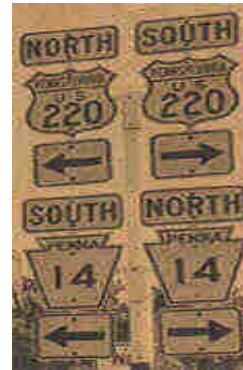


Maps and Legends

Rachel Anton & Laura Blaurosen



Sick Kitties



Sometimes I start to think that maybe Brian is through surprising me. Sometimes I feel so connected to him, so tuned in to every thought, every word, every expression that crosses his face, and I'll think this is it. This is the moment when the smoke and mirrors disappear, and the bag of tricks is empty, and there's nothing left but Brian. Stark, naked, and clear.

It's like one of those stupid old Magic Eye posters. If you stare at the dots long enough, a cuddly puppy will suddenly appear. Or maybe a sad clown, or an ugly landscape. Sometimes, Brian will pop out at me like that- order out of chaos, sense out of nonsense, and a thousand times more beautiful than any poster in the world- and I'll start to believe that I truly see him. That I truly understand him.

And then he'll do something so completely unexpected, so seemingly inexplicable, so fucking *bizarre*, and the picture will scramble again. Total confusion.

I should be able to predict it by now. Sometimes the surprise is incredibly good, and sometimes it's incredibly bad, but it always comes eventually. Never trust the cuddly puppy. I oughtta get a tattoo or something.

We were having one of those times, one of the clear, understanding, almost psychically connected times, when he decided to run away.

It was early June, almost three months since he'd lost his job, and I could tell he was starting to get antsy. We still had that us-against-the-world vibe going, and I think he was happy, but worried. There wasn't any money, and there wasn't any furniture, and he'd sold half his wardrobe on E-Bay to pay off the last of his debt, and I guess the victory high was starting to wear down to a dull buzz - maybe even a hangover. I'd find him pacing the empty floors at night, pacing and drinking, drinking and pacing. Smoking. Rubbing his face over and over.

He started looking at maps around the time that Michael brought the car back. Returned with two door dings and a scratch on the hood that we'll all be hearing about till the end of time.

He'd spread the atlases over his desk, like he used to spread his work, trace paths in orange highlighter, log onto Mapquest, and when I asked him about it he muttered something about "research" in that tone that means he'll only discuss something when he's good and ready. Which sometimes turns out to be never, and sometimes that's okay. I've learned to leave him some space. A few secrets. As long as they're not too huge. As long as they're not too important.

But maps...maps made me nervous. They made me very nervous, and when the phone rang one night and it was some irate sounding queen on the other end, calling from someplace noisy and crowded and asking for "Mister Kinney", I knew right away that this was it. I got that weird stomach feeling that always comes with the scarier, bigger shifts in the Brian picture. The bottom falling out feeling. Like driving down a hill way too fast.

I told the guy that Brian was out, that I didn't know when he'd be back, and he gave me a fake sounding name and a fake sounding number and then he gave me a reason for my pre-cognitive hysteria- he told me he was going to take the loft. He wanted Mister Kinney to know. He wanted Mister Kinney to call him with the first available move-in date.

I wrote the message in my sketchbook, trying to keep my fucking hand from going spastic all over the paper like it still does when I'm upset, and when he finally stopped talking I threw the phone as hard as I could. It landed on Brian's bed with a gentle, completely unsatisfying thump, so I turned around and kicked the wall. Which hurt my foot.

It was all very frustrating. And pointless, I decided.

There was no use having a fit like some pathetic little bitch. What I needed was a plan. Figuring out a plan might keep me from crying, and that was very important.

So I started packing. And planning.

I still had some of my shit at Daphne's. Maybe she'd take me back. I could work double shifts at the diner to give her a full month's rent up front.

About an hour after I'd packed my last bag, Brian came stumbling through the door, well into stage two of drunkenness. Stage one is his everyday, more-or-less functional level of inebriation. At stage two he's walking a little funny, talking too much and too loud, usually looking for more to drink. By stage three he's nearly incoherent, and can veer wildly between suffocating affection and shocking, sudden belligerence. I don't think I've ever seen stage four, but Michael says it's absolutely terrifying.

"Honey, I'm home," he slurred, tossing his keys on the kitchen counter and moving towards me with arms outstretched. He didn't seem to notice the pile of suitcases around me or the infuriated look I must've had on my face.

By then I'd torn the message out of my book, and it was clutched in my fist in a crumpled ball. I threw it at him before he got too close to me, and it bounced off his chest and onto the floor.

"You got a message, honey," I snarled at him. Well, I was trying to snarl, but usually that doesn't work for me so, it probably sounded more like a whine or a whimper.

He quirked an eyebrow at me and reached down to uncrumple the paper. My heart was racing and my palms were sweating and I just knew this was going to be the Worst Confrontation Ever, but when he read the note he said, "Oh, this is fucking great!", and continued lunging in my direction for a hug. Like I was supposed to celebrate with him or something.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me, you prick?" I demanded. Loudly. Angrily. Still, not a flicker of acknowledgment.

"Get dressed," he said, wrapping his arm around my waist. "We're going to dinner."

"I can't get dressed, you asshole! I packed all my fucking clothes!"

He laughed and nuzzled his face into the side of my neck, seeming to understand that I was saying words, but maybe not too clear on what they were.

"You're so clever," he murmured against my ear. "How'd you figure it out?"

"The guy calling to say he's taking the apartment was a big fucking clue. And the maps, and..."

He cut me off with a kiss, and for the first time in...probably ever, I pushed him away, wriggled out of his grasp. Refusing amorous advances. That finally got his attention.

"What is this, my goodbye fuck?"

His brows furrowed together, and he looked genuinely puzzled.

"No," he said, and grabbed for me again, pulled me to him by the front of my shirt and leaned his forehead against mine. "It's ours."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means..." Another kiss under my ear, his hands on my hips, a drunken sway. "That I'm sick of watching you mope around here since you got thrown out of school. You're working too much at that goddamn grease pit of a diner, and the art you've been producing lately is for fucking shit."

I was on the verge of tears at this point- distressed, angry, getting hornier and more confused by the second- and now he was insulting me on top of everything?

"So this is your solution to my problems?" I asked shakily. "Ditching me?"

He rolled his eyes and made a groaning noise, moved his hands up to my neck like he was gonna strangle me, but instead ran his thumbs gently up and down my Adam's Apple.

"No, you idiot," he said. "That's why I'm taking you out of this hell pit. You need inspiring. And so do I."

I just stared at him for a minute, feeling the opposite of the bottom falling out in my stomach. Feeling the tingle and thrill of soaring uphill that accompanies the really, really good Brian surprises. And feeling like a fucking jackass, too.

"You...you're taking me with you?" I asked, stupidly, and he gave me the "duh" look I so deserved.

"Of course, dumbfuck. I'm renting out the loft for the summer, and we're going to homosexual Jerusalem."

He pulled me over to the desk, and stood behind me as I looked through the maps with new, happier eyes. He'd drawn us a path across the country, through cities and back roads and lots and lots of nothingness, leading from Pittsburgh all the way to San Francisco.

"It's the ultimate road trip," he said, wrapping his arms around my waist and peering over my shoulder. "Every young lad should have a chance to explore the world on his summer vacation."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't know if I could get enough money for this place," he said. "And I wanted to surprise you."

Have I mentioned yet how completely stupid I was feeling? Cause I was. Seriously.

"I'm surprised. Really...really surprised."

I turned towards him and threw my arms around his neck, giddiness overcoming my guilty feelings. Then I started jumping up and down, and the rest is just really embarrassing. I blithered something about "the best boyfriend ever" and how sorry I was for doubting him, and eventually he pushed me away with a sour look on his face. Which was completely understandable.

"Okay, okay, just...no more pictures of emaciated kitties with red ribbons," he said, pointing his finger at me. "If you draw one more fucking sickly looking animal, I'm sending you home to your mother."

I don't even wanna explain the emaciated kitties. Let's just call it my blue period and leave it at that. I promised him to cut it out, and hugged him again, and jumped some more, and this time he laughed and hugged me back.

"When are we leaving?" I asked him.

"Well, if I can get the cash from this guy I s'pose we could leave tonight. Since you're already packed...."

"Tonight? Really?" I was starting to get whiplash at this point. "I-I've gotta call my mom. And Daphne. Oh, and I need to tell Deb so she can fill my shifts, and..."

"Do it from the road," he said.

"How come?"

"Cause, there's no time for you to call all those people *and* suck me off, now is there?"

It was too much at once. There were questions I should've been asking, things I should've been thinking about. Things like money, and why Brian wanted to spend his summer doing this instead of looking for a job, but I was overwhelmed. I was itchy with anticipation. I didn't really want to talk anymore. So I tackled him to the floor of our very empty living room, and we were on our way.

A Forest



"Yeah, tell...tell Daph I'll call her later, oh, and Debbie, and I guess Dad too, if he asks...hello? Mom? Fuck!"

The battery was dead. Just in the nick of time too. I still can't stand hearing him worry about what his bastard father thinks, anyway. I looked over at him staring at the dead cell phone. "I can't believe you didn't bring the car adapter," he said.

In reality, I had. It was somewhere in the trunk. "I think I lost it," I lied. "I've got the other one. We'll charge it when we get to a hotel."

"What if we break down before that? Or worse, if we get lost in the woods!" I'm pretty sure he figured I was bullshitting him about the charger, but the slightly panicked tone in his voice kind of surprised me.

First stop on our trip was going to be a little walk through Cook Forest State Park, and camping out a night there. It was something Michael and me did a lot when we were kids and I really wanted Justin to experience it too.

"Are we planning on getting lost?" I asked. "Phone's not gonna work in the middle of the fucking woods anyway."

"It won't?" He really sounded nervous and it was then I knew our woodlands adventure was going to prove to be more than just an ordinary night of camping. I tried really hard not to smirk, but it made me think of that night Mikey and I thought we saw the fucking Jersey devil. I was higher than a kite and Michael was as usual somewhere out in the stratosphere. His eyes were opened so wide he looked like Shaggy from a fucking Scooby Doo cartoon. He swore he'd seen two red eyes and a dark "shape" watching him take a piss behind a tree. He thought it'd been me fucking with his head, but the scary part was, I really thought I'd heard something too. He was crying, 'Brian cut it out...it isn't funny anymore' and I was psyched. I wanted to find the thing, bag it, take it home and put it on the fucking mantel with the rest of the Novotny Kitsch Kollektion. He ended up running back to the car and begging me with tears streaming down his face to take him home.

I was sure it'd be different for Justin, though. Justin has way bigger balls than Michael. A few strange noises in the dark weren't going to be enough to shake that kid. And what's a bigger turn on than danger and impending death?

"Do you have ANY idea where we are?" Justin asked once we'd been walking for a good forty-five minutes.

"Pretty much." I stopped and turned around. "We came from that direction," I explained, pointing that way, "and now we're going THIS direction," I pointed forward.

I passed him and walked ahead a ways, but apparently he was stopping. "Pretty much? Where's the map? Didn't you have a map?" he called after me.

I turned back around and showed him my empty hands. "A map? Who maps the fucking woods?"

"People do!" he yelled, dropping to his knees and ripping open his backpack. "People who don't wanna get eaten by bears...or-or serial killers!" I watched him dig through his bag frantically and honestly tried hard not to crack up. "Where's my fucking compass??" he mumbled. "I can't believe you don't know where we are!"

I walked back to where he was and squatted in front of him. "Hey," I said, but he was still rifling. I grabbed his hand and said it again. "Hey!"

Finally, he looked up, showing me how honestly freaked he was. "We're fine," I told him. "We're only about a mile from the car. Maybe two." I kissed him on the mouth, hoping it would help reassure him.

Standing back up, I offered him my hand so he could do the same. "Yeah but..." he started, but I pulled him in close, pressing my crotch into his. That always shuts him up - that, and of course, kissing, which I also did, for a long, long time.

"Now, what was that you were talking about before? Something about...eating?" I slid down his back to his ass and squeezed while I sniffed at his neck.

"I brought marshmallows," I heard him say.

"Mmmnot that kinda eating..." I explained, and began to lick at the skin on his neck.

He rocked his hips back and forth. "Mmmyou're just trying to distract me from our impending deaths."

"Mmmmmstop talking about death," I teased and pushed my tongue into his mouth. "Gonna make me come," I whispered.

He giggled while we kissed. "You're such a freak!"

"And you...love it." I pushed on his ass and resumed the kiss, hoping to relax him enough to put him at ease. But just when I thought I had him lulled, suddenly he jumped out of my arms and about a foot off the ground.

"Jesus!" I swore, while trying to regain my balance from when Justin pushed away from me.

"What the fuck was that?" he whispered frantically, looking from side to side. "Brian, did you hear that?"

His eyes were huge and I'd almost have called him "Mikey" had he not had his damn thumbnail between his teeth. I can't laugh at him when he's doing that, can't tease him. I pulled him gently back into my arms and pressed my mouth to his ear. "We need to get you off, you are far too uptight." He relaxed into my arms again and leaned his head against my mouth even more.

"You've never done it in the woods," I whispered, licking down his jaw line, "in the dark...in the deathly...quiet"

"Mmmmmmm...I've never BEEN in the woods, in the dark," he said, already starting to tense up again, but his hand on growing quite nicely. I dropped a hand to his ass and pushed him into me. "Ughmmm...I don't think I like it," he whimpered.

I chuckled deep in my throat and kissed him. "Well then, it's a real treat, isn't it? Besides, We'd never make it back to the car before night falls, so...we've got no other choice but to stay here."

I leaned in to kiss him again but he fucking backed away again. "I thought you said it was just a mile," he complained.

"Or so," I shrugged and forced his lips back to mine.

"Mmmmph...we could run," he mumbled between kisses, "if you knew the way..."

I shrugged again. Couldn't believe he still believed I didn't know where we were. I pulled the sleeping bag off of my shoulders and tossed in on the ground. But Justin wasn't through worrying yet, I guess, because he tossed his bag down and huffed.

"God, this is like the Blair Witch Project."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Fucking waste of two hours of my life, that movie was. I had a letter all ready to mail to the production company, demanding my money back plus compensation for mental anguish.

"You're like that crazy girl who just wouldn't let it go," he whined.

My back stiffened. "I am not like that crazy cunt, so shut the fuck up and gather some sticks."

"Well then you're like the guy who threw the map in the river like a giant retard, and I'm the normal guy who got killed first" he proclaimed, waving his hand like he was auditioning for Hamlet, "...who died for his art."

I glared at him. "There was never a map, and you're nothing even resembling normal. In fact, you're more insane than the serial killers we're sharing the woods with tonight." He hesitated just moment and then must have finally realized how ridiculous he was acting. He started picking up sticks, even though it was with half-assed effort.

Smoothing out the sleeping bag I couldn't help to smile, thinking about how awesome it was really gonna be to fuck him out here. Out in the open, and away from civilization. He was all mine, he couldn't go anywhere out here, he was stuck with me. Lucky little fucker.

"Here's your sticks," Justin said, and dropped about a handful of twigs near the foot of the bag. "S'that enough?"

I rubbed my neck and sniffed. "Not quite. What the hell kind of Boy Scout are you?" I asked jokingly and got up to finish what I thought was a simple enough task.

"The kind they throw out," he laughed and plopped himself on the sleeping bag, wasting no time tearing into his bag of giant marshmallows.

Didn't take me long and I had a really killer flame going. It had been a long time, but I guess I still had the knack for setting things on fire. Which gave me an excellent inspiration to break into the stash of joints I'd rolled, just for the occasion of this pilgrimage. The final supply of weed; purchased before the fall of the Great Nation that had once been My Life.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Justin asked as I got the joint lit and took that first sweet hit. I let the feeling of it wash over me before even thinking about the answer to that ostensibly harmless question.

"My dad," I said as exhaled. "Used to go camping when I was a kid, on holiday weekends and that. Before he started disappearing for weeks at a time, that is," I laughed bitterly.

He looked at me with that pathetic pitying face and I shoved the cigarette in it. Wasn't asking for sympathy. Time to change the subject. "Then it was Mikey and me, spending drug-induced nights in the woods. Fucking-a that was fun," I laughed and let Justin feed me another hit. "One night we even saw the fucking Jersey Devil," I choked out.

"The Jersey who?"

"The Jersey Devil. No fucking way you've never heard of the Jersey Devil." Where the hell had this kid been? Guess that's what happens when you've got a fag hag for a best friend instead of a guy.

"Isn't that a hockey team or something?" he asked, lying back on the sleeping bag.

I laughed out loud, my voice echoing through the now very dark woods. I propped myself on one elbow and hovered over his face, leaning down for a hit kiss. When I pulled back he was smiling, looking totally relaxed and content. My favorite look.

"Well?"

I must have been staring too long. He was waiting for the story. One more hit. Had to make this good. I put on my best storyteller voice, the one that used to give a teenaged Mikey goose bumps, and began the tale. "See there was this woman, back in the 18th century. And she was pregnant for the thirteenth time..."

He snorted and pushed at my chest. "Oh of course, 'thirteen'," he mocked, rolling his eyes.

The voice must have been working on him too. Already. "You wanna hear the story or not?"

"Okay-okay-okay, I'm listening," he giggled.

I leaned down closer, putting my chin on his shoulder and speaking directly into his ear. "Well, because it was that evil number, she proclaimed that the it "might as well be a devil as a child." He snorted again, but I could feel his body quivering. "And as soon as she'd said it, the demon child flew out of her womb and into the woods, cursing his bitch of a mom the whole way."

"Are you sure this isn't the story of your birth?" the little shit asked, but with a shaky voice.

