

**Title:** *Cut*

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**Summary:** After the bashing, Justin can't handle the stress. But is cutting really the solution it seems to be? AU-no Ethan.

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## Chapter 1 – An Accident

It started as an accident, after the bashing.

He was high as a kite. He'd taken something; a prescription something, a sleeping pill, to keep the nightmares at bay. But he wasn't asleep. Instead he was standing naked in the kitchen.

"Justin, come lay down," Brian said sleepily. Justin shook his head; the movement felt strange and special and odd. He liked this Ambien stuff, yeah.

"I'm hungry," he explained, but Brian was already falling asleep again, and he didn't answer. For once, there was food in the fridge, and Justin grabbed a chunk of cheese and tossed it clumsily onto the counter. He reached into the knife drawer, and closed his fingers around a blade. It bit into his skin, but it didn't hurt. He pulled it out, seeing blood on the steel and on his fingers. Fascinated, he watched the blood flow down his arm.

"Ouch," he said matter-of-factly, even though there was no pain. He turned on the water, watching the blood wash away from his fingers. And then he started crying. And cried, and cried.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder and then Brian said, "What the fuck—what happened? Shit." He didn't resist as Brian grabbed a dish towel from a drawer, and wrapped it around his hand, holding it there. "Are you okay?"

"I didn't mean to," Justin replied nonsensically.

Brian wrapped his free arm around Justin, and pulled him to his chest. Justin could feel him trembling, but his voice was steady. "Obviously not." His grip tightened.

"Sorry about the dish t-towel." Justin felt his body shudder, and then he started sobbing against Brian's shoulder.

"Don't worry about the towel," Brian said, stroking his back gently. Justin sobbed harder.

Brian could feel Justin's tears on his chest. *What the hell was in that sleeping pill*, he wondered. He said, "Come on," and directed the compliant blond towards the bathroom.

Justin was tripping on his own feet, like he was drunk, so Brian sat him on the lid of the toilet. "Don't move," he said, "and keep holding that towel on your hand." He watched to make sure Justin complied before moving to the medicine cabinet.

He grabbed the first aid kit. He hadn't had one, but Linds had given it to him. "In case you need it when you're watching Gus," she'd explained. He never had before, but now he was glad he had it.

"Let me see your hand," he commanded. Justin held it out, and Brian pulled the towel away from the cuts. The bleeding had stopped, more or less. Brian tried to figure out how to bandage them.

He grabbed the can of antiseptic spray and sprayed the cuts. The blood still oozing thinned and ran, and he wiped it away with a clean piece of towel. Justin whimpered, but didn't say anything.

Brian picked up the roll of gauze and wrapped Justin's hand. "Too tight?" he asked. The blond shook his head.

Brian threw the things back into the kit and put it back into the medicine cabinet. Then he washed his hands, his mind flashing to the last time he'd washed Justin's blood off of himself. He took a few deep breaths. Then he turned to Justin.

"Come on, let's get some sleep," he said, keeping his voice even.

Justin practically lunged into his arms, crying again. "I'm sorry!" he whimpered, and Brian held onto him. "Shh," he comforted.

He led Justin to the bed, by his uninjured hand. "Lay down," he said, and Justin flopped down, still sniffing. He went to the other side of the bed, and slid under the duvet. Suddenly, the blond was in his arms again.

"Just relax," Brian told him. He could feel his heart hammering against his ribcage.

Justin could feel it too, where his head lay against Brian's chest. A feeling of warmth stole over him, like he was on top of the world. "You care," he whispered.

He felt Brian's chest rise and fall in a silent sigh, and he shut his eyes. Just before he drifted off completely, he heard Brian's whispered, unintentional reply.

"Of course."

And everything was alright.

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## Chapter 2 – The Second Time

The second time was after he saw Chris Hobbs at the hospice.

Emmett dropped him off at the loft, in so much pain that he didn't notice Justin's own. Justin ran up the stairs, unable to wait for the elevator. All he wanted was to get into the loft and lock away the world.

He barely shut the door behind him before collapsing to the floor, silent tears running down his face. Hobbs was wrong; he was wrong damn it! He pounded the floor angrily with his left fist until the pain made him stop. He was breathing hard.

Suddenly, he remembered watching his blood run down his arm, and the tender way Brian had cared for him. The sense of peace afterwards. He picked himself up off the floor and went into the kitchen.

He yanked open the knife drawer and grabbed a knife with a smooth, sharp edge. It had taken forever for the cuts on his hand to heal, because of the odd location. He dropped to the floor right there, and sat with his knees curled to his chest and his back against the cabinets. He wanted to see blood.

Justin pushed up his sleeves and stared at the flesh on his arm. It was pale and smooth. He took the blade into his left hand- he didn't want to kill himself after all, and if his gimp hand started shaking, he probably could- and placed the edge of the blade against his arm.

He pressed, gently at first, watching the metal crease his skin, and then sink in, parting the flesh. It stung bitterly, taking his mind off of Hobbs and the afternoon. He pulled the blade away, watching the blood well up, smooth crimson droplets that formed a small blob and ran down his arm, staining his wrist and gimp hand.

Justin dropped the knife and sat on the floor, staring at the blood. It wasn't a lot of blood; no more than the night he'd accidentally cut himself, but a feeling of peace wound its way inside of him. He sighed, a sound of relief.

After a few minutes, he realized the bleeding had stopped, leaving a crusty trail over his skin. He stood up, dropping the knife into the sink, and went to the bathroom.

Justin located the first aid kit, and slowly, methodically washed and bandaged the cut. As he did, he felt the calm settle deeper around him.

Finally, he pulled down his sleeves and put the first aid kit away. He looked at himself in the mirror. His eyes were calm.

He went into the bedroom and curled up on the bed. Suddenly, he just wanted to sleep. And to his surprise, sleep actually came, without a pill, for the first time since the bashing.

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### Chapter 3 – What We Leave Behind

"You need to seriously consider whether you're able to meet the requirements." Dean Ryerson gave him a look, and then left the room.

Justin sat on the stool, still, but angry as hell. This wasn't fair, and it wasn't his fault! Fucking Hobbs! He felt tears well up. Frustrated, he threw the piece of charcoal in his hand to the ground.

He swiped at the tears, trying to stop them, and looked at his art. This was hopeless. His dream was hopeless now, because of one kid who hit him with a bat. And what happened to him? Community service! As if that would give Justin back the future he'd had, the ability he'd had. All lost now, probably forever.

He got to his feet, fury and sadness warring inside him. He kicked at the stool, sending it flying. It clattered along the floor. Not enough. He wanted to destroy something.

He grabbed his sketchbook and went to tear it. Suddenly, he stopped. This was all he had left of his art, possibly all he'd ever have. He couldn't ruin it. Anyway, it wouldn't be enough.

His mind flashed back to the kitchen, not so long ago. To the blood, and the peace. Why not? It had worked before. Adrenaline was making him shake as he thought what he could use.

He had the kit Mel and Linds had given him. Besides all the brushes and paints, pencils and charcoals, there was also a small X-acto knife with a few different blades. It was supposed to be used for carving for printmaking, but it would do very well. He dropped to his knees next to the kit, and dug through it. There it was.

Desperation clawed at him. He had to do this now. It was late enough that no one would likely come in. His sleeves were already rolled up. He uncapped the knife, and held the blade to his arm.

Just like last time, it burned as it sliced through his flesh, making him gasp. The blood sprang up in its wake. But he still felt the ache and the anger. Fine. Justin moved the blade down his arm half an inch, and pressed again. More pain, more blood, rolling down his arm like the tears down his face.

He cut again, another, longer slice. The blood splashed to the floor, a perfect, round drop. Suddenly, he realized again that he was in the middle of PIFA, leaking blood on their floor. He capped the knife, blood still visible on the blade, and dropped it into his kit. "At least there'll be something here to remember me by," he said bitterly.

Justin pressed his hand against the cut, spreading the blood over his hand and arm. More splatters hit the floor. Hell, they'd probably think it was paint, if they didn't look too close. His heart was beating fast, but that sense of calm and control was settling around him, like a shirt warm from the dryer.

He walked to the sink in the corner, used to clean paintbrushes. A paper towel dispenser hung over it. He grabbed a few and held them against his arm, mopping up the blood. The cuts weren't deep, and the bleeding stopped quickly. He balled up the towels, stained with bright red blotches, and tossed them in the trash.

He washed his hands and arm, cleaning off the sticky remains of blood. He didn't have any bandages, he realized. Then he laughed, a harsh sound in the quiet. Bandages.

He wrapped a paper towel around his arm to protect his shirt from blood, and then pulled down his sleeves. He was still in control.

He picked up his kit. At the door, Justin took one last look at the room he was leaving. They didn't want him, didn't want his art? Well, fuck them.

The hallway had never seemed so long. Justin ignored the feeling of being in a nightmare, where the hallway gets longer and longer with every step. Finally, he was at the door to outside.

He stepped out the door, and kept walking.

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#### Chapter 4 – Sunshine's Arm

"Sunshine, what'd you do to your arm?"

He was pouring coffee when Debbie's query hit his ears.

"Uh...nothing," he said, spinning around and putting the carafes back where they belonged. He pushed down his sleeves, covering the freshly scarring cuts. He'd forgotten to cover them with a bandage before work.

"Nothing? Let me see that." Debbie reached for his arm. Justin pulled away.

"I need five minutes," he said. He headed back towards the break room.

Debbie stared after him. He was sure acting funny lately. She'd heard from Michael that he'd been at Babylon last night and told everyone he had quit school.

"Kiki, watch my tables for a second," she said.

"Sure Deb," she said, rushing past with plates stacked on her arms.

Debbie walked into the break room. Justin was sitting in the corner, with his back to the door.

"Sunshine, are you okay?"

"I said I'm fine." His words came out with more bite than he'd intended. "Sorry."

Debbie took a deep breath and moved so she was standing in front of him. "I heard you quit school."

Justin didn't meet her eyes. He shrugged. "So?"

"So, you're an artist!"

"Not anymore, Deb." His voice was defeated.

"Yes, you are!"

"I'm not!" It was nearly a scream. "Just leave me alone!"

"Sunshine—" She reached for him.

"No!" Justin jerked away from her. He stood so fast his chair toppled. She could see his shoulders rising and falling with each breath.

Her heart broke, looking at him. He was just a boy still, and he was hurting.

"Justin, honey..." She reached for him, and this time he didn't pull away.

"The Dean told me to quit." His confession was a whisper.

"What?" Debbie couldn't believe what she was hearing. She stepped back, to see Justin's face. "Why would he—"

"My hand doesn't work long enough, or well enough, to do what the program requires. I can't go to school there anymore. I dropped out yesterday afternoon." Justin's face screamed out his misery.

"Oh, baby." She pulled him back into her arms. "I'm so sorry."

She could feel him shaking. "Me too," he whispered.

"Deb, it's getting busy out here!" Kiki's voice came screeching in from the main part of the diner.

"Listen, Sunshine. You stay back here as long as you need." She patted his cheek. "It's gonna be okay."

Justin smiled weakly at her. "Thanks, Deb," he said.

As Debbie left the room, she saw him shake his head. *Poor boy*, she thought. She felt a familiar rise of fury at Chris Hobbs, and that damned judge. How could they do that to her Sunshine?

It was only later, as she delivered another pink plate special, that she remembered his arm, and wondered.

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## Chapter 5 – Apples

He and Daphne giggled uncontrollably, a mixture of the joint and the story.

"You really fucked right there? While everyone was eating dinner?"

"We were in the bathroom," Justin defended. He put the joint in his pocket as the elevator made it to the top floor.

"As if that makes it better! They could have heard you!" Daphne smacked his arm.

They both giggled again as Justin pulled open the door of the loft. His eyes went to the floor. Apples? Why were there apples, on the floor? Then he heard a moan.

Brian was on the couch. On the zucchini guy, on the couch. Justin forced his face not to change, as he felt Daphne's eyes on him. But inside, he felt a kick to his stomach. *Oh, Brian.*

Daphne squeezed his arm. "See ya later," she whispered, and left. Justin didn't know what to do. Finally, unable to watch them anymore, he walked into the bathroom.

He could still hear the grunts from the living room, and they brought wave after wave of emotion roiling to the surface. Anger, confusion, hurt. Why wasn't he enough?

The now-familiar urge to cut, to see blood, sprang up. He considered going out into the kitchen to get a knife, but an exceptionally loud groan made him think twice. Fine. He could use something else.

He dug into a drawer and pulled out his razor. It was nearly time to replace the blade anyway, he mused. Might as well.

Splitting open the casing was more difficult than he would have guessed. He ended up crunching the

plastic with his teeth, nearly cutting his tongue in the process. He carefully freed one of the blades.

Justin dropped his coat to the floor and rolled up his sleeve.

*"Sunshine, what'd you do to your arm?"* Debbie's earlier question cut through his need. Arm was a bad place to cut. It left marks, and those caused questions.

He sat on the floor and pulled up the leg of his pants. Legs were better, he mused. Brian never looked lower than his thighs...*fuck Brian!*

Justin angrily jabbed the blade into the skin just above his ankle. The pain made him gasp, and his angry tears started down his face, matching the blood rolling down his leg. He cut another line, and another. Quick. Painful.

Finally, the calm settled around him. He dropped the blade in the trashcan, and looked at the blood that had made its way over his foot and onto the floor.

He stood, grabbing some toilet paper to wipe up the blood on the floor. He dumped it in the trash, next to the discarded remains of the razor.

Justin undressed and got into the shower. He didn't hear the trick anymore, and wondered if he'd left. Then again, he might just be recovering between rounds. "He's not as young as I am," he whispered. Well, if Brian'd rather fuck someone who was old and ugly, let him!

The water stung as it ran over the fresh cuts, taking his mind off of Brian and the zucchini guy. Justin quickly washed his hair and body, and turned off the water.

Suddenly, the door opened. Justin tensed. It was Brian, still naked, and oh so beautiful.

"Done so soon?" Brian asked, his voice low and seductive. "Thought I could join you."

"I'm finished," he said curtly, grabbing the towel from the rack and wrapping it around his waist. Brian pushed him into the wall and grabbed his dick.

"You haven't even started." He licked Justin's jaw, something that usually drove him wild. Justin jerked away.

"Stop it," he said, breathing hard. "I'm going to bed."

"Well, I could join you there," Brian replied, watching him.

Justin shook his head and left the bathroom. He felt tears well up, and swallowed hard against them.



Quickly, he dried off and pulled on some underwear and a tee shirt. He didn't want to be naked tonight.

He heard the shower start, and let out a relieved sigh. That gave him plenty of time to pretend to be asleep before Brian would be out.

He lay down under the covers, curling his knees to his chest, so he could touch the freshly created cuts on his leg. It would be okay, he decided, and then shut his eyes.

It had to be.

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## Chapter 6 – Godiva

He left the next morning before Brian's alarm even went off. He had had a restless night, not catching more than a few hours of sleep between long bouts of pretending.

When Brian came into the diner, he found his excuses quickly, ducked the attempt at a kiss, and left.

Michael came after him, of course. He always stuck his nose where it didn't belong. But his rudeness was too much for Justin to take this morning, and he stormed off.

He didn't really have to go so soon, but he had no reason to stick around. His fury at Brian and, even though there was no reason, at Michael, had him seeing red. He ducked into a bookstore on Liberty and made his way to the bathroom, looking for a good cut.

He seemed to be doing that a lot lately.

It got worse. His mother informed him that his father wouldn't pay for his school anymore. Even though Justin told her to keep her money; that he would find a way to pay for it, inside he was dying.

Brian wasn't much help. He offered to pay, or at least loan him the money. But Justin couldn't do that. He wasn't a "kept boy", or a plaything. It made him feel like a hustler, like a loser, and not like a man. Which he was. And he'd prove it.

He got a job as a go-go boy at Babylon.

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Justin ran, shirtless, through the streets. Terror was making his heart pound. Where was he? He saw the sign for The Gravel Pit. Liberty Avenue.

He slammed into someone, who caught him before he hit the ground. "You okay, honey?" the voice

asked. He looked up, seeing sequins and lipstick. A drag queen, at least a foot taller than he was, held onto his upper arms.

"I'm okay," he said. He felt the world tilt, and he nearly fell on his ass.

"What are you on, baby?" she asked, using one long-nailed hand to tip up his chin.

"I dunno...Sap gave me a drink." Justin tried to pull away, but she didn't let go.

"Shit. Saperstein? He's a bad guy," the drag queen said. "God knows what was in there." She steadied Justin. "Listen, come with me to the Diner. We'll get some food in you, try to sop up some of the GHB."

"NO!" Justin cried. He pulled away hard, but the drag queen was stronger than he was.

"Baby, you gotta eat something." She was insistent.

"Can't...not the Diner. Debbie..." he trailed off, not quite sure where he was going with his thought.

"Debbie's not there right now, sugar. It's too late. She rarely works this late, and I saw her there this morning. Now, come on." The drag queen tucked his arm into hers, and led him towards the diner.

Justin was too confused to fight anymore, and at least her intentions seemed good. He remembered the men grabbing at him, remembered kicking Sap, and running for it. Even in his confused state, he had realized their intentions for him.

She ushered him into the diner, pressing him into the booth by the door. "What do you want?" she asked. He managed to shrug, feeling very tired.

A waitress came over. "What can I get you?" she asked.

"Coffee, and a burger, side of fries," she replied.

"And for you?" the waitress asked Justin.

"That's for him, sweetheart," she corrected. "I have to watch my girlish figure."

The waitress walked to the kitchen to put in their order.

"So, what's your name, kid?" she asked finally.

"Um..." Justin found it hard to speak. "J-Justin."

"Nice to meet you, Justin. I'm Godiva, just like the chocolate, dark and sweet." She smiled at him.

The name tickled the back of his brain somewhere, but he couldn't figure out where. He nodded.

"What were you doing at one of the Sap's parties? That doesn't seem like the kind of place a boy like you would go." She rested her chin on her hands, looking at him.

"I needed the money," Justin managed. The waitress came by with his coffee.

"Drink some of that, sugar." Godiva pressed the mug into his hand. He sipped at it. "What did you need money for that badly?"

"School," Justin replied. "G-gotta pay for school. Dad won't, the asshole."

Godiva looked at him and shook her head. "Poor baby," she said, and she sounded like she meant it. "There's no other way?"

"Well, he said he'd loan me the money..." Justin lost his train of thought, wrapping his arms over his bare chest.

"Why won't you let Brian loan you the money?" The waitress swooped in with his burger and fries. "Eat that," Godiva urged.

Justin took a sloppy bite, and swallowed. "I'm a man," he said, slurring his words.

"Sometimes, a man needs to know when to ask for help," she said.

The words bounced around in Justin's head as he made short work of the burger and fries. Godiva dropped some money on the table, and stood up.

"Come on, baby. Let's get you home."

She helped him to his feet, and out the door. He didn't find it strange that her car was parked right in front of the diner. She let him in, and then got in the driver's seat.

"Buckle up," she urged, and as he fussed, trying to get his fingers to work with the seatbelt, she turned on the car. "Ready?"

"Uh...huh," Justin said, leaning back in the seat.

Without a word, she drove him to Brian Kinney's loft. "Go inside, Justin," she said. "I'll watch until you get in."

Justin stumbled out of the car and into the building. For once, the elevator was on the bottom floor, and he pressed the button for Brian's floor. Outside, he heard Godiva's car idling.

It seemed like a very good idea to sleep in the elevator, suddenly, but Justin fought it. Instead, he knocked into the door of the loft, and managed to get it open.

Once inside, he shut and locked the door, and stumbled into the bedroom, flopping down on his side of the bed.

"Godiva!" he said suddenly, and it clicked in his brain. Godiva; Emmett's friend he'd lost to AIDS the night before PRIDE.

