

## **Running**

**By Julesmonster**

**Disclaimer:** All publicly recognizable characters, settings, etc. are the property of their respective owners. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. The author is in no way associated with the owners, creators, or producers of any media franchise. No copyright infringement is intended.

**A/N:** Okay, so this one came from... I'm not really sure. I just had this idea that Justin disappears one day and Brian has to find him. That takes up the first chapter. After that, there are six more chapters of what my mind came up with to explain the disappearance. That's an absolutely horrible explanation, but I hope you enjoy it anyway. Jules

### **Part 1**

For two years after he left for New York Justin called Brian at least once a day. For two years, he came back for Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, the 4th of July and pretty much any other long weekend he could get away from work. For two years, despite the fact that they were hundreds of miles apart and fucked whoever they wanted, Brian felt like he still had Justin.

And then everything changed overnight.

Brian could still remember the last thing Justin said to him. They had been teasing back and forth about who could pull more tricks in a day. Justin had scoffed at Brian's assumption that he would win and had challenged him to prove it. They would each have twenty-four hours to pull as many men as they could. Just before they hung up, Justin stopped and whispered, "You know, no matter how many men there are, they'll never compare to you. It'll always be you."

"I know that, Sunshine," Brian had said lightly. "I am the best."

Justin had chuckled and they hung up with their usual, "Later." But now, Brian wondered why he hadn't told Justin how he really felt. Why couldn't he just say that Justin would always be the only man he could ever love? It was true and they both knew it, but Justin needed to hear it sometimes. That was a lesson he thought he had learned. But apparently not. And now...

When Justin didn't call him the next night at the end of the designated bet and didn't answer Brian's call, he brushed it off. When he hadn't called the

next day or the next and he still wasn't answering his phone, Brian began to worry. He started calling Justin and leaving voicemail every couple hours. But Justin never answered. He blew up Justin's email inbox with messages but got no response. Three days of that and Brian was frantic with worry. He called Jennifer to see if she had heard from Justin. She hadn't. He called Debbie and Lindsey and every person he knew Justin kept in contact with on a regular basis. None had heard from him. He called the gallery where Justin's art showed and where he worked part time and was told that he'd quit a week ago, but his paintings were still selling. A week ago...that was before their last conversation, but Justin hadn't told him. In fact he had said work was fine when Brian asked.

Brian sat down and tried to think it all through. Justin had quit his part-time job. That wasn't so shocking. He'd been making enough from his art to live for six months or more, but he liked getting out and talking to people. He said it helped him paint. So why would he quit? And why wouldn't he tell Brian? Unless, whatever happened, whatever reason he wasn't returning Brian's phone calls, was something he planned and hadn't wanted to tell Brian. In that case, those last words seemed even more important.

Brian stopped trying to piece it together. He didn't have enough information to form any reasonable answers. Besides, he was a man of action. He packed a bag and was on the next plane to New York, despite Cynthia's protests.

Justin's roommate answered the door and said, "You're Brian, right?"

He grabbed an envelope from a table by the door. "He asked me to give this to you. Seemed pretty sure you'd show up. I guess he was right."

Brian looked at the plain manila envelope with his name on it and hesitated to take it. He knew that he wasn't going to like what he found in there. But what real choice did he have? He took the envelope. "How long ago did he leave?"

"A week ago," the guy said. "I'm sorry I don't know more to tell you. He didn't leave a forwarding address."

Brian nodded numbly and tucked the envelope into his bag and walking back to the street in a daze. Justin was gone, and he had done this to Brian purposefully. He had left him. Not left him, as in he moved to another state while they still maintained a relationship, but left him as in never see each other again. He had planned it out and not said a word to Brian, maintaining

to the end that he loved Brian, and now he was gone. That just wasn't acceptable.

He went to the gallery next. They repeated what they had told him on the phone. Justin didn't leave any contact information. Then the manager came over and added that Justin said he would arrange to have the next set of pictures shipped. That was new information. It at least told him that Justin wasn't in New York any more. But it didn't tell him why he left or where he went.

Without any more leads to follow, Brian went home. But he wasn't giving up. He hired a detective to carry on the search.

His conversation with the detective brought home the fact that he really knew very little about the life Justin led in New York. He knew where he worked and where he lived, but he didn't know who his friends were. He didn't know where he liked to go out dancing. He didn't know what he did when he wasn't painting or at the gallery. He didn't know if Justin had gotten into harder drugs or had fallen in with another Pink Posse. Those thoughts only made Brian worry more as all sorts of horrific scenarios played through his mind.

The only relief to his anxiety came when Jennifer called him a few days later to tell him that Justin had called. Justin was alive and well, but he wouldn't even tell Jennifer where he was or why he left. He was simply calling to let her know he was alright and keep her from worrying too much. She thought maybe Brian might need the same assurance, so she had called.

That set up the pattern for the following months. He'd work himself into the ground trying to keep busy and keep from obsessing over Justin's disappearance. Some days he'd be consumed with worry. Some days the guilt would take over. The worst days were the ones when he was overflowing with anger towards his wayward lover. Those were the days even Cynthia avoided him. Then Justin would call Jennifer and Jennifer would call Brian and he'd be okay for a day or two and the cycle would start all over again.

Brian tried to convince Carl to trace the weekly call, but he refused... something about right to privacy or some such bullshit. Brian got Debbie on his side, though, and he thought that it might only be a matter of time before the semi-retired policeman caved to his bride.

For two years, Brian had gone along with his life, believing that someday Justin would come home and they would take up where they left off, maybe

even get married. But now Brian wasn't sure of anything...except that he wanted Justin to come home.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

"You should at least call him, Honey," Jennifer scolded her son. She had given up trying to convince him to come home. Now she would settle for getting him to talk to Brian. "He's a wreck, Justin. This isn't fair to him. You say you love him, but you don't shut out the people you love."

"I have to," Justin said, and Jennifer could hear the tears in his voice. "I don't have any choice. At least not right now. Maybe... someday. I left a letter explaining as much as I could for him. That has to be enough for now."

Jennifer gave a frustrated growl. "It isn't enough and it never will be! You're destroying him, Justin. He's lost weight. He doesn't sleep. He's swings from angry to depressed to anxious on a daily basis. You have to do something!"

"It's killing me too," Justin said angrily. "I don't like this any more than you or Brian, but I don't have a choice."

"Justin..."

"I have to go," Justin said coolly.

"I'm sorry," Jennifer told him.

Justin sighed and relented. "Me too. I'll call next week. I love you. And tell Brian..."

"I'll tell him you love him," Jennifer said. "Because it's the truth."

"Yeah."

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Jack Waters walked into Kinnetik without an appointment, but when the receptionist called back to Mr. Kinney's office, his assistant had directed her to Mr. Kinney, who had told he would be out to escort the man himself. Whoever this guy was, Jenna figured he must be important. He didn't look very important, though. He was scruffy. He was unshaven and wearing wrinkled clothes that had seen better days. He was wearing a button-down shirt unbuttoned over a green t-shirt, jeans, and running shoes. His one

concession to the fact that he was entering a respectable business was the sports coat he had thrown on over everything.

"Jack?" That was Mr. Kinney. Jenna sat up straighter and watched as he led the scruffy man away.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Brian was anxious to hear what Waters had to tell him. The detective had called two nights before saying the he thought he might have a lead. Brian had been anxious since then, waiting for news.

"I think I might have found him," Waters said once they were in Brian's office with the door shut. "There is a Justin Taylor in Mercer, Vermont."

"Vermont?" Brian asked. "What the hell would he be doing up there?"

"If it's the right guy, he's involved in a custody case over two minors," Waters told him. "Alexander and Robert Anderson. Their mother and adopted father were killed in a car accident about six months ago, not long before your boy disappeared. The case is between the biological father and the adopted father's parents."

Brian shook his head. "No, that can't be the right Justin Taylor. Justin doesn't have kids."

Waters nodded. "You could be right. It might not be him. But he is an artist. And I was able to trace the shipments made to the gallery in New York to a UPS store in Bristol Vermont. That's two towns over, but the closest UPS store to Mercer."

Brain sat back in his chair and let his brain work. It seemed like it was spinning, but suddenly all the pieces began to fall into place. "The mother... her name was Daphne, wasn't it?"

Waters looked at the little note pad he carried with him everywhere. "That's right. Daphne Anderson, maiden name Chanders."

"Oh fuck," Brian said. On the one hand he knew that he had finally found Justin. On the other, Daphne was dead and Justin was fighting for custody of her children—who were apparently his children as well. No wonder he'd run to Vermont. But why was he hiding from Brian?

"Okay, I'm going to need as many details about this custody case as you can get, including who Justin's lawyer is and what sort of background he has," Brian said. "I also need Justin's address. It looks like I'm going to Vermont."

## **BJBJBJBJBJ**

Brian wondered just what the hell his Sunshine had been thinking. He was driving through back country roads in a rental car on his way to the house Justin was renting in Mercer. From the information that Waters had given him before he left Pittsburgh, he knew that Justin and the Andersons had been granted shared custody of the twin boys for six months, after which, the case would be reopened for further examination. What they were examining, Brian had no clue. As far as Brian was concerned, if both guardians were dead, then custody should go to the biological father unless he was unfit. And no one in their right minds could believe that Justin was unfit.

He also learned that Justin's lawyer was one of two in the small back-woods county. If there was some local conspiracy going on, it was likely that he would side with the Andersons. Which was why Brian had hired one of the best lawyers in the state of Vermont to handle the case. He just had to convince Justin to meet with him.

Brian drove through Mercer and realized just how small this town was. There were two stop lights and a single street making up the downtown. There were several side streets with houses, but not much else. There wasn't even a grocery store. It wasn't hard to find Justin's house with so few streets to get lost on and soon Brian was pulling into the drive behind a minivan that had obviously been bought used.

"Shit, Sunshine," Brian muttered, deeply offended by the vehicle. "What have you let them do to you?"