"Believe me or don't. But they say it, and others like it roam every forest in the world, teasing and torturing unsuspecting humans for sport, until they eventually die of fright." I blew lightly into his ear and he shuddered. "So, we were in the woods one night," I whispered even quieter, "and it was soooooo still, like it is now, and pitch black. Suddenly Mikey goes, 'what's that?'" I looked where he was pointing, and there were these two red glowing lights. And then...they moved! And they moved again, to the side of us. We just sat on the sleeping bag for about a minute and then there was this awful howling sound and this thing...JUMPED out of the trees!"

Justin jumped too when I raised my voice. He propped himself up on his elbows, trying to appear cool and calm, but laughing uncomfortably. "I bet Michael pissed his pants, huh? And it was probably just a car or something, huh...?"

I shook my head slowly "It was a definitely human shaped thing, all skinny and hairy. Two beady red glowing eyes. It might have had a tail. We grabbed our shit and the fucking thing chased us all the way to my car. We drove home so fast, and when we got to Deb's, there was a big scratch on the side of the car, like from a claw."

"What?? You're so full of shit!" He laughed and pushed me flat down on the ground.

Okay, maybe that last part was a bit too urban legend, but it seemed to work for Justin. "I am fucking dead serious. Call Mikey and ask him yourself."

"I would, if we had a fucking phone!" he scoffed playfully.

I got up to go take a leak, but he grabbed my hand. "Wait, where are you going?"

"Gotta pee. Want me to do it where you're gonna lay your sweet head?"

"Just...don't go too far. Y-you might get lost again."

I took care of business and by the time I got back, Justin had balled himself up inside the sleeping bag, his blond mop just visible over the top of it. I fished around my pockets for my cigarettes and discovered I had one of those give away laser pointers. The wheels in my head, impaired as they were from the pot, began to spin in overdrive. I hid behind a nearby tree.

First I threw my voice, making as awful of a wailing noise as I could produce.

He popped out of the bag and grabbed his flashlight, swinging it around frantically. I swallowed my laughter.

"Brian????!! Brian, where are you?"

I kept as still as he was, trying to listen closely. I walked behind him to another tree, making as much of a rustling as was possible.

"BRIAN!! Dammit, answer me!"

I made the wailing noise again and he gasped. That's when I flashed the laser in the direction he was looking, reflecting it off a tree. His chest and shoulders was rising and falling rapidly. He shined the flashlight in the direction of the red light and I shut it off, then let it shine somewhere else.

"Fuckshitshitshitshitfuck, Brian..." His voice was starting to sound really strained and when he fished my switchblade out of my bag I figured that was probably enough. I didn't wanna end up being a causality. I walked back to the direction I'd originally gone in order to return and the rustling must have freaked him out even more.

"BRIAN!!! WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU????!!

"Right here, why?" I said calmly from behind.

He screamed and flew around, tossing the knife in the air, the blade not drawn.

"Well it's a fucking good thing one of us is a man."

"Jesus Christ where the fuck were you?!"

I shined my own flashlight on him and that's when I really started to feel bad. He was panting still, and wiping tears from his face. My own heart started to race. I really hadn't meant to make him cry. I turned off the flashlight so I didn't have to see it and flashed the laser on him.

"Was that you?? You fucker!"

"I'm so sorry, I didn't think you'd..."

He plopped down on the sleeping bag with his back to me. I joined him and tried putting an arm around him. "C'mere, I'm sorry."

He pushed my arm away. "God you're such a fucking prick!! What the fuck is wrong with you??"

I rubbed his back, but couldn't keep myself from laughing. There was something...charming about his fear and vulnerability. "I really didn't think you'd get that freaked. S'okay, s'okay, it was nothing."

He whipped around and really shoved me hard and stood up. "It's not fucking funny!"

I cleared my throat and bit my cheek. "I know, I'm sorry." He was pissed at me, but too afraid to walk more than a foot away from me. "Jesus, lighten up, you're not gonna die in the woods." I grabbed his calf. "I wouldn't let you die."

"No, you'd rather scare me to death then let somebody else do it."

I let go of his leg and grabbed the bag of marshmallows. I'd fucked this one up, I think. Justin sat down on the far end of the sleeping bag and pulled his legs up to his chest, his back to me. He poked at the fire and I stuffed two marshmallows into my mouth before remembering how much I loathed the things.

After awhile I couldn't take the silence. I tapped his ass with my foot. "S'matter? Not having fun anymore?"

"Not at the moment."

"Should we turn back and send you home to your mommy's? We're not that far from her..."

"Oh shut the fuck up, you proved your point already."

Finally I was able to stop. Sometimes I don't know what keeps me going. I should have kept my hole shut about fifteen minutes ago, but sometimes, I dunno, it's like I get possessed. I gotta let it out. Even though I know he was pissed. I know I should just leave it and let him be pissed, but...I don't want him to be.

I kept waiting for him to finally turn his head and tell him how I could fix it. Or just let me have it. Finally, I couldn't stand it again. I tapped his ass. "Hey. Hey, I'm sorry, all right? I thought...I thought you could take it."

"Ugh, God, Brian, everything you say just fucking makes it worse!"

I sighed heavily. Fuck. How was I going to fix this? I couldn't have him being angry the whole night. I still wanted to fuck him.

"You know my old man used to say that spending a night in the woods could make a man out of anybody."

"Well I guess he was wrong," he pouted

"Night's young..." I said, trying to sound seductive, and rubbed at his lower back with my toe.

"Oh, great, what else are you gonna do to make me feel stupid?"

"Nothing, nothing! Honestly. Justin, I didn't think you were gonna freak out that much."

"Yeah, I get it! I'm an even bigger pussy than you thought, congratulations."

I groaned. "I don't think you're a pussy."

He sniffed, but after a few seconds sighed and lay back down next to me. He turned and looked at me eventually and asked, "Do you know where we are?"

"Pennsylvania."

He sighed again. "I'm giving you a chance to not be a complete shit here. So I can decide whether I wanna talk to you anymore."

"Oh well in that case," I started, grabbing the flashlight and shining it on my face, below my chin, "Yyyyyyyyyyyyyessssssss!"

"Really?"

"Jesus, what the fuck did I just say?"

He shook his head like I oughtta know better or something, but in the glow of the flashlight I saw a more relaxed smile.

"Did you torment Michael in the woods too?"

I flashed him an evil smile. "Mmmmmaybe just a little bit." I took a chance and leaned in to kiss him. This time he pulled me closer. "I tease, because I care."

He laughed quietly and kissed me this time, and ran a hand through my hair. "I'm touched. Really."

We kissed again and after awhile I tugged at the fly of Justin's jeans and stuck my hand inside, working his dick and his balls until he was hard.

"Ughhhmmmyou're really lucky I didn't have an asthma attack."

I pulled his pants and underwear all the way off. "You don't have asthma." I dropped my head down to his cock and licked the tip. "Do you?"

"Mmmmmwell, I've got bad allergies..."

"Jesus, you really are a princess," I said, as though I didn't already know it, as though it annoyed me.

He turned on his side and helped me off with my jeans, his cock twitching when he saw I had no underwear on. "This one time when I was little, I got attacked by bees. I almost hyperventilated to death. Really." He dipped his head down and swallowed my dick whole.

"Ughhhhhh...lemme guess, not one of them stung you," I groaned.

He popped his head back up. "Nope. Not a one. I was at my nana's house, she almost had a heart attack, too"

I ruffled his hair. 'Nana'...

"Again with the death talk," I teased and pushed his head back down.

Instead he moved up close to my face. "You get turned on hearing about my nana's bad heart? Wanna hear about grandpa's prostate cancer?"

I tried to play it cool, but ended up laughing so hard with him I started to cough.

"Careful, you might choke to DEATH!"

"Well hurry up and get your mouth on my cock, we can go together," I said, once I'd regained some composure. "Now THAT would be romantic."

I pulled Justin's now naked body on top of mine, making sure our cocks were touching. "Mmmme choking to death on your dick?" he laughed, then shrugged. "Guess there's worse ways to go."

I grabbed his ass and pressed him into me, thrusting upward at the same time. He followed suit and began to move his body up and down. Felt so good to be like this, be this close, feel his skin on mine, hear him moan when I'd moan, hear him sigh my name, almost involuntarily.

"Doesn't anything give you the creeps?" he asked, just as I was losing myself in the sensations.

"Uuuuuuhhhhhhm...nope," I answered honestly and moved my hands to his hips, digging my fingers into that perfect ass of his.

"Some scary movie that freaked you out," he persisted and I wondered what it was that made him get tenacious right when we were gonna have sex.

"I don't recall, Mister Senator..." I sighed, and pressed all my fingers between his cheeks, hoping to distract him.

"Mmmph...Psycho. Texas Chainsaw Massacre? Halloween!"

I shook my head. I was so stoned when I saw all three of those movies that I had no chance of being the slightest bit freaked out. Pot sometimes had an annoying way of making things MORE clearly instead of deadening anything. I tried bringing his lips to mine, but he got another idea. "Or, wait! Oh! What about that one with the disembodied hand that played piano? What was that again?"

"You mean Thing from the Addams Family? Oh yeah that was real scary."

"No-no, it was a movie. Well, I guess they got the idea from that...but, there was a scene where it crawled up this girls back-God, it was so spooky."

I smiled, swallowing a laugh for fear of getting into trouble again. I walked my fingers up his back. "Like this?"

"No, more like this," he said and drummed his fingers up my chest and onto my shoulders.

"Oh yeah, spooky." I grabbed his hands and laced my fingers in his, reaching up to lick his pouting bottom lip.

"Clowns!" he exclaimed, interrupting yet another kiss. "You cannot tell me that clowns don't freak you out, everyone's scared of clowns."

"Not any scarier than drag queens."

He twisted his mouth. "Good point. Well, there's gotta be something. I'm gonna find it, and scare the bejesus out of you."

"Right," I laughed. "Good luck. Hope you find it."

I kissed his neck and he sucked at mine. Our hips settled into a rhythm, rubbing our cocks into each other, getting faster and faster, and feeling the moisture build up on our bodies, Justin's body sliding more easily up and down my chest, his nipples scraping my skin, mine scraping his, his panting breath blowing into my hair, hearing his little grunts, watching his back arch when I pressed my fingers into the cleft in his ass, his hair growing damp on the ends, flopping all over, and then just pushing and rubbing and pressing and...

"Ooh, I know!"

I opened my eyes again and let out the breath I was holding. "What!?"

Then the little fucker reached down between us and grabbed my dick and I didn't have time to hold my breath again to keep from letting out a whimper. "Immm....po....tennnce..."

Oh fucking hell. "Not afraid of that," I grunted out, "S'not gonna happen."

"Well, maybe you should be," he said, stroking me idly, "You are starting to get into the danger zone."

"Danger zone...? What the fuck ever." I couldn't believe he was even thinking that would ever afflict me.

"They say that once you hit thirty-five it's inevitable."

I sighed. "Well that may be true for the average male," I thrust into his hand and kissed him, "but I think you would agree...I'm far above average."

"It happened to Frank Sinatra."

Whose idea was it to bring him on this trip? "Didn't realize that you and the chairman were such good buds."

"I was reading about it in this biography of Marilyn Monroe."

"Jesus, if we weren't already certain you were a fag..."

"I had to read it for school!"

"Marilyn Monroe."

"Cultural Studies. She's an icon," he explained, as though I couldn't have made the connection on my own.

"So your teacher was a fag."

"Obviously. My point is: even Frank couldn't get it up. So, if it could happen to him..."

"It *isn't* going to happen to me."

"I'm sure that's what Frank said." He let go of my cock and braced himself so that he could grind against me again.

"Yeah, well he was a putz," I told him and met his thrusts. "A seh...second rate actor," I grunted, "and nnnnnnot that great a singer."

"He fucked like, ten zillion girls though," he laughed and humped me harder. "Ughhhhand probably Sammy Davis, Junior. S'just the ravages of age... your body starts to betray you."

My orgasm was building fast this time and I could hardly process what he was talking about anymore. "Ughhhfffffuck...yy-youuuu..."

"We'll see if you can in ten years..." is the last thing he said before I couldn't take it anymore. I flipped him over and drove my dick into him so hard he ended up with bruises on his hips. I kissed him hard, gnashing my teeth into his lips. And I think I was growling, but it was hard to hear even myself at that point.

I know we both screamed like we were being murdered when we came, but I don't recall falling asleep.

Truck Fuck



I woke up at dawn, confused and stiff-necked and not entirely sure where the hell I was. I'd never woken up in the middle of the woods before. I felt like I'd fallen out of the back of a truck, rolled down a rocky hill, and slept in a pile of dirt. Not a happy camper, I guess.

Brian was still wrapped around me in the sleeping bag, though, snoring softly into my hair and drooling onto my cheek, and that made everything seem a little less alien.

The fire had burnt down to a few crackling embers, and memories from last night started coming back to me as I watched it die. I felt even dumber, in the light of day. Everything seemed so unthreatening- birds chirping, sun shining, pretty trees and squirrels. Why had I been so terrified of this place?

Fucking Brian. Thinks he's so goddamn funny sometimes.

I was starting to sympathize with Michael for the first time. Growing up with Brian must've been fucking nightmare. I'm sure he was even worse as a teenager.

I really was filthy as hell, so I wriggled my way out of the sleeping bag and out of Brian's grasp, and got some stuff together to head down to the little stream we'd passed coming up here yesterday. Brian rolled onto his stomach and started snoring louder, and I figured it'd be better to just let him sleep. He's a cranky bastard if you wake him up before he's ready.

So, let's get something clear here. I did not go down to the stupid stream with any malicious intent. I just wanted to brush my goddamn teeth and wash my goddamn face. Just for the record.

The stream turned out to be really pretty in the morning- much prettier than I remembered- and luckily I'd brought my sketchbook, so once I'd cleaned up I decided to sit and draw for a little while.

It was just like Brian had promised. Inspiration. I've never been particularly inspired by nature before, unless you count naked men as nature, so it was a pretty exciting moment of revelation for me. My hand just started going, and it felt like some magic force was working through me. That sounds retarded... but, let's just say I was finally starting to get why Monet felt compelled to make, like, sixty paintings of the same freaking flower. Anyway, I guess I lost track of time, sitting there. I don't know how long I was drawing, but I suppose it doesn't really matter. I didn't truly fuck up until I was done. Until I heard Brian calling for me.

Yeah, I heard him, and I can't say that I was too distracted by my art to respond, cause that's total bullshit. The truth is, some stupid, vindictive, childish part of me was still angry about last night and wanted to pay him back. I wanted

to scare him, and when his voice started getting frantic and raw, calling my name, I think I actually smiled. Because I knew his fear, and it wasn't Psycho or Halloween or that stupid movie with the amputated animated hand.

His fear is losing me, and I knew that, and yes, I am a giant prick sometimes. Yes, I really am.

After about five minutes, which is, I'm pretty sure, as long as he'd let me suffer; I started walking towards his voice. He was still at the campsite, and I came up behind him, smiling. Fucking smiling. Until he turned around.

I don't know if I could describe the look on his face in words. I might be able to draw it, but I'm not sure I'd want to. He'd kill me, for one. And for another...really not pleasant. I've never seen such raw fear. I think it made my heart stop for a second. Then it turned to anger- the difference in expression was subtle, but unmistakable- as soon as he registered that I was standing there in front of him, probably with a stupid smirk plastered onto my lips.

"Where the fuck have you been? Did you hear me calling you?" His voice was terrifyingly harsh and cold. I had no idea what to say to explain myself.

I knew what Brian would do, if he were me. He would laugh, and tease, and blow it off as nothing, and then he would hug me until I got over it. But I'm not Brian, and he doesn't react well to his own tactics anyway.

Someday I will learn not to start jokes I can't finish.

"I-I was at the stream. I was...I-I had to pee and stuff," I stammered.

He turned his back to me and started shoving things into his backpack.

"Pack up your shit," he said. "We're getting out of here."

I packed my bag quickly and quietly, but when I was done he was already stalking away from me, about ten huge paces ahead. I ran to catch up with him, and found him muttering under his breath.

"Think you're so fucking cute..." And normally I would've agreed, but I wasn't feeling particularly cute at that moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. Lame, but sincere.

"Yeah. I'm sure."

"No, really, I am!"

He didn't say anything, and I didn't know what else to say, so we made our way silently back to the car.

"I really am sorry," I tried again when we got there.

"Just forget it and get in the car," he said, and tossed the keys at me. "You're driving today."

Then he proceeded to climb into the passenger seat, curl onto his side, and fall right back to sleep.

I wasn't entirely sure where I was supposed to drive *to*, but I did my best. Dug through his maps, and followed the paths he'd drawn as closely as possible, and tried not to make any noises or sudden movements.

It wasn't easy. I guess he wanted to take the scenic route, cause he had us driving all over the place- down twisting, tangled rural roads, and nowhere near the interstate. It was totally confusing, and I was tempted to find my way back to I-80, but I figured he might actually wake up at some point and be disappointed if we were on the highway.

Unfortunately, he slept, or pretended to sleep, for almost the entire day. He didn't open his eyes until I pulled into a desolate, sketchy looking diner, with a jerk of the steering wheel and a slam on the brakes.

"Jesus fuck, what're you doing to my car?" he grumbled, rubbing his face. And then, "Where the fuck are we?"

I told him we were at the Route 71 Greet and Eat, and that I was starving, and he gave me an utterly disgusted look. I think he was considering arguing about it, but then seemed to decide it wasn't worth the effort of talking to me at all and stumbled out of the car, slamming the door behind him.

"Whaddya know," he muttered to himself as we were walking in. "Looks nothing like the Liberty Diner."

"Isn't that the point?" I asked. He just scowled.