"Oh fuck," he muttered, and then the combination of tiredness and GHB took hold of him, and he was out like a light.

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## Chapter 7 – Discovered

To his surprise, after his initial resistance, Brian spread his legs, giving his silent permission for Justin to top him.

Justin couldn't believe what was happening. Brian had never allowed him to top before; he'd laugh and flip him over and fuck him mercilessly if he even suggested it. Well, he'd better make it good, he decided.

He kissed Brian's spine, and then ran his tongue over the individual vertebrae. He moved down his spine with light licks and kisses, trying to drive him mad. Brian shifted slightly, and a louder breath escaped his lips.

He moved down lower and lower, until his tongue met Brian's hole. Little licks, and then longer, sensual ones, made Brian squirm. Suddenly, he pushed his tongue inside Brian, who let out a startled gasp.

He continued the sweet torture, feeling Brian's legs trembling. Suddenly, he pulled away.

"Like that?" he whispered, and then nipped Brian's ass cheek hard enough to sting.

Brian moaned and turned onto his side, grabbing Justin's arm and pulling him up for a kiss. Justin smiled,

"Good," he whispered, and then pressed Brian's shoulder so his chest hit the mattress. He grabbed the lube and a condom from the ever-present stash. He flipped the cap off with his thumb and squirted it onto his fingers. Gently, aware that Brian hadn't bottomed for a long time, if ever, he pressed one finger

against Brian's hole.

Brian relaxed enough to let him through, and he worked the lube inside of him. Then he found Brian's prostate, and stroked it teasingly. Brian let out the most erotic moan Justin had ever heard.

Justin worked a second finger inside of him, still kneading his prostate. Brian's moans grew in intensity, desperate, mewling sounds that were completely different than his ordinary sex noises. Justin scizzored his fingers, and Brian gasped.

"Justin!" he begged.

"Are you ready?" he asked, using his fingers to fuck him.

"Oh God," Brian groaned. "Come on."

Satisfied, Justin pulled free of Brian and ripped open the condom wrapper. He quickly rolled it over his dick, and covered it with lube, too turned on to torment Brian any more.

He positioned himself between Brian's legs, holding his body up with one arm and using his other hand to guide himself inside of Brian.

Brian grunted as he pushed through the first ring of muscle, and Justin kissed the back of Brian's neck. "Okay?" he asked.

He felt Brian nod, and he sank deeper inside of him.

"God, you're tight!" he whispered. Brian chuckled.

"It's been awhile," he managed to say, and then his voice dissolved into a wordless groan as Justin hit his prostate.

They fucked slowly, finding a rhythm. Justin had never felt like this, with any guy he'd fucked before. He felt protective. Brian trusted him; really trusted him. He loved him. Even if he wouldn't say it, Justin knew it was true.

Justin reached underneath Brian, stroking his cock to the same rhythm as his thrusts. Brian gasped.

Justin felt Brian shuddering underneath him, even as he felt his own orgasm approaching. He sank all the way inside, and then stars exploded in front of his eyes.

Spent, he dropped down onto Brian's broad back, gasping. He felt himself starting to soften, and regretfully pulled free, tying the condom into a knot and dropping it on the floor.

He rolled over onto the mattress. Brian grabbed him and pulled him against his chest, and they held onto each other, letting their breathing settle back to a normal rhythm.

Justin shut his eyes, feeling sated. Suddenly, Brian's hand closed around his dick.

"Aren't you ever satisfied?" Justin asked, a small smirk playing at his lips. "Don't you ever think of

anything but cock?"

"Sure I do," Brian said. He rolled on top of Justin, holding his wrists flat to the mattress by the sides of his head. "But not often." He kissed him, and then leaned down, pulling Justin's nipple into his mouth.

Justin groaned, feeling himself come to life again. Brian's tongue swirled around his nipple and then he gripped the ring between his teeth and pulled at it.

"Stop!" Justin begged. The sensation had him arching his back, squirming against Brian's grip.

"Oh no," Brian said, pulling again. "I'm the one in charge now. Don't move." He got up off the bed, and went to his drawer.

He pulled out a handful of neckties, but not ones that Justin had seen before. "Damn, those are..."

"Ugly," Brian said. "But I didn't buy them to wear them." He smirked, and seated himself on Justin's thighs. "Give me your wrists, Sunshine," he said.

Justin obediently pressed his wrists together in easy reach. He understood, somewhere inside, that Brian needed to prove that even though he'd let himself be topped, he was still in charge. Brian tied them together. "Too tight?" he asked. Justin shook his head.

Brian stood up, climbed off the bed with easy grace, and then pulled Justin to his feet. "What..." he started to ask.

"Don't talk," Brian commanded. He led Justin to the table. "Bend over," he said, pressing Justin down with a firm hand between his shoulder blades.

Justin allowed Brian to push his chest and stomach flat against the table. Brian knelt, pulling his legs apart. He tied one ankle to the leg of the table, and then grabbed the other one.

Suddenly, he stopped. It hit Justin, after a moment, why. *Shit*.

"Justin, what happened to your leg?" Brian's voice was unnaturally calm. Justin stood, pulling his leg away from Brian's hand.

"Nothing," he said. He twisted his hands around so that he could untie the knot. It fought him.

"Nothing? Justin, it's covered in cuts and scars." Brian grabbed Justin's hands in his own, stopping his desperate attempt to free his wrists.

"Untie me," Justin said.

"Justin—"

"I'm done. Debbie. You've heard my safe word. Now, untie me." He tried to pull away from Brian's grip.

"Okay. I'll untie you." Brian undid the knot holding Justin's wrists together. Justin dropped to the floor

to untie his leg.

"I'll do it," Brian said, knocking his hands out of the way. Justin could see his hands shake as he untied the knot. When it came free, Justin leapt up and started for the bathroom.

"Wait," Brian commanded. Justin ignored him, going into the bedroom.

He heard footsteps, and then Brian had his arm in his hand. He tried to pull away, but Brian grabbed his other arm and pulled him against him, so his back was pressed to Brian's chest. Brian wrapped his arms across Justin's chest, pinning him there.

"Brian, let go," Justin said, trying to keep desperation out of his voice.

"No," Brian said. He held on to Justin as he struggled to get away.

"I'll kick you!" Justin threatened.

"Do it and I'll spank you," Brian replied, "and not in a way you'll like. Knock it off!"

The two struggled, and then Brian tightened his grip and pushed Justin onto the bed, using his extra weight and the force of gravity to back up his strength. He pinned Justin facedown underneath him, holding his arms to the mattress.

The two were breathing heavily. Brian could feel Justin trembling underneath him.

"What's the problem, Justin? What happened to your leg?" Brian was beginning to feel ill. His mind flashed back to the night he'd fucked the zucchini guy, and the blood-spattered toilet paper and razor-blade in the bathroom garbage. He'd assumed that the razor had broken somehow, and cut Justin. He was starting to feel that that was not what had happened.

"I told you, nothing fucking happened to my leg! Now let go of me!" Justin heard his voice crack as he started to cry. He struggled anew, needing more than anything to get away from Brian.

Brian refused to let him up. "Something happened," he said. "It's fucking *covered* in scars."

Suddenly, Justin's body went slack. Brian could feel him shaking as he cried into the pillow. "Please," he sobbed. "Please..."

"Justin..." Brian hated the feelings of helplessness coursing through him. "Tell me." He shifted so his weight wasn't pressing Justin into the mattress, and flipped the boy on his back. Justin turned his head, trying to hide his tears.

Brian grabbed his hands, interlacing his fingers with Justin's and settling his weight on Justin's thighs.

"It's nothing," Justin said, choking on his tears.

"Don't tell me that." Brian gently wiped away a tear, and then took Justin's hand. "I can see it's something."

"Brian, please," Justin replied, pulling one hand free and covering his face.

Brian's eyes ran over the pale arm, and his stomach dropped. More scars striped his arm, these ones paler and more healed than the ones on his leg. He wondered how he'd missed them before.

He covered the scars with his hand. "Justin," he said. "Your arm."

Justin tried to hide his arm under the pillow next to him, but Brian pulled it free and held onto his hand. Justin shut his eyes, the expression on his face one of waiting for the boom to fall.

"I'm not stupid," Brian said finally, knowing that Justin knew he knew. "I've seen scars like that before."

"Well, if you know, then why did you ask?" Justin yelled, pulling his hands out of Brian's. Brian promptly grabbed his wrists and pinned them down again.

"How long have you been doing this?" Brian asked, scared of the answer. The silence stretched into minutes.

"P-pretty much since I moved in," Justin whispered finally. He sniffed.

*Fuck.* Just the answer he was hoping it wasn't. Brian pushed sweaty bangs off of Justin's face.

"Why, Justin?" he asked, trying to keep his voice gentle, even though he wanted to grab his shoulders and shake him, wanted to force the truth out of him. Whatever it was.

He waited, but Justin didn't answer. He watched the boy struggle to keep from crying, and he felt something akin to pity. He released Justin's wrists and lay down next to him. "Come here," he said, opening his arms.

Justin stood up. "I've got to use the bathroom," he said, and practically ran for it. Brian heard the lock turn, and he felt his stomach jump in fear. Was he going to cut himself now?

Brian stood up, and crept, cat-like, to the bathroom door. He pressed his ear against it.

He could hear Justin crying.

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## Chapter 8 – Panic

Justin sat on the toilet lid, his elbows on his knees and head in his hands. He couldn't seem to stop crying. Why had he been so stupid?

He'd forgotten about the scars for a moment, forgotten about the damage he'd done to himself, and now Brian knew. He knew, and there was no way Justin could take it back or make him forget. It was just there, forever. Much like the marks he'd made on his skin. "Fuck," he whispered.

He'd never wanted to cut so badly, not when he'd seen Hobbs at the hospice, not when he'd let Sap suck



him off so he could dance on the bar, not even when Ryerson had told him he should leave PIFA. And he couldn't, not now. Brian would look, would see the fresh cuts, and God knew what he would do then.

Justin didn't know what he thought of Brian's reaction. Their struggle had been physically rough; painful, even. Justin could feel places on his skin where bruises were starting to rise. It was just a part of having such pale skin, but he'd be marked for days.

*I suppose at least it won't be permanent*, he thought ruefully, rubbing the healing cuts on his leg.

The urge to see blood made him feel slightly vampire-like. The emotions swirling inside of him were making it hard to breathe. He swallowed hard, trying to overcome the feeling that his throat was closing. He needed it, now. Before he exploded.

But he couldn't.

Had to.

Couldn't.

He felt like he was going to throw up, or pass out. Panic rolled over him in terrifying, heavy waves. He could hear himself hyperventilating,

"Justin, are you okay in there?" Brian's voice through the doorway gave him something to focus on. He gulped down air desperately.

"Justin? Unlock the door." He could hear Brian trying the doorknob. But of course, he'd locked it, not wanting Brian to follow him. Only now, he needed him. Tears coursed down his cheeks and dripped to the floor.

Like blood. But the pain was missing, and also the relief. He dropped forward, landing hard on his hands and knees with a cry of pain.

"Fuck!" Brian cried. Justin curled up on his side, wishing he would just die and not have to face Brian, not have to face him now that he knew. He could hear Brian beating his fists against the door.

"Open the door, Justin!" he yelled, his voice harsh with fear. Justin felt a strange terror, like that of a child who has done something wrong and is going to be in trouble. The pounding on the door continued. His fingers scrabbled at the healing cuts on his leg. Suddenly, he felt a familiar bite.

He looked at his fingertips. They were dotted with blood. He scrambled into an awkward crouch and looked at his ankle. He'd pulled off a scab.

He was still gasping, still fighting for breath, still feeling the walls closing in on him threatening to crush him. He scratched at the scab again, harder. He needed to see more blood.

There was a loud string of curses, and then there was an incredible crash. Justin screamed as the door splintered from the force of Brian's shoulder. He toppled backwards onto the floor, throwing his hands over his head to protect himself.

Brian stood over him. He was fighting multiple flashes of memory.

*Himself, as a child, huddled on the floor, trying to escape Jack's rage—and his brutal fists.*

He dropped to his knees, pulling Justin into his arms.

*Justin, lying on the cement, blood covering his face.*

Justin was whimpering, his eyes shut so tight he was seeing white flashes. "NO!" he screamed, but Brian didn't get the feeling Justin was talking to him.

"Shh," Brian said, using every ounce of strength he possessed to keep his voice calm and soothing. "It's okay, Sonnyboy."

He could feel how hard Justin was shaking. He still held his arms over his head, hyperventilating so hard that Brian feared he might pass out.

*Would probably do him some good, Brian thought. Give him a chance to calm down.*

He hung on to the boy, who was very obviously not paying attention to Brian. And then, very suddenly, he went limp.

Brian felt another jolt of panic race up his spine. "Fuck! Shit! Justin!" He slapped the boy's face, trying to wake him. He didn't stir.

Did he take pills? Brian grabbed the garbage can and looked inside. Nothing. No bottles. He jumped to his feet and ran to the medicine cabinet, rifling through the pills. Everything seemed to be there. He ran back to Justin's side.

"Justin? Justin!" He felt frantically for a pulse. It was there, and strong. Brian swallowed hard. He was still alive. He probably had just passed out from hyperventilating.

He knelt at Justin's side for almost five minutes, looking over his body. He saw the multitude of scars on his leg, and a handful on his arm. He also saw a multitude of small bruises springing up on his arms. With a jolt, Brian realized they were handprints. His fingertips, pressing into Justin's skin, had caused those purple marks. There were also two larger bruises on his back, where Brian had used his elbows to pin him down. Guilt hit him hard in his gut. "I'm sorry, Sonnyboy," he whispered, gently resting his hand over one of the bruises. Shit. He knew as well as anyone, that sorry was bullshit. He sounded like Jack, for Christ's sake! He shook his head, clearing his thoughts.

It had been long enough that Brian was wondering if he needed to call an ambulance. Suddenly, Justin's eyelids fluttered.

"Justin?" Brian said. The boy blinked, looking dazed.

"Brian? Brian, please..." Justin trailed off, shutting his eyes.

"Please what?" Brian asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"Please, don't hate me," he whimpered.

*Oh God.* "Come lay down," Brian instructed, getting to his feet. He nearly picked Justin up and led him to the bed.

The boy allowed Brian to help him lay down. Brian could see him shaking.

"Brian, don't leave me," he begged.

"I'm not going anywhere," Brian promised, lying down next to him. "Just rest, okay?"

He watched Justin close his eyes. He reached for him.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Brian ignored it.

The knock became more persistent.

"Fuck. Not a good time," Brian muttered, but since Justin's eyes were closed, he stood, figuring he'd tell whoever was on the other side of the door to fuck off.

As he approached the door, he heard a strong male voice he didn't recognize.

"Pittsburgh PD, open up."

*Fuck.*

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## Chapter 9 – Police and Problems

Brian grabbed a pillow off the sofa to cover his crotch. "I'm coming," he said. *And not in a life-affirming way.*

He unlocked the door and slid it open with his free hand. Outside his door stood two cops, a man and a

woman..

"Can I help you, officers?" he asked, trying to sound gracious despite the fact that he was wearing nothing except a throw pillow.

Their faces were stern as they flashed their badges. Brian had fucked a few cops before; they were the real deal. "I'm Officer Henley, and this is Officer Grey. We got a call saying there seemed to be a domestic disturbance happening here?" The officers' eyes were quickly taking in Brian and his loft. He was glad that most of their tussle had occurred in the bedroom and bathroom, rather than in plain view. "The neighbors were concerned."

Brian had to fight not to roll his eyes. He'd lived here for years, and never once had the neighbors called the cops, for any reason...and he'd had a lot of rough, loud sex. With plenty of kinky begging and pleading for him to stop. *Figures.*

"We're fine, officer," Brian said. "There was just a little...incident, but he's asleep now-"

"He's asleep now?" the male officer repeated. "And 'he' refers to...?"

"Your son?" the female officer asked, looking around. Probably for evidence of a child. But Brian made a point of never having any of Gus' things at the loft.

"My lover," Brian replied, with a slight bite. "My son lives with his mothers."

The officers glanced at each other. Brian couldn't read the quick expression that passed between them, which was unusual. Usually he could read people like books. The feeling was disconcerting.

"Can we come in, Mr...." Officer Henley trailed off. Brian waited just a moment longer than propriety dictated before answering.

"Kinney," Brian replied. "Go ahead." Brian left the loft door opened, turned away from the officers, and went into the bedroom. He grabbed his jeans off of the floor, where he'd left them, and slid them on.

He walked back out to the living room, where the cops stood. He did a quick visual check for drugs left out, but luckily, they were all stashed away where they belonged. *As long as they don't go into the fridge.*

"Where is your...lover?" Officer Grey asked, looking around.

"He's asleep. In our bedroom." Brian looked at them stiffly.

"We'd like to talk to him," Officer Henley said.

"He just fucking fell asleep, after a hell of a...I don't even know what to call it. You don't need to wake

him up." Brian's voice, although low in volume, was quite forceful.

"I'm afraid we do, Mr. Kinney," he said. He started towards the bedroom.

"Stop." Brian's voice carried the force of a bullet. "I'll wake him up." The last thing he needed was for Justin to have another panic attack. They'd barely survived the first one. Although, at least then they would believe he wasn't...what? Beating him? Fuck.

He walked silently into the bedroom. The cops watched him from the doorway, but they were quiet. He walked to Justin's side of the bed, where the boy was curled in a small ball under the covers, and sat. Justin startled.

"Shh, it's me," Brian said.

"Brian?" Justin sounded so young and vulnerable. Brian just wanted to protect him. He put his hand on Justin's shoulder, through the duvet. "Are there people here? I heard talking..."

"Someone called the cops. They're here, and they want to talk to you."

Justin sat up suddenly, eyes wide. "Shit!" he said.

"It's not a big deal," Brian said, although frankly, it pissed him off. "Just—"

"Stop coaching him," Officer Henley barked.

"Coaching is for little league," Brian spit back. "I'm explaining."

"Well, stop." The officers walked up the steps into the bedroom. Justin grabbed Brian's arm, hard enough to hurt. He was scared.

"It's okay, Sonnyboy," he whispered, his voice pitched low so only Justin could hear.

"I'm not d-dressed," Justin stuttered. He felt his cheeks flush, and was glad for the darkness that hid it.

"You mind leaving so he can get a pair of fucking pants on?" Brian asked. "I might not mind everyone seeing me naked, but he does."

Officer Grey looked as though she'd like to protest. Brian held up his hand. "Listen, if it makes you feel better, I'll go out there with you. Just let the kid get dressed without giving a show." He gently removed Justin's hand from its death grip around his bicep, and stood up. Justin looked like he wanted to protest, but he didn't.

The officers and Brian stood in the living room. Through the fogged glass, he could see Justin's indistinct outline as he tugged on a pair of sweats. Remembering the bruises on Justin's arms and back, Brian hoped Justin would throw on a tee shirt.

Justin felt sick to his stomach. Cops, here. Because of him. Because he'd freaked out Brian enough that he'd yelled, pounded on the bathroom door, knocked it down. Because their fight had been noisy as hell. All his fault. He took deep breaths, wanting to cut, wanting Brian to hold him and tell him it would be okay.

He tightened the string on the sweatpants, and felt himself shaking. "Brian," he called weakly.

Brian heard Justin moan his name, and the fear in his voice made his stomach drop. Automatically, he started towards the steps. One of the cops grabbed his shoulder, but Brian pulled away and nearly leapt into the bedroom.

Justin was standing by the closet, shaking like a leaf. Brian was next to him in three steps, wrapping him in his arms. "Hey, it's okay. Relax." He kissed the top of the blonde's head.

He heard the cops behind him, but he ignored them, concentrating on Justin. He rubbed his bare back, mindful of the bruises. *That I put there.* He tried to put the thought aside. It had been accidental, and they only looked so bad because Justin's skin was stark white. It didn't help much. He felt like Jack.

