehow be worth it. But I won't waste my time and talent. Or get out of bed miserable every day because I know I'm headed nowhere. That's NOT worth it, and I know you understand." Justin closed into a lengthy kiss, felt Brian's hand pull on the back of his neck.

Kiki's passing snap at Brian broke it off. "Hey. No hitting on the help."

Justin smiled, "I'd rather sling dinner slop HERE, than eat shit at WaveLight."

"Coffee. Black." Brian nodded. I understand. Perfectly.

Evening at the Loft. In the cyclic response to change, euphoric optimism often gave way to hard reality, and that's where they were – side by side in bed under a sheet with two days of anxiety bearing down.

"It's getting late for Babylon. You'll have to hit the Baths," Justin reminded.

“And leave the best part at home? Besides, it’s more appropriate that Lightwave’s creators mourn its loss together.”

“I’ll miss that,” Justin looked at Brian. “We were a great team.”

“We still ARE,” Brian kissed his cheek.

Justin rolled against Brian, head on his shoulder, arm around his chest, one leg hooked across both of Brian’s. “Scott’s funeral is tomorrow. We should go.”

“What for? So we can hobnob with backstabbers and share pathetic condolences with vultures?”

“I think he was more gay than straight. At least we could pay him decent tribute. I’m sure THEY won’t.”

Brian wrapped an arm around Justin, stared off...

...sat at his desk the next morning, and read the folded paper he’d taken from Scott’s room. He raised a thoughtful hand to his chin and viewed the sheet again.

Justin in sweats and curled on a living room chair, glanced up from a newspaper movie section to check out Brian. Watched him rise and stretch, white tee and button jeans. “What do you wanna do today?”

Brian stepped around the desk, looked at the sunny window and back to Justin. “It’s a nice day for a funeral. Let’s go.”

Justin rushed to join him at the bedroom closet, saw Brian debate over a dark dress shirt. “What’s wrong with THIS?”

Brian watched Justin pull out a shirt, smiled wide at the man whose choice put their thoughts in sync and crowned the something-else he had in mind.

Saint Whoever The Fuck.

In the closed-off foyer, Brian and Justin could hear the muffled echo of an ancient Priest’s lay-to-rest speech. The Service was nearly at an end.

Brian pulled the foyer brass-handled ornate door open and with Justin beside him, sauntered up the aisle like it was a red carpet to the orgy pit of the Liberty Baths. Toward the front pews of mourners - clustered shades of black with bare color tints from light

through stained glass panels. Toward a closed walnut casket draped with expensive flowers. Fucking flowers. A final show for the living.

The Priest shot a dagger stare and stopped mid-sentence. Heads swiveled with the rustle of fabric, sucked breaths, low blurts of surprise and the locked brows of disgust. Over a lanky man in faded jeans, his sleeveless black shirt half unbuttoned, an olive-pit rosary around his neck, crucifix on his bare chest. And a blond man in a tight pink midriff tee, khaki cargos slung low on his hips.

Face heating, Dave jumped up from the corner of the front pew, grabbed Brian's arm, and sternly whispered, "What are you doing here?" eyes flaming their attire, "Like THIS?"

"You asked me to say a few words for Scott," Brian calmly smiled. "That's Scott, isn't it?" he cocked a nod at the casket.

The Priest flowed like a dark ghost down the altar steps to end the disturbance. "Gentlemen, just take a seat please?" He waved a hand at the front pew.

Justin stepped over to comply, watched people crunch aside more for distancing than welcome. "Thanks," he sat, "I'm Justin Taylor and I'm a Protestant," smiled at the Joan-Kinney-Look-alike beside him and got a flat stare in return.

Brian whispered to the Priest, "I promise I'll be done in time for Benediction," and he loped up three steps to the first landing, grinned at the casket, hiked two more steps to altar level and headed for the pulpit.

Dave and Priest traded flustered what-the-fuck headshakes and hand movements, then Dave squeezed into a seat beside Justin as Priest rushed to join Brian.