When we sat down, he picked up his menu and stared at it blankly for so long that I started to wonder if he'd slept too long and wound up with some kind of brain damage. Eventually he turned it around and ran his finger over what it said, like he was a teacher and I was his Special Ed case.

"Toledo?" he asked. "What the fuck are we doing in Toledo?"

I was kind of wondering that myself, actually, but it was his fucking route.

"Isn't that where we're supposed to be?" I asked, even though I knew it was. He was just looking for something else to be irritated about, it seemed.

But then he dropped the menu, and rubbed his face, and looked genuinely disoriented for a minute. Sometimes he's disoriented when he wakes up from a long sleep, and it makes him angry- not to be on top of things- so he acts like kind of a jackass for awhile. I thought maybe that was all this was. Maybe he wasn't mad at me anymore.

"What the hell time is it?" he asked.

I told him it was dinner time- seven-thirty- and that seemed to send him over the edge of despair for some reason. He groaned like I'd kicked him in the gut, and slid out of the booth.

"Gotta piss," he said. "Order me a Reuben."

And then he was gone. For like, a million years. Once I didn't have him to distract me, I started noticing lots of unpleasant things about my surroundings. The place stank like grease and burning meat, and the coffee tasted like dirty pennies. Everything looked like it had a thin layer of filth over it, including the patrons, some of who were openly staring at me in a very unfriendly fashion. Even the waitress gave me weird looks when I ordered our food, and I wondered if we were the first strangers these people had seen since the traveling freak show came through town or something. I felt really uncomfortable, and wished I'd brought in my sketchbook so I had something to do with my hands. Something to look at besides the enormous, scary waitress and the mean, ugly customers.

I decided to look at my bright red placemat instead, which was fairly boring until I spilled some sugar on it accidentally. I added some pepper and mustard, and suddenly it was a canvas. I drew the waitress with my finger. She had this crazy salt and pepper colored 'fro, so it actually worked out pretty cool, and it entertained me until Brian came back from the longest piss break in history.

He had a newspaper with him, and when he sat back down he held it up between us, blocking my view of him.

I was starting to wonder if this whole trip was a really huge mistake. Maybe we were one of those couples that don't travel well together. Or maybe Brian just didn't travel well at all. Maybe he was a giant baby who'd never forgive me for making a joke of his one weakness. It was getting really annoying, whatever it was.

"Look, it's the waitress," I whispered to him, and turned the placemat towards him. It really did look like her, in a cartoony, abstract sort of way.

"What?"

"I drew her with condiments, see? It's folk art."

He turned down one corner of the newspaper with his finger and peered at the mat, then back up at me. I could see the corners of his mouth twitching upwards, forcing a smile against his will, and I smiled back. Then the paper snapped back up to cover his face, and he cleared his throat. I sighed and slumped against my seat, dejected.

"Are you gonna ignore me for the rest of the trip, or just the rest of the night?" I finally asked him. 'Cause if it was gonna be the rest of the trip, I was seriously ready to go home.

He didn't answer me or put down the goddamn paper, but eventually I felt his toe of his boot tapping against the side of my sneaker under the table. It was one of those weird, purely Brianesque gestures of affection, and it was enough to set my mind at ease a little bit.

"There's a really interesting story in here," he said. "About a jogger who found a dead body in the woods."

I kicked his shin and laughed, and he put down the paper and gave me a quirky half-smile. He grabbed my foot between both of his, and soon we were playing an elaborate game of footsie under the table, and grinning at each other like total dorks. By the time the waitress brought us our vaguely food-like substances, I felt like we were us again.

"Where do you think we'll stay tonight?" I asked, hoping he wasn't planning another woodland adventure, but almost equally fearful of our other options. I hadn't seen a remotely inhabitable hotel since we'd left Pennsylvania.

"Dunno," he shrugged. "Why don't you pick a place."

"Well, all the places we've passed today have looked pretty sketchy. Maybe we should just go to a truck stop."

"A truck stop." He raised one eyebrow at me, and I wasn't sure if he thought I was serious or not. He looked more intrigued than horrified, which was surprising.

"Yeah, don't they have places where the truckers sleep?"

"S'this some wild fantasy of yours I've never heard about?" he asked, running his foot up the inside of my calf.

"I saw it in a movie," I told him. "Truck Fuck."

That finally got a laugh out of him, which was a huge relief after the Day of Crankypants, and I smiled back at him.

"Truck Fuck it is," he said, snatching a french fry off my plate.

"I was kidding!" I said quickly. "Those places are disgusting! And real truckers don't look anything like the ones in the movie."

He glanced around the diner, seeming to take in our surroundings for the first time, and muttered, "That's for damn fucking sure."

I leaned across the table and whispered, "They're kinda scary, actually," and he reached over and ruffled my hair.

"Aw, are the big ugly men frightening you, Sunshine?" he asked, louder than he probably should have. "Maybe we oughtta frighten them back, hmm?"

"I think we already are."

"Well then, let's go all the fucking way."

He grabbed onto the back of my head, and I'm a little ashamed to say that I almost pulled away. It was stupid, I know, after everything we'd just gone through back home, after everything I'd been through my whole life trying to stand up for myself and my right to kiss whoever the fuck I want, wherever the fuck I want, but shit, those people were scary. This felt like the kind of situation that could lead very easily into a lynching.

But, as usual, horniness won out over self-preservation. I really wanted to be kissed.

I leaned into it, expecting a little peck, but as soon as our lips touched he started moaning, sliding his tongue into my mouth. He wasn't kidding when he said all the fucking way, and after a minute or two I stopped caring if people were staring. After a minute or three, I forgot there were people at all. There was just me and Brian, and that nearly hysterical, giddy feeling that bubbles up in my throat sometimes when he's kissing me. That frantic need for more.

Brian's kisses aren't like other people's kisses. Not like anyone I've ever kissed, anyway. They're not just a random mashing of lips and tongues and teeth, used simply as a precursor to sex. They're not perfunctory or mechanical or meaningless. They say things. They talk to me, in ways that he can't, and that's why I want them all to myself. This kiss was telling me that he was proud to be here with me, even if everyone in the place thought we were disgusting perverts.

When he finally pulled back, we were both panting and flushed, and he was giving me that desperate to fuck look, and I probably would've done it right there on the table if he'd asked me to. But he didn't. He just pulled a twenty out of his wallet, slapped it on the table, and said, "It's time to go."

I grabbed a handful of fries on the way out, and didn't look back.

When we got outside, he grabbed my shoulders and shoved me against the side of the car. My sneakers slid in the gravel, and I probably would've fallen if he hadn't been holding onto me so hard. He kissed me again, and it was a different kind of kiss- harder and wetter. This kiss was telling me that he needed his cock to be inside some part of my body. Right away. We were both totally hard, and when he started thrusting against me I felt almost dizzy from wanting him. From excitement. From the knowledge that he was gonna fuck me right here in the parking lot, and it was gonna be rough and hot, and all the fucking hicks in the diner were probably still peering out the window at us.

Then he stopped. Pulled completely away and groaned, and for a minute I thought maybe he'd come in his pants by accident. That would've been really cool.

"S'matter?" I asked.

"Fucking cops," he grunted, and sure enough there was a patrol car pulling into the parking lot. For a second I was scared someone in the diner had called them to arrest us for indecency or something, but they walked right by us and headed inside. Just hungry, I guess.

Brian walked around to the driver's side, and we both got into the car, but he didn't turn it on. Just sat there staring at me in the semi-darkness, breathing heavy.

"We should probably go," I said.

"Uh huh."

"Uh huh."

We had a staring contest for a few more seconds, and then simultaneously lunged at each other. He started biting at my lips, sucking at my tongue, and I reached down for his cock. Fuck the cops, I thought. Fuck the cops and fuck the hicks and fuck the whole stupid world. I just wanted him.

"S'kinda risky," he said, through clenched teeth, as I unbuttoned his jeans.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

I dropped my head into his lap, licked him up and down, and he made the most amazing gaspy, whimpery sound. Brian makes the best noises. I think about his noises more than anything, when I'm jerking off.

He grabbed onto a hunk of my hair, and I wrapped my lips around him and slid down, taking him all the way in. His hips bucked off the seat, and he laughed through a grunt, told me they were all watching us through the window. I don't know if he was telling the truth, but it made me fucking hot.

I started really going at it, the way that makes him craziest, and I thought I might come just from listening to him, feeling his fingers in my hair. But I wanted more.

"Mms'my boy," he groaned, looking down appreciatively as I unbuttoned my jeans and started stroking myself. I knew he had to be particularly pleased- he only calls me his boy when he's really fucking excited, and nearly out of his head. "Jus' don' come on theeeoughh...leather."

I didn't really know where else he expected me to do it since the whole fucking interior of the car is leather, so I aimed for his leg when I felt it starting. Which was like, almost immediately.

"Fuck...shit...what're you...ugh," he sputtered out, and I giggled in my throat around his cock. That was enough to set him off, and he shot into my mouth with two sharp cries.

"On my black fucking jeans," he complained, after I'd let him taste himself on my tongue for a while.

"At least it's not the leather," I said, and he laughed and pulled my head to his shoulder. He was panting still, and covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and making no effort to really do anything about the rapidly crusting stain on his thigh. "And now you have something to remember me by. So no matter who you're with, I'll always be there."

The look he gave me was utterly unreadable, but the fact that he gave me a look at all told me that he remembered, and was glad that I did too. Brian loves to be quoted.

"Until I wash my pants..." he said, and kissed the top of my head. "Now let's get the fuck out of here before we wind up tied to the back of somebody's Ford pickup."

Chicago



It took us three days to get from Pittsburgh to Chicago. Looking at the map, I'm not sure how that's even possible, but somehow we managed to stretch a six or seven hour drive into a seventy-eight hour wilderness odyssey. By the time we got there, I was really really glad to be back in a city. Big buildings, lots of people, traffic, noise- it felt like home, but better. There was so much I wanted to do, I thought we could stay for weeks and I'd never get bored. But then I saw the hotel room Brian had booked for us, and wondered if we'd even be able to stay the night.

A fucking suite. At the goddamn Four Seasons. It was huge. It was ridiculous. I didn't know what to say, seeing him standing in the middle of that with his arms wide open, like he thought I should be impressed. I was afraid I might have a brain hemorrhage if I tried to figure out how much it had to be costing him. I didn't even want to put down my bag. It felt like somebody else's room.

"Um...can we afford this?" I asked him, knowing the answer, but hoping maybe he had another "surprise" for me. Like winning the lottery.

It was the first of many times I'd be asking that question, and he gave me his first annoying, evasive answer as he flopped onto the enormous bed.

"The only WE here is me and my one remaining credit card," he said, fishing around in his jeans pocket for a joint. "And we do whatever we want. Whatever feels good. And this feels fucking great."

I didn't know how to respond to that without sounding like a horrible, nagging wife, so I didn't say anything. He stretched out on the mattress, and lit up his joint, and I sat in one of the fluffy, ridiculously expensive sofas (the room had fucking *sofas*) and started digging through my backpack for the travel guide.

"C'mere," he said eventually, patting his belly. "Take those stinky clothes off and join me."

"I was gonna look around," I told him.

"Around?" He was bewildered- stripped down to his underwear by then, and probably unable to conceive of someone wanting to look at anything else. I was having trouble remembering why I wanted to, honestly.

"There's lots of museums and stuff right near here," I said.

"So? They'll still be there in an hour. Or two..."

"But they'll be closed."

"So, go tomorrow," he suggested.

"Tomorrow...How long are we gonna stay here, anyway?" I was truly afraid of the answer. If he was thinking any more than two days, I was gonna have to stage some sort of intervention. Take away his credit card. Something.

"Depends," he said.

"On what?"

"On how long it takes us to get through every gay bar in Chicago."

I wasn't sure what he meant by "through", but my mind was immediately filled with images of random men fucking all over our hotel room, and me spending lots and lots of time at museums.

When I looked at him again, his hand was inside his briefs, moving slowly, and he was staring at me intently. I realized then that it might be the last time I'd have him all to myself for awhile, and that maybe I shouldn't let it go to waste. I couldn't really resist him like that anyway, the bastard. It's so unfair. He's just too fucking beautiful for his own good. For my own good. He could tempt me away from anything with those hands, and that mouth. That cock.

Sometimes it makes me feel so weak, even a little pathetic, but then I remember that I've got the same power over him, in a way. He's just a little less obvious about it.

I put the travel book to the side, and climbed onto the bed. Straddled his hips and pulled off my shirt. Kissed him. And kissed him some more.

"See, now isn't this better?" he asked as he was working on getting my jeans open. "Won't get this at any museum."

"Mmm...I dunno about that. I fucked a guy at a museum once."

"Really?" He raised an eyebrow and pulled my dick out. "Really..."

"Always lots of pretty queers to be found at the museum," I said, then gasped and dropped my head when he started stroking me. He ran his tongue over my upper lip, and I pushed into his hand needily.

"But none of them would be as satisfying as me." He grabbed both of my wrists, hard and sudden, and pushed me onto my back. Ground himself down between my legs, and licked up my neck. Whispered in my ear, "Now would they?"

"I...yes...n-no. Fuck." I was getting confused. Dizzy. Couldn't really breathe, let alone have a conversation anymore, so I just shook my head.

He got my jeans off quick, and got inside me even quicker, and I forgot about everything- the hotel and the money and the museum and the bars. None of it mattered with Brian inside me.

"Still the best, huh?" he grunted. I made some loud, keening noise in response, and nodded enthusiastically. It was true, obviously. No one's better.

He fucked me hard and slow, with a deeply serious expression. With eyes blazing, watching me. I reached above my head to grab onto whatever I could reach, to give myself enough leverage to push back against him, and when I came it was with a yell and a very loud snapping sound. After the spasms had passed, I realized I was holding a piece of the headboard in my fist.

"Holy shit," I said, laughing. "I think I broke the hotel."

Brian was panting and sweaty, collapsed on top of me. I poked his shoulder with the hunk of wood, then let it fall to the carpet.

Once he caught his breath, he laughed a little, too.

"Looks like your supercock gave me superstrength," I told him.

"Sounds like something for your comic," he murmured against my neck.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him against me for awhile, enjoying the feel of his weight on me, his cock still in me, his breath evening out in time with mine. Sometimes I think that's how I wanna die. It's when I feel the safest- the most content.

But then I glanced at the clock and noticed it was still fairly early. We hadn't taken very long at all.

"I should probably go," I said, and he groaned in protest.

"What do you wanna go to a stanky old museum for, anyway?"

"Uh, I dunno... for the art? They have one of the best collections in the country!"

He groaned again and rolled off me. I was covered in all kinds of fluids, but didn't really have time for a shower so I just grabbed a towel from the bathroom and wiped myself down, then started getting dressed. Brian watched me from the bed with a bemused smirk.

"You wanna come with me?" I asked him.

"Mmno, I think I'm gonna go check out the man collection on Clark Street. I hear it's one of the best in the country."

"Well then, how 'bout I meet you later? Nine-ish?"

"Sure you don't wanna come with *me*?"

It was becoming clear that he did not want me to go to the freaking museum for some reason, but I couldn't figure out why, and I didn't really have time to talk about it anymore.

"I'll come with you. Later," I said, and leaned over the bed to kiss him good-bye. We agreed on a place to meet, and I left in a hurry.

I only had an hour at the museum, and I got at least one weird look- most likely because of my very strong odor- but it was totally worth it. So much better than any of the second rate places in Pittsburgh. I almost hoped we would wind up staying a few days so I could go back and linger. Maybe I could talk Brian into moving to a cheaper room at some point.

They locked the doors at eight, and I think I was the last person out of the place, which made me feel vaguely guilty for some reason. I hate being the last one to leave. But everyone was very nice, and I bought a poster.

I went back to the hotel for a much needed shower before going to meet Brian, and got to the club at, I think, something like 9:15. But apparently, Brian was experiencing a time warp.

"It's almost ten-thirty," he said when I found him at the bar. "And I almost got laid."

"It's not even nine-thirty," I told him. "And why almost?"

He grabbed me by the waist and kissed me hard. His face was sweaty, and there were little bits of confetti stuck to his shoulders. He'd been dancing already, and I couldn't help wondering who with. Fucking was one thing, but dancing...sometimes that was something else.

"You distracted me," he said, and kissed me again. Softer this time, but hungry. Like I was a good bag of candy. If he ever actually ate candy.

"Distracted you with my lateness?" I asked. "Or with my sexiness when I finally arrived, fashionably pretty much on time."

He laughed and brushed his nose against my cheek.

"How was the museum?"

"It was great! I got a poster."

He gave me a weird smile, and sat down in one of the barstools. Pulled me between his legs and squeezed my ass.

"Neat," he said. "But how were the...exhibits?"

"They had an amazing Mapplethorpe retrospective. And, like, the biggest Post-Impressionist collection I've ever seen. It was so cool."

"And...?"

He was still giving me that look, and I really had no idea what he was getting at.

"And...what?"

His eyebrows shot up, and he leaned in to sniff my neck, and I finally caught the clue train. Dumbass actually thought I'd ditched him to go get some hot museum action or something.

"I was there for the ART, you perv," I said, shoving him away playfully. "Not everyone has to make random sexual encounters a part of every life experience."

"Well, that's too bad for them, isn't it."

We kissed again, and he bought me something big, tasty and blue to drink, and eventually we wound up on the dance floor. It was really a lot like Babylon. Same kind of music, same kind of guys, even the layout was essentially the same, and I wondered if they'd all be like this, everywhere we went. I couldn't decide if the sameness was comforting or irritating.