Justin clung to him. Brian's arms were wrapped tightly around him, his hand tracing light circles on Justin's back. He felt the panic that had started rising inside of him ebb enough that he could breathe.

"What happened to the door?" the male cop asked, looking at the battered, splintered remains of the bathroom door. Justin tensed, but Brian's gentle touch didn't stop.

"I knocked it down," Brian said matter-of-factly.

"I locked it," Justin managed to say, although he mostly said it to Brian's chest.

"Why did he knock it down?" the female cop asked, coming closer to the pair.

Justin didn't know what to say. Already, his panic-smeared memories were foggy. He looked up at Brian.

His eyes were so wide. The expression on his face reminded Brian of Gus. Trusting. Innocent. And unlike Gus, frightened out of his wits.

"He was crying. Hyperventilating. It made me nervous...because of a discussion we'd been having. And then I heard a thud, and he yelped, and I was scared he'd hurt himself, so I tried to open the door. But he'd locked it, and I kept telling him to open the door, but he didn't. So finally, I knocked it down."

Justin started crying then, silently. Brian pressed his face into his chest, feeling the tears on his skin.

"Can we come out into the living room?" Officer Henley asked. "I'd like to talk in the light."

Brian wanted to refuse, wanted to allow the darkness to cover the tears and the bruises that looked so bad, but instead he took a deep breath. "Come on, Sunshine," he said, gently pushing him away except for the hand that clung to his.

The officers moved aside so Brian and Justin could go down the stairs ahead of them. Brian heard a light intake of breath when they walked into the light, and the still-darkening bruises became visible.

Brian led them to the kitchen counter, leaning casually against it. Justin leaned against Brian's side. Brian attempted to read the officers' expressions, but came up blank. *Damn, they'd be great at poker.*

"What's your name, son?" Officer Henley asked.

"Justin. Justin Taylor." Justin was glad he'd managed to keep his voice steady. He swiped the remainder of the tears off his face with the back of his free arm. Brian squeezed his hand, trying to give him a little support.

"How old are you?" he asked.

Brian wanted to pull his hair out, but he resisted. Anyway, even he noticed that Justin appeared younger than his age. Hell, he appeared younger than he usually did at the moment, with mussed hair from sleep, bare feet, and a nervous expression.

"Eighteen," Justin replied.

"What's your birth date?"

Justin rattled it off, and Brian was reminded of that first night. He fought a smile at the memory.

*"What is this, a missile launch?" he'd asked.*

The officer didn't look convinced. "Let me see your I.D.," he said.

Luckily, Justin had dumped his bag on the counter, and he merely had to turn to dig it out. The officer looked it over, and then handed it back. Justin threw the wallet on the counter, and grabbed Brian's hand again.

"How do you know this man?" asked the officer.

"He's my...uh...lover." Justin looked a little uneasy, and why not? Brian had never let him pin a label

on their relationship.

"You don't sound too sure of that," Officer Grey said.

"It's complicated," Justin said.

"Given the limits of language and people's minds," Brian said.

"Right. Is this man your pimp, son?" asked the male officer.

Justin's eyes widened in horror, while Brian's narrowed.

"No," they both said at the same time.

"I'm not a hustler," Justin said, sounding offended.

Brian reached behind him and grabbed the framed photo off the shelf over the counter. "He's my lover," Brian said, ignoring the pinch that word caused. "Here he is, with my son." It was a picture of Brian, Justin and Gus at the playground, pushing him on the swings. Lindsey had taken the photo, and given it to him framed, so he'd just put it on that shelf. He reminded himself to thank her.

"It was just a question," the officer replied, looking at the photo in Brian's hand. "He's pretty young."

"My son?" Brian asked.

"Justin," the cop replied.

"I'm only thirty," Brian replied, feeling disgusted with these cops and their questions. *It's not like I'm a fucking child molester.*

"Brian and I are in a relationship." Justin shuddered, pulling closer to Brian. Brian settled his arms over Justin's shoulders, resisting his urge to say that wasn't exactly the word for it. It was as close as the English language got, in a non-conventional, undefined sort of way.

The female officer took over the questions. "How'd you get all those bruises, Justin?" she asked.

"They're fresh."

Justin sighed. "Listen. I'm fine, we're fine. No one's hurting anyone, and h-honestly, I just want to sleep. Can you please leave us alone?"

"Listen, Justin. If you're afraid of Brian, if you want us to help you, all you have to do is ask. We'll take you down to the police station to file a report, collect evidence, get a restraining order—"

"I'm not afraid of Brian, and there's no reason to file a report and no evidence to collect. I just want to



go to bed." Justin sounded tired.

"Those bruises—"

"Did not come because I was beating him. He was having a panic attack, he scared the fuck out of me, and I knocked down a door to help him." Brian's voice was cold. "Now please." He gestured towards the door.

Officer Grey handed Justin a card. "If you change your mind, you can call at any time. Someone will assist you."

Justin hung onto Brian, the card crumpled in his fist. The two of them stood there, watching the officers leave. Brian was sure they were deliberately moving as slow as possible, in case Justin changed his mind. But finally, they were out of the loft and heading down the stairs.

Brian released Justin and shut and locked the loft door behind them.

"Are you okay, Sunshine?" he asked softly, turning back to the worn-out blond.

"Yeah. But I'm tired." He looked tired. He tossed the balled up card onto the counter. "That was... fucking weird. I mean, since when do your neighbors call the cops?"

Brian shook his head. "Yeah, no kidding. All that kinky sex, and no one ever called. Must get off on that sort of thing."

Justin smiled. It was small, but true, and Brian had to kiss him for it.

The kiss was brief and sweet. They broke apart, and Brian grabbed his hand and led him back into the bedroom. They wordlessly stripped off their pants and climbed into bed.

Justin curled up on his side again, and Brian curled around him, his arm across the blonde's chest.

"We'll talk later. Just rest now." Brian felt him tense his muscles, but when Brian didn't move, and didn't continue the conversation, Justin relaxed.

Eventually, his breathing evened out. Brian could tell he was asleep. He kissed the back of the boy's head.

"Oh, Sunshine," he murmured, feeling sick from the myriad emotions running through him. "I don't get it."

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## Chapter 10 – Deals with the Devil

Brian eventually fell asleep, but he woke early the next morning. He glanced over Justin's sleeping form to the alarm clock. 5:00 a.m. He had a while before he'd have to get up and get ready for work.

Brian lay next to the sleeping teenager, watching him. He looked peaceful asleep, as if all the troubles of the day couldn't touch him. Brian used to think that was merely because the boy had no troubles, but obviously, he was wrong. The scars on his body spoke legions about his troubles.

Brian knew what cutting was, at least in theory. He'd taken Psychology 101 in college. But what he hadn't understood then was what he didn't understand now. Enough people would hurt you, given the chance. So why hurt yourself? And anyway, Brian hated scars. He hated anything that marred his perfection.

How could he talk to Justin about it? What could he do? He wasn't a therapist; wasn't a doctor. He couldn't force him to stop, although he'd like to. The helplessness he felt was becoming familiar. He shook his head, trying to clear the feeling.

He thought through their fight the night before. He didn't want to go through another round of that. He knew he'd feel guilty as hell until all the bruises he'd caused were healed, and he had no interest in dealing with more cops. But he also couldn't pretend that it had never happened, that it didn't matter, that he hadn't felt his heart jump into his throat as Justin lay limp on the bathroom floor.

The blond murmured in his sleep, rolling onto his side. His arms flopped in front of him. Brian saw the bruises he'd inflicted, finger-shaped marks on his biceps, forearms, and wrists. Underneath them, he spotted the pale lines marking his skin.

There were a lot of them, although nowhere near as many as were on his leg. Brian studied them in the soft light streaming in through the window. Some were slightly raised and pink, others flat and nearly white. Nothing that looked fresh.

Cautiously, he sat up. He gripped the edge of the comforter and slowly pulled it up until Justin's ankles and calves were uncovered. He looked at the boy's face; he was definitely still asleep.

Brian studied the scars. They were mostly on his right leg, straight stripes, a couple inches long on the bottom of his leg. Looking at the dozens of scars there made Brian's stomach turn. Some of them were healed over, others only half healed. Some were still scabbing over. The scabs had been peeled off of a few of them, and there were darkened smudges around them. With a start, Brian realized it was dried blood.

He swallowed hard and tossed the duvet back over Justin's legs. *Coffee. I need coffee.*

He plodded into the kitchen and began making coffee. The last thing he wanted to do right now was think. About Justin, about him hurting himself, about the blood and the scars and the—STOP!

He paced back and forth restlessly, waiting for the coffee to brew. He glanced at the clock hanging on the wall; 6:30. The alarm would go off in 15 minutes.

"Brian?" His sleepy voice was barely audible over the burble of the coffeemaker.

*Shit.* Brian hadn't yet decided what to do, and now he was awake.

"I'm in the kitchen," he said. His voice was calm, but inside, he was frantically scrambling for what to do. The urge to grab him and shake sense into him was still there; but thinking of last night's confrontation and its effects, he fought it. He also felt the need to know *why*, but he didn't even know if Justin knew that.

He heard him bumping around in the bedroom, and checked the coffeemaker. It was close to finished brewing; he poured himself a cup and gulped it down. "Aaah," he said.

He looked up when he heard soft footsteps. Justin stood at the threshold of the bedroom, dressed in a pair of baggy sweatpants.

"What are you waiting for? Breakfast in bed?" Usually, Brian would have been suggestive, but today, it felt awkward. "You want some coffee?"

He held up the carafe. Justin nodded, and walked forward until he was standing in front of the counter. He looked unsure, and again, Brian was reminded of his youth. He wrapped his arms around his bare torso, as if he were hugging himself, bringing the bruises on his arms into sharp focus. They made Brian wince inwardly, but he held his hand steady as he handed the cup of coffee to him.

"Thanks," the blond said, his voice quiet. He sipped at it.

The tension between them was tangible. It wasn't angry tension, or sexual tension, or any of the other tensions they usually had between them. It was...nervous. Cautious.

Justin sipped his coffee slowly, avoiding eye contact. When he'd awoke, Brian hadn't been there. Although he knew it wasn't true, he was afraid that Brian had left, had decided he couldn't handle another problem with him, and stormed off. Of course, he wouldn't do that; he'd kick Justin out. But no, Brian was still there.

Justin had slept well, actually. No dreams that he could remember, no nightmares. But now he'd woken up, and remembered the night before. He remembered that Brian knew. He remembered their fight, the police, the nosy questions. Now what?

"You're up early," Brian remarked. He took another drink of coffee.

"So are you," Justin replied. He looked up. Their eyes met. Justin looked away first, ashamed.

Suddenly, the alarm clock went off. They both jumped. "I'll go turn that off," Justin volunteered, the words spilling out in a rush. He put the coffee cup on the counter, and dashed into the bedroom.

Brian watched him dart off, looking for all the world like a frightened rabbit. "I can't handle this," he muttered into his coffee cup.

Justin sat on the bed, his knees drawn against his chest. "I can't handle this," he breathed. He could feel familiar anxiety building up in his chest, and he fought it with all his might. He couldn't cut now, not here, not with Brian in the other room. Not without a lock on the bathroom door, or for that matter, much of a door on the bathroom door. Brian had really done a number on it with his shoulder.

"You want a ride to school?" Brian asked from the kitchen.

Justin thought about it. He didn't want to walk, but he also didn't want to have to sit in a vehicle with Brian, in the awkward silence that had built up between them. "I think I'll walk. I could use the exercise," he said finally.

"All right," Brian said after a moment.

Silently, Justin stood and stripped off his sweatpants. He left them where they lay on the floor, walked into the bathroom, and turned on the shower.

He waited until the water was warm before stepping in. The water pressure stung his back, especially where it was bruised, but he didn't move. He just let it sting, let it hurt. Tried to let that be enough pain, so he wouldn't feel the urge to cut. It wasn't working.

He looked at the door. He could easily see the bedroom beyond through the splintery gaps in the wood. He couldn't do it here, not while Brian was here.

As if he'd heard his thoughts, Brian appeared. He opened the bathroom door. "Can I join you?" he asked.

He never asked; he just did. Justin shrugged. "It's your shower," he said. Brian opened the glass door and stepped inside.

Justin poured some shampoo into his palm and started washing his hair. Brian snagged the bottle out of his hand before it touched the shelf.

They showered in silence, their bodies never touching. The feeling was odd for both of them, like they were showering in a gym locker room. A *high school* gym locker room, not the locker room at the Ript Gym.

Brian had to fight the urge to tell Justin to wash the blood off of his ankle. It wasn't clearly blood unless you got close to it, and he didn't want to have to explain his snooping this morning. He never wanted to see blood on Justin's skin again, after that horrible night in the parking garage, and the kid was purposely making himself bleed! Brian shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

Justin's back was to him, and Brian couldn't take his eyes off the two dark bruises there. Another bolt of self-hatred struck him hard. He reached out for him, wanting to comfort, but stopped just short of contact. He let his hand drop back to his side.

Justin finished as quickly as possible, and stepped past Brian and out of the shower. He grabbed one of the towels off the rack and dried his hair before wrapping it around his hips. He left the bathroom quickly, not even bothering to brush his teeth.

Brian stood in the shower, watching him through the gaps in the door. He'd have to replace it eventually...well, maybe not. He'd figure it out later. He knew that he didn't ever want to have to do what he'd done last night. He rubbed his shoulder. It wasn't bruised; Brian's skin didn't bruise easily. But it was sore. Maybe a screen, instead, he decided.

Justin scrambled into clean jeans and a long sleeved tee shirt. He needed to get out of the loft now. He stuffed his feet into socks, and slipped on his shoes. "I'm leaving," he called.

"See you later," Brian replied.

Justin paused. "Yeah," he said finally.

The loft door slammed, and Brian let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Justin took a deep breath before starting down the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator. He was dying to cut. Right. Now.

As he walked down the sidewalk, he realized he didn't have his art kit with him. It was at PIFA, because it was a pain in the ass to haul back and forth, especially since he did at least 75% of his work at PIFA, rather than the loft. There, he mostly sketched pictures of Brian. But he couldn't wait to cut until he got to PIFA.

God, this morning had been so weird. He'd never felt so uncomfortable in Brian's presence. It was so different even from the night before, when all he'd wanted was for Brian to hold him, to protect him. But, he reminded himself, last night he'd been panicking, and later, had been worried about the cops. Brian's loft wasn't exactly a drug-free environment, and he'd been afraid the cops would start snooping in an attempt to prove that Brian was hurting him. The last thing he'd needed last night was for Brian to get arrested. He'd already been on a narrow ledge; it would have pushed him over.

*But it didn't*, he reminded himself. The panic was already blossoming in his chest. Now. He needed it now.

He saw a sign about a block away. "Hank's Hardware," he said. "Bingo."

He started jogging towards the sign and ran up to the door, yanking on it. It didn't budge.

"Shit!" he cried, frustrated and desperate. "Come on!" He searched the windows, looking for a store hours sign. Opens at 7:00. He looked down at his watch. It said 7:00, on the dot., "Fuck! You're supposed to be open!"

From inside, he saw an older man approach the door. Justin wanted to pull his hair out. He'd never seen anyone move that slow. At least, not anyone under 90. And this guy looked to be about 65.

The man unlocked the door, and Justin pulled it open, nearly bowling over the old man.

"What's your hurry, boy?" the man asked.

"Sorry," Justin called over his shoulder. He started up and down the aisles, desperately searching.

He was about to go ask the old man for help, when his eyes lit on the shiny plastic handles. "Yes," he said, grabbing one of the small, portable x-actos, the kind you attach to a keychain. It would go on his bag. But he had to use it first. Now.

He forced himself to wait. "You can't go cutting yourself in the middle of a fucking hardware store," he scolded himself under his breath. "They'll haul you to the fucking loony bin!"

He nearly ran to the cash register, digging cash out of his wallet. The old man slowly, carefully rang it up. "\$1.19," the man said. He reached under the counter and pulled out a bag, with an arthritic slowness.

"I don't need a bag," he said, dropping two dollars on the counter. "Keep the change."

He grabbed the knife, ignoring the man's protestations, and bolted from the store.

Next door was a coffee shop. He ran inside and sprinted towards the bathroom in the back.

"It's for customers only!" a girl behind the counter called out.

"I'll buy something after," he replied, gritting his teeth. Before she could say anything, he popped inside and locked the door behind him.

He leaned against the wall, using it to support his weight as he sunk to the floor. Quickly, he rolled up the leg of his pants. The scarred, battered skin met his eyes. He used his thumb to expose the blade on the knife, and quickly, deftly, sank it into his flesh.

It burned, bringing tears of pain and relief to Justin's eyes. The pressure on his chest was enormous. He cut again, watching the blood bubble up and make small clumps along the cut.

He moved up a little higher, closer to his knee, where there were fewer scars. The fresh skin parted easily under the blade. The blood flowed freely over his skin, staining the blond hairs on his leg. He shuddered at the jolt of pain each cut caused.

Finally, he felt release almost as powerful as an orgasm. He panted, watching the blood roll down and absorb into his sock. *Brian's going to notice that*, he thought, but he couldn't muster up the strength to care. He no longer felt like his world was crashing around him, and that was all that really mattered. He closed the blade and dropped it into his bag.

Justin pushed himself to his feet and grabbed a few paper towels out of the dispenser. He quickly wiped up the blood that hadn't already dried and tossed the stained towel into the garbage. Finally, he rolled down the leg of his pants. Everything was back to normal. Everything would be okay.

He washed his hands at the sink before leaving the bathroom.

"What are you going to order?" the girl behind the counter asked. Justin sighed and walked over to her.

"Give me a small latte, to go," he said, handing her a five.

Deals with the devil were expensive, but when you had to have it, you just had to have it.

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## Chapter 11 – Can't Put it Off Forever

It was 7 PM. Justin was walking out of PIFA, about to start the walk back to the loft, when a black Jeep pulled up to the sidewalk. He wasn't really paying attention; he had a lot on his mind. He started around it.

Was he ignoring me? Brian studied the blond, hunched under the weight of his bag. He rolled down the window. "Justin!" he called.

Justin turned, surprised to hear Brian's voice. "Brian?" And then he realized that the black Jeep he'd walked around was Brian's. "Sorry. I didn't even see you." He stood in the middle of the street, looking at him.

"Get in," Brian said, with a small jerk of his head. Justin smiled cautiously, and started for the

passenger side.

He climbed inside. Brian waited for him to buckle his seatbelt.

"You weren't in the loft when I got home from work," Brian said. It sounded like a statement, but Justin knew better. He wanted an explanation.

"I was working on a piece for the student art show that's coming up soon," Justin replied. It wasn't exactly a lie; he'd been trying to work, but instead had stared at a blank canvas, unable to think of anything to paint.

Brian nodded, and started to drive. That awkward silence sat between them, almost like a third person in the car. Brian knew he was going to have to bite the bullet, soon, and start talking. Fuck. He hated talking. It was messy, and emotional, and involved a lot of bullshit.

Justin forced himself not to fidget. He knew that Brian wasn't going to let this whole thing just fade into the woodwork, not after the debacle last night. He felt himself getting more nervous as the blocks went by.

Finally, Brian parked the jeep. Justin had to contain his urge to jump out of the vehicle and run for the loft. After all, Brian was going to be there soon enough, and whatever was going to happen would happen. He swallowed hard, trying to clear a nervous lump forming in his throat.

The two walked together in uncomfortable silence, into the building and to the elevator. Justin could feel Brian studying him as they waited, but he deliberately avoided making eye contact. Where the fuck is the elevator?

Finally, it creaked down to the ground floor. They stepped inside. Brian could feel nervous energy radiating off of Justin. He reached for him, hooked his arm around the boy's shoulder, and pulled him close.