The house itself wasn't so bad. It was a small colonial house painted cream with blue trim and shutters that looked like they actually worked. The house was a little rundown but it was obvious that Justin took care of it. There were flowers in the flowerbeds. There was a small play area in the side yard and a patio with several plastic chairs scattered around. Brian could imagine Justin out here playing with two little boys.

Brian shook off those thoughts and went to the front door. Two quick raps on the door and he waited, his heart beating faster than he had thought possible. And then the door swung open and there he was.

"Justin."

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

## **Part 2**

"Brian?" Justin breathed out. The tall brunet was the last person he had expected to find on his doorstep. He just stood there and stared, afraid that if he looked away, it would be an illusion.

"Are you going to let me in?" Brian asked. Justin automatically stood aside and let Brian enter the house. He was still staring however. Brian huffed and reached out to bring Justin into his arms. "I'm really here, and I'm not going anywhere."

As soon as Brian wrapped his arms around him, Justin seemed to fall apart. Months of stress and fear and loneliness and grief came flooding out. On top of the rest, the guilt seemed to be the worst. It ate at him until he feared that there would be nothing left. He felt guilty for lying to Brian. He felt guilty for running away. He felt guilty for hurting his lover.

When the tears finally subsided, Justin realized they had moved to his living room and he was sitting on Brian's lap on the sofa. Justin looked up at Brian and soon, shame was added to his list of emotions. He looked around his living room. It was clean and tidy—it had to be in case the judge decided to drop in for a visit—but the furniture was all shabby and dated. He hadn't been able to buy anything new except for the mattress for his bed. The carpets were worn and an ugly shade of olive green. The walls he had painted himself, so at least they were a cheery sage green that didn't clash too badly with the mismatched furniture and carpet.

"Why are you here?" Justin asked with his head still buried in Brian's neck. It wasn't the question he wanted to ask. He wanted to ask if Brian would stay forever, but he couldn't do that.

"To save your sorry ass," Brian said. "Why didn't you just tell me what was going on? I would have understood. I would have done everything I could to help you."

"But you can't help me," Justin said sadly. "There's nothing anyone can do."

"That's not true," Brian said. "Your new lawyer is coming here in about an hour to go over exactly what options you have and decide how to proceed with the next phase of this case."

Justin lifted his head and looked at Brian eye to eye. "You hired a lawyer? Why?"

"To help you get custody of your kids," Brian said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Did you really think I wouldn't support you in this?" He pushed Justin from his lap and stood to pace back and forth in the small room like a caged tiger. "Do you really think so little of me?"

"I didn't..."

Brian didn't let him finish. "I thought we were past this shit, Justin. I thought we were at a point where we trust each other, where we don't keep secrets from each other. Even if I hadn't fully agreed with you about giving Daphne a kid—which would be a bit hypocritical of me, don't you think?—I would have still supported your decision. And why would you ever think that I wouldn't want to help you get your boys? After all the shit I've gone through with Gus, why would you think I'd let you go through the same kind of shit alone?"

He stopped pacing and realized that Justin was crying again. He let out a deep sigh and sat back beside the blond. "Did you forget that I love you? I know I don't say it often, but I really thought you knew."

"I know you love me," Justin said. "God, Brian, I'm so sorry. I should have... should have told you... but I was so sc-scared... and they were... so... so mean! And I just..."

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin for the second time and let his own anger go. He'd lost Justin for six months, but he had him back again now. "You have to promise me that you won't ever do something like this to me again. I can't... function if I don't have you in my life, even if you're four hundred miles away."

"I pr-promise," Justin hiccupped and then laughed at himself. Brian grabbed a tissue from the box on the side table and handed it to Justin.

The doorbell rang and Brian said, "That will be the lawyer. You go clean up and I'll let him in. Okay?" Justin nodded and headed for the half bathroom down the hall.

Brian opened the door and a woman was standing there, not the lawyer he had spent hours on the phone with over the last several days. "Hello, can I help you?"



The woman narrowed her eyes at him and the permanent frown which marred her face deepened. Brian was reminded immediately of his mother. "I'm Esther Anderson. I'm here to pick up my grandsons."

Justin came out just then and nodded a cool greeting to the woman. "You're two hours early. They're still taking their nap."

"I was in town and decided not to wait," the witch said rudely. "Now get my babies."

Justin was polite but firm in his response. "We agreed that you would pick them up at four o'clock. They will be ready at four o'clock. I am not waking them up from their nap for your convenience. Come back at four and they will be ready."

She scowled but turned her attention to Brian. "Who is he?"

"Brian Kinney," Justin said.

"His fiancé," Brian told her. "Now, if you don't mind, we have some things to do, and you are interrupting."

How anyone could look that angry without exploding Brian had no idea. "You can bet I'll be back. And you can bet that I'll be telling Martin about this."

Justin closed the door in her face and leaned against it.

"There is no way in **hell** any child should be raised by that woman," Brian said, "let alone *your* boys. We are going to find a way and we are going to win this. Don't you doubt it Sunshine."

Justin nodded and felt a little hope for the first time in months.

**BJBJBJBJ**

The lawyer, Doug Bone, arrived a few minutes later and they sat at the kitchen table while whole story came out. Justin got a call from a friend of Daphne and John's that they had been killed in a car accident. That same friend told him that John's parents had come down to Massachusetts where the family was living, arranged to have their son's body sent back to Vermont and took the boys. All within hours of the accident. Justin tried calling the Andersons but they were hostile and refused to even acknowledge that Justin was the twins' father, despite the fact that it said so on their birth certificate. They told him that he would never get the boys.

So Justin had packed everything he owned up, used a portion of his savings to buy the minivan, and drove to Massachusetts for Daphne's funeral and John's memorial. Daphne's parents were sympathetic to Justin's plight—they knew that John had left home young and had never wanted to go back—but there was little they could do to help. They were grieving and they wanted their grandchildren back, but they felt helpless to do anything. Their daughter wasn't even going to be allowed to be buried beside her husband.

So Justin headed up to Vermont after his children alone. He hired the local lawyer because that was all he could afford, and they presented his petition for custody to the court.

"Brian, you don't know what it's like up here," Justin said. "Everyone knows everyone, and they all hate outsiders. It isn't like the towns that people visit on vacation or for skiing. There was no way that judge, who just happens to be Mrs. Anderson's cousin, was ever going to let me have my children. But legally, he had no reason to rule against me. So he ruled that we would have joint custody and revisit the case in six months. They're hoping I'll give them reason to rule against me."

"And what happens if you don't?" Brian asked.

It was Doug who answered. "The judge has to make a ruling. Under the state laws, there can only be one continuance of a custody hearing. Once he makes that ruling, we can do something. If he rules against Justin, we can take the case to the appellate courts. In the meantime, chances are good that the shared custody will remain in place and Justin will have to remain local."

"They don't like that I'm gay," Justin said. "But they can't legally rule against me for that. They don't like that I'm from New York, that I'm an artist, or that I'm single, but again there's no legal basis for ruling against me. Then again, in their opinion, there's no reason they have to rule in my favor either."

"How long before the next hearing?" Brian asked.

"Three weeks," Justin said.

Doug sighed. "I'm not sure how we're going to get this resolved without going to through appeals."

Brian sat back to think about that for a few minutes. Just then, two sets of little feet could be heard above their heads.

"They're up," Justin said. He looked at Brian. "You ready to meet the terrors?"

Brian smirked. "They can't be that bad."

And then they were standing at the bottom of the steps and looking at the two strange men with their daddy. Brian was surprised that their skin was no darker than his when he had time to tan—though it was a few shades darker than Justin's—and their hair was actually a lighter shade of brown than his own. Their eyes were even the same shade of blue as Justin's. The only real sign of Daphne's mixed heritage that was visible at first glance was the wild silky curls in their hair. In all they were adorable and would probably be drop-dead gorgeous when they grew up.

"Alex, Robbie, it's okay," Justin said. The two boys responded to him by running at full speed to his side and launching themselves into his lap. Justin took it in stride and smiled at them. "Did you have a good nap?"

"Un-huh," Robbie—or was it Alex?—said. Brian found it quite disconcerting that both boys seemed to be staring at him. "Cookie?"

"Cookie!" Alex chimed in with his opinion.

Justin laughed. "I did promise you cookie, didn't I. Okay, why don't you get into your seats and I'll bring your cookie to you?"

The boys scrambled down and went to the booster seats that were in the only two chairs left around the small round table. Justin got up and went to pour milk into sippy-cups and get a cookie from the cookie jar on the counter for each of the boys.

"Who you?" Alex demanded. He and Robbie were both still staring at Brian—and ignoring Doug for some reason.

"I'm Brian," Brian said. He held out his hand and shook each of the twin's hands. "Pleasure to meet you."

The boys giggled and then shared a look communicating some message that none of the adults could decipher.

"Picture Brian," Robbie said and Alex nodded in agreement. "Daddy's picture Brian."

Justin returned with the snack and told them, "Yes, this is the Brian in my pictures. He's daddy's special friend."

Alex mumbled around his cookie, "Okay."

"I guess that explains why they were staring at me," Brian muttered ruefully.

Doug spoke up, "Their grandmother will be picking them up soon?"

"Yes," Justin said, his eyes flashing a warning that he did not want to discuss anything in front of the boys.

Doug took the hint. "I'd like to be present for the exchange."

"We'll both be here for that," Brian said. "I don't plan on going anywhere for quite some time."

Justin looked at Brian. "But what about work? You can't just leave Kinnetik to run itself."

Brian chuckled. "I have no intention of leaving my agency to flounder. I'll be working from here, assuming you aren't going to toss me out on my ear. I can handle most things electronically or over the phone. Cynthia, Ted and the new guy I hired to supervise the account managers can handle any pitch meetings. And if I have to, I can fly back to Pittsburgh for a couple days at a time. I have no intention of leaving you here to deal with all this sh – stuff on your own."