After three or four of the blue drinks I settled on comforting, and also sort of irrelevant. The important thing was that Brian's arms were around my neck, and Brian's cock was hard and sliding against my body in time with the music, and soon enough Brian would be fucking me again. Sometimes it seems like that's the only reason we go anywhere—every outing turns into foreplay, sooner or later, and that's probably a good thing. I don't know if we'd ever leave the loft, otherwise.

But then, just as I was getting ready to suggest we find the back room equivalent, we were approached and molested, respectively, by two of the hottest guys in the place. A tag-team. Just like us. Except, not. Cause I left.

It was all right. He'd have fun with them, and come back to me even hornier than before. I told him I was going to the pizza place next door, to come and get me when he was done, and kissed him good-bye. I could feel his eyes on my back as I walked out of the place, and hoped this wouldn't turn into a whole big issue.

I dunno what the big deal is about Chicago style pizza, cause the one I had was pretty gross, but the place was cool enough. Full of freaks and fags and crusty old drag queens singing karaoke. It was fun. Then Brian showed up.

He slid into the booth across from me, looking irritated and confused and not nearly as horny as I'd expected.

"That was quick," I said. I'd only been gone for about twenty minutes.

"Why'd you turn it down?"

"I was hungry." I held up the slice I was working on for emphasis. He pulled it out of my hand and took a bite.

"So was tank top boy," he said, when he was done chewing. "And you made the poor guy go away starving."

"I figured you could handle them both."

He raised an eyebrow, lit a cigarette, took two drags, put it out. I begged him silently to let it go. We so did not need to have this conversation. But of course, the one time I **don't** want to talk...

"What's the deal with you anyway?" he asked. "We used to have so much fun together."

"You're not having fun?"

"I mean with other boys..."

And there it was. I knew this would happen eventually. I'd just been hoping it would be, I don't know, in ten or twenty years maybe.

I sighed and picked at my food, looking anywhere but into his eyes. Tried to think of a way to explain, in words that he could understand. In words that wouldn't piss him off, or bring up terrible memories, or ruin things forever.

"I guess...I've sort of decided that- that I don't really want to be with...other boys." I stared down at the table, started pulling my crust to bits, and prayed he'd just leave it alone now. No such luck.

"What the fuck ever," he said. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means exactly what I said. I haven't been with anyone else since we got back together, and I haven't wanted to, so...that's all it means."

I took a cautious glance at him, and almost laughed at his expression. It was so comical. Rage dumbfounded, his mouth gaping wide enough for bugs to fly in. I couldn't remember ever seeing him look so completely mystified.

"Is that gonna be a problem for you?" I asked.

"Uh, it's not a problem for me, but I would think it'd be one for you."

"Well if it was, I wouldn't be doing it."

"It's hardly fair," he said. "And besides, we're not some married fag couple. You don't have to..."

"It's not about that," I interrupted him. "I just don't want to."

He kept staring at me, waiting for more of an explanation, but how could I tell him the whole truth? That I wasn't him, never could be, and that when I'd tried it had only led to disaster. That I always fucked it up, and broke the rules, and wound up hurting him because I just don't have it in me to do what he does. That when I looked at that part of his life now, sometimes it made me feel sick- not jealous, or even turned on like I sometimes used to be, just queasy and sort of sad for him. That I still hoped he might stop someday, but not for me. For him.

"Look, it-it's not as easy for me," I said, finally.

"What's not?"

"To just...fuck random people with no feeling."

"Well, aren't you a fucking saint," he snorted.

"No, that's not...I just don't enjoy it that much. It isn't fun for me. In fact, it's kind of depressing, and isn't fucking supposed to be fun? I mean, isn't that your whole....thing, or whatever?"

"Well, yeah, but...you didn't have fun?"

He looked sort of hurt, and I knew he was thinking of the good old days, wondering if I'd been going along just to please him. Which I guess I had, a little bit, but I was also a really horny kid who wanted to get laid.

"I had fun sometimes," I told him, and it was true. "I just have more fun when it's just us."

He sat there silently for what seemed like hours, and I picked another slice of pizza apart. One of the drag queens got on stage and started singing Xanadu.

"I didn't wanna tell you," I said, eventually. "I knew you'd be weird."

"I'm not weird."

"You look weird."

"I'm not, I'm just...thinking about our day tomorrow. We should probably get an early start. See all the sights."

"You wanna see sights?"

"Isn't that why we're here?"

I distinctly remembered reading from the travel guide when we were in the car, and hearing a variety of derogatory comments as I listed the tourist attractions to him, culminating in "Fuck the aquarium, we're gonna get laid," but hey, I wasn't about to complain.

"S'only midnight," he said, and I felt his legs intertwining with mine under the table. "We could go back now, get our beauty sleep, and be ready to hit the big ball of twine first thing in the morning."

"The big ball of twine is in Kansas."

"Whatever. Let's go."

He took my hand and led me back to the hotel and wound up fucking me till three o'clock in the morning, which sort of defeated the whole purpose of leaving early, but again, not complaining.

"Fuck me!"

It sounded like a great idea; just not at whatever ungodly hour it was at the moment. I pulled the pillow over my head to block out his voice.

"Brian, are you awake? Look at this!"

I groaned and forced the pillow more tightly to my ears. I wasn't really ready to do the opening of the eyes portion of waking up. Or the getting out of bed. Or the forming of coherent thoughts.

"Brian, don't you want to know that we almost died last night?"

I thought that's what he asked, at any rate. Then he was quiet, thankfully, and I felt myself drifting back to sleep. That was until I felt a nice soft, warm hand wrapped around my cock. I moaned and moved the pillow away from my face. This was definitely a nicer way to wake up.

He jerked me nice and slow and before I knew it I was planting my feet on the bed to raise my hips. He started to go faster and I was definitely more than awake at that point. I opened my eyes finally and smiled when they'd focused on his face.

Then the little twat fucking stopped.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I grunted through my panting.

His smile disappeared and he whipped the goddamn newspaper into my lap. "Trying to get your fucking attention," he scowled, pointing at a story on the front page.

"Whaddya know, Kate Hepburn died. Maybe we should call Emmett and see how he's doing." I grabbed his hand and tried to pull it back to my aching dick.

"No! Brian-"

He poked at the paper, pointing directly at the story I knew he'd been referring to in the first place. Seems about an hour and a half after we'd left the bar last night, some lunatic bombed the place. It was certainly a coincidence, but only three people were killed out of the at least four hundred drunken fags that were there that night.

"THREE people died, Brian!" he shrieked. "That could've been us."

When I looked up at him and saw the illogical fear in his face, I groaned. "This was almost two fucking hours after we left, it doesn't mean we avoided certain death. Now stop with the melodrama already and finish what you started."

He gave me a nasty look and ripped the paper out of my hands. "Finish it yourself," he grumbled and plopped down in a chair with his back to me.

Here we go again, I thought, and dragged my ass to the shower. I never know what he's expecting me to do or say. He expects me to have a reaction, some emotion or feeling that I just don't have in me and then gets pissed when I don't. Like I'm supposed to think about how Justin would want me respond and then make damn sure that I give that to him. Fuck that shit, he ought to know better by now.

I watched the load I yanked out myself -no thanks to Justin - wash down the drain. Little fucker. But after I stood there awhile, leaning my head into the wall and letting the water beat down my back, I couldn't help but appreciate his tactic. I started to wonder if why he was so upset had little to do with the fact that we'd been in that bar and more about what had happened to him. The fact that he'd gotten whacked in the head with a fucking bat just because some insecure twat couldn't deal with the fact that fags exist, and God forbid, what if he was one too. Better to kill them all off than to ask the hard questions.

"So, what's on the agenda for today, Mister Taylor?" I asked him as I walked back into the room. He was still in that chair, in the same position. I saw him pinch the bridge of his nose between his fingers and I looked away quick. I did not even want know if he'd been crying all this time. I walked over to the closet and pulled out something to wear.

He must have shrugged because I didn't hear anything.

"Well, you're welcome to sit in this room all goddamn day," I said, pulling my blue sleeveless shirt over my head, "but I thought I'd wander around the city. Maybe take in a museum, get some lunch, shop for clothing we can't afford..."

"I know what you're trying to do, asshole, and it's not going to work."

"Oh, he has a voice," I teased. "And the only thing I'm trying to do is offer to take you somewhere I thought you'd like to go. Now get your skanky ass in the shower and get ready. We're going to the aquarium."

He turned around finally. Dammit all, his fucking eyes were red. I was afraid I was going to see more pissiness, but, thank God, he was smiling a little. He hopped out of the chair and bounded into the bathroom.

So we checked out the Shedd Aquarium and we looked at some fish. It really was cool, but I know he was way more into it than I was, and that was just fine because I love to watch him just watch things. His eyes are wide open and aware, and it seems as though he looks at everything with constant wonder and total amazement. Actually, I guess it's a lot like the way Gus watches the world: everything a new stimulus, something new to view, to study, to swallow up and make it a part of him. For Justin it has everything to do with his being an artist. I am certain he sees the world through different eyes, in ways that I won't ever see it. In the same way that I'll never see things the way a colorblind person does, or the way a dog's eyes see. We're just genetically different.

"Now THERE's a fine specimen of nature," I said, snaking my arm around his waist and pressing my cheek into his, guiding his gaze to what had caught my attention in the tank where we were looking.

"We came here to observe the aquatics, you know," he giggled turned his head to kiss me, "not the staff..."

His avowal from last night was still really fresh in my memory. I think I even recreated the conversation in my dreams the night before, perhaps in a vain attempt to handle what he said with more finesse than I had actually displayed. I'm not really sure why it should have surprised me that he'd feel that way. I knew from the moment on the street in front of my building when I sent him away with my make orgasms, not love speech that's exactly what he was after. The happily ever after. With one person, just like the hetero's. I tried to tell him it didn't exist in our world. I don't think he ever really believed me. And now he was changing the rules again. I really didn't know what to make of it.

What I did know was that he needed to realize that even though he'd made this grand decision for himself, it wasn't going to magically make me change my own life. I'd meet him half way - I cared about him enough to give him at least that - but he had to know that my ways were still my ways.

"Well yes, he may just be an obviously well chiseled male form in an extremely fitting wetsuit, but he is "swimming", is he not?" I asked.

He shook his head, then took my face in both of his hands and kissed me a long time. We were cut off by a woman clearing her throat; a veiled request for us to stop, I guess. I looked up to a very homely and dried out middle-aged woman giving me her best look of disgust. Or maybe that's how she always looked. Justin turned and looked at her too, at which moment she huffed, shaking her head.

Justin turned back and rolled his eyes. "Sorry," he apologized sarcastically to the bitch, who had already walked off, presumably to go heave into that enormous ugly Wal-Mart purse she had slung over her neck like a yoke.

"Well, you have to cut her a little slack, being around all of these microcosms of "nature", we're bound to look especially unnatural." I leaned in for another kiss.

He interrupted it, pulling his head back and replacing his smile with an odd look. "You don't...really mean that, do you?"

It had been an off-handed remark, really, but I was finding it difficult at that moment to come up with a decent explanation for making it, one that would make him shut up. He reached for my face and I pulled away from it, letting him go from my embrace. I held his hand as a compromise and dragged him to another exhibit, hoping it would distract him from the fact that I didn't want to look into his face at that particular moment.

"Brian..."

"Yyyyes..." I stared into one of the tanks intently, but I couldn't for the life of me say what the hell was even in it.

"You don't really think that we're...freaks...do you?"

I could feel his gaze boring into my temple and I shifted my face the slightest bit further away, still not answering. It wasn't something I tried to think about often, and if that feeling did creep up, I'd press it right back down. And go get laid.

"'Cause we're not, you know. It's not unnatural, at all. I mean...there are instances of gay behavior all over the animal kingdom."

Apparently now I had incited an impromptu biology lesson. "I know. I've been in the back room of Babylon, in case you forgot." I moved on to the next exhibit.

"I mean," he said with exasperation, "animals, besides 'homos.' There are documented cases of same sex relations between like, seagulls and mountain goats, and sea lions."

"Oh my!" I scoffed. "Is that the kind of thing I was paying for you to learn at that school?"

He laughed and clutched on to my bicep with his other hand. "Anyway, I'm just saying that we're just as natural as anything or anyone else in this world."

I wondered if he had any idea how loaded that statement was. "Well, right now, my natural instincts are telling me I'm fucking starving," I said, carefully avoiding anymore iconoclastic discussion.

We wandered around Grant Park for a while. Justin took pictures with the digital camera and I pointed out hot guys. I wanted to find a really good place to park before I went back to the car to get the boxed lunches I'd ordered from the hotel. Once I'd spotted it, I told him to sit on a nearby bench.

"Why? Where are you going? I thought you were ravenous."

"Back to the car. Won't take me thirty minutes, so sit here like a nice queen and don't talk to strangers."

"Unless they're hot, right?" He winked.

I only looked at him with a half smile before walking away.

When I returned, I found him entranced, drawing in his sketchbook. I set the stuff on the ground and sat behind him, resting my chin on his shoulder. He was working on an especially sexy likeness of the male form, from the neck down, shirtless and wearing a nicely filled out pair of tight biking shorts. "Like this better than the sick kitties?" he asked, still drawing.

"It's beautiful, except you chopped off his head. Which would be all right if you hadn't drawn him with his shorts on so we could see at least one of them..."

He laughed through his nose. "It's not supposed to be any particular guy, it's just "guy". But it's that guy by the fountain, if you're interested."

I lifted my head and focused in on the male in question. "Excellent subject matter choice, Mister Taylor." He smiled and rested his head back in the crook of my neck. I twisted my head around and pushed my tongue into his mouth. He latched right onto it with his own and I let him stroke it with his awhile. I opened my eyes to see if anyone else was enjoying our kiss as much as us. Unfortunately it seemed no one gave a shit. No one, except for Justin, whose eyes were shut tight and brows pinched in concentration.

He whimpered and pulled away. "Mmmmmyou taste sweet."

"Had the rest of your Toblerone when I went to the car..."

"Brian, you what?" he whined.

"It was melting. It was an act of mercy," I told him and got off the bench. I grabbed the stuff I'd brought from the car and smacked him on the back. "C'mon."

I led him toward the tree I'd picked out and handed him the blanket I'd swiped from the room.

"Is this from the hotel?" he laughed.

"Oh, is it? I must have packed it by mistake." I grabbed one end of it and helped him spread it out.

"Smells like we had sex on it."

"That's not going to be a problem, is it?"

He plopped down onto the blanket and kicked off his shoes. "S'one of my favorite fragrances."

I sat down and started pulling stuff out of my backpack. I know he was staring at me, but I didn't look. I poured him a drink from a bottle of scotch wrapped in a paper bag into a Styrofoam cup. "If you see a cop, dump this the fuck out."

He took the cup and giggled. "Oooh, my boyfriend is such a rebel..."

I smirked and smacked him in the back of the head. "Boyfriend..." I rolled my eyes.

He only smiled at me with his eyes as he sipped his drink. That stupid look that says he think he knows so much more than I do about myself. He's always acted like I'm such a freaking open book to him, and now more than ever before. I've got no fucking place to hide anymore. Somewhere he can't reach me, if even for a couple seconds so I can get my goddamn bearings again. And if I do manage that, he's right around the corner with that fucking look.

But they used to call me the magic man at the agency, so I was determined to find a way to throw him.

I pulled the boxes out of my backpack and set them out in front of us, and used my switchblade to cut the gold strings off them. "Hope you're hungry," I said and leaned in to kiss the small smile he had on his lips, "...still." I kept my forehead pressed to his.

"Mmmm...starved," he replied. "What're we having?"

I opened both our boxes. "Cracked pepper turkey sandwich with apple-cranberry chutney and double cream Brie on pain rustique, fresh bits of mango, and broccoli salad," I announced into his ear. "Is that to your liking, Mister Taylor?"

"It looks fucking fantastic. Is it from the hotel?"

For a minute I thought he was going to give me more shit about the money issue, but after seeing him dig into his sandwich like a starvation victim, I was pretty sure he wasn't nagging. "Ordered it while you were in the shower," I told him and kissed him under the ear before starting on my own food. "Hope you like it."

"I love it," he said with a mouth full, "thank you!" He leaned over and kissed me quick on the corner of my mouth.

I stuffed a couple slices of mango into my mouth and pulled out the iPod I'd set up especially for our road trip, downloading a boatload of music I knew Justin liked, stuff we'd danced to at Babylon, mostly stuff I liked. The five hundred dollar thing was actually something I'd ordered as an incentive gift for a client I'd be courting. I was supposed to have met with them the day after I'd gotten shit canned. Now the fucking thing was mine.

Once I had it playing I looked over at Justin and he was looking at me weird again, peering up from his sandwich with a half smile as he chewed. "Are you waiting for something more? 'Cause this is about all I've got."

"More?" he said, mouth full again.

"Yeah you keep looking at me like you're waiting for something else."

"No, I...", he laughed through his nose and ducked his head.

I know he thinks because of what happened that I don't have the ability, or the slightest inkling about how to be thoughtful. To do things purely because I know Justin would like it. What he didn't understand before was that I did always think of him. Somehow, where ever and when ever the fuck it happened, I don't know, but somehow he became such an integral part of...me...that I found that I couldn't meet my own personal needs without thoughts of him intruding in on the process.

"Did you think that Brian Kinney couldn't do romance?"

He shook his head and set aside his box. "I always knew you could."

I smirked and took a big swig of scotch. "Just not the way you'd want?"

"In ways I wasn't smart enough to recognize."

Oh, so maybe he did know. At least now. I swallowed a smile that threatened to creep up. Then I felt his hand on mine.

He squeezed it. "And sometimes in ways I forgot because of amnesia."

I looked away from his gaze and used my other hand to rub my neck.

"Actually, when you come right down to it, you're probably the most romantic bastard I've ever met."