Justin allowed himself to be pulled into Brian's one-armed embrace. It felt nice; the first contact they'd made all day. Brian kissed him, and he returned it. An idea popped into his head. Sex. If he could distract Brian with sex, he might not even talk about it at all. It was worth a try.

He wrapped his arms around Brian's neck and pulled him down for another, more intense kiss. He felt the change in Brian's posture that told him he was hooked. He slid one hand down between them to stroke Brian's cock.

Brian let out an appreciative groan. He threw his head back, and Justin attacked his neck with kisses and licks, feeling Brian's growing erection. Brian's hands roamed down to his ass, gently squeezing both cheeks.

Suddenly Brian picked him up. He was so surprised he let go of Brian's dick and instinctively wrapped



his legs around Brian's waist and his arms around his neck. "Hey!" he yelped.

He heard Brian chuckle. "C'mon Sunshine. It's our floor."

Indeed it was. Brian carried him into the house and sat him down on the counter. He turned to shut the loft door, and then returned to Justin.

They both yanked off their shirts, tossing them to the floor. Justin reached for Brian's belt buckle, when suddenly, he remembered his leg. Shit.

Thinking fast, he jumped down off the counter, his hand still on Brian's belt. "Come on," he whispered. "The shower."

They both kicked off their shoes on their way into the bathroom. Justin pulled his socks off and shielded the bloody one in his hand before stuffing it into the pocket of his jeans. Brian unbuttoned his jeans with a speed born of practice, and yanked them down. Justin stepped out of them. Brian let his pants drop down along with his underwear, and reached in to turn on the shower as Justin finished removing his clothes.

He turned and grabbed Justin's hand, and pulled him into the shower.

Justin nearly slipped on the wet towels, and grabbed Brian's arms to keep from falling. Brian laughed again.

"What's so funny?" Justin asked.

"You are," Brian replied, and he bent his head for another kiss.

Justin eagerly explored Brian's mouth, enjoying his taste. He reached back down, his hand running lightly over Brian's dick.

"Cock-tease," Brian accused, kissing his way down Justin's neck and shoulder. Justin grinned, and slid down to his knees, his hands on Brian's ass. "Let me show you," Justin said, and then pressed his lips around the head of Brian's cock.

Brian moaned as Justin worked his cock, licking and sucking and nibbling at it in that way he had that drove Brian wild. "Stop," Brian said finally, and he pulled Justin to his feet.

He grabbed a condom and a packet of lube from the bowl in the shower and ripped the package open with his teeth. Justin's dick twitched at the sight. No matter how many times Brian did that, and there were plenty, he still thought it was one of the hottest things he'd ever seen.

Brian coated his dick with lube, and Justin turned so he was facing the shower wall. But Brian

commanded, "Turn around."

He did, and again, Brian picked him up. He held tightly to his neck as Brian used one hand to guide himself inside. Justin gasped, throwing his head back. "Oh!" he moaned.

Brian held him, using the wall to support some of his weight. "Come on Sunshine. Ride me," he said, his voice raspy with lust.

They moved together, their groans growing in intensity and volume until it was too much. Justin came first, crying out in ecstasy as he spurted cum all over his and Brian's chests. The spasming of Justin's muscles around his dick pushed him over the edge, and he came hard, filling the condom with a throaty groan.

The two clung together, panting, until Brian felt himself start to soften. He pulled free of Justin, and set him back on his feet. They kissed again as Brian pulled off the condom and tied it, tossing it into the nearby garbage.

They showered in companionable silence. Justin wondered if Brian had forgotten, or at least decided it didn't really matter that much after all. He rinsed the shampoo out of his hair.

Brian gently soaped Justin's back, avoiding the bruises that seemed to scream at him: Guilty! Finally, he turned him around again and kissed him before turning off the water. "Come on, Justin. Have you eaten yet?"

"No," Justin said, and his stomach grumbled loudly in confirmation.

"Thai okay?" Brian asked, wrapping a towel around his waist.

"Sure," Justin replied. He grabbed a towel too, and started drying his hair.

Brian left the bathroom and went to the kitchen. He called the Thai place and put in their usual order before going back to the bedroom.

Justin was already dressed, in the same pair of gray sweatpants he always wore. He smiled at Brian as he tied the drawstring.

"What are you smiling about?" Brian asked. He pulled the towel off his waist and snapped it at Justin's butt.

"Ow!" Justin complained, jumping, but he was still grinning. "Nothing."

"You look like the proverbial cat who ate the canary," Brian said, pulling a pair of cut-off sweats out of his dresser.

Justin shrugged and wandered into the kitchen. He felt successful. It had actually worked!

Brian came out to the kitchen and took a water out of the fridge. He walked over to the couch and sat down. "Come here," he said, patting the couch cushion next to him.

Suddenly, Justin didn't feel so confident. He paused. "Why?" he asked.

Brian didn't know what to say. Finally, he decided on the truth. "Because we have to talk."

Justin cocked his head. "I feel a role reversal coming on," he said.

"Shut up and sit down," Brian said, and he looked serious. Justin let out a breath; he'd known it would happen sooner or later. He walked over to the couch and plopped down, facing Brian. "All right," he said after a pause. "Let me have it."

Brian let out a grim chuckle. "You don't want me to do that. Trust me." He ducked his head for a moment, trying to figure out how to start.

"When I saw those scars on your leg, it was a hell of a shock, okay? And I just... I just don't understand why you'd do that to yourself." Brian glanced up, trying to see what Justin was thinking.

Justin heard his words, but was distracted by that familiar tightness in his chest. No. Not right now, please not now.

"And then I asked, and you freaked out. Even after you admitted it, you freaked out and locked yourself in the bathroom, scaring the fuck out of me with all the weird noises and crying and whatever. And—" Brian cut himself off, not wanting to mention his worry that Justin had been hurting himself in there.

Justin fought to keep his breathing even. The tightness in his chest continued to build. "Stop," he said, putting his hand out as if to block the flow of words.

Brian looked at him. His voice sounded odd, and his face was white. "Justin? Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine!" he spit. He was angry. What business was it of Brian's, anyway? "This isn't any of your business."

Brian's eyes widened. "None of my business?" he repeated. "Oh, sure. I'm just supposed to be okay with the fact that you're slicing up your body like it's made of fucking paper? That you're covered with self-inflicted scars?"

"It doesn't affect you!" Justin shot back. The anger was helping; his chest didn't feel like it was being

crushed anymore. Adrenaline shot into his system.

"You think it's safe, to do that?" Brian stood. "You think that, with all those cuts, something couldn't get in there? Look at them!" He grabbed Justin's foot and yanked up his pants leg, exposing the mass of scars and cuts. He stopped, suddenly. There were more now, fresh ones that had barely scabbed over.

Justin yanked the fabric over his leg, but it was too late.

"Are you a fucking idiot?" Brian yelled. "You spend a shitload of time in the backroom of Babylon, which is coated with cum. You think none of it is from someone with HIV? What if you got fucking AIDS because some body fluid got into one of those? Or some other disease?"

"That's not likely," Justin said, jumping to his feet. "I mean, yeah, there's a lot of cum, but it's not like you have to wade through it!"

"Or they get infected? You want to lose your leg?" Brian was furious. He moved so he was only six inches away. "Because you could!"

"Stop being a fucking drama queen!" Justin pushed at him, surprising them both and sending Brian stumbling backwards. "Nobody loses their leg from a couple of cuts!"

"There's a lot more than a couple!" Brian said, stalking towards him. "And apparently, you add to them on a daily basis!"

"What do you care? You have your method of 'pain management' and I've got mine, so fuck off!" Justin glared at him, breathing hard.

"Yeah, but my method isn't hurting anybody!" Brian yelled.

"Yes it is!" Justin wanted to grab him and shake him. "You don't think I hate watching you fuck your way through a dozen guys and suck down a dozen drinks? But I don't try to stop you!"

"Sure you do!" Brian said.

"Okay, fine. I do. But ultimately, it's your choice! And this is mine!"

"Well, excuse me if I don't sit back and watch you carve yourself like a fucking pumpkin!" Brian grabbed him hard, and Justin grunted in pain.

"You're hurting me!" he cried, trying to pull away.

Brian released him immediately, and Justin dropped down to the couch. Shame hit Brian in the gut like

a sledgehammer. But he couldn't, wouldn't apologize. "I thought you liked pain. Doesn't that hurt?" He gestured at Justin's leg.

Justin was shocked. Brian had never, ever grabbed him during a fight. Yelled, brooded, and queened out, certainly, but never made physical contact. "It's different," he managed to say. Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. The men looked at each other. The same thought ran through their minds: Fuck. Someone else called the cops.

Through silent agreement, Brian steeled himself, walked to the loft door and unlocked it.

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## Chapter 12 – What To Do?

It was the delivery boy, holding boxes of food. "Brian Kinney?" he asked.

"Yeah. Hang on a second." Brian allowed himself a small breath of relief. He turned and made his way back into the bathroom, snagging his wallet from his pocket. He handed the guy a twenty, and took the boxes. "Thanks."

He shut the loft door behind him, and held out one of the boxes. "Food's here," he said. Justin stood up and walked over to him, taking the box and a set of chopsticks.

They both walked back over to the couch, setting the other boxes on the coffee table and opening the ones in their hands. They silently dug in, and for a few minutes, the only noises were the sounds of chewing and swallowing.

Finally, Brian spoke. "Well?"

"What?" Justin asked. He took another bite of noodles, not wanting to have to speak.,

"Now what? I know. You know. You don't want to stop—"

"It's not that simple, Brian!" Justin was frustrated. He swallowed hard, and took a deep breath, trying to keep himself from yelling. "It's really not."

"What do you mean it's not that simple? I don't get it, okay? Why do you do that to yourself?" Brian was looking at him, he could feel his gaze.

Justin's hand started to shake. At first, he thought it was nerves, but then he realized it was only his gimp hand, tired from hanging onto a set of chopsticks. "Fuck!" he cried, feeling anger blaze through him. He dropped the chopsticks and tossed the box of noodles on the coffee table.

Brian put down his food and grabbed his trembling hand. He started rubbing it.

Justin didn't know what to do. On one hand, he wanted to scream that he wasn't a baby, that he could take care of himself. But he also wanted Brian to take care of him, to hold him and tell him everything would turn out okay, to fix it. Tears welled up in his eyes.

Brian noticed. "Does it hurt?" he asked. Justin shook his head, and then to his horror, burst out in tears.

Brian paused, unsure of what to do. *Shit. I don't do drama!* he complained to the universe. The universe wasn't listening. Fine. He could handle this.

He reached for the blonde, pulling him into his arms. Justin didn't resist. Brian held him until he couldn't feel him shaking anymore, and then he held him back, to get a clear look at him. "You okay?" he asked softly.

The boy shook his head. His jaw tightened. "I'm not okay, Brian. I'm never going to be okay again." His voice wasn't sad anymore; it was furious. He held up his right hand, still stiff and contorted. "I'll never be able to use my hand like I used to. One second with a fucking baseball bat, and he took everything from me! Everything!"

Brian bit his lip so he wouldn't say the first thing that came to his mind. He gave Justin's shoulders a small shake. "Listen to me, Justin. Are you listening?"

Justin nodded, his face still stiff with anger.

"It's not true. No," he said, seeing Justin open his mouth to protest. "No, it's not. Yes, your hand is fucked up. Yes, it's gonna take a while for it to work like it used to. Yes, it might never be exactly the same. But he did not take everything." Brian fought to keep his voice steady. "You still have your will, and your talent, and your friends, your family."

Even in his current emotional state, Justin heard the words that Brian didn't say: *You still have me*. He couldn't help but smile. Brian really must be worried about him, to say such "lesbianic" things.

"I can't explain why I do it. And even if I could, I don't want to explain. But I need to."

"You need to? Justin—" He could hear frustration in Brian's voice, and he cut him off.

"I told you. It's pain management. You have yours, and I have mine." Justin kept his voice low.

"Pain management? You call hurting yourself 'pain management'? You can't tell me that it doesn't hurt!" Brian was practically yelling by the last word.

"Yeah, it hurts. That's the point," Justin said. Brian looked at him, and his expression was caught somewhere between a grimace and a smirk.

"I didn't realize you had a thing for hardcore S&M," Brian said. "I mean, I know you like spanking and a little bit of bondage, but—"

"It's not fucking S&M," Justin said, blushing slightly. "It's not to get me off. It's different. And it helps."

"Helps what?" Brian really wanted to know.

Justin was quiet for a moment, trying to figure out how to explain. Brian watched him expectantly.

Finally, Justin spoke. "Have you ever felt," he asked slowly, "like your chest was being crushed? Like your throat was closing, and the world was going black around the edges, and just maybe, you were dying? Have you felt that?" He looked at Brian, waiting for an answer, even as his face flushed a tomato-red with embarrassment.

Yes, Brian knew that feeling. It was the way he'd felt on the night of Justin's prom, when he'd seen the beautiful, blond twink lying on the cement, covered in blood. It was the way he'd felt as he'd drove to the hospital, running lights and stop signs, desperate to get there. It was the way he'd felt when Justin's mother had told him she never wanted him to see Justin again. He licked his lips. "Yes," he said softly. "I have."

Justin was surprised that Brian would admit it, but he nodded. "Okay. Well, it helps with that. When it's all falling down...when I'm scared that I'm dying...it just helps."

Brian felt nauseous. He hadn't realized that Justin's emotions were so intense. He knew about the nightmares, he'd watched him get drunk, and fuck and suck his way into oblivion, he'd known he was desperate when he'd practically sold his ass to pay for school, but he hadn't know what Justin had been thinking. Or feeling.

Part of him chastised himself for caring, but he brushed it aside. He *wanted* to care right now. Justin's face told him that the kid was miserable.

"But...you're leaving scars all over yourself. Doesn't that bother you?" It sure bothered Brian.

"Not really," Justin said. He rubbed the scars on his arm lightly. "They say a lot about me."

"A lot about you? They say that you're a—" Brian cut himself off before the cruel words could spill out. He didn't want to be the cause of any new scars.

"A what? A mess? A disaster? A drama queen? A fucked-up person? Because it's true. I'm all of that stuff." Justin was fighting tears again.

"Stop it!" Brian said. "That's not what I said."

"Maybe not. But that's what these say, Brian," he said, gesturing at the pale lines marking his arm. "That's what all these marks say."

"Couldn't you just get a fucking tattoo like everyone else?" Brian asked.

Justin just shook his head. "You just don't get it," he said.

"You know what? You're right. I don't get it. I don't fucking get it. But I know one thing. It has to stop. You have to stop." Brian's voice was firm.

"No," Justin said, shaking his head. "I'm not going to stop."

"What?" Brian asked. He was surprised. He figured Justin would at least agree, would lie to him if nothing else.

"You heard me. No." Justin took a breath. "Listen, I know you want me to stop, but I'm not going to. It's how I deal with things now, and—"

"Can't you find a way to deal with things that doesn't include seeing your blood on your skin?" Brian's voice sounded anguished, even to his own ears. "I've seen enough of that for one lifetime."

Justin stared at him, surprised. He knew that the bashing had affected Brian too, but he'd never expected anything like this. He wanted to tell him that that's why he did it, because the pain and the blood made it easy to forget everything else. But he couldn't. He could tell Brian wouldn't be able to handle it.

They were still, looking at each other. Finally, Justin leaned into Brian, wrapping his arms around him.

"I'm doing the best I can," Justin said into Brian's chest. "Maybe I'll be able to stop eventually, but not now. I can't."

Brian held onto the blonde with all his might, wishing he could just hold him here forever so he'd never hurt himself again. He kissed the top of Justin's head. "Be careful," he said finally.

Justin didn't know what to say to that, so he didn't say anything. They sat there together in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Justin stood. "I'm going to put the food in the fridge," he said.

"Sure," Brian said, and he watched Justin walk into the kitchen and toss the boxes in the nearly empty refrigerator. He had no idea what to do now.

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## Chapter 13 – Hardball

"What do you want Em?" Justin asked, waiting for Emmett's order.

"Blueberry pancakes, please!" Emmett said, looking overly excited.

"And the rest of you?" He looked at Ben, Michael, and Ted, waiting.

They gave their orders and Justin quickly put them in. He and Brian hadn't slept much the night before; after their big fight, and the ensuing conversation, they had spent the night tossing and turning. Justin was tired, and irritable. Brian hadn't even had breakfast at the Diner like he usually did; he'd gone into work early. Justin didn't know what to do. He knew what Brian wanted, and usually he'd do what Brian wanted. But he couldn't this time. He just couldn't.

There was a crash from behind the counter, and a stream of colorful invectives from Debbie.

"Sunshine! Can you grab a new pot for the coffee machine? I've gotta clean up all this fucking glass!"

"Sure Deb," he said. He sidestepped the shards of glass and stood on his tiptoes to reach the spare carafes they stored on high shelves. "I don't understand why we keep them up so high, considering how often someone breaks them," he said, straining to reach one without toppling a whole pile of them.

"Because it's usually Kiki who's breaking them, and she's tall enough to grab them, no sweat," Debbie replied, standing up with her dustpan full of glass shards. "Although, if she'd stop wearing those four inch heels, she might actually keep her balance well enough not to break something! I mean, she's six feet tall barefoot. How much height does one girl need?" She dumped them in the garbage can under the counter. "Where's a rag?"

Justin grabbed one off the sink and tossed it at Debbie. She snatched it out of the air and dropped it to the floor, sopping up the remains of coffee.

"Disaster averted," Justin said, stretching out his arm to give Debbie the empty carafe.

Debbie paused. Justin's sleeves had ridden up, and she saw bruises. Not just one or two, but groups of them. She reached for the carafe, overshot it, and grabbed his wrist.

Justin flinched, and pushed his sleeve down. He'd forgotten about his arms, and with all the moving around, his sleeves had ended up around the middle of his forearms. He pulled out of her grip easily; she wasn't anywhere as strong as Brian after all. But he'd forgotten that what Debbie lacked in physical strength, she made up for with persistence.

"Sunshine, what happened to your arm?" She remembered before, seeing marks on his arm and questioning him about them. But those had been...scratches, or something. Not bruises.

"Nothing," he said. "You gonna take the damn coffee pot, or not?"

She grabbed it and put it on top of the burner. He tried to push past her, but she moved into his way. The bell rang.

"Deb, my order's up," he said.

"I don't care," she said. "I want to know what happened to your arm." She chomped on her gum very determinedly.

"Nothing! My order's getting cold!" He made to push past her again. She grabbed his arm to stop him, and he winced. She noticed.

"Bettie, me and Sunshine need a minute. Can you handle the tables?" Debbie asked.

"Sure Deb. Breakfast rush is over." Bettie ran to serve Justin's orders. Justin felt a surge of nausea roll through him. This was not good.

"Come with me, Sunshine," she said, her tone not allowing any arguments.

"Deb, please," Justin said, and Debbie heard the desperation in his voice. It made her more determined to know what was going on.

"You better get your bubble butt to the break room this instant or else I'm gonna call Ben over here, and have him haul you back there. You hear me?" She grabbed his chin.

"All right, Deb. You don't have to manhandle me!" Justin looked resigned.

Debbie gestured impatiently towards the break room, and Justin silently started back there, Debbie on his heels.

Justin was nervous. He couldn't think of any way to get out of the coming situation, and he couldn't think of any explanation that Debbie wouldn't see through.

She herded him into the break room and shut the door. "Okay. You've cornered me." Justin tried to keep his voice glib.

Debbie gave him a look. "Roll up your sleeves, Sunshine."

He shook his head. "No," he said.

"Do it. Now." She looked at him. "Don't make me play hardball, Sunshine. I'll do it if I have to."

He managed a weak chuckle. "Hardball?" he asked softly.