Justin chuckled at Brian's self-censoring but the sentiment behind his speech was something that Justin hadn't thought he could ever hope for. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me Sunshine," Brian said. "We're a team—even if you did forget that for a while."

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Esther Anderson was no more pleasant the second time around, and it almost broke Brian's heart to see the change in the two lively and intelligent boys her arrival produced. They went from giggling and wrestling with Justin on the floor to quiet and almost timid in a heartbeat. She marched them out to her car and strapped them in without ever once smiling or speaking to them.

"Every time it gets harder to let them go," Justin choked out and Brian had to agree that it really did suck. He stood there with his arm around Justin and watched the car disappear around the corner.

"Alright, let's get to work," Brian said gestured for everyone to gather around the table. "This is what we're going to do. Doug, you are going to do your lawyer thing. Justin, you are going to do you artist and father thing, and I am going to do my thing."

Justin looked rightfully skeptical, "And what exactly is your thing?"

"Why, fighting injustice," Brian said with a smirk. "That and shelling out cash to get the results that I want. I'm going to get my detective up here to do some digging. Then I'm going to put together a media campaign that will have every gay rights activist in the state up here for that hearing. Debbie isn't the only one who can rabble-rouse."

Justin leaned over and kissed Brian. "You are a great rabble-rouser, Rage."

### **Part 3**

It didn't take much persuading on Doug's part to get John's friends to speak out against his parents. The ones from Massachusetts even offered to come up to the hearing to testify. The ones from John's high school were even more reliable witnesses and ready to tell what they knew. There were even a couple teachers who had tried to get help for John, but had been blocked time and again by officials who covered for their own.

Meanwhile, Waters was busy getting hard proof of corruption and collusion to take to the State's Attorney. The conspiracy went beyond the Anderson's and the county judge. It went back decades and involved not just the mistreatment of John Anderson. As Waters was finding out, the culprits were skimming county funds, illegally influencing land transactions, and a number of other crimes, with Andrew Anderson, John's father, at the center of it all. But he wasn't alone; both lawyers were implicated, as was the retired sheriff, the doctor that covered up John Anderson's abuse, the county commissioner, and two members of the Mercer town council.

Brian was gathering all of the information and evidence that Waters and Doug were bringing to him and creating a press release and media storm. He had made contact with a number of local gay rights organizations, as well as television stations around the state. The Anderson and the whole fucking town of Mercer wouldn't know what hit them when he got finished

Justin spent most of his time letting out his fears and frustrations through paint each time the boys were at the Anderson's but as soon as they got home, he was a whole different person. He was happier than Brian could remember taking care of those two boys. He was a great father. In fact seeing Justin with those boys made Brian ache for Gus to come home. But he could only handle one battle at a time.

Alex and Robbie warmed right up to Brian. It was as if the fact that he was in Justin's photo albums and the framed photos around the living room made him part of the family. Maybe it did. One afternoon, Robbie took him by the hand and introduced Brian to all of the people in the photos.

"At's Gamma n' An' Molly," Robbie said. "At's Daddy's Brian." Brian wondered why they always seemed to call him Daddy's Brian and not just Brian. "At's Annie Em." Brian smirked when he realized that Robbie was calling Emmett Auntie Em. Emmett would love it. "At's Daddy's Brian. At's Gamma Debbie." Brian smiled when he heard that one. Debbie would be beside herself with joy.

"At's some guy wif some uhver guy." Ted and Blake apparently weren't worth remembering. Brian could sympathize with the toddler; he sometimes wished he could forget Ted too. "At's Daddy's Brian n' Daddy." Brian smiled as he looked at the picture of the two of them from their engagement party. "At's Gus n' Jenny n' Mel n' Linny."

"At's My-Cole n' Ben." Brian was impressed that Justin had included Michael at all, let alone taught his sons to recognize him. "At's Daddy's Brian. At's Daddy's Brian." There were a lot of pictures of Brian.

Then Robbie showed him the last picture. "At's Mommy n' uhver daddy. Dey in Heab'n." Brian knew that he was too young to really understand what that meant and he probably didn't even remember Daphne. It made him sad that these boys would never know he vivacious, funny and warm-hearted person she was. Then again, he knew that Justin would tell the boys all about their mom and he knew that they would never want for anything as long as he had a say in things.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

The week before the hearing, people started arriving. It was just a reporter or two at first. Then the activists arrived to picket the county courthouse. The story grew as word leaked about a possible conspiracy and improprieties on the part of the judge. Brian had hoped that the State's Attorney would bring charges up against the conspirators before the hearing and assign an

impartial judge, but it didn't happen. Still, by the day of the hearing, there were more than three thousand activists surrounding the courthouse and camera crews from stations as far away as Boston and Albany. Brian thought that they might even make it to the national news—wouldn't Debbie shit if she saw them on the evening edition?

Justin held Brian's hand tightly as they entered the courthouse. One of Daphne's friend's had come up and was watching the boys, so it was just them and Doug fighting their way through the crowds of people to the top of the stairs.

Esther and Andrew Anderson were waiting there and hissed at Justin as they passed. "This is your doing, isn't it?"

"Actually, it was my doing," Brian said with deadly calm. "And if things don't go our way today, this is just the beginning of the storm I can stir up. Are you ready for that?"

She didn't have an answer and Doug was encouraging Brian to keep moving. They did not need television footage of Brian threatening an old lady on the courthouse steps to hit the news.

Once inside the courthouse, things weren't much better. Family court was closed, unlike criminal court, but there had been a petition by one of the activist groups and a hearing at the state court earlier in the week and somehow the ruling came down that only one camera would be allowed in the court and three reporters. It was up to the lawyers to agree on who would be given entrance. It was an easy negotiation. Doug didn't care which station or reporters they let in; any one of them would tell the story the Anderson's didn't want told. There would be no spectators.

Judge Martin Walker entered the courtroom and Brian could see the family resemblance to Esther right away; they both wore permanent frowns. They rose, they sat, the clerk announced the case number interested parties and the hearing began.

"Mr. Taylor," Judge Walker intoned like a voice of doom. "I do not appreciate the mockery you have made of this hearing."

Doug rose and addressed the judge. "Your honor, it was not my client's intent to make a mockery of these proceedings but to insure that justice be served. As a matter of record, it was not my client who requested the inclusion of media in the courtroom; that was done by outside parties."

"Sit down counselor," Judge Walker said rudely. "I was not speaking to you."

There was a chorus of boos heard through the open windows as the crowds out in front of the building—obviously following on television—let their opinion be heard.

"Close those windows!" Judge Walker ordered the bailiff. The man looked reluctant, considering it was June and there was no air-conditioning in the old building, but he complied. There were more boos at this action, still audible through the closed windows even if they were muted.

"Jared, state your case," the judge told the Anderson's lawyer.

For the next hour, their lawyer spouted unsubstantiated accusations about Justin's ability to be a father. The only witness he called was Esther Anderson.

"Tell the court what you saw when you went to pick up your grandchildren," Jared Landon said.

"It was filthy," Esther said snidely. "The furniture was mismatched and stained. The carpet threadbare. How he could ever consider letting my babies live in such squalor is beside me. It broke my heart leaving them there."

Her testimony went on like that for far longer than anyone needed to hear, as she repeated her objections to used furniture and a used car. Then the topic turned. "What did you find when you went to Mr. Taylor's residence on May 17th?"

"A strange man answered the door," Esther said. "He looked wicked and slick. Obviously from that awful city."

"Do you see that man in the courtroom today?"

Esther nodded and pointed at Brian, who smirked at her in return. "That's him."

"What did he say to you?" Landon acted as though he was leading up to some shocking revelation.

"He asked who I was, so I told him," Esther said. "Then Mr. Taylor came out and told me that I had to leave and come back later. They were obviously up



to something sinister. I asked who that man was and he said his name was Brian Kinney and that he was Mr. Taylor's fiancé."

"Had you ever heard of a fiancé before that moment?" Landon asked.

"Not once in all the times I had been there," Esther said.

"So why do you believe this man actually came?"

"Obviously to help Mr. Taylor steal my babies away from me," Esther said trying her best to look sympathetic, but failing miserably.

"Objection," Doug intoned.

"Overruled," the judge said coldly. "Unless you think that I can't tell opinion from fact after thirty years on the bench?"

Doug kept his peace and let it go. It was that sort of attitude and disregard for legal procedures that would work in their favor if they had to ask for an appeal.

"No further questions," Landon said.

Doug stood up and addressed Esther. "Mrs. Anderson, do you have any basis for your belief that Mr. Kinney is not in fact Mr. Taylor's fiancé?"

"Well... just that it seems a bit coincidental that he shows up right before this hearing after six months."

"I see," Doug said. "Let's go back to your statement that Mr. Taylor's house is 'filthy.' Did you ever see dirt or dust? Mold? Mildew? Did you ever find dirty dishes in the sink or used diapers anywhere but the trash? What exactly made the house in your words 'filthy'?"

"I already answered this," Esther scowled. "The furniture is old and worn and mismatched."

"I see," Doug said once again. "So it is Mr. Taylor's limited resources to which you really object, not his cleanliness?"

"Well, yes!" Esther said. "He has no right raising children in such a place."

"Thank you," Doug said. "Just one last question. Have you ever once stepped beyond the front door to Mr. Taylor's home to see if it is clean or not?"

"I wouldn't go in there if you paid me."

"No further questions," Doug said. "But I would like to reserve the right to call upon her at a later time."

"Yeah, yeah," the judge said. "Jared, you got anything else? I'd like to see this done before lunch."

"Nothing further, your honor," Landon said.

"You're up then, hot shot," Walker told Doug.

"My first witness is Mrs. Genevieve Barton," Doug said.

A kindly old lady was called into the court by the bailiff and made her way to the witness stand. She was sworn in and took her seat.