Oh God, someone shut this kid up. I kept looking toward the lake, trying to pretend I wasn't listening.

"But don't worry," he assured me, not falling for my pretense, "I won't tell anyone." He got up on his knees and took my face with his hands, then kissed me very gently.

Taking the cue, and hoping it would stave off any more of this romance discussion, I took him by the shoulders and pushed him down flat on the blanket, climbing over on top of him for good measure. He was rock hard already and I couldn't help grinding myself into him. He inhaled to say something else but I put my tongue into his open mouth instead. He sucked on it and let the air out through his nose as I continued to move over him.

"Mmmmmmmm...somebody's got a big hard on," I said as I rubbed my nose over his face.

He laughed a little. "Two somebodys," he pointed out and ran his hands down my back and onto my ass.

I rubbed down on him again, even harder, and wished our jeans weren't in the way. He closed his eyes and moaned.

"Are you having a nice time?" I asked, continuing to grind into him. "Or are you ready to go back home to Mama's?"

He groaned and laughed. "I'm having a fucking amazing time," he said through a grunt, opening his eyes as much as he could. "The best. Ughh...ever."

I smiled. "Sure there's nothing else you'd rather be doing?" I kissed the corner of his mouth. "No one else?" I kissed the other corner and rubbed the tip of my nose on his. "No place else?"

I'm not quite sure why I was compelled to ask him these stupid assed questions. Maybe I just wanted to make sure he was really serious last night. Maybe I wanted to give him a chance to back out of his statements.

But he grabbed onto the sides of my face and looked into my eyes. "There's no one in the world I want more than you," he said, with as much seriousness as he had last night, "there never has been."

I gave him a half a smile and called him a sucker. He smiled back knowing full well I didn't really mean it, and I leaned in and kissed him slowly. For a long time.

He moaned and ran his hands all through my hair, rocking his hips up to meet mine. "Mmmm...and I cant think of anyplace I'd rather be right now. It's perfect here."

I had to nod in agreement to that. "It is a fucking gorgeous day."

He smiled brightly and nodded. His face was flushed and his breath quick, and I could feel his heart pounding heavily in his chest. "Gorgeous park. Gorgeous man on top of me. You'll get no complaints from me." He pulled my head back down to his neck and rocked his hips again. "I like this music too."

I smiled into his neck and licked the skin there. "Thought you might."

"Ughmmm...what is it?"

"Just a bunch of stuff I pulled off the internet. Stuff I figured you'd like." I took a hold of his earlobe and sucked and bit at it. "Stuff we've danced to at Babylon. At least I think we have, s'hard to remember sometimes."

He gasped and laughed and pulled my head away from him. "Oh my god, it's the apocalypse isn't it?" He was beaming. "You made me a mix!"

I knit my brow. "What the fuck are you talking about? I did not make you a mix."

"A mix, you made it, yes you did!" He insisted.

"No I didn't!! It's for me. It's on MY player."

But he was giggling so much I don't think he really was listening. "Uh huh..."

I twisted my mouth. "Look, it's not like I'm giving it to you. I'll probably erase it all in a few days and put new shit on there. So, no."

"Right, okay..."

"It's not like you can KEEP it. It's not on your very own CD. I just threw it down. Took five minutes - what?"

He was laughing so hard he started to snort. "You...loooooooooove me," he whispered and pulled my head down for a kiss.

"Shut up, fucker," I said gently into his mouth while grinding into him hard, over and over. "There's not one actual LOVE song on there."

He gasped and grabbed onto my shoulders, the both of us laughing between grunting and panting, getting nearer and nearer to the edge.

"You're adorable. I adore you." He kissed my eyelids.

I smiled down on him with my panting mouth open. "I know."

Mechanical Bull



I dream in comics, once in awhile. I've heard of people dreaming in black and white, or even cartoons, but I think I might be the only person in the world who dreams in comic stills. Except for Mikey, maybe.

I started having them when we were working on the first Rage issue, and they've been coming sporadically ever since. It happened a lot when me and Brian were apart. I'd see frames of Rage and JT in my sleep- flying, dancing, fucking, keeping the world safe for queers everywhere- and I'd wake up smiling, sometimes even coming, and be able to tell myself that it was about the art, not about missing him. Ethan would ask me what I'd been dreaming about, what had gotten me so very excited. And I'd say, "You, of course. What else would I be dreaming about?" What a fucking joke.

The night we left Chicago, I dreamt about Rage and the bar bomber. An entire issue, and it was pretty fucking good. I wanted to call Michael about it as soon as I woke up, but I knew that Brian would get annoyed if I asked for the phone. He got annoyed every time I wanted to call home, and usually managed to find some excuse, some distraction to keep me from doing it.

Normally I would've asked anyway, and tried to get him to tell me why he was being such a big freak about the whole thing, but after the day we'd had I really didn't wanna start a fight with him. After the aquarium, and the picnic, and the fact that he'd actually listened when I suggested we check out of the eighty-four thousand dollar hotel room earlier than he'd planned, the last thing I wanted to do was antagonize him. I just wanted to enjoy him.

And I was sure he didn't wanna hear any more about the goddamn bar bomber. He didn't understand why it upset me so much, and I sure as fuck didn't want to explain it to him. Didn't want to let him know that sometimes I wonder what I'll do when he's dead- that I know he'll die before me, before he's supposed to, if he keeps living the way he does, and it terrifies me more than anything in the world. If I hadn't left the bar when I did, if he hadn't followed me...if, if, if. I stay awake at night worrying about that kind of stuff.

"Did I miss a nuclear war?" I asked, stretching in my seat and taking in our surroundings. I'd fallen asleep before we'd even gotten out of the city, when it was still light out, and now it was dark, deserted, and eerily quiet. Brian had the top down, and the stars were brighter than I could remember ever seeing them. Probably because there were no fucking streetlights on this insane road he'd chosen for us.

"No," he said. "We were in a terrible car wreck and died. We're in hell now."

"Huh. I expected a lot more fire."

"Well, it could be Iowa. I didn't wanna scare you."

"Are we anywhere near Buttfuck? I've been looking forward to that."

He laughed and put his hand on my knee, and I leaned back in my seat and looked up at the sky some more. We drove on for a while, listening to music and soaking in the nothingness around us, and it was actually a lot cooler than I expected Iowa to be. It was one of those times where you think; this should be in a movie. It's all pretty and moody and cool, and somebody oughtta make a movie.

I felt almost ridiculously happy just to be there, just to be with Brian at all, and I wanted to tell him that, but it seemed like a dumb thing to say. I could tell he was feeling it too, though. Just by the way he was touching my leg.

Then, as we were passing through something vaguely resembling a town, his hand was suddenly back on the wheel, and we were doing a 70 mile an hour U-turn in the middle of the street.

"No fucking way! Did you see that?" he asked me.

I looked around, startled and confused, and didn't see anything remotely interesting at all.

"Um...no?"

"Streetcar Named Desire," he said, pointing to a dilapidated old theatre marquee. "At eight-thirty. It just started."

He swerved into a parking space, nearly sideswiping a rusty pick up truck with a gun rack in the process, and threw open his door. I hadn't seen him this excited since the Cocks in Socks party at Babylon, so I shrugged and followed him in.

"You ever seen it?" he asked as we were buying our tickets. I shook my head. He kissed my hair, told me I was gonna love it, and practically carried me to my seat.

I don't really know what to say about the movie. Everyone in it was completely psychotic, which was entertaining I guess, and the theatre was pretty cool and old fashioned and pleasantly empty, but honestly I was paying more attention to Brian than anything else. He was so completely engrossed, smiling and mouthing some of the words, and every so often he'd poke me and look at me with this hopeful little smile- like he wanted to make sure I was enjoying it as much as he was. It was so totally dorky and sweet. I was seeing his hidden, inner geek, and it felt like he was sharing some big important secret with me. I loved it.

When it was over we sat there until the lights came up, and he asked me what I thought. I told him it was the best movie I'd seen in years, and that Marlon Brando was like an older, slightly less good looking version of Brian Kinney. He kissed me for like, a half an hour. He's so fucking easy.

When we got back to the car we looked at the map and realized we were only an hour or so outside of Des Moines (the closest thing to a city that exists in Iowa), so we decided to keep going.

I don't know how we wound up at the Rainbow Cattle Company. I didn't expect to find any gay bars in Iowa at all, and I certainly never expected to see a gay bar like this one. Anywhere. Ever. But somehow there it was and there we were and, you know, rainbow flag in the middle of god-fearing, tobacco-chewing, queer-hating Middle America...any port in a storm I guess.

So, okay, imagine the seediest, scariest roadhouse dive bar you've ever seen. We're talking straw on the floor, Merle Haggard on the jukebox, dirty glasses, dirty tables, a pool table with only one cue and seven balls, a freaking

mechanical bull in the center of the room where a dance floor oughtta be. Now imagine it full of overweight queers in cowboy hats with bad moustaches. That's the Rainbow Cattle Company.

"I've never seen so many ugly homos in my life," Brian said, upon entering this lovely establishment, and I had to agree. For some reason I'd figured that if there were, in fact, any gay men in Iowa, that they'd be the corn fed, boy next-door types. Wholesome smiles and healthy tans and nicely muscled arms from working all day on their farm equipment or whatever. Well, what can I say...I was wrong.

We decided we'd need to drink heavily if we were going to spend any time in the good ol' Rainbow Cattle Company, so I grabbed us a corner table by the jukebox, and Brian moseyed off to the bar and got us an entire bottle of Jim Beam. That fucking Beam was the beginning of the end for me.

See, I'm not a functioning alcoholic like Brian. Just a lush really, and when I get drunk I get *stupid*. I do things that would really be better left undone. Like, say, riding mechanical bulls. Or making lame and sappy proclamations to Brian and then projectile vomiting, for instance.

Let's start with the bull.

They were having a contest that night. Five hundred bucks for the longest ride. Now when we first got there, the whole thing seemed pretty retarded to me, but the longer we sat there drinking, smoking, listening to country music, watching other guys- flabby, out of shape guys- riding Bessie, the bull...did I mention the drinking? Anyway, at some point I decided it was a fucking awesome idea, and an easy way to score five hundred bucks.

"I'm gonna do it!" I announced when they made the last call for contestants.

"Shut the fuck up, you're not getting on that thing," Brian said, laughing.

"I am! I'm gonna win! Five hundred dollars!"

I stood up, drink in hand, and started wobbling towards the bar to sign up. He grabbed onto my forearm and yanked me back.

"You are NOT," he said. "Now sit down or I'm taking your bottle away."

"Oh, come on. How hard can it be? I'm an expert at riding things!"

He didn't even crack a smile at that, which, had I been sober, would've been enough to tell me that he was genuinely worried and that this was not a good plan at all, but...not sober.

"Have you ever even been on a *horse* before?" he asked me.

"Yeah! Of course!"

Okay, so it was a donkey, and I was twelve, and I think it was in a pen or something, but still.

"Get the camera ready," I told him, then leaned down to kiss him goodbye.

"Don't FUCKING kill yourself," he snarled against my mouth. I giggled stupidly, and sloshed off to my near-death.

No, I'm being melodramatic now. It wasn't that bad. But seriously, I would not recommend mechanical bull riding to anyone, under any circumstances. I really didn't expect it to be that painful. It felt like all my bones were snapping out of place, getting shaken around inside my body and grinding against each other. I thought my whole jaw might come flying out, followed by several gallons of vomit, and I don't even wanna talk about my ass.

I was dimly aware that people were cheering, and music was playing, and somewhere Brian was watching and I hoped he thought it was hot, but mostly what I was focusing on was holding onto that fucker for all I was worth. I have no idea how long I was up there. It felt like a fucking hour, but was probably something like 45 seconds. Anyway, at some point I became convinced that if I held on any longer, my hands would be torn from my body, so I let go and went flying head first over the front of the bull. Fortunately I managed to flip around in the air somehow, and wound up landing on my back on one of the numerous safety mats they had placed around the area.

I slowly scraped myself off the ground and looked around woozily. Brian was on his feet near our table, poised to rush to my side and cart me to the emergency room if the need arose. I gave him a smile and a reassuring wave, which seemed to relax him a little, but he didn't sit down again until I'd staggered my way back to the table.

"Well, that was fun," I said, flopping into my chair and trying not to wince at the pain in my tailbone. "D'you think I won? How long was I on for?"

"Dunno," he shrugged. "Wasn't really paying attention."

"Well, did you take pictures? Was it sexy?"

He handed me the digital camera with a slight scowl, and I looked at the one shot he'd gotten. It was horribly out of focus, and my head was completely cut off. It made me kind of nauseous to look at. But it was so sweet, I couldn't resist commenting.

"Aw, you were too worried about me to take a good picture. That's so cute," I said, like a giant, drunk retard.

"Fuck off," he snarled, and grabbed the camera back. I laughed, and drank more, and watched Bessie toss around some other contestants.

"Iowa's weird," I announced at some point.

"That's the understatement of the century," Brian said.

"Hey, what's the weirdest place you've ever done it?" I asked him.

"Weird obscure or weird...inappropriate?"

"Let's go with obscure. They're all inappropriate."

He rubbed his chin and pondered for a few minutes, and I took the opportunity to pour myself another drink. 'Cause, ya know, I hadn't had enough or anything.

"Gonna have to go with the Rock," he said eventually.

"The what? What rock? You fucked The Rock?"

"Not the wrestler, the prison. Alcatraz."

"What? You did not!"

I started laughing the laugh of the truly inebriated- the kind that goes on for far too long, over something that's not even very funny- and he told me the whole stupid story, which I've mostly forgotten. Something about a college trip, and a marketing class, and a blond guy with a giant cock whose name he spent about twenty minutes trying to recall. I still don't really know what the fuck they were doing at Alcatraz, but the important thing was that I decided I'd find a weirder place somehow, someday, and get him to fuck me there.

I guess telling the story made him horny, because when he was done he reached under the table to squeeze my thigh and started rubbing his thumb in slow circles against my crotch.

I smiled at him, glassy eyed and grateful for the touch, and he stared back intently.

"Are you having a good time?" he asked me, pressing a little harder.

"Mmm," I nodded, and my eyes slipped shut. I saw spinning colored lights behind my lids, which is never a good sign. They made me dizzy.

"Hey, look at me," he said, and I did, and the bad dizzy went away and got replaced by a good dizzy. The kind of dizzy I get just looking in his eyes sometimes, even when I'm sober. That feeling washed over me again, like it had in the car earlier, but even stronger. The relief, and the peace, and the sweet ache in the pit of my stomach that comes just from being near him, and then he kissed me and it was so tender and hot, I thought I might come from it.

Even without his fingers on my dick, it probably would've been enough if it had gone on long enough. He's given me orgasms with those kind of kisses before.

"I can't wait to fuck you," he whispered against my lips, and it was just too much. I had to say something. Fucking whiskey.

"Can I tell you something and will you promise not to call me a dyke?" I slurred into his ear, and reluctantly pried his hand away from my crotch so I could concentrate. So I could figure out how to word this in the least embarrassing way possible. Our fingers tangled together on my thigh and he nuzzled his stubbly cheek against my face.

"Now why would I do something like that?" he asked with faux innocence, and I tossed back another drink with my free hand.

"Mmmyou're gonna make fun of me. I can tell."

"Would I be me if I didn't?" he asked, and kissed the tip of my nose. He had a very good point, and I started to change my mind about the whole thing, but it was kind of too late by then. If I didn't tell him, he'd wind up thinking it was something even dumber than what it actually was.

"I just...was thinking today, when I woke up, how I...well, sometimes I wake up, and I..."

Oh yeah, this was going well. He was giving me that raised-eyebrow smirk already, and I was stammering idiotically and saying nothing at all.

I stopped myself and took another big swig of whiskey, then tried again.

"Sometimes I wake up, and I forget you took me back," I managed to get out. He stared blankly at me, and I took that as the most encouragement I could hope for. "I forget that we're together, and I feel this-this panic, like waking from a nightmare, and then-then I open my eyes, and you're always there, and it's such a relief."

He pulled back a little at that and glanced around nervously, like he was afraid someone might be listening, but he didn't laugh or make any rude comments, so I kept going.

"I'm just really glad that we...that you...I just missed you so fucking much. When I was...when I was with him, I-I wanted it to be you. Every time. All the time."

I don't exactly know where that came from. It wasn't what I'd been planning to tell him, but fuck, it was so true, and saying it out loud really brought those feelings back in a sort of horrible way. I still remembered what it was like- getting fucked by Ethan and wishing he'd be just a little bit rougher, a little bit more passionate, a little bit more like...But I'd always clamp down on my thoughts before they went there, before I let myself imagine. Sometimes it just happened, though. Sometimes he'd sneak in, like a song you can't get out of your head, and I'd come just a little bit harder, just a little bit longer, and want to cry when it was done.

Brian was staring at me now- not blank anymore, but I couldn't really read his expression. It made me uncomfortable, whatever it was, and I decided it was time to cut this off before it got even lamer. I could've gone on for hours, honestly, but I hadn't completely abandoned my sense of pride.

"Anyway," I sighed. "I know it couldn't have been easy to take me back after that, so...thank you, I guess, is what I'm trying to say."

He continued to give me that inscrutable silent stare for a long time, but he was still holding my hand, and I felt his fingers slowly coming to life- wriggling and squeezing possessively. Then, finally, he smiled.

"Thank you," he said, and reached around with his other hand to ruffle my hair and pull my head to his shoulder. I let out a breath of relief against his neck.

"We're goin' to Vegas," he told me. "I just decided."

"Isn't that kind of out of our way?" I asked.

"Fuck it. We've got all summer."