Brian's reach to tap the mike was thwarted by Priest's hand cupping it. A multi-speaker thump echoed and Brian raised a smile of satisfaction that the system worked.

"I don't know who you are, or what you think you're doing," Priest glared over his smile.

"I came to read a passage for Scott. My Christian contribution. Or is Christianity only for them?" Brian tipped his head to the crowd, hazel eyes wide and waiting.

Priest breathed out, swept a fingertip to stop halfway down a page of The Good Book on the stand. "This is where I left off. When you're done, just take a seat with the congregation." He released the mike, drifted back to an empty chair against the wall beside the altar and sat between two clueless altar boys.

Brian pulled a folded sheet from his pocket, panned the tense crowd as he undid it, locked eyes on Justin's smile and slow blink. Smiled back, then started...

“On the first day God made Schlitz and Seagram’s.” He could hear the rustle and gasps. “On the second day God made noon. On the third day God made the Inner City. On the fourth day God made needles and syringes. On the fifth day God made lice...” He could see eyes pleading to the Priest behind him and didn’t have to look back to know the old guy was clenching the chair seat with both hands to keep from falling off. “And then on the sixth day, when all was ready, God made man and God loved man and placed him in the Inner City. And God said: Increase and multiply and fill the bars and brothels.”

Mumbles and groans. One couple jockeyed from their pew and stormed out.

“And on the seventh day, God rested and went to church and heard a nice sermon...about something or other. As God was going home from church that evening, he met a young girl who propositioned him.” He saw a few men leaning toward each other in hushed conspiracy, talked faster – “And God met a Wino, a Pusher, and a Pimp and a Queer. And then went home and thought a lot about sending fire. Or government money. Or social workers. Or something equally clever to destroy the Inner City.”

Those incensed calmed to the sound of that, others sat quietly digesting, some frozen dumbfounded and oblivious. Only Justin gazed with pride.

“And God said: I will live in the Inner City. I will hide myself in such a disguise that they will see my works. But not my face. No cross, no cassock. I will serve them. I will listen to them, and talk with them. Of jobs and food. Of rent and books. And human dignity. Until they demand: Show us your God!”

Two grim-faced men started up the aisle, halted when Priest hustled center altar raised his hands high and shouted the ritual ending “Peace be with you!” his profound sign of the cross over a confused, out-of-synch “And with you also” response from people hesitantly standing, looking at some still seated - Brian reading louder, “And I shall say to them: He lives in all men. We will find him wherever men suffer. Wherever men love. In deep disguise from far within the Inner City...I will be their God...and they shall be My people.” – the ending nearly washed out when Priest waved to the balcony and an organ-backed choir chimed, “*Tantum ergo sa-cra-men-tum*”...

Done, Brian rolled the paper, removed and wrapped the rosary around it, skipped down two steps, stuck it in the floral piece on Scott’s coffin then hiked the final three steps to the main floor.

Justin darted toward him, eyes met and the kiss just happened. A deep, potent symbol of respect, support and belief in each other. Wherever men suffer. Wherever men love.

To the horror of the audience. Two men kissing? At a wake? In the middle of CHURCH?

Against the apocalyptic surprise, disgust and a few private grins, Brian tossed a good-by smile at their silent witness, took Justin’s hand and they walked up the aisle unobstructed,

the choir still ringing, *“Novo cedat ri-tu-i; Praestet fides su-u-ple-e-mentum...Sensuum defectui.”*

Clearing the door to the foyer, Justin looked up, “People still sing in Latin?”

“Guess so,” Brian shrugged, pushed open the heavy door to the outside.

“Does anybody know what it means?” Justin kept up with Brian’s long steps.

“...newer rites of grace prevail; Faith for all defects supplying...where the feeble senses fail. But it sings better in Latin, so why give a fuck what it means.”

Justin didn’t question Brian’s serious expression – his opinion of religious hypocrisy. He watched Brian swing into the Honda, pop the passenger lock. After a last glance at the Church, shaken mourners trickling out, Justin got into the car and barely had the door shut before the Honda peeled away.