"My almost-son-in-law is sitting in a booth out there, and if you haven't noticed, he's built like a brick shithouse. And I will get him back here to help me if I have to." Debbie looked serious.

Justin looked at her. He knew Debbie really would sic Ben on him if he refused; he could see it in her eyes. "Debbie, there's nothing wrong with my arms. Just lay off, please." He bit his lip, an unconscious, anxious movement.

"If there's nothing wrong, then roll up your fucking sleeves." She crossed her arms over her chest.

It wasn't the scars Justin was worried about; they'd healed so you had to look pretty damn close to notice them at all. They kind of blended in with his blond hair. But the bruises were fresh, and dark. They were only two days old, and in that stage where they look the worst that bruises can. And he really didn't want to have to explain them to Debbie.

He hesitated again, and Debbie shook her head. She grabbed his hand and yanked up his sleeve before he could stop her. And gasped. "Fucking hell, Sunshine. What happened?"

He tried to pull them down again, but she said, "Stop. Damn it, if you pull those sleeves down one more time, I'm gonna...do something." She grabbed his other hand and pushed up that sleeve also.

Justin felt himself blush crimson. Debbie looked at his arms for a long time, taking in all the marks. There were a lot of them, small circular bruises. She recognized them—Brian Kinney used to come to her house as a fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen year old kid and have them all over his arms. Those were bruises from fingertips pressing hard into skin. Handprints, on her Sunshine's arms.

She shook her head. "Take off your sweater," she said. Justin blushed almost purple. She shook her head. "You've got a tee shirt on under that," she said, "and even if you didn't, I know what you look like without a shirt, Mr. King of Babylon. So take off the damn sweater."

He shook his head. Debbie turned. "Ben!" she hollered.

Fuck. Justin didn't need this. "All right, all right. Don't pull him into this!" The last thing he needed or wanted was for someone else to get into the mix. He pulled his sweater off, careful not to take the tee shirt with it. If she was this upset over his arms, she'd have a heart attack if she saw his back.

He held the sweater in his hands. Debbie looked at the bruises. They were all over his arms. She pushed up one tee shirt sleeve to his shoulder. There were marks on his shoulders, biceps, forearms, and wrists. No wonder he'd flinched when she'd grabbed his arm. "Jesus Christ, Sunshine. Who did this to you?"

"It's not a big deal, Deb," he said, looking at the floor.

"Not a big deal? You've got bruises all over your arms!"

"I bruise easily." He hugged his sweater to his chest, wishing he was anywhere but where he was.

"Yeah, well, that's an awful lot of grabbing. Did your Dad do that to you?" Debbie asked.

Justin wanted to say yes, but his mouth wouldn't move. He nodded after a moment. Let the bastard take the blame.

Debbie kept looking at him. "No, it wasn't. I can see it in your face." She looked at his arms again, and then looked up at him with a look of horror. "Brian? Did he...it was. Wasn't it?"

Justin shook his head, shrinking into himself in horror. This was his worst nightmare, coming true. "No. No, it wasn't."

But Debbie watched him carefully. The boy was an open book; all his emotions on his sleeve. "Yes, it was. That fucking bastard; I'll kill him!"

"No, Deb! Please!" Justin hastily yanked his sweater back on. "Debbie, he didn't hurt me."

"Didn't hurt you? Your arms are covered in bruises!" She looked like she was ready to spit bullets. "That asshole!"

"Deb, I swear. He didn't hurt me! Please, Debbie." Justin wanted to cry. "I know it looks bad, but I swear, he wasn't hurting me. We were having an argument and—"

"You're defending him? He hurt you!" Debbie's emotions were roiling. She didn't even know what to do. "No argument should get physically abusive, Sunshine!"

"It wasn't! Listen, just stay out of it Debbie. You don't know the whole story." Justin took a deep breath, trying to keep calm. "I've got to get to class. I'm going to be late." He tried to get past her, feeling panic blossoming in his chest.

"Listen to me, Sunshine," she said, cutting off his exit. "Brian might be one of my boys, but so are you. And he's not going to hurt you."

"He isn't hurting me, Debbie. He's not. He wouldn't do that. Please, just stay out of it!" And with that, Justin pushed past her and ran out of the Diner, leaving Debbie standing in the break room.

Her heart was breaking. She couldn't believe that Brian was abusing Sunshine. He might act like an asshole, but his heart was good, Debbie knew it. And yet, all those bruises on Sunshine's arms didn't lie.

And she intended to do something about it. Today.

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## Chapter 14 – F\*\*\* if I Know

Brian could not stop thinking about last night. Justin wasn't going to stop. Flat out. No. Brian was not used to people telling him no. Justin almost never told Brian no, and never about something so important.

His head was aching. "Cynthia!" he barked into the phone.

"Yes, Brian?" she asked, her voice steady as usual in the storm.

"I'm taking lunch. A long lunch." He pulled on his suit coat and grabbed his keys.

"You don't have a meeting until three thirty," she replied, and then clicked off. Brian took a deep breath, massaging the bridge of his nose in an attempt to get rid of the headache. It didn't work.

He walked past Cynthia's desk. She silently placed a pair of pills in his hand.

"How thoughtful. A little X is just what I need," Brian deadpanned.

"It's aspirin," Cynthia said biting. "Take the damn things."

Brian popped them in his mouth and swallowed hard. "Too bad," he said.

By the time he got to the Diner, the lunch rush was almost over. He seated himself at the counter.

Debbie saw him come in. She had to bite her tongue hard to avoid saying the words that were perched on its tip. She'd been thinking about how she was going to go about this all morning, and she was pretty sure she had it.

"What do you want?" she asked, snapping her gum as she poured him a cup of coffee.

"Plain turkey sandwich," he said. She was giving him an ugly look, but as far as Brian could remember, he hadn't done anything. Recently..

"What?" he asked, looking at her. She shook her head, and put in his order. "You're getting it to go," she said. "My shift ends in half an hour, and then we're gonna talk."

"We can't talk here?" Brian asked.

She looked at him. "I can guarantee you're not gonna want to have this conversation in the Diner," she

said, snapping her gum again.

"Geez, Deb. What's got your tits in a twist?" he asked.

"You'll see," she replied crisply. The bell rang, and she rushed off to deliver food to the group at table three.

Brian sat there, slowly sipping his coffee. The aspirin seemed to be working on his headache, but that still left him with the problem of what to do about Justin. And that was his biggest headache. He shook his head, trying to remove the persistent images of the scars on his body and the way he'd defended them. Jesus. What was he supposed to do about that?

Suddenly Debbie was behind him, dressed in her garish coat. "Come on," she said. "Here's your sandwich." She handed him a Styrofoam box.

He took it from her and stood up. "Where are we going?" he asked. Usually he'd argue, but his head still hurt too much.

"Your loft."

"The fuck we are," Brian said, stopping dead on the sidewalk outside the Diner. Debbie whirled on him, and before he realized it, he'd backed up a few steps at the look of fury on her face.

"Yes, we are. Now. Because we have a problem." Debbie wanted to slap him, but he wasn't Michael, and so she didn't. "So where's your Jeep?"

Fuck. The last thing Brian needed right now was another problem. He hoped Debbie was merely having another drama queen moment. Well, might as well get it over with.

He silently led her to the Jeep and unlocked the door. She settled in as he walked to the other side.

They drove to the loft in silence. He could see her fiddling with the strap of her enormous handbag, but for once, she wasn't talking. *Unusual*.

Brian parked, and they walked into his building together. Despite himself, he felt something akin to jitters. What on earth was making Deb so tense?

"Is something wrong with Mikey?" he asked finally as they waited for the elevator.

"What?" she asked. Brian sounded concerned; did he really have no idea? "No. Michael is fine," she said finally.

Brian felt some relief. At least Michael was okay. And if something had happened to Vic, Mikey would have told him. So...what was it?

They entered the elevator, and waited out the excruciating ride to the top. Usually, Brian didn't mind how slow the elevator was; it was a good speed for fucking in. But today it was driving him crazy.

Finally the ancient elevator creaked to a stop. Brian unlocked the door to the loft, and they walked inside. Brian shed his coat and tossed it on the counter, along with the Styrofoam box that contained his lunch. "You want something to drink Deb?" he asked over his shoulder, sauntering into the kitchen for a bottle of water. *Never let them see you sweat.*

"No," she said, taking off her coat and dropping it on the floor next to her purse. "I'm fine." She self-consciously tugged at the hem of her obscene t-shirt.

Brian nodded and grabbed a water from the fridge. He leaned against the counter and opened up his sandwich box before looking at Debbie. "Well? What's your urgent problem?" he asked. He took a bite of his sandwich.

Now that it was time to say something, Debbie was at a loss for words. Brian looked at her, his head cocked in that *way* of his.

"You know Sunshine worked the morning shift today," she said. Brian nodded, swallowing the mouthful of turkey and bread. Suddenly, his appetite was gone. Had she seen Justin's leg, somehow? It didn't seem likely, but that would explain her concern.

"And?" Brian asked finally, when it appeared Debbie wasn't going to say anything else. "What happened?" He'd wondered if Justin was okay, if he had to do something more than...well...wait it out and see what happened. "Is he okay?"

Debbie looked at him. Brian was concerned, she could tell even under that blankness his face got when he was worried. But was he worried for Justin, or for himself?

"I don't know," Debbie replied, and her voice had a bit of bite to it. "Depends if you think it's okay that he's got bruises all over his arms. Handprint bruises."

Brian felt as though he'd been slapped. How'd she see the bruises? He'd thought Justin would at least cover the damn things. "Deb—"

"And you wanna know why I know they're handprints? 'Cause they look just like the ones you had all over your arms when you'd come running to my house as a kid, bruised and hurting! And I'm no happier to see them on his arms than I was to see them on yours!" Debbie plowed on, watching Brian's face shift rapidly through surprise and shock to fear and finally anger.

"What do you know about it Deb?" Brian snarled. He knew where she was going, and it made him feel sick. She thought he'd hurt Justin? Didn't anyone know him better than that?

"Plenty. And I know they're from you! How dare you hurt that kid like that? He fucking loves you, adores you, and you leave bruises on him?" Debbie glared at him hard.

"Obviously, you've made up your mind about me," Brian spit. "I'm abusing him, right? Roughing him up, shoving him around? Maybe even hitting him? Well, if it makes you happy, that's what the cops thought too!" He came out from behind the counter and stood directly in front of her.

"The cops?" Debbie said.

"Yeah. They were here the other night. A pair of them, with their questions and their little abuse-helpline referral cards, the whole thing! Because someone heard us and called the cops! And they saw the bruises too, Deb! So obviously I'm a depraved monster, right?" Brian kept yelling because he was afraid if he stopped, he would break. "I'm hurting my lover, and he's just taking it? Is that what you think?"

For a moment, Debbie saw the boy he'd been. A fourteen year old, terrified and helpless but trying to seem tough and hard, as if he didn't care. But there was that glint in his eye, the glint that said he wanted to cry, but wouldn't let himself.

"Is that what Justin told you? Did he tell you about the rest of the night too, Deb? About the scars and the confrontation, and the screaming and fighting and how he locked himself in the bathroom?" Brian's voice was shaking. "Did he tell you he was sobbing? That I had to break down the fucking door because he wouldn't unlock it? That he passed out from hyperventilating so much? Because those bruises don't tell the whole fucking story." Brian's voice broke on the last three words, and a muscle in his jaw worked violently. *Did he tell you how I held him the whole time the cops were there, and afterwards, until he fell asleep?*

"Brian..." Debbie said. She could see true anguish on his face, and she knew it was true, that she didn't know the whole story. "Brian, Justin wouldn't tell me anything. I thought they were from his father, but when he said yeah, they were, I knew he was lying."

"So you thought of me? Am I really that type, Deb?" he asked, spreading out his arms. "You can really see me hurting him?" His voice cracked, despite his best efforts. If she said yes, he'd crumble. It would be his biggest fear, coming true. He'd be just like Jack Kinney.

"No, I can't," she said honestly. "But I also couldn't figure out who else might have done it. And things happen when couples argue sometimes...not on purpose necessarily, but they do. And not just straight couples."

"We aren't a fucking couple, Deb," Brian said automatically.



She glared at him. "I'm not going to let you sidetrack this," she said firmly. "Now, you're going to tell me what the fuck happened the other night. The whole story. And you're going to do it now."

Brian hesitated. "Now, Brian!" she demanded. "What's going on?"

Fuck it. Brian took a deep breath. "He's hurting himself, Deb."

"Those bruises aren't self inflicted," Debbie replied. "So don't tell me—"

"Not the bruises. He's...fuck. I can't even..." The pause seemed to stretch forever. Finally he spoke. "He's cutting himself."

"Cutting?" Debbie looked confused.

"Yeah, you know." Brian could see she didn't. His voice was barely a whisper as he explained. "He's cutting his skin. On purpose."

They stood in silence for a long moment, Brian's words hanging there in between them. But finally, Debbie's mouth came back to life.

"Why the hell would he do something like that?" Debbie couldn't believe the words coming out of Brian's mouth. "Sunshine? He wouldn't—"

"He is, Deb." Brian didn't know how to explain, but somehow, the words kept coming. "He's got these scars all over his leg...there are some on his arm too, but not as many. I—shit. I found out accidentally."

"Accidentally?" In her head, Debbie remembered the scratches on Sunshine's arm, the day after he'd quit school. Those were intentional? Not scratches, but cuts?

"During sex," Brian said. Debbie made an 'oh, well of course' gesture. "And when I asked him what happened to his leg, he freaked out. Told me to stop, took off for the bathroom." Brian grabbed his pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket and lit one. He'd prefer a joint, but he didn't have the time. He took a long drag before continuing.

"I went after him and grabbed him, just so he wouldn't lock himself in the bathroom. I didn't want him fucking hurting himself in there." He looked at Debbie briefly. She nodded, understanding. "But he fought like a motherfucker until I pinned him down. We...talked for awhile and he started crying, but then he stopped, and I thought he was okay. And then, when I let him go, he jumped up and locked himself in the bathroom anyway."

Debbie was starting to get the picture. But then..."Why'd the cops show up? I mean, you guys are probably screaming and yelling all the time, between all the sex and all the queening out the two of you

do."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Brian replied, remembering the lurch in his stomach at those words: 'Pittsburgh PD, open up!' "And I do not queen out."

"Sure. So then, why'd the cops show? I mean, the neighbors have to be used to it by now."

Brian's eyebrows rose, and he let out a small snort of humorless laughter. "He was making weird noises in there. I thought..." All sorts of awful things had run through his mind as he stood outside that door, listening to Justin sobbing and hyperventilating. He shook his head. "And then he...yelped, and I knocked the door down."

"Jesus, Brian. You knocked down the door?" Debbie walked up the steps into his room to see for herself. "Holy shit!" The bathroom door was more splinters than door; she could clearly see the interior of the bathroom through it. "You really did a number on it!"

"What would you have had me do?" he asked sharply from his place in the living room. He took another deep drag off his cigarette.

"Just what you did," she replied, still studying the splintered door. "I'm just saying."

"He screamed so loud, and then..." The moment replayed in Brian's mind like it was happening. *Justin curled in a ball on the floor; his arms shielding his face like he was afraid Brian would hurt him. The flashbacks of Brian's youth; of that night in the parking garage. The way he'd held Justin as he screamed, and then passed out. The terror as he'd searched for evidence of a suicide attempt, and his relief as he felt Justin's pulse, strong under his fingertips.*

"He passed out. From hyperventilating. When he came to, I helped him to bed. He fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow." Debbie had made her way back into the living room. She was only a few feet from Brian, looking distressed. Brian coughed out another half-laugh along with a mouthful of smoke. "And that's when the police knocked."

Debbie shook her head. She wanted to fold Brian into her arms, but she could tell that he wouldn't let her. Not now.

"That's how he got all those fucking bruises." She could tell he was ashamed that he'd bruised Justin, even unintentionally. It was all over his face. "Not because I was..." He didn't finish the sentence.

"I just can't believe he'd hurt himself on purpose. Why? I don't get it." Debbie looked up at Brian. He shook his head.

"I don't get it either Deb. But he said he wasn't going to stop. And I can't force him." He sounded resigned.

"What do you mean? You have to!" Debbie was indignant. He would just let him hurt himself?

"What can I do, Deb? Hold him down? You saw how well that worked last time. Hide every sharp object on the fucking planet? I'm not his mother, not a doctor, not a fucking therapist." *I don't know what to do.* He took one last drag off of his smoke and butted it out in the ashtray on his counter.

"Well, someone has to do something," Debbie said.

Brian placed another cigarette between his lips. He lit it, shaking his head. "He's an adult. The only person who can do something about it is him. And he doesn't want to." He tossed his lighter onto the counter.

Debbie thought of something else. "Does his mother know?"

Brian shrugged. "Probably not. It's not exactly obvious."

"Well, I should tell her—"

"No, you shouldn't." Brian's voice was like steel.

"She's his mother. She should know." Debbie glared at Brian, who continued shaking his head as he took another long pull off his cigarette.

"Yeah, that's great. Tell her, 'Your son is cutting himself on purpose, there's not a damn thing you can do about it except worry, and he doesn't plan on stopping. Aren't you glad you know?'"

Debbie thought about it for awhile. "Well, then? What the fuck are we supposed to do?"

Brian shrugged again and blew out a mouthful of smoke. "Fuck if I know."

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## Chapter 15 – Carrie

Justin's head was aching, and his leg both itched and hurt, and he just wanted to go to sleep.

He scratched his leg lightly. The rough denim of his jeans rubbing the fresh cuts hurt, but it distracted him from the thoughts running through his head.

He wondered what Debbie had done, had said after he left. He had no illusions that she wouldn't confront Brian—she considered Justin one of "her boys" now, and she'd looked pissed that anyone would dare hurt him. But Brian hadn't hurt him, not really. If he hadn't struggled like a motherfucker, none of those bruises would be there. He stood and quietly made his way out of his Art History

classroom, unable to concentrate on the professor's words.

He walked down the hall and paused at the entrance to one of PIFA's many galleries. Someone was putting up a new show, and Justin had nowhere else to be. Well, class, but that was hopeless. He walked in.

A pale, slender girl not much older than himself noticed him immediately. "Hey," she said, pushing dark curls back off her face. "What are you doing in here?"

Justin flushed. "I'm just looking. I'll go." He turned to leave.

"You don't have to go," she said. "I'm just finishing hanging my senior show."

Justin smiled at her, and looked at the nearest painting. It dragged him in, right away.

In the middle of a huge black canvas, there was a heart, bruised and covered in spikes. Blood oozed over the entire painting. "Holy shit," Justin gasped under his breath.

He heard the girl come up behind him, her tennis shoes squeaking softly. "What do you think?" she asked, standing next to him, her arms crossed over her chest.

"It's intense," Justin replied automatically. "There's a lot of pain there." He looked over at the girl. She smiled softly.

"That's an older piece," she replied. "Life was...not so good." She turned to look at him. "I'm Carrie Grant."

"Justin Taylor," he replied, and she smiled.

"What inspired it?" he asked, and immediately regretted it. Surely that was too personal a question to ask. "I'm sorry," he said.

She shook her head. "Don't be," she said. "My fiancé broke off our engagement—he told me he'd fallen in love with someone else. I was heartbroken. I wanted to cut my wrists—I did this painting instead." She laughed softly. "Saved my life."

Justin understood the feeling. He nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he said.

She looked at him with an intensity that made him blush. "You do, don't you." It wasn't a question. "Listen, I could use a break. You want to go get a coffee?"

Justin looked at his watch automatically, even though his class wouldn't be over for another 45 minutes.

"Uh, sure. But uh...just so you know, I've got a boyfriend." *Sort of.*

Carrie grinned. "So do I. It's just coffee."