"Mrs. Barton—"

"Oh, call me Genny," the old lady said with a gentle smile. She had to be about the same age as Esther Anderson, but the differences between them were quite obvious. Genny was everybody's image of the perfect grandma.

Doug smiled back and said, "Genny then. Can you tell me your relationship with Mr. Taylor?"

"Oh! Justin's my next-door neighbor," She said happily. "Such a sweet boy. He shoveled my walks all winter and has me over for tea at least once a week. When I was sick a couple months back, he brought some homemade chicken soup. Such a wonderful boy he is. And those babies of his! Oh, they are something else." She chuckled to her self. "They just love their Daddy."

"Thank you Genny," Doug said. "Now, you said Justin invites you to tea at least once a week. Have you ever seen evidence that his house was 'filthy'?"

"Oh my goodness, no!" Genny denied. "Always spic and span. Justin may not have much, but he's very good about making sure that everything is clean and safe for those boys. Covers on all the outlets, locks on cupboards with harmful chemicals and cleaning supplies. No, Justin would never let his house be dirty, let alone filthy."

"Thank you Genny," Doug said. "No further questions."

"Jared?"

"Nothing Martin," Landon said. Really, he couldn't very well grill the sweetest little old lady in town.

"In that case I'd like to call Brian Kinney to the stand," Doug said. Brian gave Justin's hand a squeeze and walked over to the witness stand.

After swearing to tell the truth, Brian looked around the courtroom. Justin looked nervous, but Doug looked confident. The reporters were all waiting for him to speak so that they could jot down notes and questions to pelt them with later. The camera man looked more interested in the proceedings than Jared Landon. And Esther and Andrew were doing their impression of American Gothic.

"Brian," Doug said, not bothering with formalities. He wanted to convey a relaxed and open feel to this exchange. "Can you tell me your relationship to Justin Taylor?"

"He's my fiancé," Brian said.

"I'm sure that my colleague over there is dying to know why you were not here for the first six months that Justin was living in Mercer," Doug said. "So I'll ask for him."

Brian chuckled. "I wasn't here because my fiancé decided to be noble and try and fight this battle on his own."

"Why would he do that?" Doug asked

"Because he's a martyr?" Brian suggested. They could hear laughter outside and Justin had to bite his lips to keep from laughing himself. "Seriously? Because he believed that it was asking too much of me. I have a business that relies on my leadership and he knew that this custody thing would take months. I also have not given him any reason in the past to believe that I would welcome children into our home."

"Would you? Welcome children, that is?"

Brian smiled as he thought of the twins. "I've only been here a few weeks, but Robbie and Alex are great kids. I would love to have them be a part of our family."

"Finances seem to be a concern for Mrs. Anderson," Doug said. "Can you tell the court what your financial situation is currently?"

"Well, like I said, I own my own business," Brian said. "Kinnetik is the largest advertising agency in the state of Pennsylvania and in the top fifteen in the nation. We handle national as well as regional accounts. I bought a house for Justin and me almost three years ago now. It is more than 10,000 square feet, not including the out-buildings, and has eight bedroom suites. I'm not the richest man in Pittsburgh, but I'm up there. Money would not be an issue once Justin and I are married. It wouldn't be an issue now if Justin wasn't so damn proud."

"Thanks Brian," Doug said. "No further questions at this time, but I reserve the right to redirect."

Landon was on his feet before Doug had even finished his sentence. "Mr. Kinney. You say that you and Justin have been engaged for how long?"

"Three years," Brian said. "I asked him the same day I showed him the house."

"I see," Landon said. "And yet, you did not get married in all that time."

"No, we didn't," Brian agreed. "Justin's career as an artist took a sudden favorable turn and we both felt it was important that he spend time in New York pursuing that career."

"So he went to New York and you stayed in Pittsburgh," Landon clarified. "How can you claim to be engaged when you haven't lived in the same state for more than two years?"

"We didn't get married right then because it would be too easy to allow that to take precedence over Justin career," Brian said. "We always intended that we would get married when the time was right. I even kept our wedding bands." Brian pulled the box from his pocket and showed them to the lawyer. More accurately, he was showing them off for the camera, which was zooming in on the bands. There were cheers and whistles from the crowd this time.

#### **Part 4**

After Brian's testimony, Judge Walker called a short recess. Justin and Brian both headed for the men's room in the hopes of finding some sort of privacy.

"You kept them?" Justin asked. "And you brought them with you?"

"Of course I kept them," Brian said. "And I intend to use them before we head back to the Pitts. Marriage is actually *legal* up here."

"Really?" Justin asked with a bright sunshiny smile.

Brian rolled lips in for a moment but then let his smile free. "Yeah. But I think I might have to use an *actual* ball and fucking chain on you to keep you out of trouble. If you think I'm letting you go anywhere without me after this, you have another think coming Princess."

"Asshole," Justin said with affection and leaned up to kiss his fiancé.

Soon they were locked in a passionate embrace. Of course, that was when the flash went off and the news photographer gave them a sheepish grin. "Sorry, but that's what they pay me for."

"If it's any good, I'll buy a copy," Brian said and handed him his card.

**BJBJBJBJ**

Court resumed and Doug began calling John's friends. When the first was called up, Judge Walker said, "What is this? What are you trying to prove?"

"I intend to prove that Mr. Taylor is a better option than the Anderson to parent these two boys," Doug said calmly. "In order to do so, I will bring witnesses who can attest to the way they raised their own child."

It was obvious to everyone in the room that Judge Walker wanted to put a stop to this, but he really had no choice but to allow it. It was a legitimate line of questioning. And he knew then what he had been trying to ignore all morning: this hearing was not going to be over quickly and the outcome was no longer assured.

"Mr. Runyon, you were John Anderson's best friend in high school, is that correct?" Doug asked.

"That's right," Runyon said. "Me and John were like brothers. Even after he went off to college and then got married and everything, we stayed close. He was the best friend I've ever known."

"Can you tell me about the first time John stayed at your house overnight?"

"Yeah," Runyon said. "We were like 12 or 13 at the time. We'd just moved up from our town elementaries to the county middle school. Anyway, John

was all shy about getting his pajamas on. I teased him about it a bit and so he took his shirt off and I saw the bruises."

"What bruises were those?" Doug asked.

"His chest and back were covered in bruises. Some were dark purple, like they were new, and some were that ugly green color they get then they've been around a while." Runyon took a deep breath. "So I asked him how he got the bruises and he says his mom and dad."

"Objection!" Landon cried out and rose to his feet. "Hearsay!"

"According to precedent set in *Hartman v the State*, hearsay is allowable in cases where the party in question is deceased," Doug said. He'd been prepared for this one.

It looked like it cost Judge Walker everything he had to say, "I'll allow it."

Brian glanced over at Esther Anderson and saw that she looked ready to kill someone.

"Did he give any more details?" Doug asked trying to get the momentum back.

"Um not that time," Runyon said. "Over the years, there were a lot of times we talked about bruises and such, like the time he broke his arm in 8th grade. He told the teachers that he fell off his bike, but he told me later that his mom had hit him with a bat and when he'd put his arm up to protect himself, it broke."

Justin looked sick when they heard that and Brian didn't feel so great himself. He grabbed Justin's hand and squeezed it to give them both some comfort.

"How did John feel about his parents?" Doug asked.

"He hated them," Runyon said. "He always talked about how he was gonna get out of here and as far away from his parents as he could. He did it too. He got out. He'd hate to think that his kids got stuck back with *them*. He'd hate that."

"No further questions."

Landon rose and walked up to the witness stand. "Mr. Runyon, did you ever see either Mr. or Mrs. Anderson hit John Anderson?"

"No, but I wasn't allowed to go to his house," Runyon said. "None of John's friends were allowed over. The Andersons didn't like kids."

"But you didn't see this abuse?"

"No."

"No further questions."

Runyon was excused and Doug followed up with similar testimonies from three other friends in high school who testified that they had seen bruises and even belt lashes on John on a regular basis. Then there were the two teachers who had tried to report their suspicions only to be blocked by friends and relatives of the Andersons. They broke for lunch and when they came back, Doug called an independent doctor whose specialty was orthopedics to review the x-rays from John's broken arm.

"In your opinion, Dr. Johnson, is the break on this x-ray consistent with a bike accident?" Doug asked.

"No it is not," Dr. Johnson said. "You see the way this bone fragment is placed? That only happens when a bone comes into direct contact with a blunt object."

"Thank you doctor," Doug said.

Landon was up and asked, "Is it possible that the blunt object that broke that bone was the handlebar of a bicycle?"

"It is possible...but..."

"No further questions," Landon said.

"Redirect," Doug said. "Dr. Johnson, in your thirty-five years as an orthopedic specialist, approximately how many broken bones from bicycle accidents have you treated?"

"I would say somewhere between three and four thousand."

"And have you ever seen a bone that looked like this in one of those patients?"

"Not once."

"So, in your expert opinion, what is the likelihood that this fracture was caused by a bicycle accident?"

Dr. Johnson chuckled. "Since the rider would have had to have been facing the ground in a very awkward position and his arm stretched out in front of him while riding to actually catch the handlebar at this angle, I would say it is not likely at all."

There was testimony from John's therapist in Boston next. They also heard testimony from several of John and Daphne's friends about who the couple had wanted their children to go to. And then, late in the afternoon, Doug finally called Justin to the stand.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

"Justin, in your own words, can you tell the court how you came to agree to provide the sperm for Daphne and John to have Alex and Robbie?"

Justin nodded and took a deep breath. "Well, Daphne and John always knew that he wouldn't be able to father a child. John said it was from a childhood trauma. Daphne said it was because of his parents, but I never saw any of his medical tests or anything, so I don't really know."

"I submit copies of John Anderson's medical records with the notes obtained from the fertility specialist the young couple used highlighted." Doug gave one to the judge, one to Landon and handed one to Justin. "Justin, can you read what that paragraph says?"