Late evening at the Loft...

Justin in a tee shirt and briefs sat in Brian’s chair, paged through Newsweek and sneaked a glance at Brian, shirtless with unbuttoned jeans, sitting on the couch across from him, legs stretched with bare feet crossed on the coffee table. “Are you okay?”

Solemn eyes distant, Brian slowly tapped his fingers on a half glass of Beam resting on his thigh. Thinking about how it could all be gone in a moment. No chance to deliver a final message. No chance to say...things that should have been said. It almost happened to Justin. But that didn’t sink in. Because Justin fought back to life. And time didn’t seem so critical anymore.

“Brian?”

Returning to earth, Brian saw Justin’s concern. Suddenly remembered a question he’d never answered and heard himself think out loud, “Your arms around my neck.”

“What?” Justin squinted, felt a charge from Brian’s steady gaze, and knew what it meant.

But the delay nipped the moment. “Your arms around my neck,” Brian grumbled to his glass. Fuck. What the FUCK. Why. “It...makes your body stretch long,” he looked off, ran a hand through his hair, chuckled - breaking abstracts down to body parts always came easier - “And then your ass sticks out a little more...” stopped when he felt the couch shake.

“Don’t overkill it,” Justin smiled as he sat sideways next to Brian, one leg folded under him. He leaned against an arm on the seatback, swung his outer leg across Brian’s thighs and rubbed his calf on Brian’s drink hand. “Anything else?”

Brian downed his drink, set his glass on the table and sat back, one hand on Justin’s leg, the other into the pale locks along a temple - “Your hair.” – before he retreated again, glanced at Justin’s leg – “And there’s so MUCH of it.”

Justin snapped his leg up and kicked a thigh, ignored Brian’s wince. “I’m not shaving my legs for you.”

Brian grabbed the leg, stretched it back across his lap and held it firm. “Aren’t we getting abusive. Whatever happened to that starry-eyed kid who used to idolize me?”

Justin sensed a layer beneath the line, gave Brian a second to recognize it, then quietly answered, “He’s still here. And he still does.” Justin watched Brian’s throat ripple a swallow, his eyes go soft and deep. Slowly moving his legs to the floor, Justin slid his arms around Brian’s neck. “I like how you look at me,” then faintly serious, “I like how you look at the world.”

Eyes never leaving Justin’s, Brian circled his arms around Justin’s waist and they pulled each other close. Not voracious and lusty. Or sweetly light. More like when words aren’t enough, and minds can touch only through the language of a kiss.

Brian eased back, guiding Justin over him, bodies shifting and flowing until they reached a comfort zone...hips over hips, cocks aligned and stirring. Brian looked down at Justin’s head, cheek pressed to his chest. Saw gold strands shiver under his own heavy breaths. He floated a hand onto that hair to smooth it down and kept stroking even after every hair was back in place. Felt Justin’s hand squeeze a bicep and relax warm, not going anywhere. This is where I should tell you something. But it’s not easy. Not like it is for you. Because you say things in ways...fuck it...that vibrate in my head...in a good way. And I’m never really sure I could give that back to you. “Your arms around my neck...make me feel like we’re connected...”

Justin smiled, eyes half-closed and peaceful with the words humming through Brian’s chest, hand tracing a slow short arc over Brian’s arm. Then he stopped and narrowed his eyes when Brian added...

“...almost as good as having my dick up your ass.”

Justin resigned with a relaxed smile and silent exhale, resumed his easy hand movement. You just talked about your feelings. You never promised me it would be perfect. Then he heard Brian’s voice drop so low, it almost cracked.

“I can’t think of a reason I’d want that with anybody else.”

Justin closed his eyes and hugged like they couldn't get close enough. He felt Brian's arms tighten around him, lips press the top of his head and stay. You don't have to say any more. What I heard...

...was perfect.

I knew it the first time I saw you. I knew it was in you all along.