They walked to the on campus coffee shop together in companionable silence. Justin ordered a latte, and paid before sliding into a booth in the corner. Carrie joined him after a moment, carrying a coffee cup.

"What's your show called?" Justin asked. "I didn't look at the information."

"It's called Lineage," she replied. "Tracing where I've been, and where I'm going. A little cutesy, I guess, but I liked it at the time. And I was stoned."

Justin laughed. "I understand. Many things sound good at the time, especially when you're stoned. Are all your paintings that intense?"

"I hope so," Carrie said. "But probably not. Unfortunately."

"It's probably for the best," Justin said. "Shit that intense can really tear you up."

"That's why I put it on canvas. That way, it doesn't have to tear me up." Carrie took a sip of her coffee.

Justin nodded, and scratched again at the fresh cuts on his leg, to prove to himself they were still there. "Maybe I should do a little painting," he said, almost to himself.

"Justin Taylor...I think I've seen some of your work," she said. "You're pretty intense yourself. I like your stuff."

"Thanks," Justin replied, gulping down more coffee.

"But all your stuff is computer generated, isn't it? When's the last time you used real paint and went for it?" She leaned on her elbows, looking at him.

"Oh, God...back in high school," Justin replied. "A lifetime ago, at least." It certainly felt like a thousand years had gone by between then and now.

"Maybe you should try it again," Carrie said. "You might surprise yourself."

Justin shrugged. "I don't have the best fine motor skills anymore," he said.

His words didn't seem to surprise her. "It doesn't have to be good, necessarily, or something to show others. Do it for yourself. Get shit off your chest." She paused and took another sip. "Just a thought."

"I'll think about it," Justin replied.

Carrie checked her watch. "Oh, damn. I better get the rest of my show up before four—my boyfriend's picking me up tonight. It was nice to have coffee with you, Justin." She slid out of the booth and gathered her things.

Justin smiled at her. "Yeah, same here," he said. "Thanks."

"No problem. I'll see you around. Maybe you could come to the opening of my show?" She paused, waiting for his answer.

"I'd like to. We'll see," he said. "Good luck with that."

She flashed him another smile and hurried off, coffee cup in hand. Justin sipped his coffee. Now that Carrie was gone, his earlier worries about Debbie and Brian were back. He scratched at the cuts again, feeling them burn.

His cell phone went off in his pocket. He answered it quickly. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's me." Brian's familiar voice.

"I'm in class," Justin lied.

"No you aren't," Brian said. "You wouldn't have answered so fast. Hell, you wouldn't have answered at all."

"Okay, so I'm not." Justin swallowed before asking his next question. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fabulous," Brian replied, his voice sardonic. "As always."

Justin sighed. "Did Debbie...?"

"Corner me? Threaten my life, limbs, and balls? Ask me why the fuck I was hurting her Sunshine?" Brian's voice had more than a little bite to it.. "You could have warned me."

"Shit. I'm sorry, Brian," Justin said. "I didn't even think to—"

"Sorry's bullshit," Brian replied. "Listen, since you aren't in class, do you want me to come pick you up? I can."

Justin knew Brian loved him; here was undeniable proof. "Don't you have work?" he asked.

"Done with meetings for today," Brian replied.

"Sure. I'm at the coffee shop on Institute and 5th," Justin said.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," Brian said, and he hung up.

Justin put his phone into his bag and sat back in his seat to wait for Brian. After that—well, he didn't know what would happen after that, but he'd figure it out.

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## Chapter 16 – Try

"You told her?" Justin was livid. "I can't believe you told Debbie!"

"What was I supposed to do?" Brian couldn't handle this. He walked into the kitchen and took a bottle of water out of the fridge. He would have rather had a beer, but that seemed like a bad idea. He needed all his senses right now.

"You didn't have to tell her, Brian!" Justin looked pissed, standing there, arms crossed over his chest. "Christ, now everyone's going to know about it! She can't keep her mouth shut!"

"She wanted to tell your mother." Brian grabbed his pack of cigarettes off the counter and lit one.

"What? What the fuck! That's the last thing I need right now, for my mom to know. Jesus!" Justin paced back and forth.

"I told her not to. We'll see, I guess." Brian took a deep drag off his smoke, feeling the nicotine enter his system.

"But—"

"Listen, Debbie hauled me over here from the Diner, cornered me, and demanded to know why I was leaving bruises all over you. Do you have a good explanation for that?" Brian leaned against the counter, staring pointedly at Justin.

"You can't think fast on your feet?" Justin asked angrily. "You're a fucking ad-man, and the most charming son-of-a-bitch I've ever met, and you're telling me you had nothing?"

"Well, you could have warned me that she'd invade like a fucking storm trooper, demanding to know why you were covered in bruises. Maybe if I'd had some warning!" Brian pulled in another mouthful of

smoke. "It's been awhile since I've had to make up excuses for random bruises, Justin! I guess I'm out of practice!"

"Shit!" Justin wanted to throw something, to hit someone, to do something. He wanted to cut. "You shouldn't have told her!"

"Well, it's too fucking late for that," Brian said. "She knows."

"So who else does she want to tell? Michael? Emmett? Ted? Ben? Is she gonna tell Vic? Hell, knowing her, she'll take out an ad in *Out*!" Justin dropped onto the couch, holding his head in his hands. "This is such a mess."

"You're the one who got yourself into this mess," Brian said irritably, puffing away at his smoke.

"Me? Maybe if you hadn't fucking manhandled me, it wouldn't have been a problem!" Justin shot back over his shoulder. He saw Brian wince slightly, and he felt like an asshole. "Shit, Brian, I didn't mean —"

"Sure you did," Brian replied, tossing the butt of his cigarette into an ashtray. He pulled another one out of the pack and lit it. "And maybe you're right. But you're the one who...fuck. I mean, why? How'd you start that? It's not exactly common, you know, to go around slicing your skin!"

Justin just shook his head. He felt like crying again. *How did life get so fucked up?*

He went to his bag and grabbed the X-acto he'd bought earlier in the week, trying to hide it in his hand.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brian asked, seeing the plastic knife. He knew immediately what it was. *Jesus Christ, an X-acto knife? He's cutting himself with an X-acto knife?* He dropped the still-lit cigarette into the ashtray.

"Nothing," Justin said. Brian seemed to cross the distance between them in seconds.

"Give me that!" Brian demanded, holding out his hand.

Justin ducked to the side. "No!" he said.

"Fucking hell Justin. I'm not getting into another wrestling match, complete with calls to the cops and panic attacks from hell. Give me the goddamn knife!" Brian kept his body between Justin and the bathroom.

"I need this, okay? So if you want to avoid the cops, the panic attacks, and the wrestling, you better let me do this!" Justin darted backwards, away from Brian, trying to keep him from getting the knife. He knew Brian could overpower him; he'd made that painfully clear.



"Damn it Justin!" Brian lunged at him, grabbing for his arm. "I'm not just going to sit here and watch you hurt yourself! Are you fucking crazy?" His fingers closed around Justin's wrist and pried the X-acto out of his fingers. Justin tried to grab it back, but Brian had the advantage of over a half foot of height.

"Give it back, Brian!" Justin cried angrily. He thought, crazily, about punching Brian in the stomach. *Holy fuck, what's wrong with me?* "No," Brian said. He turned his back on Justin, still holding tightly to the plastic-covered blades. *What the fuck do I do with it, anyway?*

"You can't stop me, Brian." Justin said shakily, trying to control the panic that was threatening to overwhelm him. "Taking that isn't going to stop me."

"Are you making this into some kind of power struggle on purpose? Because I don't want this, okay? I don't want to fight you about this—it's fucking ridiculous." Brian kept his emotions under control through sheer willpower.

"Why do you care?" Justin cried. His arms were crossed; his stance was wide and angry. "Why do you care so much? It's my body; I can do what I want with it, and this is what I want!"

"It's not like a tattoo, or a piercing, or gaining twenty pounds, Justin! I...I care about you, okay? I don't want you hurting yourself, you stupid fucker!" Brian spit.

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment. Justin dropped first. He walked up to Brian, who still clutched the knife with white knuckles. Brian was watching him carefully, waiting for an attempt to grab it.

Justin didn't speak until he was standing within Brian's reach. "Why Brian, that might be the sweetest thing you've ever said to me," he teased.

Brian tilted his head, allowing himself a small smirk. He held out his empty arm. "Come here you little shit," he said gruffly, and Justin let him wrap his arm around him and pull him close.

They stood like that for a long moment. Brian spoke first.

"Can't you just try?" Brian asked, trying not to sound as desperate as he felt.

Justin shut his eyes, thinking. Yes, he could try, but what happened if he fucked up? Because he would, he knew it. Then what? And yet...it mattered. It mattered to Brian, and he'd (practically) admitted it.

He opened them, and looked up at Brian. "All right," he said, almost a whisper. "I'll try."

Brian wrapped his other arm around Justin. "Good."

*Oh God*, Justin thought. *What the fuck did I just promise?* But he didn't say anything; he just stood there

in Brian's arms.

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## Chapter 17 – A Way Around

It was hard. Justin had known it would be hard, but he didn't expect it to be this hard. It was just a little habit, just a small thing. His way of keeping control. And he didn't know if he could live without it.

At work, he could feel Debbie watching him as he delivered plates and took orders. She wasn't patently obvious about it, but now that Justin knew she knew, he noticed it. He felt the pressure intensely, to appear normal and sane and not like someone who did what he did, to put her mind at ease.

"Can I get some ketchup please?" a short, slender queen wailed. "My fries are getting cold!" He tapped his fingers impatiently on the tabletop.

"Sorry. I'm going as fast as I can," Justin said, stealing a bottle of ketchup from the next table over and plopping it down in front of him.

"Is my meal going to come sometime this century, darling?" a drag queen called. "I've got a gig at 1:00; I can't be late!"

"The kitchen's a little backed up," Justin said, filling her coffee cup. "It'll be out soon." He could feel a familiar stress building in his chest. Damn it, he wanted to cut. Now.

Someone pinched his ass, hard enough to hurt. He jumped, and whirled. It was a big fellow, dressed in leather, who leered at him. One of those guys who hung out at Meathook, probably. Justin shook his head, and darted for the kitchen. He was pretty used to strangers grabbing him at work, but today it was getting on his nerves.

"You okay, Sunshine?" Debbie asked, seeing his frustrated expression. She always worried about him; he was one of her boys. But now that she knew his "little secret", she worried more. She didn't know why he did it, but she didn't figure a lot of stress would help him any.

"I'm fine," he said, wiping sweat off his forehead with his sweater sleeve. "I'm just sick of people pinching me!" He thought longingly about getting his hands on an X-acto. He knew there were some in the break room...but he'd promised Brian. Stupid fucking promise.

"Tell them to knock it off," Debbie said, chomping on her gum as she refilled salt and pepper shakers. "No one pinches *me*."

"It's a gay diner, Deb. Who'd pinch you? You're not exactly their type!"

She grinned at him. "We get lesbians in here, and I've gotten a pinch or two, thank you very much." She

cracked her gum, like punctuation.

Justin shook his head, but couldn't help but smile. "Whatever, Debbie." He forced himself to stop thinking about razor blades and blood. He couldn't do it. He'd promised.

The bell rang twice. "Your order's up, Sunshine," Debbie said. He went around to the window and grabbed the plates.

He bent slightly to serve them to the complaining drag queen and her dining companion. They thanked him somewhat obnoxiously, and started eating.

Suddenly, someone smacked his ass. "Fuck!" Justin yelled. "I've had enough of this!" He was ready to give *someone* hell. He spun around, his hands clenched into fists.

"Whoa, Sunshine. Who pissed on your Cheerios this morning?" Brian regarded Justin with a small smirk of amusement.

"Jesus Brian! Don't do that!" Justin dropped his voice from a yell to a grumble.

"Rough day?" Brian asked, seating himself at the counter. Justin walked to the other side and poured him a cup of coffee before leaning forward for a kiss.

"A little," Justin replied. "It's almost over though." He absently scratched his arm over the old scars, the yearning for a razorblade so tangible he could practically feel it in his fingertips.

Brian noticed. "Don't," he said warningly.

Justin looked at him. "Don't what?" he asked, still scratching his arm.

"Don't even think about it," Brian replied with a piercing look. He put his hand over Justin's on his arm.

They stared at each other for a moment, and then the bell rang, breaking the reverie. Justin turned away and got the plates, stacking them on his arms and carrying them to booth 4 before walking back over to Brian.

"So, what do you want?" Justin asked, pulling out his order pad.

"Plain turkey sandwich, no mayo, side of fries," Brian said. "And a promise."

Justin paused. "I already gave you the last one. That's all I can do. And I'll put this order in." He walked over to the window and put in the order, and then said, "Debbie, I need five minutes."

"Fine Sunshine. But they better be a fast five," Debbie said, rushing past with plates balanced on her arms. "More than that and we'll be in the weeds."

"That's all I need," Justin said hastily, and ran for the bathroom before she could change her mind, locking the door behind him. He bent over and rolled up his pants leg, looking at the cluster of scars still healing there. God, he wanted to cut. He studied the bathroom floor, chose a relatively clean spot, and slid down the wall until he was sitting, his leg stretched forward so that the scars were visible.

He stared at them for awhile, and then picked at a scab with one bitten fingernail. It hurt as he carefully pulled the whole scab off in one piece. It almost looked like a fresh cut; a very shallow one that didn't bleed a lot. He relished the pain, allowing it to pull some of his stress out. His breathing evened out, although he didn't notice. He just felt that familiar rightness, that peace.

He played idly with the scab, rolling it in his fingertips. It was gross and amazing at the same time, in a sick sort of way. His skin, in his hands. The blood from it smeared on his hand, a pale red smudge over his white flesh.

When he saw that, a feeling of guilt hit him hard in the stomach. Brian's voice played through his brain: *"Can't you find a way to deal with things that doesn't include seeing your blood on your skin? I've seen enough of that for one lifetime."* He had promised he'd try.

*Try not to cut*, he argued with himself. *Not not to pick*. He stared down at the small wound on his leg, watching the blood slowly congealing. It wasn't much, after all. Just a little bit of blood. Not a big deal at all, really, compared to some of the times he'd cut. And Brian wouldn't see it.

His conscience calmed slightly, but he still felt uneasy about it. He knew he was quibbling over semantics: Brian wouldn't see the distinction, and would likely queen out about it. No blood on his skin. His stomach fluttered.

*Well, too bad. It's done. It's over.* Justin threw the scab in the trash, and washed the slight smear of blood off of his hands. Then he rolled down his pants leg again, and looked at himself in the mirror.

Everything looked normal. Everything was fine. He practiced one of his signature "Sunshine" smiles, and he almost believed it.

And his conscience let out one more pitiful cry, and then hung its head in defeat.

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## Chapter 18 – What's Up Doc?

Brian sat in Woody's, nursing a beer and thinking. He looked up and saw that guy, that shrink he'd talked to after Justin had moved in with him and wouldn't let anyone touch him.

"Hey," Brian said softly. "What's up, Doc?" He smirked at his own little joke. The man turned, and

smiled. He brought himself and his beer over to where Brian was sitting.

"You've got something better than that," he said, plopping into the free seat. "So, what do you want?" He knew Brian well enough to know that they wouldn't talk unless Brian had a problem...or if they were fucking in the baths. And really, very little talking was involved there anyway.

"You know about cutting?" Brian asked, tripping over it like it was a foreign word.

"I'm a psychiatrist, Brian," he said. "Of course I know about it." He looked Brian in the eye. "Why?"

"You remember the kid who wouldn't let me touch him?" Brian replied. The shrink nodded in recognition. "He's cutting himself."

Doc looked thoughtful. "Hmm. How long has he been doing this?"

"Since he moved in with me, I guess. That's what he said, anyway." Brian took a swig from his beer, and regarded the doctor with a cool gaze.

"That's what? Three, four months?"

"Around that, yeah." Brian tapped the beer bottle with long, slender fingers. "Why?"

"Cutting becomes progressively more difficult to quit the longer it is done. You see, it works on the brain much like, oh, morphine. It sends all kinds of feel-good endorphins into the body in response to the pain and tissue damage. And that can be very addictive for some people." The doctor leaned forward in his chair. "Have you talked with him about it?"

"Yes," Brian said. "It didn't go well. After our last...scuffle...he said he'd try to stop."

"Well, that's a step in the right direction," Doc said. "But....?"

Brian sighed. "But I know he doesn't want to stop. He's trying for me, but he still wants to do it. I went to the Diner today, and I could tell he wanted to cut, and then he ran off. I'll probably find new ones tonight."

"Like any addictive behavior, it may take many tries for him to stop. He will likely slip up, perhaps many times. All you can do is support him. He has to do the hard work himself." The doctor handed Brian a card. "If he wants to talk to someone, he can make an appointment with me."

"Aha. *There's* the corporate-sponsored product placement. Evan Carpenter," Brian said, reading the business card. "So you do have a name."

"Most people don't call me Doc," Evan said, raising his bottle in a small toast. "Good luck, Brian." He stood up.

"How much do I owe you?" Brian asked, looking up at Doc without tilting his head.

"The usual. I'll take it in trade next time we meet in the baths." He smirked slightly, and walked away.

Brian stared at the card in his hand, tapping the edge lightly against the table. Would Justin want to talk to him? Brian didn't really hold much with therapy; it seemed like a crock of bullshit to him. Just because he'd talk with Doc occasionally over a beer didn't lessen his disdain of counseling.

*But it wouldn't hurt anything if it made him feel better,* Brian mused. And then, *God, I sound like a fucking dyke.*

He slid the card into his jacket pocket. He wouldn't tell Justin about it, but maybe he could leave the card somewhere where he would see it. Justin knew Brian would pay for just about anything he needed or wanted; he'd figure it out.

Brian swallowed the last of his beer, and started towards the door. Suddenly, he saw a blond head. Justin?

It was. Justin was sitting at the bar, drinking a beer. Brian came up behind him and put his arms over his shoulders.

"Hey Brian," Justin said, his speech slightly slower than usual from alcohol.

"I thought you were working on a project," Brian said, sitting on the next barstool.

"I needed a break," Justin said. He took another swig of beer. "Who's that guy you were talking to?"

"Uh...that's Doc." Brian dug the business card out of his pocket and handed it to Justin.

"You're talking to a shrink?" Justin said loudly.

"Shh. I don't talk to him as a fucking shrink. He's just Doc." Brian took the beer bottle from Justin and sipped it. "He said you could make an appointment to talk with him. If you wanted."

"You told him about me? How could you do that? You gonna just tell everyone?" Justin got even louder, his speech slurring.

"How many of these have you had?" Brian asked, gesturing at Justin's drink.

"A lot," Justin said. "I'm not talking to some fucking shrink. You gonna be my mom? Take me to a shrink and *fix* me?" His tone was scathing.

"I'm not your mother," Brian replied. "Jesus, that's too incestuous for me to even fathom. Not to mention breeder."

"You can't fix me," Justin said quietly. He didn't look at Brian. "No one can fix me. I'm broken."

"You get very maudlin when you're drunk," Brian said. "Come on. Let's go home."

"Home?" Justin said, as if the word was unfamiliar.

"Come on." Brian grabbed Justin's hand and tossed some money onto the counter. "Let's go."

Justin allowed Brian to drape his arm around his shoulder and lead him out to the street without another word.

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## Chapter 19 – The Decision

Justin stared at the card. He was sipping some of his grandmother's hangover recipe. Brian was right—it did kind of taste like someone had pissed in it. Not that he'd know what that tasted like, but he could imagine.

He'd woken up alone, but Brian had left a note on the table. Lindsey called. Two words. Justin had wondered if something had happened to Gus, but he figured Brian would have woken him if that was the case. He looked at the card again.

Evan Carpenter. A shrink. He remembered the shrink his mother had brought him to when he'd come out; he smirked slightly. His mother's face as he'd explained how he liked dick, in all its various forms, had been priceless.