Justin looked at the highlighted paragraph. "It is my opinion that cause of Mr. Anderson's sterility is due directly to blunt force trauma at an early age. Mr. Anderson agreed that it was a likely cause as his mother liked to kick him in the testes as punishment for disobedience." Justin shut his eyes and mourned for the man who had to suffer through this horror and prayed that his boys would never be subjected to the same.

"Okay, let's go back to my earlier question," Doug said. "You were telling us how your friends came to you with this unusual request."

Justin nodded again. "Right. Well, I think Daphne got the idea from Brian, at least indirectly. See, Brian donated sperm so that his friend and her partner could have a child together. In that case it was two women, but the same premise applied. Or at least that's how Daphne explained it to me. We talked



it all out over several weeks and then sat down with a lawyer and signed a contract."

"I submit exhibit E," Doug said. Again he distributed copies of the contract. "I'm sure no one wants to sit through a reading of this entire contract. Justin, can you give us a summary of what it says?"

"It says that I gave up my right to any child that may result from the treatment," Justin said softly and sadly. "It also gave John the right to adopt that child, or in this case children. Which he did. The last stipulation of the contract was that if anything should happen to John and Daphne, then those children would revert to my custody as their godfather and as their biological father."

"Why didn't that happen?" Doug said.

"Because Mr. and Mrs. Anderson came in the middle of the night to steal them away!"

"Objection!"

"Sustained. Control your witness counselor."

Doug nodded at the judge and turned back to Justin. "You received a phone call the night of the accident?"

"Jessica, Daphne's friend from work, called to tell me what had happened," Justin said. "I was devastated. Daphne was my best friend since we were toddlers. But then Jessica went on. She said that she had been watching the babies, but that the Andersons had come to take them home with them. They were very insistent and she felt like she had no choice but to let them. She said she felt threatened by them. She's just a small thing and I'm sure she wasn't thinking all that clearly in her own grief..."

"I called the Andersons to talk to them reasonably, but Mrs. Anderson told me that I would never have the boys no matter what that contract said. She said they were hers now and nothing I could do would change that." Justin's voice grew thick and his eyes filled with tears. "I had heard the same stories as some of John and Daphne's other friends. I knew that there was no way I could leave my children alone in their care even long enough to get help. So I came up here to fight for them."

"One last question, Justin," Doug said. "How do you feel about being a father?"

Justin's eyes were still watery, but his smile was its sunshiny best. "I love Alex and Robbie. I would do anything for them. I love seeing them grow and change. I love the way Alex has to examine everything and figure out how it works. I love the way Robbie just draws people in. I love my boys and I just want them to be happy."

"Thank you."

"That is very touching from a man who would give up his children before they were even born," Landon said snidely.

"Objection!" The objection of the crowd outside echoed Doug's outcry.

"Sustained," Judge Walker sighed. "You know better than that, Jared."

"Sorry Martin," Landon said, but his smirk said he wasn't sorry in the least. "Mr. Taylor, isn't it true that you once danced as a go-go boy at a gay nightclub?"

Justin chuckled in disbelief. "Wow! That was a long time ago. Yeah. I was eighteen at the time. Not old enough to drink or serve alcohol, but I could dance in a tight pair of shorts for a bunch of drunk men. I made great money doing that."

"So you openly admit to living a licentious lifestyle?" Landon said.

Again Justin laughed. "You've obviously never danced every night and tried to go to school at the same time. I didn't have enough energy to live a licentious lifestyle as a go-go boy; I barely had enough energy to get to classes. Which was one of the reasons I quit after only a couple weeks: it was affecting my schooling. There were easier ways to pay for college."

"And what would those be?" Landon asked, with a leer.

"Brian gave me a loan," Justin said.

"You were 18 and he was what? 30?"

Justin sniggered. "Yes. He hated turning 30. I bet he misses being 30 now." Brian glared at him but Justin grinned back.

"And you were already close enough that he would offer you a loan to pay for your education?" Landon persisted.

Justin sighed, and good humor draining away. "I know where you're going with this. I was 17 when we first met, which is legal in the state of Pennsylvania. My father didn't like that I was gay, let alone that I was dating an older man, so he kicked me out. But Brian was there for me then and has been there for me for the last eight years. We have a strong relationship and a good relationship. I love him and he loves me. The fact that I was only 17 when that began does not change anything. It happens. Some people are lucky enough to find their perfect partner the first time out."

"You say you have as strong relationship, but you lied to Mr. Kinney when you left New York. He had to hire a detective to track you down."

"Yeah I did. I was stupid. But there was not a single day when I doubted that if I called him that he would come for me. Even after lying to him and running away. And when he found me, he read me the riot act. Rightfully so. But he loves me enough to forgive my mistakes." Justin looked Landon in the eyes and said, "That's what love is."

"Nothing further," Landon said. He'd been cowed by Justin.

## **Part 5**

After Justin's testimony, there wasn't much left to do but give closing arguments. While technically Justin should have had custody of the children and the Andersons should have had to prove his unfitness, in reality, Doug knew that the only way to win without going to the appellate court was to crucify the Andersons in front of the world. Luckily, they made that easy to do, since they were such awful people. Now the only question was whether Judge Martin Walker was willing to ruin his already shaky career to help out his witch of a cousin, or would he sell her out to try and save his own ass.

Like rats on a sinking ship, Walker scrambled over the bodies of his family to save himself.

"While I hate to do this to two such wonderful people," Walker said, kissing Esther's ass even as he stabbed her in the back, "the law is clear in this case. The contract that was signed by John Anderson, Daphne Anderson and Justin Taylor takes precedent over any claim that the Andersons might have. Without definitive proof that Mr. Taylor is unfit, I have no choice but to award custody of Alexander and Robert Anderson to Justin Taylor."

There was much cheering from the streets, but Doug was on his feet to make one last request and dig the knife a little deeper.

"Your honor," Doug said. "As biological father and legal guardian of Alexander and Robert Anderson, Justin Taylor would like to petition this court to change their last names to Taylor..." Justin tugged at Doug's sleeve and the lawyer leaned over and listened to Justin. "You're sure?" Justin nodded. "Correction. He would like to petition the courts to change their names to Kinney."

Walker growled but agreed. "Petition granted pending the proper paperwork being submitted to the county records. Court is adjourned."

Walker practically ran from the room, while Esther and Andrew seethed. Justin could tell that there would be a lot of discussion over the case in the coming days among their clan of thieves. But that didn't really matter to him. He turned to Brian and kissed him long and hard. "We won!"

"We did," Brian agreed with a smile. "Kinney huh?"

Justin laughed sheepishly. "I was thinking that I might want to take your name when we get married, though I'll still have to use Taylor for my art. And also, the boys would have a tangible connection with you."

"You could have waited until I adopt them," Brian said and Justin kissed him hard for that out-of-the-blue statement. With one sentence Brian was able to ease any lingering doubts Justin might have about Brian wanting the twins.

When they came up for breath, Justin continued as though there had been no interruption, "Then I would have had to change their names twice."

"That is a lot of extra paperwork," Brian agreed facetiously. "So, when are you going to make me an honest man?"

"I don't think that's possible," Justin teased. "Oh! You mean the wedding? Well, we have to pack up the house and everything..."

"A week from Saturday. No later," Brian said. "And everything else will be ready to go by then if I have to pay double to get it done. I plan on having our honeymoon at Britin. Think your mom will forgive you enough to take the twins for a few nights?"

"God I hope so," Justin murmured. Then they were kissing again. When they came up for air, it was to find that the camera man was aiming the camera at them, presumably catching their entire exchange and broadcasting it to fuck knows where. And the photographer was there beside him, taking shots of them for the papers.

"They're very persistent. I think we should hire them to record our wedding," Justin said with a laugh.

"I'll do that," Brian said. "But first, you and I have two boys to get so we can celebrate."

"They're ours, aren't they?" Justin asked with a watery smile. "No one's going to take them away ever again?"

"Never," Brian said.

### **BJBJBJBJBJ**

The picture of Brian and Justin embracing after the victory was on every television station across the country in minutes. The couple was bombarded by questions as they left the courthouse, but Justin gave everyone a short but eloquent speech about how grateful they were for everyone's support and how happy they were to be able to know that their boys would be safe and happy. Then he flashed them his best smile and that was sent out across the nation as well.

Brian's phone, the only one that their friends and family had, began ringing almost as soon as they left the courthouse. He ignored Michael and Debbie's calls, but when the caller ID came up as Jennifer, Brian took the call and handed the phone to Justin before turning back to driving them home.

"Mom?"

"Justin sweetie, why didn't you tell me what was going on?" Jennifer asked. "I would have been there to help."

"For the same reason I didn't tell Brian," Justin sighed. "Because I didn't want you to drop everything to come save me."

"Well, I'm glad Brian was there in the end," Jennifer said. "Even if I couldn't be."

"I don't think I would have stood a chance if he hadn't shown up," Justin said ruefully and smiled over at Brian. "He's the one who got the gay rights groups up here and he brought Doug, our lawyer. He's done so much."

"Yeah," Jennifer said. "I saw."

Justin paused. "Just how much did you see?"

"Well, the story built up over the last couple days on the national news," Jennifer said. "But none of the national stations were covering the whole thing. So Molly hooked up the computer to the television somehow and we were all able to watch the whole thing. They showed everything from beginning to end. How do you think we knew when you had left the courthouse and could answer our calls?"

"Who is we?" Justin said with some trepidation. He was not ready to face telling Brian that their private moments had been sent out over the internet.

"Debbie, Michael and Ben, Ted and his friend, Emmett, Molly and me," Jennifer said. "We all took the day off to watch."

Justin closed his eyes and sighed. "Listen Mom, can I call you back in a few minutes? We're almost home and I need to tell Brian what you just told me where the boys won't hear him swearing."

Jennifer laughed. "Alright Honey. But you had better actually call me."

"I will." He disconnected the call and sighed. "Um..."

"Spill," Brian said. "What exactly is going to make me swear?"