I shrugged and snuggled deeper into his neck, not really caring where the fuck we went, as long as I could do this.

I think I almost passed out, leaning against him there for god knows how long, but eventually he was shaking me and they were announcing the winners of the ride-off, and somehow I actually managed to win third place. Unfortunately the prize was not cash. It was a bottle of whiskey.

"Ummmare you okay to drive?" I asked, staggering back to the car after collecting my reward.

"Better than you are," he said, but that wasn't particularly reassuring. I think a blind octogenarian would've been better to drive than I was at that point. I climbed into the passenger seat, though, and dug through the rapidly growing pile of crap on the floor for the bag of Doritos I'd started yesterday.

"I can't believe I won more whiskey," I said. "Life is funny."

He laughed and started driving, and I started eating the stupid Doritos and working on the second bottle of whiskey and, not surprisingly, after about five minutes I was ready to hurl.

"Ughhdon't feel well," I groaned.

"Jesus Christ," he grumbled, and pulled off to the side of the road. "Open the door."

I ran as far from the car as I could manage, and then opened my mouth and watched the contents of my stomach flying out in every direction, like seltzer out of a clown's spray bottle. It was sick. Vomit splattered against the trees and the grass, and I clutched my knees and tried not to keel over.

I heard Brian calling my name and running after me, and then he was there behind me- rubbing my back and giving me water and making things slightly less awful.

"Such a lightweight," he teased quietly, as I gargled and spit.

"Fuck off. I drank, like, an entire bottle of whiskey. And rode a fucking mechanical bull. And was subjected to your driving. Ugh."

I drank some more water and sagged back against him. He wrapped his arms around my waist and kissed my ear. I started to feel a little more sober. Almost hung over.

"You're a dumbass," he whispered. "But you had fun, huh?"

"It was a honky-tonk."

"You wanna go find a hotel bed to pass out in?" he asked.

That was probably a good idea, but I was starting to get my second wind, standing there, and noticing how beautiful a night it was. How quiet and dark and breezy and not-fucking-Pittsburgh. I really didn't want to go anywhere, and I wasn't ready for the night to be over.

"Did you bring any E?" I asked him.

"Oh, man," he laughed. "You are a little trooper."

"Well, I just always thought it would be cool to do it in a big open field, out where you can see the stars and stuff. And here we are..." I gestured to our left where there was, in fact, a big open field. There are a lot of those in Iowa.

He led me back to the car and dug through his suitcase for a while, and eventually emerged with a Ziploc bag full of pills.

"You sure you can handle this, now?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

He shrugged and took one himself, then said, "Open wide," and popped one into my mouth. I sucked on his fingers, and he made a really hot little grunting sound and pressed me against the side of the car. He kissed me, soft and sweet, and I wondered if I had puke breath, but if I did he didn't seem to care.

We took a blanket and a flashlight and the bag of Doritos and made our way to the middle of the field. It was a little bit creepy now- the quiet and the dark and the thought of homophobic Farmer Joe lying in wait with a shotgun somewhere- but also really cool, in that way that things are cool when you've taken a vaguely hallucinogenic drug. Everything was sort of shimmery and somehow simultaneously more and less real. Surreal, I guess. By the time we'd gotten ourselves situated, lying on our backs on the blanket and staring up at the sky, I was starting to feel the effects in full.

"What a strange night," I said; though it certainly wasn't the strangest I'd had with Brian. It was probably close, though.

"Strange fucking month," he said. "Strange fucking year."

I guess it really had been for him. Sometimes I forget what his life was like before, how much things have changed for him in such a short period of time. I thought about that, and wondered what it felt like. I wondered what I felt like, to him, and if he was glad for the change or not. If he even thought about it in those terms.

I wished I could crawl completely inside him somehow and experience everything the way he does- just for a couple of hours. Just for a night. But we would've needed stronger drugs for that.

"I have no fucking job," he said, and laughed. It wasn't a happy laugh. "No money. God, I'm so fucked."

"You'll find something when we get back," I told him, hoping- fucking *praying*- that it was true. If we went back to the night pacing and the emaciated kitties after all this, we'd both go completely insane.

"Yeah, and I'll be low, old man on the totem pole, at some fucking pathetic two-bit shop..."

He sighed, and pulled my head to his chest, ran his fingers through my hair over and over. "Fuck it," he said. "S'not important now."

"You could start your own agency," I suggested. Dunno where that one came from either, but once I'd said it, it felt totally logical. Totally right.

"Yeah," he snorted. "Cause that's the simplest thing in the world."

"What? You totally could. You've got the experience, and the talent, and the drive, and..."

"No. Money."

"So, you could get loans. You'd be amazing!"

The more I tried to convince him, the better the idea started to sound, until I became utterly certain that it was the best plan in the universe, and the only possible option for him. E has that kind of effect on me sometimes.

"Do you have any idea how long it took Vanguard to really get off the ground?" he asked me.

"Nope."

"Twenty fucking years."

"That's it?"

It didn't seem that long to me. If Brian got that successful in twenty years he'd be able to retire in his fifties. Of course I wasn't gonna say anything about that. He'd probably start to weep at the thought of being fifty.

"Twenty years is a long fucking time," he said. "And they didn't even start to really boom till I got there."

"Exactly! You're the reason they started to boom! They're gonna totally flop without you, and you should be there to reap the rewards and blow them out of the water!"

He looked down at me with a weird little smile, and just stared for a few minutes, and I started to wonder if he was seriously considering it, but then he laughed and shook his head.

"How did you get to be so goddamn optimistic?" he asked. "I know it can't be from hanging out with me."

"Fuck optimism. I'm just hoping you can give me a job."

His smile broadened, and he pulled me completely on top of him and kissed me hungrily.

"You are just evil enough to be in advertising," he said, and bit my ear. He was hard already- probably from all the compliments- and I pushed myself down against him.

"It would be awesome," I told him. "We could be like, the gay crusading ad agency. Take on progressive clients, battle corporate greed..."

"Okay, you need to start your own agency, Sunshine. Mine's gonna be all about the greed."

We both laughed at that, and then at lots of other stupid things that I can't remember, and eventually we wound up fucking out there. Fucking and talking and talking and fucking. Making plans we both knew would probably never come to fruition, but it was fun to pretend.

I fell asleep that night on a blanket in a field in the middle of nowhere, with Brian still inside me, and I dreamt in real life- not comics.

Nowhere Man



Lincoln, Nebraska.

Always assumed Lincoln was a "Major City". It isn't. Pittsburgh looked as shiny as the fucking Hope Diamond once we'd passed through it. If I had to go back to it, I could take comfort in at least that.

We found yet another diner to stop at, and as I was pissing I thought about all the diners across America that I had relieved myself in since we'd left the Pitts. That was about all I had to show for this trip, and I'd flushed all the evidence.

Well, I suppose I had a couple memory cards full of digital pictures. But even those were transient. Just a series of ones and zeros that eventually make up an image that could be erased in an instant. Or manipulated into something completely unrecognizable. And then it's my word against the world that I ever went anywhere. That I ever existed.

When I got back to the table, Justin was paging through a "What's Happening in Lincoln" brochure. I sat down and asked him if that was just an existential question or if there were actual things in there.

"Sure. We're just in time for Pineapple Days. Starts tomorrow."

"Somebody oughtta tell these people pineapples don't come from Nebraska," I said and inhaled both the glass of juice and the glass of water on the table.

"Maybe you should do it," he said, still paging through the book, "you're so good at breaking bad news."

He looked up and gave me a smart assed smile. I gave him a discreet flipping off.

"Okay, how 'bout umm, the Nebraska Church Goods Company? We could buy some crosses." I didn't answer, trying to exude boredom so he'd shut the fuck up already. But unfortunately, he had more to share. "The Delray Ballroom offers swing and country dance classes... ooh! They have a Gap." He looked up with a silly grin on his face and nodded sarcastically.

I shrugged with nonchalance. "Well that's at least somewhat comforting. I was starting to wonder if the Twilight Zone might actually exist."

He ripped open his usual six packets of sugar and poured them into his coffee. "You never know, it could be a Bizarro-Gap. With nothing but cowboy boots."

It wasn't all that funny, but he ran his foot up my leg and smiled and I found myself unable to contain laughter. We looked at each other through tired eyes and chuckled for a while until the waitress brought our food.

"Maybe it's some kind of sexual euphemism for a gay festival. The pineapple fest or what the fuck ever it was."

He swallowed what he was eating and laughed. "I've never heard that one before. 'Hey big boy, wanna see my pineapple?' That's just too scary to contemplate."

We finished eating in silence, but I kept expecting him to bring up what we'd talked about in the field the other night. It's not as though I hadn't considered it. Shit, there were several nights I was wide-awake in bed, thinking of ways I could take over Vanguard all for myself. And when Stockwell offered to buy my soul for the most fucking beautiful client list in history...well, a part of me did weep for that. But to start from literally nothing? Leave it to my eternal optimist just to believe that it's more than a remotely feasible option.

"I'm sure if we just drive around we're bound to find something interesting," Justin said as I started the car.

We ended up driving until about five o'clock, which was about five hours after we'd left the diner, and were fast approaching the Colorado border. Determined to not exit this god-forsaken state without actually seeing something besides the interior of that fucking diner, I took a chance and turned off the road when I saw a dilapidated wooden sign that said "Eureka".

The bumpy dirt and gravel road woke Justin up. He looked around a few seconds before finally asking where the hell we were going. "Is this even a road, Brian?"

"There was a sign. With an arrow." I said it more to assure myself than him.

"What did it say? 'This way to absolutely nothing?'"

I couldn't have driven more than a few more yards when I saw something. "Look! Look, straight ahead," I pointed. "See that white thing up there on the hill? I think that's a building."

"So?"

"So let's check it out. I think it might be a ghost town."

"Again, I say, 'so?'"

"So, wee kin mine fer gold, yung'n," I teased and ruffled his hair.

He laughed and rolled his eyes. "Aren't they ghost towns 'cause there wasn't any gold?"

"Don't kill a man's dream before it's started, boy." What happened to the optimism from the other night, I wondered. "Holy Fuck would you look at this!" I said as we reached the main, well, the only drag, of what was once Eureka, Nebraska. "It's just missing the camera crew to film the spaghetti western."

"Weird..."

I let the car coast past the buildings and the both of us just took it all in without speaking. It really did look like the set of a John Wayne film or something. There was a post office, a sheriff's office, a general store, a saloon, complete with swinging doors, still in tact, and, of course, a house of ill repute above the saloon. It was such a cliché of itself it was hard to accept that it was really authentic.

I pulled up to the saloon and put the car in park. "Honey, we're home." I grabbed his head and brought his lips to mine. "Think there are still beds in the brothel...?"

He made a funny face. "I dunno.... that's kinda gross, actually."

"...And if there are, do you think we could still see cum stains?"

"Wow, that's *extremely* gross," he admonished through giggles.

I smiled and kissed him again. "C'mon, let's look around."

I grabbed the digital camera and stuck a new card in it and Justin grabbed his sketchpad.

He put his hand up to shade his eyes from the setting sun. "This is pretty cool."

"Yeah. I know," I affirmed and pushed through the doors of the saloon like Clint Eastwood.

Not much remained in the old watering hole, except for a few overturned, rotted out tables, the bar, and a platform, which was probably the stage for the dancing girls. The shelves behind the bar were empty and dusty as hell, spider webs covering just about every inch. The place reeked of mildew, and I wondered how long it would be before Justin would need his inhaler.

Justin wandered over to the back of the room and hopped up on the stage. I took a couple shots of him wandering around up there. "Careful," I told him between pictures, "never know how sturdy this place is."

"You think those guys ever fucked each other?"

"Of course. That's why they had to ship the whores into town. Because it wasn't right a proper Christian man take it up the ass. Better he fucked a pussy. So they built this place to keep them from all turning gay, and all was made right." He laughed and I was able to get a really great shot of his smile. "Now show me whatcha got, boy."

"Dance?" he laughed harder. "I feel like it's about to collapse as it is."

"C'mon, just one picture. Then I get to take you upstairs and have my way with you."

"You better have a lot of gold, mister," he said in falsetto and swayed his hips at me.

"Yeah I got two huge nuggets in my pants, sweetheart."

We both laughed and he spun around a couple times. Then I heard a crunch, and watched

Justin's leg disappear.

"Owwwww! Fuck!"

I hopped up there and gave him my hand. "Well that was a piss poor excuse for a sexy dance," I said and pulled him, wincing, out of the hole. "How's a guy supposed to get it up when you're falling on your ass?"

He smiled, half-assed, and leaned into me, rubbing his ass. "How come I'm the one taking all the pratfalls on this trip? My ass is going to be paralyzed when it's all over."

I laughed and helped him off the stage, making him take a few steps holding on to me to check to see if he was walking okay.

He brushed the cobwebs off his leg. "Brian, this place is gross. Whaddya say we move on...?"

He was fucking nuts if he thought I was gonna leave this place already. I wanted to stay the night. "I'm goin' upstairs," I told him and grabbed, sweeping him off his feet and carrying him like a girl.

"Hey!" he giggled. "Put me down you ruffian, I want my gold first!"

I carried him up the stairs, laughing the whole way. "Fuck, you're heavy," I teased.

"Shut up, I am not!" he protested and bit my ear.

We were both laughing so hard by the time I got to the top step, I wasn't sure the sound I was hearing was wood cracking again, like it did when Justin fell on the stage. Then in an instant, a horrible, loud, awful racket sounded from beneath me and I realized the stairs were about to fall out from under us.

I propelled both of us as far as I could to the upper level, which was enough force to detach the stairs completely. I watched the structure crash to the floor.

"Hoh shit," I said, stunned.

"What the fuck just happened??" Justin asked and crawled next to me to peer over the edge. "Jesus Christ..."

I turned to look him over. "Are you okay?"

He laughed. "Yeah, but...we broke the whole place! How are we gonna get back down?"

"We'll have to jump."

"That's a long jump..."

I took a couple shots of the broken staircase and rose to my feet, offering Justin my hand yet again. "So, door number one, two, three, or four?"

"You're not really thinking of staying up here, are you? What if the whole place collapses?"

"Relax, I just wanna look around as long as we're up here."

He humored me and opened one of the doors. "Ewwwwwww Gross! Brian! There's a dead rotting cat in there. Can we please get out of here now?"

I sighed. It was getting too dark to take any more good pictures inside and I still wanted to check out a couple of the other buildings. Hopefully there'd be a decent one to camp out in.

We were able to make it out of the building climbing through a back window. I told him to help me with the camping stuff and he threatened to sleep in the car if I thought he was going to stay in one of these disgusting old buildings. But I called his bluff and headed for the little white church at the end of the road, a mere five doors down from the saloon and brothel.

The building was ironically and appropriately immaculate. Save for a few cobwebs in the corners and coating of dirt and dust on the hardwood floor, the place was bare. There were three windows on either side of the building, the glass panes all in tact. All that remained of the chancel was a tall shelf attached to the wall, and the communion rail.

I could tell right away there were about a hundred other places Justin would rather be than in an old church, let alone being less than thrilled by the idea of spending the night there. While he paced the floor, I spread the sleeping bag out in the sunken aisle in the middle of the building.

"I feel like I'm going to hell just for standing in here..." he mumbled, staring toward the ghost of the altar.

I snuck to the back and grabbed the rope hanging down there. Latching both hands and arms to the thick cord, I gave it a good yank. It still rang. Loudly.

Justin jumped out of his skin and spun around. "Jees...jeeeeez, Brian, Jeez...what, what did you do that for?? What if that old thing comes crashing down on top of you?? What if people hear it ring and the cops come after us and arrest us? What if - "

I walked over to him and grabbed him by the waist, shutting him up with a long kiss. "S'just a building," I assured him.

"It- it's kinda creepy, dont you think?"

"And what makes this one creepier than the whorehouse?"

"Well, because...it's...church...churchy."

I let go of him, rolling my eyes and sat down on the bag. I turned on the iPod that still had the music on it from Chicago, hoping that would ease him a little. By now it was getting close to eight thirty, so I lit our two Coleman lanterns and placed them up on either side of the aisle.

"It's too dark to take any pictures in here, why don't you sketch that old Franklin stove back there." He shrugged and sat down with me, practically in my lap. "C'mon," I encouraged, kissing his ear, "We came here for the inspiration, remember?"

He sighed and grabbed his sketchbook and took one of the lanterns over to the stove, placing it so that the light cast an artful shadow on the floor and wall. He returned next to me and began to draw. I watched every moment of it, until it got too dark for him to see.

"Looks great," I told him and he jumped, I guess forgetting I was even watching this absolute magic unfold. I shined the flashlight on it for a minute. Maybe I really could make a go at starting my own business, I thought. How long could it take, really, to establish a decent client base in San Francisco? With my experience and ability I could at least be able to afford to eat in a reasonable space of time. And he's such a fucking good artist, I could really use him. And we both need a fucking job.

He smiled and put the book into his backpack. "I'll bet there's ghosts in here," he said.

I dug through my own for something to smoke. "Well," I said and showed him the joint

I'd gratefully found, "They can join us."

"I dunno if ghosts can inhale," he laughed. "And I dunno if I should either, it might make me paranoid in here."

I rolled my eyes yet again and took a drag, handing it to Justin anyway. He pushed my hand back at me.

"Princessssssss..." I exhaled and leaned in to kiss his neck. "C'monnnn, I wanna fuck."

He shivered. "So, I can't fuck you without getting high?" he giggled. "I figured you thought better of yourself than that..."

Instead of trying to come up with a clever response to that, I kissed him. As I puffed on the cigarette another time, I slipped my hand up his t-shirt and rubbed my thumb over his nipple. I felt his body relaxing, leaning into my hand and he made a moan I felt travel through my fingers and then straight to my cock.