But Brian talked to this guy. Not officially, of course: Brian Kinney needed no psychological help. But Justin had seen them talking as he slugged back his drinks the night before. He'd watched because the guy was probably older than Brian, and Justin couldn't believe that Brian would actually fuck him, even if he was pretty good looking. But he hadn't, and then Brian had given Justin that card, and it had all slipped into place.

Brian wanted him to talk to this guy. Justin had asked him the night before if that was what he wanted. Brian had undressed him and helped him into bed, ignoring the question, so Justin had repeated it, more and more loudly. Finally, Brian had said, "Yes. I want you to talk to the fucking shrink. Now will you shut up and go to bed?"

Justin had; he'd been so drunk that he couldn't help it. But now he was awake, and he had to think about it.

Talking to a shrink was a crazy-person thing to do. And Justin wasn't crazy. *Okay, so maybe I do some things that are a little strange*, he thought, running a finger absently over some of the scars on his arm, *but I'm not nuts*.

But Brian had told him, straight out, I want you to talk to the fucking shrink. Brian, who never admitted anything, ever, was admitting that he didn't know what to do. *Not in so many words, but let's be honest. If he knew what to do about this, he wouldn't send me to a shrink, would he?*

Justin sighed again, and stared at the card. What would it hurt? If he was truthful with himself, this was a lot harder than he'd thought it would be, and he'd thought it would be hard. And now there was the added guilt every time he cut, because he knew Brian would look at them and get that tension in his jaw when he saw the new marks. Brian never said anything, but Justin knew he noticed. There was a roughness to how he handled Justin, a frustration in his touch that had nothing to do with sex. And it hurt more than a slap to the face.

Brian didn't see how hard he was trying to stop; he didn't see that each cut could have been five, if he'd done what he wanted instead of holding himself back.

He stood slowly, still holding the card, and walked over to the phone. Dialing the number was hard; he hung up twice before finally dialing all the way through. The phone rang. He clutched it tightly in his hand.

"Green Lane Counseling, this is Melissa, how may I help you?"

Justin took a deep breath. His heart was hammering.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Uh...can I make an appointment with Evan Carpenter?" Justin looked at the card in his hand.

"Name please?" the woman asked.

"Justin Taylor," he said, licking his lips.

"Are you a first time client?"

"Yes," Justin said. "He gave my boyfriend his card...and said I should make an appointment."

"We have an opening next Wednesday at 3:30; would that be a good time for you?"

"Uh, sure," Justin replied.

"Please come about twenty minutes early; there is some paperwork you'll need to fill out. Also, bring your insurance card."



"Okay," he said.

"Alright then. We'll see you next Wednesday."

"Thank you," Justin said. He hung up the phone and sat down, feeling slightly dizzy. What had he just done?

Panic crept in, lapping at his feet like water. He could feel himself fighting for breath. "No," he said, trying to keep it at bay. It didn't work. He curled tightly into a ball on the couch, trying desperately to ignore that little voice telling him that cutting would make it better.

But he was standing, walking to the kitchen, grabbing a sharp knife from the drawer. His body seemed to do it without his consent, without any interference from his brain. He watched, detached, as his body knelt, rolled up the leg of his pants, and pressed the knife into skin. He barely felt the sting as the metal broke his skin in a neat line, and watched with abstract fascination as the blood bubbled up and trickled down his leg, pushed out of a straight path by blond hairs.

He made another straight slice, and then another, watching the blood slide down his leg with fascination. He heard a noise, but it didn't seem important.

Suddenly, Brian was on top of him, holding both his wrists, squeezing his hand until he dropped the knife. Justin flinched, and suddenly he was back in his body.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Brian yelled, pulling him to his feet. He grabbed his shoulders, holding him at arm length. Justin shrunk away from him, frightened by the anger and fear he saw in Brian's face.

They stood there, Brian holding Justin away from him, Justin curled into himself. They were both completely still.

"Justin!" Brian yelled again, giving him one hard shake. Justin cringed again.

"Oh, fuck," Brian said, looking at him. "Justin, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" He didn't sound furious anymore. He sounded resigned.

"I didn't..." Justin said. "I...I mean..."

Brian just stared at him.

"I'm sorry," Justin said. "Please, I..." He ducked his head, feeling tears well up.

Brian's grip loosened slightly. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

Justin swallowed hard, feeling a tear run down his face. He spoke to his feet.

"I called...that shrink guy. I made an appointment." His voice was quiet.

Brian shook his head, not understanding. "That doesn't explain the knife," he said, his eyes dropping to the blood stained knife on the floor.

"I don't know. I...I panicked. I didn't....I didn't mean to..." More tears spilled down his cheeks.

Brian looked at him, his emotions boiling so fast he couldn't figure out exactly what they were. Finally, he sighed and pulled Justin into his arms.

The blond clung to him, crying. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Brian bit his tongue. "Sorry's bullshit," he said, rubbing Justin's back.

"I didn't mean—"

"I know," Brian said. And he did. This was bigger than Justin. It had to be, because one thing he knew about this kid was that he'd do anything for Brian. So if he wouldn't do this, it was because he couldn't. "I know." He felt guilty. If he hadn't left, if he'd been here, this wouldn't have happened. Except—Lindsey had needed him to watch Gus, and Justin had been asleep.

Suddenly, Justin pulled away and dashed off to the bathroom. Brian let him. He picked up the blood-smeared knife from the hardwood floor and took it to the sink to rinse it off. Then he thought better of it, and wrapped it in a paper towel before throwing it away. He never actually used his knives for anything, and if that stupid fucker kept cutting himself with them... Well, it was better to get rid of them.

"Thai okay?" he asked. There was a pause, and then he heard Justin's footsteps on the hardwood floor.

"Yeah, Thai's okay," he said. Brian picked up the phone and dialed the Thai place from memory, putting in his usual order. He watched as Justin settled himself on the couch.

"And don't forget the chopsticks!" he said before hanging up. He sat down next to Justin, folding one leg up onto the couch. After a moment, the blond leaned into him without saying a word. Brian put his arm around Justin's shoulder, and felt him take a deep breath.

They sat like that, in silence, until the delivery boy knocked on the door.

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## Chapter 20 – Waiting

*Justin checked his watch again for the twentieth time. Why had he even bothered going to class today? His attention span wasn't worth shit, and he was feeling sick to his stomach, like he might throw up at any moment.*

Ten minutes left in class, and then Brian would pick him up for his appointment with the shrink. Justin gave up finally, and quietly packed away his notebook and pencils. He swung his backpack onto his back and left the room.

He stood in the hallway, leaning against the wall. He had a choice still, and he knew it. He could do the easy thing, and walk away. Not be there when Brian drove up. He knew Brian; knew he would wait about ten minutes before parking the car and searching for him inside the building. And if he was walking down Liberty by then...

But he couldn't do that. It wasn't fair to Brian. He didn't know if Debbie knew about the counselor, but if she did, she'd be likely to tear him a new one over skipping out. Liberty Avenue wouldn't be much of a refuge. He'd get delivered into Brian's arms like a wayward child, and be embarrassed on top of everything else. He was almost 19 now, after all. Too old to pull something like that. *Damn it.*

He walked towards the front of the building where he'd told Brian they'd meet. The halls were deserted. He felt himself losing his nerve, and he paused.

His eyes caught the sign above the student art gallery. Lineage. Carrie's show. He'd forgotten all about the opening for it. He felt vague guilt, but pushed it away. He had enough shit on his plate without adding to it. Her art really was amazing; he stepped inside the gallery.

That bleeding, spiky heart painting caught him again. That's exactly how he felt. Exactly. He studied it intensely, wishing he could produce something like that. Something raw, painful, and intense, that showed the world what was going on inside. Instead, his body was his canvas, and it just made people nervous and angry.

He left the gallery and walked purposefully towards the door at the end of the hallway. He pushed against it with a flat palm, swinging open into briskly cool air. Brian's jeep was sitting there, with him behind the wheel.

Justin managed a small smile for Brian, who nodded at him. Justin opened the door and climbed inside the jeep.

"Ready?" Brian asked as Justin fumbled with his seatbelt. Justin looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"No," he said truthfully. Brian just nodded. "Alright."

They drove in silence for awhile. Justin realized that Brian didn't have directions with him. "Have you

been there before?" he asked.

"No," Brian said. "I looked up the directions online."

"Oh." Justin kind of wished that Brian had been there before; he was really nervous, and wanted some reassurance that everything would be okay.

Brian could see Justin trembling as he bit at his thumbnail "Hey, it's alright. Doc's a pretty decent guy," he said, trying to comfort him.

Brian saw the sign for Green Lane Counseling, and he turned into the parking lot. He drove up to the entrance.

Justin was pinned to his seat. Brian looked at him, one eyebrow raised. "We're here," he said.

Justin was silent. He was shaking, wishing he was anywhere but where he was. Brian put his hand on his knee.

"Come in with me," Justin whispered. It was a plea, a quiet one, but heartfelt.

"What?" Brian asked.

"Please, Brian," Justin said, looking at his lover with frightened eyes. "I can't do this."

Brian sighed and studied Justin. He looked like he was about to faint. Brian didn't understand his fear, but he knew it was real. "All right. Fine. Let me park."

Brian swung the Jeep into the nearest parking place and opened the door.

"Wait!" Justin cried. It was only the sheer terror in his voice that kept Brian from yelling at him to stop being such a drama queen. Brian looked at him. "What?" he asked, trying to keep the snappishness out of his voice.

His breathing had sped up, Brian noticed, and then it clicked. Another panic attack. *Shit.*

He quickly undid Justin's seatbelt and yanked the boy halfway into his lap, with his face pressed into Brian's shoulder. "It's okay, Sonnyboy. You're alright." He ran his hand over Justin's back, trying to give comfort. He hated these panic attacks; he knew Justin couldn't help them but they were exhausting for them both.

"I can't do this Brian!" Justin cried into his chest.

"Yes, you can. Relax." He kept his voice even, trying not to get sucked in.

Justin clung desperately to him, like a drowning man to a life raft. Slowly, Brian could feel his trembling lessen, and his breathing even out.

"Come on," Brian said. "It's alright." He released the blond and opened the car door. He gracefully climbed out, followed by Justin. Brian took his hand, and Justin squeezed back so tightly it bordered on painful. "Don't break my hand," Brian said. He saw Justin blush, and his grip loosened fractionally.

They walked into the shrink's office. Justin's eyes were everywhere, trying to take it all in. The place was bland and soothing; the walls were painted a neutral shade of green, with unremarkable, comfortable furniture. The desk the receptionist sat behind was made of solid oak, tasteful and sedate. She smiled at them. "How may I help you?" she asked.

"I'm here for an appointment with Evan Carpenter," Justin said. His voice was remarkably even, considering. Brian was impressed.

"Name, please?" she asked.

"Justin Taylor," he said.

"And you're a first time client, yes? Can I get your insurance card please?"

Justin released Brian's hand to dig his wallet out of his back pocket. He pulled his insurance card out and handed it to the lady.

She typed some things into the computer, and then smiled at him and handed him his card again. "Take a clipboard, please, and fill out the paperwork. It should take around twenty minutes or so. Dr. Carpenter will be out shortly." She smiled and gestured at a stack of clipboards.

Justin tucked his insurance card back into his wallet and took a clipboard. Brian led him towards a small loveseat, and they sat. Brian let Justin settle himself against him and start on the clipboard.

They were silent as Justin circled answers. Brian looked over his shoulder.

"They ask you about how you feel about sex?" Brian asked. He read off the clipboard, "My interest in sex is the same as usual, my interest in sex is lower than it used to be, sex is not very interesting to me anymore. I've lost all interest in sex? How sad would that be? That must be a breeder problem." He kissed Justin's neck. "That would make me lose all interest in sex too."

Justin smiled, and circled the first answer. "One thing that never changes is my sex drive," he said.

"And a damn good thing that is," Brian replied, placing another kiss behind his ear and making him giggle.

Justin finished the last of the paperwork and brought it to the receptionist, who thanked him and disappeared down the hallway connected to the waiting room.

He and Brian sat together, waiting. Now that he'd filled out the paperwork, he could feel himself getting nervous again. "Brian?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brian said.

"Will you wait for me here? Please?" Justin held his breath, waiting for the answer. He needed to know Brian was right here, and that if he needed to, he could run into his arms.

Brian didn't want to; he wanted to leave him here for the hour-long appointment and go get a coffee or something. Anything but sit in this bland, boring office. But as he looked at Justin's face, he could see that was close to running for it again. He sighed. "I'll be here." If he was truthful with himself, he'd known he'd do that all along. But he didn't have to like it.

Justin squeezed his hand lightly in thanks.

"But you owe me at least a dozen blow jobs," Brian continued, trying to make Justin smile.

It worked. That Sunshine grin lit up his face. Brian couldn't help but kiss him, and Justin kissed back, forgetting for a moment that they were in a psychologist's office, forgetting how nervous he was, forgetting everything except Brian.

The sound of someone clearing their throat broke the pair apart. Brian smirked. "Hey Doc," he said. "Enjoy the show?"

"Brian," the man acknowledged, a small smile playing on his lips. Justin looked up at him. The gray haired man held out his hand to Justin. "I'm Evan Carpenter." Despite the hair, he appeared to be in his early forties, and still in good shape.

"Justin Taylor," Justin said, standing up. He shook the man's hand, then nervously adjusted his shirt.

"Why don't you come back to my office?" Evan asked, gesturing down the long hallway. Justin nodded and followed Evan. He looked back at Brian, who was watching him with that inscrutable *Brian Kinney* look on his face. Then he rounded the corner, and followed Evan Carpenter into his office.

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## Chapter 21 – Talk It Out

The office, too, was very calm. More neutral green paint on the walls, with comfortable, non-matching

armchairs and a couch. Justin stood uneasily in the doorway, clutching his messenger bag in his hands.

"Take a seat," Evan said, gesturing expansively at the choices.

"Which one?" Justin asked. He swallowed hard. His voice sounded odd to him, young and scared.

"Whichever one you want," Evan replied. Justin chose a beige armchair and sat on its edge, unsure of his choice. *Why am I doing this?* he asked himself for the umpteenth time.

Evan shut the door, and sat down in the other armchair, a high-backed plaid monstrosity that reminded Justin of Emmett. He smiled, and Justin smiled back. It wasn't a real smile on his part, but a country club, suburban upbringing smile, a polite smile.

"I'm Dr. Evan Carpenter, as you obviously know," he said. "Feel free to call me Evan, though." He picked up a legal pad and a pen, and wrote something down before looking up at Justin again.

"Justin Taylor," Justin repeated. He forced his voice not to shake. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so nervous.

"As you may or may not know, I know Brian—"

"Everyone who spends time on Liberty Avenue knows Brian," Justin interrupted. A real smile, or perhaps a smirk, made its way onto his face.

"True enough," Evan replied, and the men shared a small look of acknowledgement. "But Brian talked to me about you. He was nervous about some behavior you are engaging in."

"Yeah, I know," Justin said. "He told me. Are you allowed to tell me this? Isn't there some kind of patient/client privilege?"

"Only between clients and therapists, not acquaintances at a bar," Evan said. "You signed the papers. We have client/therapist privilege; he doesn't."

"So you know what I do?" Justin asked. He scratched lightly at his leg, roughing up the old scars as a means of comfort. Evan wrote something else on his legal pad as he responded.

"Sort of. He told me you've been cutting yourself, but not much more." Evan looked at him for a long moment.

"You want me to talk about that?" Justin asked. He wasn't sure what to do. Opposing emotions were warring in the pit of his stomach; the need to talk, to spill, to confess...and the need to keep his dirty little secret. He snorted softly; geez, how dramatic.

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Evan asked.

"I guess," Justin said. He sighed, and scratched at his leg again. "I don't....I don't really know where to start." He looked up at Evan through his eyelashes.

Evan shrugged. "The beginning is usually a good place," he offered.

Justin looked at him; there was a long moment of unbroken eye contact. Finally, Justin dropped his head. "Okay," he said. He took a deep breath.

"I went to my senior prom. With Brian. Well, actually, with my best friend, Daphne. See, Brian told me he wouldn't be caught dead in a room full of "fucking eighteen year olds." But he showed up." Justin didn't notice the slightly dreamy tone his voice had taken. He'd lost those memories for awhile, and now that he had them back, he reveled in them.

"We danced." Justin hummed a few bars of the music, and saw the doctor nod. "'Save the Last Dance for Me'...it was really, really romantic. Ridiculously so, Brian said, because that's the way he is. And then I walked him out to his Jeep...I had to take Daphne home before meeting him later. That was the plan anyway." Justin's face dropped a little.

"I was walking back, and then I heard Brian scream my name. He sounded...so scared. I turned back to look at him..." Justin's voice trailed off.

"What happened?" Evan knew what had happened. Brian had told him this very story, from his angle. And he'd read in the papers, just like everyone else on Liberty Avenue. Hell, just like most of Pittsburgh. But he had to hear it from Justin.

"I didn't see it, really. Barely. Just for a second, I saw the bat...and then I don't remember anything. But I know Chris Hobbs hit me with it, and I know that Brian hit him in the knee." Justin's voice was barely audible; Evan could see the pain of it on his face.

Justin had never talked about it before. Not really. He'd had nightmare after nightmare, and Brian had held him and soothed him, but he'd never wanted to talk about it. He'd never wanted to put those awful fears, those horrible images, into words.

"Brian never came to see me in the hospital. I thought he would...but he never did. The hospital was so awful. They made me do tons of physical therapy, until I just wanted to scream. My hand wouldn't work. It killed me; I'm an artist! I need my hand, and it wouldn't work...God, sometimes I just wanted to die, because I couldn't see what would come of my future, without a functioning hand. I mean, drawing? Painting? Out of the question, you know? And I just wanted to be with Brian. But when I came home, he was there. He helped me with my rehab and everything, throwing a tennis ball back and forth. He made some slightly smartass remarks about it, but nothing that was actually mean." Justin smiled again, remembering Brian's teasing taunts. "You mean you've always thrown like this, and no one suspected you're gay?"



"My mom told him not to see me again, I guess...I was so pissed when I figured it out. But not long after that, he asked me to move in with him, and I did." Justin looked up at the doctor, who was rapidly taking down notes.

"Has your hand's function improved?" Evan asked.

"Yeah, it has. It's not perfect, though. Not like it used to be. If I draw for very long; even say half an hour, it starts to shake and gets pretty damn useless." Justin stared blankly at the wall. "And Hobbs... well, nothing happened to him. Probation. And I..." he trailed off.

"You...what?" asked the doctor.

Justin snorted out a humorless laugh. "I'm never going to have a normal hand again. But he's still got a normal life." He shook his head. They sat in silence for nearly five minutes; Justin thinking, Evan writing.

"When did the actual cutting start?" Evan asked, seeing that Justin wasn't going to say anything else about that subject.

"It started as an accident," Justin replied. "It was...I don't know. I'm pretty sure it started right after the sentencing. Or lack thereof. It was nighttime...I was under the influence of a sleeping pill." He remembered that night pretty well; a little fuzzy around the edges, but otherwise whole. "Brian actually had food in the fridge for once, and I was going to cut a slice of cheese. But the pill made me kind of clumsy, and I grabbed the blade instead of the handle. There was a lot of blood..." Justin's breathing got slightly faster as he told the story. "I guess I was crying. I woke Brian up, and he stopped the bleeding and fixed me up. We went back to bed. Not a big deal, really." He remembered Brian's arms around him.

"So when did you first cut intentionally?" Evan asked, pen still traveling over the paper.

"It was the day before Pride. My first Pride, actually. It was supposed to be a really big deal. Emmett was so excited. He had plans to push his friend, Godiva, in the parade. She was at the AIDS hospice." Justin scratched at his leg again, the emotions from that day welling inside of him again.