"The whole gang took the day off to watch the hearing at my mother's house," Justin said. "Molly connected the TV to the computer and they watched the streaming video that was broadcast. They saw everything from the moment we walked into the courtroom until the moment we left."

"Shit," Brian muttered as he parked his car behind the van in the drive and shut off the engine. "I have one sappy moment in my whole fucking life and they have to catch it on video and make sure everyone I know sees it. This is your fault."

"Mine?" Justin asked with amusement. "How do you figure?"

"You make me say those things," Brian said. "I would never say them to anyone else. So it must be your fault."

"Right." Justin's grin was infectious and Brian had to bite his lips to keep from returning it. "Ready to go face the terrible twosome?"

"Ready."

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

"Gamma!" Alex and Robbie were excited to be allowed to talk to their 'Gamma' on the speakerphone, so as soon as she said hello, they were shouting in her ear. "Picture Gamma!"

"No picture Gamma," Alex told Robbie. "Pone Gamma."

"Pone Gamma." Robbie said with a nod.

"Well hello," Jennifer said. "Is that Robbie and Alex?"

"Is us, Gamma," Robbie said.

"N' Daddy 'n Daddy's Brian," Alex clarified.

Jennifer could hear Brian groan at that. "We have got to do something about that, Justin."

"I've tried," Justin chuckled. "They're stubborn."

"We see Gamma soooon," Alex said very seriously.

"Daddy's Brian say so," Robbie said as though Brian's word was law.

Jennifer laughed. "I can't wait to see you both in person. I have hugs and kisses saved up just for you."

"Wow," Alex said. He was trying to figure out how you saved hugs and kisses. He'd like to save some of his Daddy's hugs. Maybe he'd ask later.

"By Gamma!" Robbie said. He slid from Justin's lap and grabbed Alex's hand.

"Bye Gamma," Alex said as he slid from Brian's lap and then the two were running to their play room.

"Wow," Jennifer said. "I..."

"They're a bit much to take in all at once," Justin said sympathetically.

"No that's not it," Jennifer said and Justin could hear tears in her voice. "I just... never expected that..."

"I know mom," Justin said. He shut the speakerphone off and picked up the phone while Brian followed the twins to their play room. "I'm sorry you missed out on almost two years."

"I am too," Jennifer said. "But what you did for Daphne was a wonderful thing. And I'm so happy that they'll be coming home with you. That woman seemed like a horrible person."

"That's an understatement," Justin sighed. "Alex won't talk much about the times they were over there, but Robbie always gave me a full report. She was mean, and she scared them, but she never physically hurt them. If she had, there's no way I would have let them go back and I think they knew that. As it was, I worried every time she took them away."

"Well that's over now," Jennifer said. "Now you and Brian can bring my babies home so they can meet their Gamma."

"They're dying to meet everyone," Justin admitted. "I show them pictures of everyone and they talk to the pictures like they are their friends. They loved Brian right away."

"Well, I just hope they love me as much," Jennifer said. "You better be prepared. Those boys are going to be spoiled rotten."

Justin laughed. "If not by you, then by Brian. He's already contracted with a company to have the biggest play-set that he can find online built in our back yard at Britin. Then again, he's also having a fence added around the pool, so it's not all bad."

Jennifer laughed. "Listen I have to go. Will you call again?"

"Check your caller ID," Justin said. "I didn't block my number this time. You can call the house whenever you want. Just don't be surprised if you get Robbie or Alex and they hang up on you. That's their latest trick."

"I won't mind if they do," Jennifer said sincerely.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

"I don't see what's wrong with my minivan," Justin said as Brian drove the four of them north to Burlington. "It has done just fine for the past six months. There's nothing mechanically wrong with it and it doesn't have any major body damage. And it gets us around town."

Brian, who was currently driving said minivan, glared at his lover. "Justin, I refuse to be seen in this monstrosity by anyone who actually knows me. It's bad enough that strangers see this. We're going to be married and there will



be times, like now, when I have to drive you and the boys around. I will not do that in a minivan, used or otherwise. It just isn't going to happen."

When they pulled into a Mercedes dealer, Justin wasn't at all surprised. They walked through the lot, each of them holding a toddler, with a salesman following behind them for half an hour as they argued over the merits of the G Class versus the GL class.

"The GL has seating for seven," Justin said.

"And when are we ever going to need seating for seven?" Brian asked. "Besides, the G class has more room for all the shi-stuff you have to haul around."

"You mean my paintings?" Justin asked acerbically. "It's boxy and green."

"It looks just like the jeep only bigger," Brian countered. "Didn't you like the jeep? And it's dark green, which is manly."

Justin rolled his eyes. The G class was also more expensive, which Justin was sure was part of the appeal to Brian. "Fine. We'll take it for a test drive."

The salesman ran to get keys and Brian and Justin got the boys' car seats from the minivan. Once the seats were installed and the boys buckled in, Brian got behind the wheel.

"I thought this was supposed to be for me?" Justin said wryly.

Brian grinned at him. "It is. You'll get a turn." Justin shook his head and climbed in the back with the boys and they were off. Justin had to admit that there was plenty of room in the back, even with two car seats.

"New ban?" Alex asked while Robbie looked out the window.

"Maybe," Justin said.

"Not a van," Brian corrected. "It's an SUV."

"Ess... Oooo... Beee," Alex struggled to repeat.

"How about truck," Justin said. "We can call it a truck, right?"

"Sure Sunshine," Brian said. "As long as we don't call it a van."

"Trruuck," Alex tried out. "Truck. Truck, truck, truck."

"Truck!" Robbie sang along with his brother in a discordant and spontaneous song that only toddlers could enjoy.

"Great," Brian groaned. "Look boys, television!"

With a few words to the voice command, a DVD was playing on the screen for the boys who were fascinated. They had never seen TV in a car before. So even though it was a fifteen minute video about the features on the G class, they watched raptly. Brian was quick to point out that there was a 6 DVD changer, so they wouldn't have to search for DVDs constantly. And with the headphones for the boys, the adults could listen to their music files while the boys watched Sesame Street.

They pulled over and Brian reluctantly let Justin take the wheel while he sat in back with the boys. "The voice command can control all of the features," Brian told Justin. "And that includes the navigation, the stereo, the video, the phone...you can even program call lists. And it's really safe."

"You've done a bit of research, haven't you?" Justin asked. Just then, the sky opened up and it began to rain. Justin switched the wipers on but before he could even think about adjusting the wiper speed, they adjusted automatically. "What the...?"

"The wipers sense the rain," the salesman said. "And they adjust accordingly. The windshield has electric heating, so you won't have to climb up the side of the 'truck' to scrape your windshield in the winter anymore. Plus the seats are climate controlled and the steering wheel is heated. That really helps in the cold winters around here."

"We're from Pittsburgh," Brian corrected the man. "But we have cold winters there too. Just not as much snow."

Justin hated to admit it, but the SUV was really great, and it had several cool features that weren't available on the GL class. He'd thought it would drive like a tank, but it actually was really easy to handle, and had great pick up on the highway. It handled the hills easily. And Mercedes made some of the safest cars on the road, which was important to him as a father. Plus it would make Brian happy.

"Alright, you've sold me," Justin said as he turned the SUV into the dealership.

"You hear that boys? This is our new truck!" Brian said. Of course, this started the discordant if cheerful truck song all over again.

## Part 6

The week before they were scheduled to get married was hectic for both Brian and Justin. Brian had filed for their license and arranged for a simple ceremony while Justin had worked with the movers on packing up the house. Brian had often taken the boys out that week to get them out of Justin's way while he worked. Justin suspected that he was just using them as an excuse to drive the new SUV. But on Friday afternoon, the moving truck pulled away from the house and Brian and Justin loaded the last few items, their suitcases, as well as the basic necessities to keep two toddlers entertained through two days of driving in the 'truck'—they weren't even going to attempt to make the 11 hour trip all in one day.

The house was empty and clean and Justin stopped by Genny's house to let her know they were going. She cried a bit and Justin thanked her profusely for everything she had done for him. And then it was time to go. They drove to one of the resorts in Rutland which was less crowded in the summer months than in the height of ski season. Justin was somewhat subdued as they checked in and unloaded the SUV. Even the boys seemed to sense his mood and were quieter than usual.

Once in their suite, Brian turned to him and asked. "Okay, what's eating at you Sunshine?"

"Nothing," Justin shrugged. "I mean, I'm glad to be leaving and I'm glad to be going home with you. But despite how bad things were, that was the first place I lived with my boys. That was where they learned how to go down the slide by themselves for the first time. That was where Robbie skinned his knees up trying to outrun Alex for cookies and tried to be so brave while I picked the gravel out. That was where Alex brought home a dying bird and cried when we couldn't save it. There are just memories that I'll miss."

"You take the memories with you," Brian said. "And then you add to them. Pretty soon, you'll have memories of—I don't know—their first swimming lesson at Britin or something."

Justin nodded and smiled up at his lover and gave him a kiss.

"Daddy's Brian?" Alex said tentatively, reluctant to interrupt the adults.

Brian let Justin go and squatted down to the little boy's level. "What's up Alex?"

"Is you uhver mommy?" Alex asked. Robbie was standing close by and listening intently.

Brian worked very hard not to laugh at this very serious question as he sat for what was sure to be an important discussion. "No. I'm not a mommy. Some families have a Mommy and a Daddy. Some have two Mommies and some have two Daddies."

Alex seemed to ponder this for a minute and then nodded. "You uhver uhver Daddy."

Justin smiled and sat on the floor to join the discussion. "That's right. You have three Daddies. But it will get very confusing if you call us all Daddy, won't it?"

Robbie climbed into Justin's lap and huffed, "Too many Daddies."

"That's right, there are too many Daddies around here," Brian said as he pulled Alex into his lap. "So why don't I be Papa. How's that sound?"

Alex nodded and asked, "Papa same Daddy?"