I let my head droop to his neck and inhaled. He smelled fucking fantastic. Like himself. Like sweat, dirt, dust, the car, and me and I couldn't help taking a good, full lick of his skin.

"Mmmfeels nice," he whispered.

I pulled back and his eyes were shut and he was smiling and suddenly I had this feeling of elation that I wished that we could stay here forever. Stay like this. Always feel like this. And not have to worry about anything or anyone. But feeling like this.

I reached over and dug into my bag again, pulling out my switchblade.

"What're you doing?" he asked. When I flicked the thing open, he gasped a little.

"Um...you know I'll try just about anything, but I think that might be a kink you're going to have to fulfill with someone else."

"It's not for that." I leaned over him and started carving into the floorboards.

"You're desecrating a church. That's like, totally evil."

"Shut up and shine the flashlight over here."

He obeyed, except to read the words as I completed them. "Brian...and...Justin... fucked...here."

I looked up and, despite his reservations he was smiling. "Now," I said, "Roll over, or I'll be a liar, too."

He laughed and put the flashlight out. "We're so going to hell."

I helped him pull off his shirt and he lay down on his stomach. I ran my fingers up and down his spine until his breathing slowed and he was moaning again a little with every breath. I leaned down and kissed his shoulder with an open mouth.

He turned his head and smiled at me. That happy, drunk-sober smile. I rubbed my stubble lightly back and forth across his smooth skin.

"MmmmmmmBrian..." he moaned.

"Yeah?" I pulled his shorts down, staring at him the whole time.

"Nothin'...just...'mmm...'"

I chuckled in my throat and massaged his cheeks and just about the time I was gonna push a finger inside, he shot up and gasped. "What the fuck is that?!"

"What??" Fucking hell...

"There was...something moved," he whispered frantically, barely audible. "Over there, in the corner!" He grabbed the flashlight and shined it over there.

"I don't see anything..."

"I swear there was something." He sounded almost disappointed.

"Probably a rodent or something."

"What if it was an angry ghost?"

"Angry about what? That we can have sex and they can't?"

"Or that we're sodomizing in their holy place or whatever."

"Oh please," I sighed, "it's a fucking building."

"Not to the people who died here! They were really serious about this stuff."

I groaned and leaned back on my elbows. If there were spirits in here we were pissing off, they couldn't be more pissed off than I was becoming at that moment. They didn't know how fucking lucky they were, being dead. They could go anywhere they wanted, do anything they wanted, didn't have to worry about a fucking thing. But instead they stay behind in this dump because the poor fuckers never fulfilled their dreams of striking it rich quick, picking up and leaving their lives behind for a long shot. Suckers. The only smart ones that moved West were the ones that sold the dumbfuckers the pans to mine the shit.

As my mind was wandering, I felt a hand on my chest. "I'm sorry, I'm being dopey. I wanna do it though, let's do it. Fuck 'em."

I smiled. "You're a big fucking tease."

"Yeah, I know," he giggled until I leaned in to kiss him. "Mmm...s'kinda hot actually."

"They're all waaatching...oooh."

"Now you're gettin' it," I praised and kissed his neck, grabbing his hair in my hand.

I got naked and pressed my whole body on top of his, pushing my cock between his cheeks. I rubbed my hair over his back and he groaned, arching upward.

"You sure now?"

He bucked his ass up into me, over and over. "Ughhfuck me. C'mon."

I pulled away so I could put on a condom. "Mmmmaybe I don't feel like it now..."

He lifted his head and looked up at me with panic. "Ughhhyes you do, fucker!"

I laughed and pushed in quick, draping my whole body over him. Justin gasped and turned his head to the side so he could kiss me.

After a while I grabbed a hold of his hands and lifted myself up so I could start thrusting.

I went really slowly for a long, long time. I listened to Justin's breath get shallow and faster. He whimpered and writhed underneath me, squeezing the shit out of my hands when a thrust was particularly good for him.

He threw his head back and wailed. "Mmmfuck! Fuck, that's good."

"Yeah, yeah...Justin..."

Suddenly I couldn't take it anymore and my body started slamming into him. I didn't have a choice about it. Our grunting sounded twice as loud in this empty hollow space, and I rammed him as deep and hard as it took to get Justin to grunt with my every thrust.

Then it was too much and he jerked back against me just as hard, his head thrown back.

"Jesus...god!" he screamed and wrenched his hand away from mine so he could cover his mouth. Through his panting and gasping, he laughed.

I grabbed his ass and pulled on it, as though I could possibly get any deeper inside him.

A couple quick thrusts and I was exploding. My cock and my entire body.

"Oohh I'm so going to hell..." he said once his breathing had slowed.

I collapsed on top of him and groaned. "Fuck that was good." I leaned my head on his shoulder.

"Mmm...yeah," he whispered, and kissed the hand that was still holding on to his.

"Sorry?"

"Not the slightest bit."

"Having a good time?"

"Of my life," he said, his speech slurred. "I don't want to sleep here, though."

I laughed through my nose and closed my eyes. After a few minutes I think I heard him say he loved me. I think I held him tighter.

Crystal City



Vegas sort of sneaks up on you. You'll be driving across the desert for hours, seeing nothing...nothing...nothing, and then suddenly BIG SHINY BRIGHT LIGHTS! Out of abso-fucking-lutely nowhere. It's pretty cool. Especially if you've just spent the night in a goddamn ghost town.

I dunno what Brian's obsession is with finding the creepiest places imaginable to sleep and fuck in. I think he just likes to see me scared. Makes him feel all manly or something.

Anyway, I was pretty impressed with my first view of Vegas, and I vaguely remember being excited about exploring the town with Brian, but in retrospect, I really should've known better. There are certain places and certain people that just should not mix, and I should've put together the little I knew about Vegas and the lot I knew about Brian, and turned the fucking car around. I guess I was too dazzled by all the pretty colors to really think about it.

The hotel room he booked for us was, again, outrageously nice and giant, but I knew from looking through the guidebook that almost all the hotels in Vegas are cheap as hell, so I tried not to worry about it. Brian decided to take a bath when we got there, which seemed like a very good plan after our many nights of sleeping in dirt, so I followed him into the bathroom and marveled at the huge sunken tub. He filled it up and poured in his fancy French bubbles and stripped down, and I fondled the bathroom fixtures.

"This is like Cleopatra's toilet or something," I said.

"Well, that must make me Antony," Brian said, sinking into the water. "Wanna come and shave me, slave boy?"

I pulled off my shirt and gathered up his shaving stuff, and wondered why we'd never done this before. It sounded really sexy.

"So where do you wanna go first?" I asked, and sat on the side of the tub to lather up his face. "That Gipsy club sounded pretty cool."

"Nah," he said. "We can go to a dancing fagatorium anytime. Let's check out some casinos first."

"You wanna gamble?"

His face was all white and foamy, but I still recognized the "duh" look underneath it.

"Is that a good idea?" I asked him, wondering what he even had to gamble *with* other than our gas money.

"Way I figure it, we don't have a fucking thing to lose anymore."

That should've been my first big clue, if I wasn't paying attention before, but dammit, he distracted me with the shaving and the being naked and wet thing. I think I did say something like; "There's always something to lose." But he wasn't really paying attention.

Then I started running the blade over his skin, and we didn't talk anymore. We watched each other instead. It really was fucking hot. Just the fact that he was letting me stroke his neck with a potentially deadly weapon was a huge turn on. And the way he was staring at me...god, it was amazing. Made my stomach do that crazy flippy thing. I can't believe he can still do that to me sometimes. Isn't it supposed to go away after a few years?

When I was finished, I leaned in and kissed him. His lips were warm and wet and slippery.

"C'mere," he said. "You're dirty."

I wriggled out of my jeans and slid into the water, dunking my head under for a second, then leaned back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and just held me there for a while, kissing my neck and forehead every so often, and running his hands lazily all over me.

It felt so good and relaxing that I think I almost fell asleep. Until I heard him murmuring into my ear, "You know, I was thinking. Maybe we should make this a one way trip."

"Hmm...huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean...start over in California. Move there."

That woke me right the fuck up. I pulled up and looked back at him, sloshing water and bubbles everywhere.

"Are you serious?"

"Sure. Like I said, nothing to lose, right?"

"You'd really wanna move somewhere with me?"

"Well, you're already here, aren't you?"

For a minute I felt almost giddy. I felt seventeen and hungry, thrilling at the latest morsel of love he slipped to me by accident. We already lived together, of course, but moving across the country with someone- that's a whole new level of commitment. It's a whole thing. It sounded really fantastic. For a minute.

Then I started thinking about it. Really thinking about it. And it became fucking terrifying.

"It's kinda...far," I said.

"No it's not. Eight or nine hours, tops."

"Not from here, from home."

"Well if we moved there, it would be home."

My mom. Daphne. Liberty Avenue, and the street I grew up on, and Deb's baked ziti, and Mikey's shop, and Mikey, and Emmett, and my sister, and the loft, and the Thai place down the street from the loft where we go every Thursday because they have a special on the kind of noodles Brian likes, and even when we could afford to pay regular price he wanted to go every Thursday because even though he'd never say it, he wanted us to have a thing we always did, and now we might never go again and...fuck, it was scary.

Nowhere else would be home. Nowhere else would have those things. I couldn't imagine leaving all that forever. I couldn't believe Brian wanted to. But then, I guess he always had. At least this time he wanted to take me with him.

But what if I said no? Would he go anyway? There was no way I could say yes right then. I'd never even BEEN to San Francisco. I had no idea what to tell him.

"Wouldn't you miss your friends? And...everything?" I asked, hopefully.

"That's why they invented the telephone. And the airplane. And the internet."

"I guess. I dunno, maybe we should just... see how it goes when we get there."

He sighed and rubbed his nose over my hair, and I squeezed his arms tighter around me, hoping he knew I wanted to be with him no matter what. That if he decided to move there on his own, I'd almost surely follow, despite any reservations I had. I don't think he got the message though, cause after that he got out of the tub and started getting dressed in a hurry instead of staying naked and wet and having sex with me, like I expected. He didn't really talk to me as we got ready to go out, and he seemed suddenly grouchy and on edge. That was when I finally started to worry, and it was pretty much all downhill from there.

First off, I've gotta say that casinos are the most tedious, fucking depressing places I've ever seen. No one talks to anyone else. Everyone sits at their slot machine, or blackjack table, or roulette wheel, throwing dollar after dollar into the gaping maw of the city, getting nothing in return but more free drinks to feed their addiction and make them forget that anything else exists. There are no clocks in casinos, or windows. The air is stale, like a mall, but worse. It's loud as fuck with all the slot machines blinging and change rattling and random sirens going off to make you think someone's actually winning something somewhere. Most of the people are old, and probably can't afford to be there. I wanted to leave as soon as we walked into the first one, but I figured I'd let Brian play a few games and get it out of his system.

As soon as he starts losing, I told myself, he'll want to go. If there's one thing Brian can't stand, it's losing.

Well, he started losing pretty much right away, and I swear to god, I think he was in that fucking casino for ten hours straight. And it was in the lobby of our goddamn hotel. He didn't even leave the goddamn hotel.

I stood and watched him for as long as I could stand it- which wasn't very long at all- and after his eleventh or twelfth giant loss, I asked him if we could go.

"This is it," he said, as the dealer gave him his cards. I don't even know what game he was playing. "It's gonna turn around for me now. Because after all, I am Brian. Fucking. Kinney."

He threw back a drink- I'd already lost track of how many he'd had- and I tried again.

"Maybe you'd have better luck with the fucking part of that. I'll bet there's lots of hot guys in this city..."

"Later," he said, and lost again. "Motherfucker."

"C'mon, let's go to that club. It'll be fun."

"Later."

He tossed more money on the table, and I really wanted to just grab his hand and physically force him to stop. But I was scared to do that, and the fact that I was scared- that I was scared of him, and what he might do if I tried- made me feel a little bit sick.

"Go back to the room if you're tired," he said, which was pretty much a complete non-sequitur.

"I'm not tired. I wanna go someplace fun. Someplace where you won't be losing mountains of cash."

"What, like a gay bar? At least the drinks here are free..." He called over a waitress and ordered another, as if to illustrate the point, and lit a cigarette. And lost. Again.

"You may have to pay for the drinks at a gay bar, but I've never seen you spend a thousand fucking dollars in one before."

He finally turned away from the game to give me the Kinney Pissy Look, patent pending. "What the fucking fuck, Justin? Why are you so goddamn worried about how I spend my money? Why is that suddenly your big issue?"

"Because this is fucking stupid! This isn't spending, this is flushing down the toilet!"

He huffed and shook his head and turned back to the table. "You worry too much," he said.

I wanted to ask him how he was planning on moving to a completely new city, a completely *expensive* city, with his negative million dollars, and whether he realized that nobody around him was winning and nobody ever would, but I knew he wasn't listening anymore. It was pointless. He'd been sucked into the vortex of Vegas.

"I'm gonna go to that club," I told him. He nodded absently, and I kissed his cheek and said the name into his ear, hoping it would register.

I walked to the club even though it was kinda far. I needed some fresh air after being in that stink pit, and I wanted to clear my head a little.

Unfortunately, the Vegas Strip isn't the best place to walk if you're trying to think clearly. Too much stimulus. Too much noise and light and activity and insanity. It was cool, though- much more interesting than the indoor sights- and I wished Brian were there with me to enjoy it all. I decided I'd have to paint it sometime, and share it with him that way. If he didn't decide to move into the casino, that is. I swear, I think people live there.

The club was pretty standard gay bar fare, except everyone was inexplicably wearing feather headbands. I later found out that it was Native America night for some reason, which was fine, if somewhat cheesy.

The drinks weren't free, but they were pretty damn cheap so I had a couple and started dancing. Then I let some cute boys buy me a couple more drinks, because I needed to be drinking, and Brian was making me very nervous about spending our money. I didn't really talk to any of them, though, and after a few hours I started to feel a little bit lonely. A little bit bored.

Unfortunately, I couldn't really think of anywhere else to go. The empty hotel room seemed equally dull, and possibly depressing, and there was no way in hell I was going back to try and suck Brian out of the casino again. I didn't want to go to another bar, because I'd told Brian I'd be here, and I didn't wanna lose him on the off chance he decided to show up. So, I stayed. And drank. And eventually I started dancing with some random guy out of sheer boredom.

He was fairly cute and, I think, one of the few genuine Native Americans in the place. He was probably about a foot taller than me, nicely muscled with thick dark hair and shiny eyes. He was quiet, and didn't crowd or grope me excessively, which was nice. We danced through a few songs, and I was just about to send him to the bar for another drink when I spotted Brian out of the corner of my eye. He was moving towards me, pushing through the crowd and looking very irritated.

Drunk, I realized when he'd gotten close enough for me to see his eyes, to smell the fumes. He was very, very drunk.

"Fuck off," he said to my new friend, and grabbed my arm to pull me away.

"I saw him first," the guy said, and proceeded to just stand there like a tree trunk, with his hands on my hips. I could tell by looking at Brian that this was not a good time to fuck with him in this fashion. Or any fashion. He got this crazy look when the guy said that, and I had a very bad feeling that the situation was about to turn ugly. The last thing we needed was for Brian to start a fight. He was too wasted to even defend himself, and the guy was fucking huge.

"Um, actually," I said. "I think it's time for me to go."

For some stupid reason, he chose that moment to suddenly become aggressive, and leaned in to try and kiss me. Brian intercepted and started kissing me himself, and the guy was forced to let go. I felt like a ragdoll, getting pulled between them, and didn't particularly enjoy it, but once Brian's mouth was on mine, everything felt a little bit better. A little bit closer to normal. Even though his mouth tasted like a gin-doused ashtray, and he was practically collapsing on top of me.

I guess the guy just gave up and wandered off while we were kissing, because that was the last I saw of him. Thank god.

"Mmm...you taste good," he said, and licked up the side of my neck.

"Did you win?" I asked.

"Well yeah. He went away. Now you're mine."

He kissed me again, sloppy and careless, and started swaying- holding my waist and sagging against my body. I felt his weight go slack until I was practically the only force holding him upright. His head was bobbing and drooping in a very alarming way, and his sweat smelled like a distillery.

"Maybe it's time to go," I suggested.

"Nuh...we jus' got here," he said into my ear, and slid his hands under the waistband of my jeans. He started kneading my ass with his fingers, and it felt really good, but I was too worried about him to enjoy it at all.

"You just got here. I've been here all night. Brian, it's almost morning, and you're fucking wasted."

"I'm beautiful," he insisted, and started erratically thrusting his cock against my stomach. I felt his face rubbing into my hair, like I was a towel he was trying to wipe off with.

"Did you come out ahead, Brian? Or at least break even...?"

"Mmmmaybe. Dunno really. Mmmlet's fuck."

I was starting to wonder if he even knew where we were, and how he'd managed to get here on his own. I was starting to wonder if he'd decided to leave the casino of his own accord, or if they'd thrown him out for being too fucking drunk to live. I think I was finally witnessing stage four, first hand. We were at least well into stage three.

He pushed a finger inside me suddenly, but then just sort of stopped moving, and became even more slack and boneless feeling. He started breathing heavy and making weird noises.

I pulled back a little and held his face in my hands. It was cool and clammy and his skin was a sickly greenish color.

"Brian, are you all right?"

"Peach...y," he grunted, and closed his eyes.

"You look sick. C'mon, let's get you some water."

Leading him to the bar turned out to be an extremely difficult endeavor, and I wondered how the hell I was gonna manage to get us all the way back to the freaking hotel. He draped an arm over my shoulders, but that was about all the help I got from him. Mostly I had to drag all 176 pounds and 3 ounces of him across the entire length of the bar. He felt like he might fall every time someone brushed against him, and he started breathing heavier as we walked-almost dry heaving.