"We got the news she'd died. I went with Emmett to the hospice, to pack up her stuff. He wanted a moment alone with her..." Justin trailed off, remembering that day.

"What happened?" prodded the doctor gently. He could see emotion after emotion crossing the boy's face.

Justin took a deep breath, swallowing around the lump gathering in his throat. "I went downstairs, and rounded the corner into this narrow little hallway. And he was standing there. Mopping the floor." Justin's breath hitched in his chest at the memory.

"Who was standing there?" Evan asked, writing furiously.

"Hobbs. Apparently, that's where they assigned him community service." Justin scratched more frantically at the healing scars on his leg, not even noticing he was doing it. "He asked me if I had AIDS. When I said no, he said that I would, eventually. He wanted me to die of AIDS. I could see it in his face, that he hated me. And then he went like this," Justin jerked his hand at the doctor, "with the mop. And I flinched. He thought it was funny..." Justin could feel tears welling up in his eyes. "And I ran. I ran outside and sat on the pavement next to the car until Emmett came out, and drove me home." The tears spilled over his face, and he swiped at them with both hands.

"Justin, you're bleeding," the doctor said. He got up, putting his notepad facedown on his chair. Justin looked at his hands; one had blood all over it. He looked down at his leg; blood was soaking through the leg of his pants too.

"Shit. I'm sorry." The tears came faster. He felt himself losing it. "I didn't...I didn't mean to..." He swiped at them again, leaving a streak of blood on his cheek.

Evan didn't know what to do. He wanted to send the kid to clean himself up, but he was obviously in a fragile state at the moment. "Is Brian still out there?" he asked.

Justin nodded, pressing his hand against his bleeding leg.

"I'm going to call him in here," Evan said. He picked up the phone and told the receptionist to send him back.

Brian. Brian could help. He could fix this. Justin couldn't believe how much blood there was; he hadn't even cut himself. Suddenly, he stood up. The doctor stepped between him and the door.

"I didn't want to get blood on your chair," Justin explained, and the doctor relaxed slightly. There was a knock on the door.

Evan opened it, and Brian came in. He didn't even register Doc's presence. He felt his heart flutter. Justin was crying. A streak of blood marred his face, and his hand and leg were covered.

Brian didn't pause before pulling the blood-stained boy into his Armani-covered arms. Justin clung to him desperately, crying. "What happened?" Brian asked. His voice was too even, too controlled. "Doc, what the fuck happened? Why is he covered in blood?"

Evan didn't speak. He couldn't tell Brian unless Justin said it was okay.

"Goddammit, Doc!" Brian's voice raised. He felt adrenaline pouring into his system. The urge to hit this man was quickly becoming overwhelming.

"Justin, may I tell him?" Evan asked, seeing that in Brian's eyes. The blond nodded.

"He was talking about the first time he cut, and he kept scratching his leg. I didn't realize what was happening until he started crying and wiped the tears off of his face. I think he opened up some old scabs."

The two older men stared at each other. Finally, Brian nodded. He put his mouth next to Justin's ear. "Let's go clean you up," he said. He kept his voice intentionally gentle, like he would speak to Gus. Justin was a mess right now; Brian could do that for him.

The blond nodded against Brian's chest. "Where's the bathroom?" Brian asked. Evan gestured down the hall. "Melissa can show you where it is," he said. Brian nodded briskly and started leading Justin down the hallway.

Evan shut the door, and sank into his chair. Dear God, this kid was a mess. Evan had known Brian Kinney by reputation for a long time, but after they'd spoken, he knew there was more to him than the asshole exterior he showed the world. And now Brian was taking care of this damaged, hurt teenager. And why? Because he loved him. Evan's job was to read people; he knew it was true. He wondered if it would be enough.

Evan added another paragraph to the bottom of his notes for the day. Now the question was; how would he help this kid heal?

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## Chapter 22 – Cleaning Up

Brian was furious. Somewhere inside, he realized that this wasn't Doc's fault, but he had to be angry at someone, and Justin couldn't handle his anger right now.

He herded the bloody, crying blond into the men's room. Justin didn't seem like he was capable of doing much, except for sobbing and gasping for air. Brian turned on the sink. "Wash your hands," he ordered. Justin automatically put his hands under the water, but seemed long gone. He didn't move.

"Come on, Justin. You know how to wash your fucking hands." Brian felt fear and worry and anger all fighting in his chest as he watched him stand there, helpless.

Brian shook his head. He hated looking at all that blood on Justin's skin; it made him feel like throwing up. "Are you really going to make me wash your hands, like you're Gus or something?" Brian asked. "Because that's more than a little bit freaky, in a lot of ways." He tried to keep his tone joking, despite the fact that his heart was somewhere in his throat.

Finally, Justin put his hand under the soap dispenser and started cleaning himself up. Brian realized there was blood on his hands too and also some blood staining his clothes. *Shit. The dry-cleaner will like that one.* He washed and dried his hands, and looked at Justin, who had turned off the sink, and

was standing in front of the mirror, staring blankly at the smear of blood across his cheek.

Brian handed him a wet paper towel. "Clean off your face," he directed. Justin silently did. His expression was oddly blank.

Brian looked down at Justin's blood-stained jeans. "Clean up your leg," he said. Justin looked down, and the tears started again. Brian sighed. "Sit on the counter," he ordered, gesturing towards it. Justin sat and drew his knees to his chest.

Brian rolled up his pant leg, and felt his breath catch in his throat as he looked at all the scars. There were so many, many more than there had been that day he'd studied them as Justin slept. Scarlet smears covered them, and he could see that some of them were still oozing blood. He wiped them off with another wet paper towel, carefully cleaning the blood off of them. Justin pulled away suddenly. He stood so fast he almost stepped on Brian's feet.

"I want to go home," he said, and his voice was pinched and odd.

"Just a second," Brian said. "I think we'd better let Doc know you're okay." He took Justin's hand in his own, and the two made their way out of the bathroom.

Doc was in the hallway, walking towards them. "Are you all right, Justin?" he asked. Justin nodded.

"I'm sorry...about that. It was an accident." Justin wouldn't meet Doc's eye, Brian noticed, and his grip on his hand was approaching painful.

"If you want to make another appointment now, you may. Otherwise, you have my card, and can call in." Doc smiled, and then met Brian's eyes. The smile dropped. "Whatever you prefer."

Brian nodded. "All right," he said, and he and Justin kept walking, down the hallway and out into the pale evening sunlight.

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Justin was asleep now. He'd gone into the bathroom, now completely without a door of any kind, and re-washed and bandaged his leg. Brian had watched him do it. The kid had done it very professionally; he'd apparently gotten plenty of practice.

Now he was curled on his side under the covers, breathing steadily and evenly, his features peaceful. Brian lay on his side next to him, watching him sleep, and wondering what to do.

He didn't need this. He could tell Justin he was on his own, that if he really wanted to cut himself into a million little bits, to go ahead and do it. And yet he stayed. He cleaned him up, and held him, and....God, how he hated himself....loved him. Not that he'd ever tell. Damn this stupid little twink.

Debbie was right; he'd gotten under the wire somehow. And was now using said wire to cut himself to pieces.

Okay, he was being dramatic. But he couldn't be any more dramatic than Justin. After all, what was more dramatic than that little scene today at Doc's office? The kid had looked like an extra in a cheap horror film, for God's sake!

He wondered if Justin would go back for another appointment. Would he do it on his own, or would Brian would have to be a hard-ass and bribe, threaten, and otherwise coerce him into it? Justin had barely spoken two words once they'd gotten back to the loft, and Brian questioned what was going through his head. Probably nothing good.

Well, they could talk about it tomorrow. Right now...right now, he just wanted to hold onto this stubborn, stupid, dramatic little twinkie, and get some sleep.

*Shit*, Brian thought as he wrapped his arms around the blond. *Did I really just say 'we can talk about it tomorrow?' I'm turning into a dyke!*

*Well, I can deal with that tomorrow too*, he thought finally, and shut his eyes. Justin sighed, and within minutes, they were both asleep.

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## Chapter 23 – Manipulation

"You want to eat breakfast at the Diner?" Brian asked.

Justin looked at him. "Really?" he asked, taking a sip of watery coffee out of one of Brian's expensive coffee mugs.

"Yeah, really. Come on." Brian was casually dressed.

"Aren't you going to work today?" Justin asked as he pulled on a clean pair of blue jeans.

"Maybe a little later," Brian replied. "Come on."

"I'm coming! Give me a second."

"That's not what you usually say," Brian teased.

Justin yanked his shirt down. "Shut up," he said, smacking Brian lightly with the back of his hand.

Brian watched him run around the loft, getting ready. He felt the vaguest guilt at his actions; Justin wouldn't be likely to run off in the middle of a meal. He could ask him about making another appointment. Damn. He didn't really want to do this.

He also didn't want to have to clean up a blood-covered, crying twink ever again. For any reason. So he had to. He wondered if his logic was slightly twisted; after all, the last clean-up had been after his appointment with Doc. But...

"I'm ready," Justin said. "Let's go." He grabbed Brian's hand, and pulled him from the loft.

Brian noticed he seemed cheerful during the drive; he sure talked enough. Brian let him rattle on as he parked.

They walked into the diner together. Brian let his arm drape over Justin's shoulder. He steered him into their usual booth. For a moment, he considered sitting next to him, but then decided against it. Two people, two sides to the booth. There was a system to these things, after all.

Debbie was there, as usual. "Hey boys!" she called, her tone conveying exactly how thrilled she was to see them. "I'll be there in a second!"

Justin chuckled. "Ah, Debbie. Gotta love her."

"Don't have a choice," Brian said. "If you didn't, she'd hit you in the head so hard you'd lose brain cells." He was starting to think this might not be so bad after all. After all, Justin was a (mostly) rational human being... well, he was, for a drama princess...okay, he wasn't really...but Brian could hope. And he was.

"What can I do for you, boys?" Debbie asked, smacking her gum. She held her pen over the order pad, waiting.

"I'll take the breakfast special," Justin said.

"Sure thing, Sunshine. And you?" she asked Brian.

"I'll take a donut and some coffee," he said.

She nodded. "It'll be up in a minute. Just like you! Ha!" Debbie cackled to herself as she walked back to the kitchen to put their orders in. Justin shook his head, smiling.

Brian wasn't sure how to start this conversation. He didn't do "we have to talk"s for many reasons—he was lousy at them, for one. And they were boring as hell. *Shit. Well, here we go.*

"When are you going to call Doc's office and make another appointment?" Brian used his best don't-argue-with-me stare.

Justin winced. Physically winced. "Do we have to do this now?" he asked. His voice was quiet.

"Why not? Might as well." Brian kept his gaze steady.

"I'm not going to." Justin's voice was barely audible over the clink of dishes and silverware.

"Yes you are," Brian said.

"I don't need that shit. You saw how well yesterday turned out." Justin was biting his thumbnail.

"Yeah, well, if you hadn't clawed the hell out of yourself, yesterday wouldn't have been so—"

"Yeah, it would have. You don't even know." Now Justin was staring back. "Have you ever seen a therapist?"

"Me? Hah." Brian scoffed at the idea. "Doc himself told me I was one of the best-adjusted men he'd ever met."

"It's obvious he doesn't know you," Justin said, and a little smile played at the corner of his mouth.

"Don't pull this off-track. You can't just go once. This is obviously a problem," Brian said. Debbie came up then, and filled his coffee cup. Both men were silent until she retreated.

"I won't go, Brian," Justin said firmly.

Brian shook his head. He'd pull rank here, if he had to. "You're going back."

"And if I don't?" Justin was challenging him.

"I won't fuck you." Checkmate.

Justin groaned. "That's not even fair, Brian. I don't think you could do it, anyway."

"Wanna bet?" Brian leaned forward. "Listen, stop being such a twat and just call and make another appointment. It'll be easier on both of us." He smirked. "And then we can fuck before I have to go to work this afternoon."

Justin knew when he was beaten. "I can't believe you," he said, shaking his head. "You're fucking shameless."

Brian just shrugged and took a sip of coffee, leaning back in the booth. Justin kept shaking his head.

"Fine," he said. "I'll make the fucking appointment. Happy?"

"Positively gay," Brian deadpanned.

"Well, that's a first," Debbie said. She set a huge platter in front of Justin, and a small plate with a single donut on it in front of Brian.

"Thanks, Deb," Justin said. He picked up his fork and poked at the stack of pancakes.

"Don't look so down, Sunshine," Debbie said, before turning to get another order.

"Easy for her to say," Justin mumbled, before taking a bite.

"I'll make it up to you. How fast can you finish that plate?"

Justin looked up. The look on Brian's face was hungry; and not for food.

Justin took his own sweet time eating. It was his own little form of revenge, to lick and suck on the spoon almost pornographically and watch Brian squirm. Finally, he finished.

"You little fucker," Brian whispered in his ear as he dug out some money to pay. "I'll make you pay for that display."

"Go right ahead," Justin said back, wiggling his ass with every step towards the Jeep.

"After you call Doc's office," Brian said. "I will."

Now it was Justin who was horny. He grabbed Brian's cell phone out of his pocket and dialed. It took three minutes to set up another appointment.

"Now, the fun can start," Brian said as Justin handed him his phone.

They barely made it to the loft.

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## Chapter 24 – Knowing the Truth

"I just...what am I supposed to do then?" Justin was fiddling with a pencil, not meeting Evan's eyes.

"What did you do before you started cutting?" Evan asked, pen poised over the legal pad he took notes on. "You obviously dealt with stress before you happened upon this little...solution of yours."



Justin shrugged. "I'd draw. Something like that. But this is a different kind of stress, Doc. I mean... yeah, before, I had real stress. Like when my dad ran into Brian's jeep and tore it up, or when he tried to kick the shit out of him outside of Babylon. But then, Brian would..."

"Would what?"

"I don't know. He was pretty good to me, then, too, I guess, but...well, then he wasn't always worried about me. And even though he doesn't say he's worried, I know him. He's worried."

"How do you feel about that? That he worries about you?" Evan's pen was flying over the paper.

"Uh...well, I hate it. I mean, I hate worrying him. Everyone leans on Brian; the whole family."

"Whose family?" Evan asked.

"Our family." Justin caught Evan's slightly confused expression. "That sounds weird, I guess. Um, well, Deb's his, I don't know, she's like his mother, and Michael's his best friend. He's Deb's son. And Vic, who's Debbie's brother—and then there's Mel and Linds, they're the mother of his son...and of course, Ted and Emmett...it's a little confusing. But Deb thinks she's practically my mom, which is weird, since that would make Brian and I brothers...shit, that's gross. I'm babbling, aren't I? Sorry."

"Okay, so I understand the family thing. But Brian obviously cares about you; the first time you came here, he demonstrated that admirably. You're his partner. Why wouldn't you lean on him?"

"Well, I could, but I don't really want to. I mean, I'd like to take care of this myself." Justin was firm.

"Well, what other things could you do besides cutting, to deal with your stress? We'll make a list."

Justin sighed and leaned back in the chair. "This is exactly the kind of crap you see psychologists on TV do," he complained mildly.

"Well, they can't make everything up from nowhere. Even TV has to have some reality. Come on." Evan met Justin's eyes. "What's it going to hurt?"

Justin sighed. "Alright. Fine. We'll make the damn list."

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Justin sat in the bathroom, clutching the list in his hand. He ran down the list in his mind, desperately fighting the urge to cut.

*Draw...except, I'm getting these awful, morbid urges to draw with blood...god, I'm a drama queen. Sex...well, Brian's not here. I can't believe he actually wrote that on the list. I was joking...exercise. Yeah. I never do that. Another joke, I guess...oh, god. I want this so bad...Write. I'm not really a writer.*

But as he sat there, he could feel the words bubbling up inside him. Almost like he felt when he just had to paint something, when it was itching inside him, when it was bursting forth from every pore. Well, hell. He could write, couldn't he?

He got up, stuffing the list into the pocket of his jeans. Paper. He needed paper. He walked into the kitchen. It took everything inside him to avoid the knife drawer and grab a small pad of paper from beside the phone. He hesitated, and then moved into the living room.

There was a pencil sitting on the coffee table; one of his that he hadn't put away earlier. He picked it up and held it against the paper.

At first, there was nothing. He was confused; he could still feel that strange itch inside him. And then, it started.

*like tears*

*pain escaping*

*in red-hot drops*

*scarlet on pale skin*

*making marks*

*to let you know...what do you want from me?*

*i'm dying here*

*as you watch i bleed to death*

*on the pavement*

*blood escaping*

*rushing upfree, it pours*

*leaving little lines*

*what's been left behind*

*a shadow of what was...i'll never be what i was.*

Justin took a deep breath. It had all just come out of him, just like that. One word after the next, putting it on paper. He read over it, startled at the words that had just erupted from him. They scared him; they were too raw, too fresh, even more than the cuts were. He balled up the paper and hid it between the couch cushions.

He stood up, and walked over to the bed. He was going to take a nap. And after that...well, he'd take care of that when it happened.

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The loft was dark. Brian entered and turned on a lamp. He could see a ball under the duvet; Justin was asleep. It wasn't that late; 6:00. He picked up the phone and ordered Thai food, still watching Justin sleep.

He hung up the phone and walked over to the couch. Brian sat, tired. He heard a crinkling noise.

*Shit. He's always leaving shit on the couch, and it falls into the cushions.* Brian dug into the crack between the cushions. His hand came upon a crumpled piece of paper.

He looked at it. A sheet from the memo pad that usually was by the phone. For some reason, he opened it, smoothing the paper.

The words jumped out at him, painful words reminiscent of both the bashing and Justin's self-injury. He couldn't believe the force there, and the raw anger and pain. And it was directed at him. The words echoed through his brain; they'd practically burned into his retinas.

*i'm dying here*

*as you watch i bleed to death*

*on the pavement*

A direct condemnation. A condemnation of what he had done then, and what he was doing now. Justin was dying, he was killing himself, bit by bit. And Brian was standing by, doing small, ineffectual things to help. Things that didn't really help at all. Justin was bleeding himself to death, and Brian was watching.

Well, fuck. He could just give up on him, if he wanted to. Tell him, Okay. Bleed yourself dry. But if he was honest with himself...he couldn't. Because Justin was the little twink that could get in under the wire...*Thanks so much, Deb.*

Brian slammed his hand down on the coffee table, flattening the paper between the table top and his palm. The smacking noise resounded through the loft.

"Brian?" Justin's voice was scared. Brian looked over to the bed; Justin was sitting bolt upright, clutching the duvet in both hands.

"It's me," Brian replied. He saw Justin's shoulders relax. He turned back the comforter and climbed out of the bed. Brian looked away, still unsure what he wanted to do.

"What was that noise?" Justin asked. He was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, at the top of the stairs. He leaned against the wall, looking a little nervous still.

"This." Brian held out his hand, the paper centered on his palm. Justin visibly paled. Brian stood up and advanced on him. "This is what you want to know? You want to know what I want from you?"

Justin didn't move. Brian could see that he was shaking. He stepped up the stairs and grabbed Justin's shoulders.

"I want you to stop cutting yourself. Go ahead. Be a fucking drama princess—scream, throw things, hell, take a swing at me if you really want, but knock it off. You're not a fucking shadow, and you aren't going to die any time soon, you little fucker. Not after all the shit I've been through because of you. Do you get me?" Brian gave him a small shake, staring him down intensely.

Justin didn't move, and for a second, Brian felt a real flash of fear. Fear that he might say no, that he might tell him it wasn't enough. But then Justin nodded, and leaned into Brian's chest. Brian wrapped his arms around the blond, feeling relief rush through him. Wherever they went from here, it would be okay.

"I love you too, Brian," Justin whispered.

And although he considered it, Brian didn't protest. He just held on.

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