"Yes, it means the same thing," Justin said.

"Papa," Robbie said happily.

"We gots Papa n' Daddy," Alex told his brother. This was obviously good news.

It was especially good news to Brian who was more than ready to leave the appellation of Daddy's Brian behind.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

The family had dinner together at the resort restaurant and went swimming in the pool before settling the boys in bed for the night. They spent a couple hours in front of the gas fireplace just talking about their plans for Britin and their new life together and then went to bed themselves.

The next morning, the day of their wedding, Justin woke early to the sounds of little feet running back and forth in the living area of the suite. "Wake up Papa."

Brian groaned and swatted Justin's hand away. "Go away."

"The terrible twosome are up and from the sounds of it, have found some trouble to get into," Justin said as he reached for his sweats.

Brian's groan morphed into a few choice swear words, but he got up and pulled on his own sweat pants. The two went out to the main room and saw chaos. Alex and Robbie had found the little bottles of shampoo, conditioner and lotion in the bathroom in their room and were squirting them on the tile floor in the entry and mixing them together. As they watched, Alex and Robbie stood up and began to slide around on the slick mess like they were ice skating.

It was Justin's turn to groan, but Brian chuckled quietly. "Looks like fun, doesn't it?"

Justin gave him a look and then relented and smiled. "And dangerous and messy. You realize we have to clean that up. And we'll have to give them another bath to get all that goop off of them."

"Yeah, but in the meantime, why don't we join them?" Brian took Justin's hand and led him over to the entryway. The boys froze looked up at the men with guilty faces. And then Brian slid on the tiles and Alex giggled and then Justin joined them and soon they were all laughing and dancing on the messy tiles.

Twenty minutes later, Brian and Justin helped Alex and Robbie clean up their mess. "We done?" Robbie asked hopefully.

"Nope," Brian said and handed him another towel. "This is why we don't dump shampoo on the floor, even though it's fun to slide in it."

Robbie and Alex both nodded as though they understood this logic. And Justin wondered if Brian's way might not have been better than the scolding that Justin had been about to deliver. The boys would remember the fun, but they would also remember the hard work cleaning up and think twice about doing something like that again.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Justin looked over the boys and nodded in satisfaction. They looked very handsome in their little denim-blue pinstriped Armani Junior suit jackets with the sleeves rolled up casually, along with white shirts and navy dress shorts. Brian had found the Armani store at the outlets on one of his many outings with the boys. He'd bought Justin a suit jacket as well, but his was closely tailored in white with navy piping along the lapel and pockets. He had his

sleeves rolled up too, to show the navy and white striped lining, and wore a denim-blue and white striped casual linen shirt open at the collar and navy blue linen pants. When Brian emerged he was wearing a tailored navy jacket with white piping on the lapels and pockets. His shirt matched Justin's and he wore white linen pants.

"I take it Giorgio was in a blue mood this spring?" Justin asked dryly.

"Don't knock it Sunshine," Brian said and pecked Justin's cheek. "I made do with what was available. If I had time I would have gone to New York and gotten something from the summer collection. He has some great colors for the summer."

"We go?" Alex asked. The boys were both anxious to get on with whatever was happening.

"Yes, we can go now," Brian told the boys who immediately dashed for the door. Brian and Justin were close behind as the boys followed Brian's verbal directions. Soon, they were heading out to a private walled garden that was in full bloom and even had a small pond with a waterfall. There was no need for decorations in this floral wonderland.

But the garden wasn't what surprised Justin the most. It was the people who were gathered there.

"Mom?"

"Hi honey," Jennifer said. "You didn't think we'd miss your big day, did you?"

"Picture Gamma!" Robbie shouted. He grabbed Alex's hand and they went around to everyone and named them as they did. "At's An' Molly. At's Annie Em. Gamma Debbie. At's some guy wif some uhver guy..."

At Ted's offended look, Justin said, "I really tried. They refuse to learn your names for some reason." Blake seemed to take it in stride but Ted still seemed a little insulted.

"At's Mel n' Linny," Alex said, taking up where they had left off. "At's My-Cole n' Ben."

"N' at's Jenny n' at's Gus," Robbie said as he stopped in front of the boy, eyeing him warily. Finally they both turned and ran back to Brian and Justin. "Daddy, Papa! Picture people!"

"I know!" Justin said with a smile. "Isn't it great?" The twins nodded their heartfelt agreement.

"Okay, now that everyone has been introduced," Brian said dryly, "maybe we can get this show on the road?" Brian knelt down to Alex and Robbie and asked. "Remember what we practiced?"

"We 'member!"

"Okay," Brian said and ruffled their hair, making the curls even wilder.

The officiant called them all together and Brian and Justin stood—hands clasped together—before their friends and family while the cameraman and photographer from the courthouse were at the back recording everything. The twins stood near the front, holding hands and waiting anxiously for Brian's signal.

"Friends and family, we are here today to celebrate the love and commitment that Brian and Justin share. Getting married is not about dressing up and putting on a show surrounded by lovely flowers in a fairytale setting. It is about a union of two hearts and making an everlasting promise. It is about two people sharing one life." The officiant looked over the crowd and then at Brian and Justin. "Brian and Justin know that marriage is a serious commitment and are both making solemn vows and promises to each other today. They have each written their own vows and will recite them now."

Justin cleared his throat and smiled at Brian before he began to speak.

"Brian, I promise to give you the best of myself and to ask of you no more than you can give. I promise to accept you the way you are; I fell in love with you for the qualities, abilities, and outlook on life that you have, and won't try to reshape you in a different image. I promise to respect you as a person with your own interests, desires, and needs, and to realize that those are sometimes different, but no less important than my own. I promise not to run away from problems but to stand by your side through the best and worst of times, and to give you the finest of what I have and what I am from now until the end of our days."

Justin's blue eyes were misty as he continued. "I promise to love you without reservation, honor and respect you, provide for your needs as best I can, protect you from harm in all its forms, comfort you in times of distress, grow with you in mind and spirit, always be open and honest with you, and cherish you for as long as we both live."

Brian leaned forward and kissed Justin deeply, unable to hold back after the words he had shared.

"That part comes later," the officiant said with some humor after the couple had broken for air while the others all laughed.

"Right," Brian said with a shameless grin. "I guess it's my turn. Okay." He took a deep breath and began, "Justin, I want you to know how lucky I feel for having found the one perfect person for me, the one who suits me so comfortably, who accepts me completely and who gives me happiness and hope and anticipation for the future. The day we met was the day I came alive for the first time, and today I declare my love and devotion for you in front our friends and family, so that they can remind us both of this day and these vows when we forget." Justin looked around the small group and gave them a watery smile, glad that they were here.

Brian continued, but his voice was thicker than normal as his emotions tightened his chest. "I promise to keep myself open to you, to let you build doors into the walls I erect to keep others out. I want to share with you my innermost fears and feelings, my secrets and dreams. I promise to grow along with you, to be willing to face change as we both transform in order to keep our relationship alive and exciting. And finally, I promise to love you in good and bad times, with all I have to give and all I feel inside in the only way I know how ... completely and forever."

Brian looked to the twins and gave them the signal and they ran up to Justin and Brian. Brian knelt down and helped Robbie and Alex untie the ribbons around their neck that held the weddings bands. Robbie gave his to Brian, but Alex tugged on Justin's pants until his Daddy leaned down for the ring and gave his boy a kiss. Robbie got his own kiss and then Jennifer called them back to stand with her.

Brian went first this time. He took the ring and slid it just over the tip of Justin's ring finger. "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and devotion. As I place it on your finger, I commit my heart and soul to you. With this ring, I gladly marry you and join my life to yours." He pushed the ring the rest of the way onto Justin's hand.

They switched hands and Justin repeated Brian's actions and words. "I give you this ring as a symbol of my love and devotion. As I place it on your finger, I commit my heart and soul to you. With this ring, I gladly marry you and join my life to yours."



"In light of the vows here witnessed and the promises made today by Brian and Justin, it is my pleasure and honor as a representative of the state of Vermont to declare them married. Brian, *now* you can kiss Justin."

Everyone laughed and cheered as Brian kissed his husband. While they were still lip-locked, the guests began tossing rose petals at them and Alex, Robbie and even Jenny thought it was a great game to try and catch the floating petals. The celebration had begun.

## **Part Seven**

The reception was set up in another part of the resort that was no less picturesque. The buffet and dance floor was set up under a picnic shelter that overlooked a glassy lake reflecting the mountains and fields of wildflowers. The shelter had been bedecked in gauzy white linen curtains and wildflowers. It was perfect and everyone was having a great time.

Justin and Brian had shed their jackets and were swaying to a slow song played by the hired DJ when Alex and Robbie came running up to them looking very upset. They tugged at Brian and Justin until the two men followed them back to the kids table where Gus was sitting picking at his food and looking slightly guilty.

"Okay, boys, what's wrong?" Justin asked as he took a seat and let Robbie climb onto his lap.

Alex, who was similarly situated on Brian's lap, spoke up. "Papa, he call you Daddy!"

"Well, that's because I am his Daddy," Brian said.

"No, you Papa," Robbie said stubbornly.

"Ah I see," Justin said. "Remember how we said that Daddy and Papa means the same thing?" The two toddlers nodded. "Well, Papa has been Gus' Daddy for a long time."

"But he Papa!" Alex insisted. His blue eyes were beginning to tear up and Brian and Justin shared a helpless look.

Gus sighed in a way that only an eight year old can manage. "Fine. He's Papa. Happy?"

Alex and Robbie nodded warily, not sure how to take Gus.

"Thank you Gus," Brian said. "You need to find a way to get along with Alex and Robbie. They're your brothers now, you know."

"No bruhver," Robbie said.

"No bruhver," Alex repeated with a decisive nod.

Justin sighed and gave them a look. "Gus *is* your brother."

"No Bruhver," Robbie said again.

Alex looked at Gus and then Robbie and said, "No bruhver. Not look me."

Justin chuckled at that. "Guys, not all brothers look alike. Some brothers have different hair. Some have different skin. Only very special brothers called twins look alike."

"We t'ins?" Robbie asked

"That's right," Brian said. "You're twins, which makes you a special kind of brothers, but Gus is your brother too, and you have to learn to play together." Brian spoke to the twins, but his eyes were focused on Gus.

Gus rolled his eyes at his dad and said, "Come on squirts. I'll take you to the playground and push you on the swings."

With that one act of reluctant kindness, Gus became the twins' favorite person—for the moment at least. Justin leaned his head on Brian's shoulder and watched them run to keep up with Gus as he invited Jenny to go with them and then led the three younger kids to the playground about a hundred yards away.

"They'll work it out," Brian said. "Gus isn't used to sharing me with anyone, and the boys aren't used to sharing with anyone but each other. It'll take time but they'll work it out."

Justin nodded. "Hmmm. This is nice. In fact this whole day has been more than I could have hoped for. I would ask how you pulled it all off, but that's like asking a magician to give away his secrets."

"You're learning," Brian teased.

"Alright, now that the children are away, you can explain just what in the hell you were thinking, Sunshine!" Debbie said as she joined the newlyweds

at the children's table. "You should know that family helps each other out when we're in trouble. You shouldn't have tried to take all this on by yourself!"

"I know Deb," Justin sighed, knowing he deserved all the lectures that Debbie, his mother and Brian wanted to hand down. "I fucked up. I'm sorry."

"Damn right you're sorry," Debbie huffed. Then she sat back and looked at the kids playing in the distance. "But I suppose it all worked out in the end. And those babies are precious." She turned to Brian and proudly told him, "They call me Grandma Debbie!" Brian sucked his lips in to keep from laughing, but Debbie saw and slugged him in the arm. "Asshole."

Brian leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm really glad you came."

"Of course I came," Debbie said, her voice filled with emotion. "You're my boy, just as much as Michael is. I would never miss your wedding. Christ! Someone give me a fucking tissue already!"

Justin chuckled and handed her a box of tissues that the cater-waiter rushed over with.

They went back over to where the other adults were gathered at the two other tables after Debbie pulled herself together. Emmett, who considered himself to be the expert on all things wedding related, decided that they had to do the toasts. But since they hadn't actually chosen best men, the floor was opened to all present.

Ted was the first to stand. "Brian, you are my boss, but you are also my friend. And Justin, I have nothing but the deepest respect for a man who can not only capture, but keep Brian's heart. Congratulations."

Lindsey stood next. "In a way, I feel like I'm mourning the end of an era—I mean, what will Wendy do without Peter?—but at the same time, I know that this is only the beginning of a whole new adventure for the two of you. I don't know any two people who deserve happiness more."

Michael was next. "I have watched Brian change and grow more in the years since Justin came into his life than in the entire 15 years I knew him pre-Justin. I loved pre-Justin Brian. He was my hero. He protected me and did all of the crazy shit I could never do. All of you know that the only person who fought the changes that came post-Justin more than Brian was me. But as I watched the two of you exchange vows today I knew deep in my heart

that Brian had finally found love. So I want to thank you Justin, for letting my best friend know what love and happiness are."

Mel stood up next and Brian groaned. "Shut up asshole. I'm going to speak, like it or not." She glared at Brian for a second longer than necessary before turning and smiling at Justin. "Baby, I have no idea what you see in this asshole, but if he's what you want—and you've been telling us all for 8 years that he is—well then, I'm happy for you. Mazal tov!"

"Thank you," Justin said with a smile.

"You can sit now," Brian said.

"I'm not finished," Mel said haughtily. "Now, since we're all here on this historic occasion, I thought it might be a good time to make an announcement. A wedding present of sorts." Brian eyed her warily and she smirked back at him. "We're moving back to Pittsburgh."

There were questions and shouts and excitement from all over the place. Even Brian got a wide grin on his face. Gus was coming home.

"Sidney is retiring and has offered to let me take over the gallery," Lindsey explained. "And Mel's firm here has never stopped trying to get her to come back. And we know things aren't perfect, but we also know that it's better to be with friends and family than to be alone. So we're coming home. The move is scheduled for August, so we can get settled before Gus and Jenny start school."

"That's a wedding present I won't be returning," Brian said with a smirk.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Jennifer volunteered to watch the twins over night, with Gamma Debbie and Auntie Em chiming in with their services as well. That left Brian and Justin free to leave the reception and hide away in their suite for a full twelve hours of twin free time. What they did with that time, no one doubted. Especially after a very happy and very tired Justin and a very smug Brian turned up at breakfast the next morning. They hadn't even taken their seats when they were attacked by Robbie and Alex.

"Daddy! Papa! Miss you!"

Justin swung Alex up into his arms while Brian lifted Robbie over his head before settling him in his arms. "Well we missed you too. But did you have fun with Grandma and Grandma Debbie?"

Robbie nodded seriously. "Watch Pee Pan."

Peter Pan was the twins favorite movie, even though they really didn't understand much of it yet. "Well, that sounds like a very good time," Justin said and tickled Alex.

"They were angels," Debbie told them.

"They used my best lipstick to draw on the walls," Molly tattled.

Jennifer glared at her daughter. "I told you I'd buy you a new lipstick. Be nicer to your nephews."

"I think you two will want to see the paper," Ted told Brian as they finally sat down.

Brian and Justin looked at the front page and both grinned. "Conspiracy Scandal in Mercer Exposed: 12 people charged by State's Attorney." The story below went on to detail most of the dirt that Waters had dug up for Brian in preparation of the hearing. There was even a picture of the Andersons being led away in handcuffs. Justin smiled.

"Fitting end for two of the very worst people ever to cross our path," Brian said.

"I'm just glad they're out of our lives for good," Justin said. "They should rot in jail for the rest of their lives."

"Considering their ages and the list of charges being brought against them, it's likely they will," Ben said from the other end of the table.

The entire table was quiet for a moment as they let that sink in. Then Brian turned to Jennifer. "So Mother Taylor, you survived your first night with the terrible twosome with minimal damage. How'd you like to volunteer for an extended gig?"

Jennifer narrowed her eyes at her son-in-law. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Justin was the one who answered. "Well, it wouldn't be for a couple months at least since Brian really has to get back into the office, but we'd like to take a honeymoon at some point in the near future."

"How long are we talking?" Jennifer asked. She may love her grandsons, but they were a handful.

"Two weeks," Brian said. "And we would set up video conferencing so the boys could talk to us and see us everyday, in case they get worried."

"And I'm sure the others would all agree to help out..." Justin looked to Debbie and Emmett for support.

In fact, everyone volunteered to help for at least a night.

"I don't know if they'll stay with us, since they refuse to learn our names, but we'll help if we can," Ted volunteered.

"And it will be good for them to spend some time with Gus and JR," Lindsey pointed out.

Jennifer chuckled. "Fine. But I won't be able to clear my schedule until October."

Brian leaned over and kissed her cheek, "October is perfect."

"At least I'll be at college by then," Molly muttered.

"Just wait," Justin scolded his little sister. "One of these days, you're going to have kids and you'll want them to get along with Robbie and Alex. So be nice."

Molly stuck her tongue out at Justin but then the two cracked up.

"It must be a sibling thing," Brian said. "Debbie and Vic used to do shit like that and I never understood it."

"Shit!" Robbie shouted.

"Shit!" Alex repeated.

"Fuck," Brian muttered while Justin and the other s all laughed.

"Fuck shit!"

"Shit fuck!" And the twins were off on another of their spontaneous songs without tune.

Once Justin was able to control his mirth, he stopped the two boys. And made sure they were both looking at him. "Those aren't words that little boys should use."

"No shit?" Alex asked.

"No fuck?" Robbie asked.

Brian bit his lips to keep from laughing himself this time. "Papa sometimes uses words that only grown-ups should use. So does Grandma Debbie."

"Shit and Fuck are two of those words," Justin told them. "If you hear someone use a word you don't know, you need to ask me or Papa what it means and if it is a word that little boys should use. Okay?"

"Kay," Alex agreed easily. He and Robbie were soon sliding down so that they could crawl around the floor under the table and tickle people's ankles.

"You think that will work?" Brian asked Justin.

"No, but if we keep repeating it, it should help," Justin said with a shrug.

Jennifer smiled at her son. "You used to like to sing about ca-ca. Took us months to get you to stop."

"Mom!" Justin's face was beet red and the others all laughed.

**BJBJBJBJBJ**

Before long they were all splitting up for the long trip back. Most of the group would be traveling together and driving straight through, but Brian knew that they would have to stop more often than the others and would be stopping for the night halfway. The others had all packed up their bags before coming to breakfast, so they left as soon as they were finished, leaving the new family to pack up and check out at their leisure.

They had only been on the road a few minutes when Alex, the ever inquisitive one, asked, "Where picture people?"

Justin turned in his seat and said, "They went home. But we'll see them again real soon. We're going to have a new house with Papa that's close to all the picture people."

"Not picture people," Robbie corrected both his brother and his Daddy. "Gamma say *Fambly*."

Brian grinned from his place behind the wheel. "That's right, the picture people are our family. And you and Daddy and me, we're going home so that we can all be a family together. And soon, Gus and Jenny and their moms will be there too. All our family in one place, where they belong."

"Fambly," Alex nodded.

"Fambly," Robbie agreed.

"Family," Justin said as he took Brian's hand and beamed at his new husband.

Brian took a moment to savor the peaceful feeling that filled him. That peace wasn't to last, however.

"Pee Pan!" Robbie shouted.

"Pee Pan," Alex shouted.

Brian groaned and set the DVD to play. It was going to be a very long trip with two over-excitable toddlers. They would drive him crazy before they even made to the hotel that night.

But as he watched Justin get the boys settled with the headphones, Brian realized he wouldn't have it any other way.

**The End**