"No, officer, I know what I'm doing..." he said loudly into my ear, for completely unknown reasons.

"Shh, just concentrate on walking," I told him.

Eventually I managed to get him to the bar and onto a stool which I could only hope he wouldn't topple off of while I got his water.

"Remember...hey," he said, pulling on the hem of my shirt while I was ordering. "Remember how I taught you the alphabet?"

"Here, drink this." I wrapped his hand around the plastic cup, then wrapped my hand around his and led the water up to his mouth. He managed to get a few sips down before spitting and coughing.

He wiped his lips with his sleeves, and started clutching at my shirt again.

"Well I never...Justin...Jus...I never taught you your nummers. Addition and...subtraction."

"That's okay. I learned that in school."

I brushed some damp strands of hair out of his face, and kissed his forehead. He was such a fucking mess. A beautiful, sad fucking mess. I didn't really understand why he was like this, but I wanted to make it better.

"One thousand take away five thousand is no thousand," he said. "And the house always wins."

He laughed this horrible, shrill, drunken laugh, and it made my chest hurt. I think he was trying to tell me he'd lost four thousand dollars, but I couldn't think about that yet. Had to just concentrate on getting him back in one piece.

"It's all right," I said. "Don't worry about that now."

His eyes darted around distractedly, and his body started leaning towards a video poker machine they had set up at the bar, like a sickly weed growing towards a brick wall.

"Hey, les' practice our nummers," he said, and took out his goddamn wallet.

"For fuck's sake, Brian!" I grabbed it away from him and put it in my pocket, like I'd been itching to do all night. He didn't yell at me, or even try to get it back. Just sat there staring at his empty hand, like he couldn't quite figure out where the money had gone. "No more nummers tonight. We're done, all right?"

"S'like life," he said, and put his hands on my arms. Squeezed me and stared into my eyes with a sudden focused intensity. Like he was about to impart some ancient, drunken wisdom.

"Job...plus Justin...plus love...equals no job," he slurred at me, then passed out on my shoulder.

My mouth went dry, and my pulse started racing, and I couldn't really move or talk or think for at least five minutes.

It was another one of those sudden shifts in the Brian landscape. Another bottom falling out moment.

Love. He said love. That's what hit me first, but then the rest started to sink in. The context. I didn't like the sound of it at all.

I remembered the night that Stockwell lost- how proud and relieved and just plain happy Brian seemed. Happier than I could ever remember seeing him, honestly. He was at peace with himself, with us, maybe even with the world. It was amazing.

But now that the reality was starting to settle in, the real weight of what he'd done, was he sorry? Did he blame me? It never really occurred to me that he would, but it made sense. He had lost his job because of me, essentially. And he'd already told me that he made those fucking Deekins commercials because of something I said to him.

It was, I realized, perfectly possible that he was harboring a secret, festering resentment towards me. Maybe it had been growing inside him for months. Maybe that's what all the night pacing was about. Maybe that's what this whole fucking trip was about- to see if he could get over it. And maybe asking me to move to California with him was a last ditch effort to make things right and rid himself of the seething hatred he had for me, and maybe I'd ruined everything by not saying yes.

He really had lost literally everything, at least partially because of me. And now I was all he had left. Maybe I wasn't enough.

Or maybe he was just really wasted and didn't know what the fuck he was even saying. Maybe it didn't mean anything at all.

I couldn't think about it, I decided. It was making my insides burn, making me feel like I wanted to cry, and this wasn't the time. Certainly wasn't the place. The most important thing right now was figuring out how to get Brian back to the hotel. Or, possibly, to the emergency room.

I managed to shake him into a state of semi-consciousness, which seemed like a positive sign, and told him to try and walk with me- which he did, though not with any great success. The streets were relatively quiet- not deserted as you might expect streets to be at five o'clock in the morning, but far less bustling than they'd been six or seven hours ago- and somehow we managed to get back to the room just as the sun was rising. I led him to the bed, and he collapsed, face down, and didn't move again of his own accord until sometime the next day.

I pulled off his shoes and socks and turned him onto his side so he wouldn't choke on his own vomit in the middle of the night, then curled up behind him and put my hand on his heart so I'd be sure to know if it stopped beating. Or if it was beating too much. I didn't sleep.

Yeah, I don't think I'll be going back to Las Vegas anytime soon.

The scene was eerily familiar, but cloudy. I was in my apartment. I was naked. Jennifer Taylor was there, talking to me. Saying words that I couldn't hear. She was smoking a cigarette.

Finally I said, "What? I can't hear you! I can't understand you!" Then I was thinking maybe she was there to tell me how to take care of Justin.

As soon as I thought it, I could hear her speaking. "Thank you for taking care of him, Brian. I love you for loving him."

No, no, I don't, I'm not, I can't, and I won't-I wanted to say, but the words didn't come out, and then she was approaching me, reaching her hand out to touch my face and in an instant I was kissing her, hard. She was moaning,

pressing herself into me and in another instant we were on my bed, her on top of me, riding my cock fast and hard, her blond hair swinging back and forth.

"Good, Brian, good...good Brian, good man..." Oh, god, she was going to come. I couldn't let that happen, but it was too late and there was water gushing over my face and I was choking...

"Shit! No!" I sat up in bed and reached in front of me to push her off.

Except that...it was not her.

I focused on the body that was actually straddling my legs. Justin. Holding an empty Aquafina bottle.

"Brian! Are you okay??!"

"Peachy. Aside from the fact that I was just having a dream about your mother riding my cock..." I rubbed the water off my face and collapsed back down on the pillow.

"I'm sorry, you...what?!" The empty bottle went flying to the floor and he quickly jumped off my body, like it was him who'd had the dream. "Oh my god, that is so disgusting, I can't believe you!" He shuddered and shook his entire body.

"Sorry, wasn't my idea of a great time either. Wonder what the fuck that was supposed to mean."

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly and combed through my hair with his fingers. I wasn't quite sure what the answer was to that question.

"Yeah, except...what time is it?" The further back in my memory I tried to dig, the blacker it got.

"Two."

"In the afternoon?? Shit, what the hell happened to yesterday?" I laughed.

"You slept forever."

"Weren't we supposed to go to some club?"

"We did. What...what's the last thing you remember...?"

I didn't like the look on his face, at all. I started to have this weird feeling wash over me, a loathsome and skuzzy feeling, similar to many, many, countless mornings waking up with yet another stranger, and wondering what the hell I might have said or done the night before, and if any and all of it was going to impact my life adversely.

"The casino. Think they kicked me out."

I honestly don't remember anything after that. I know that I went there believing that I could make some fast cash, and a lot of it, to show Justin how it's got to be fated that we move and start over. That he'd see the limitless possibilities waiting for us. I was still confounded by that vague answer he'd given me when I suggested we move permanently.

It wasn't too long ago the kid would have sold his liver to move anywhere with me. Now suddenly it seemed he'd gotten better plans.

"Yeah, well, you got completely fucked up and lost a ton of money, and then we were dancing and you passed out." His tone of voice had changed completely. He wasn't pissed, exactly, but...

"Mmm..." I moaned and turned my face away, so I wouldn't have to strain to figure out what he was thinking.
"Sorry."

"I was afraid you were gonna die or something."

Shit.

"Couldn't have been that afraid. M'not in a hospital."

"Well, I was considering it, but I figured you'd be mad if you woke up in a hospital. And you were breathing okay."

"Well," I turned back toward him and touched his arm, "thanks, Doctor Taylor."

"...and making...noises...ew, god! I can't believe you were having sex dreams about my mother!"

"Believe me, no one's more disturbed than I am. But, s'not like your mom's not hot, so..."

"Ewww! My mom is not hot! You're sick," he protested, smacking me on the chest.

"Ughhhhhcareful," I moaned through my laughing. "Would you rather I say she's a dog?"

"No, but...ew. Lets just not think about my mom in those terms, okay?"

I sat up and grabbed another bottle of water from the nightstand, downing all sixteen-point-nine ounces in about three gulps, and wished there was more.

He ran his fingers through my damp hair again. "You want some coffee?" he asked.

"Sure." I swung my legs over the side of the bed. A little too fast, though. I had to sit for a while on the edge of the bed, steadying myself with my fists like my father used to do, and wait for the spinning sensation to subside. I resisted the urge to groan.

The trip to the bathroom was just as much fun as getting out of bed. And like some fucking old fart, I had to hang on to pieces of furniture and walls to keep from falling over.

I pissed for about ten hours, showered for ten hours, and pissed for another ten hours.

For a few moments in the shower, I thought I was going to lose whatever was in my stomach, but I cowboy'ed up like the good Irish boy that I am, and forced it to pass.

I wandered back out into the room and flopped into a chair. Ever my fairy godfather,

Justin had ordered a lovely grease-laden breakfast for me, and it was all laid out waiting when I sat down. I shoved a sausage into my mouth and asked, "D'you have a good time last night?"

"It was...interesting," he said, raising his eyebrows as he cut into his omelet.

"Did we fuck?"

He laughed. "No. You tried, but...kinda collapsed. You were pretty gone."

I wondered what "gone" entailed, but I didn't want to have to ask. "Shit. Well, that's a fuck we're gonna have to make up for."

"So...how're you feelin' now?"

"Like I was really wasted last night."

"Maybe it's time to blow this town, huh?"

"S'only been one night! Don't tell me you're bored already."

"No, I'm not bored, it just...doesn't seem to be a very lucky place for us."

I pushed away my breakfast, unable to stomach any more of it. I grabbed the copy of

USA Today and relaxed into the chair, sipping coffee. I guess I thought if I looked comfortable and relaxed, Justin would change his mind about wanting to leave.

"Like the rest of the United States has been a pot of gold for us," I scoffed. "But, if you're ready, I s'pose we can head out," I said, trying to sound especially rueful about the matter, "you hardly spent any time gambling, though."

"Well, I spent ten hours watching you do it. That was plenty for me."

Suddenly I was hit by a horrendous sinking feeling. I lost a fucking boatload of cash last night. God, what the fuck was I thinking? And why the hell didn't he fucking stop me?

Maybe starting a business was a little premature a dream. Maybe just finding a fucking job was the smarter place to start.

"Anyway," he went on, "We've been doing okay everywhere else."

"Right, such as the falling staircase in the ghost town."

"Well, we didn't get hurt. And we had great sex afterwards."

"And the woman with The Watchtower pamphlet in that creepy diner who I had to give fifty bucks to just to go away."

"Local flavor."

"Well it doesn't matter, anyway," I said. "We're bound for the Promised Land."

Everything and Nothing



"In the desert, ... there is everything, and there is nothing It is God without man."

I didn't think of that myself. Some crusty old French guy wrote it about a million years ago, and some clever ad man who worked for the parks department decided to stick it on a brochure, and I read it and thought it was really fucking cool. Cause, yeah. I can't think of a better way to describe the desert.

It only took us about three hours to get from Las Vegas to Death Valley, but Death Valley was a lot bigger than I expected. We spent the whole day driving around the park, exploring every weird little attraction we could find- salt flats, and sand dunes, and places with names like Hell's Gate, Coffin Peak, and Starvation Canyon. I'm pretty sure we didn't even begin to scratch the surface, but we saw so much and had such a good time that by the time we were ready to camp for the night I'd almost completely forgotten the horrors of Brian Does Vegas.

As usual, he chose the most bizarre, remote location imaginable for us to sleep. It was literally the middle of nowhere. Nothing but sand as far as we could see, and I'm pretty sure it was illegal to camp there, but I wasn't about to complain. He seemed really thrilled with it, and I'd rather have him cheerful and sober in the middle of the desert than drunk and belligerent in a fancy hotel room.

He'd bought some Peyote back in Pittsburgh just for this occasion, and we ate it at sunset, after we'd set up our little makeshift camping area. Neither of us had ever done it before, so we weren't really sure what to expect. I was a little nervous that it would make me sick- I really do have allergic reactions to certain drugs- and I almost puked just from tasting it, but I was mostly excited about trying something new with Brian. About him trying something new with me.

I'm not exactly sure how to describe what happened next. Some of it is muddled and hazy, some so distinct and clear that I feel like I could reach out and grab it, hold it to my heart and never let go. All of it is very weird.

I suppose we can break it down into three distinct phases. The first, I'll call the pre-trip. Before the stuff started to really take effect.

During the pre-trip, things were about as normal as can be imagined, given the fact that we were camping in a fucking ocean of sand. Brian walked around taking pictures of the sunset, and the sand dunes, and some strange looking rocks and plants he found. I sat on the sleeping bag and drew with my pastels.

"It's really beautiful here," I said to him, and he agreed.

"And just think," he said. "We know what's on the other side. The pioneers had no idea. Can you imagine just leaving it all behind, for something you couldn't even guarantee?"

"Kinda..."

That was pretty much what he was asking me to do in Vegas, wasn't it? I looked up from my drawing to see if I could catch his eye, but he was still snapping pictures, probably oblivious.

"Now that's balls," he told me. "Pure balls."

Or maybe not so oblivious. Maybe he was trying to make a point about how brave it would be for me to go with him. Who knows.

"Didn't most of them go crazy before they even got to California?" I asked. "Didn't some of them wind up cannibalizing each other out here?"

That got him to look at me, with a funny little smirk, and I took the opportunity to hold up the drawing I'd just finished for his perusal.

"How's this?" I asked. "Better than the emaciated kitties?"

"Oh, Justin..." he said, and I could tell by the tone of his voice and the way his face went slack that he was very impressed. I love it when I can do that to him. Granted, it usually happens when I'm sucking his dick, but sometimes other things will get to him just as well.

He sat next to me on the sleeping bag and took the picture from me. Looked up at the sky and down at the paper and then back up again.

"That's...pretty damn good."

I beamed back at him, drinking in the praise.

"God," he laughed. "There's gotta be about a hundred ad slogans running through my head to go with this picture. And there's gotta be at least ten of Vangaurd's clients I could've used them on."

I tensed up a little at the mention of his job, and thought briefly of the previous night, but his tone was light and amused so I tried not to worry about it.

"Oh well. Let's hang it instead," he said, and handed it back to me. "In our new place."

And that brought the tension up to a whole different level. So now he was just assuming this was gonna happen, before I'd even said yes? When I'd told him explicitly that I didn't know?

"You're really serious about that?" I asked, not knowing what else to say without running the risk of a very *very* bad trip.

"Sure," he said, and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. Kissed the top of my head. "What've we got to lose?"

I didn't answer that. Couldn't answer that. Kept my big mouth shut, and nuzzled against him to watch the rest of the sunset in silence. When it was done we cooked some Ramen on our little Coleman stove, which I puked back up almost immediately after ingesting, and that's around the time we entered stage two- The Stupids.

During The Stupids, everything I did and thought seemed really profound, but was actually really very stupid. This is the part that's pretty blurry, when I try to remember it. I have no idea how long it lasted- it could've been five or six hours, could've been forty-five minutes. I know that it got dark, and that at some point I decided that I had a deep connection to the natural world, and could, in fact, talk to animals with my mind.

I remember kneeling on the sand in my underwear with a flashlight, trying to explain to a small snake I'd found that it was my spirit guide and I wanted it to give me some guidance. Trying to explain with my eyes, and a set of peculiar hand gestures.

I remember Brian noticing me doing this, and telling me to get the fuck away from the snake, and I remember telling him he had no faith in the spirit world, but doing what he said anyway, because I trusted him more than the snake.

I remember us both lying on the sleeping bag, looking up at the sky, and Brian telling me that the stars were walking, like people.

"The aliens are giving us a light show," he said. And that seemed like an amazing revelation to me. He told me to connect the dots, and I did, and I saw exactly what he was talking about. Then we started seeing animals. Cats and monkeys and birds, and they were all walking and flying, spinning around us like the electric light parade at Disney World. It was the fucking coolest thing I've ever seen in my life.

"Look, look, a horsie," I said, and pointed it out for him. "It's got a lady on it."

"It's yer mom," he said. "She's naked and calling for me..."

"Fuck you! You are so disgusting! I can't believe you had that dream."

It was disgusting, and I still can't believe he not only had that dream, but felt compelled to tell me about it, in revolting detail. It was still kinda funny, though. He started giggling, and so did I, and pretty soon we were both

almost crying from laughing so hard. Then he moaned, "Oh God, I'm gonna vomit," and rolled off the sleeping back and onto all fours in the sand. He made a little retching sound, but nothing came out, so he rolled back and said, "Forget it."

I remember noticing him staring at me, and asking what he saw, and him telling me, "You're orange. Like fire."

He moved his hand over me, close but not touching, and said it again. "Like fire."

"Maybe it's my aura," I said.

"S'beautiful..." he sighed. "S'like your soul or something."

I said, "I think that's what an aura is."

I grabbed onto his hand and ran it up and down over my chest.

"Does it hurt?" I asked him.

He shook his head. "S'warm. Like sex. Like the warmth in your gut."

"Do you think that snake went away?" I asked him, randomly. "I'm kind of scared of it now."

"Won't come near your fire soul. Hey, that should be a song. Fire Soul. I used to play guitar, you know. Me and Mikey. We were gonna be big stars." I think he said that all in one breath, like a rambling little boy.

"What happened?"

"We sucked ass."

I remember him asking me if I was still having a good time, and telling him that it was the best time I'd ever had in my entire life, and him smiling and saying, "Good. I want you to remember this, Justin. I want you to always remember this. Next time I'm being an asshole, just remember this."

"I'll never forget," I said. "Unless I get amnesia again."

And after that, I made a concerted effort to control my mind so that my memories of the night would always stay clear. And that's when we enter stage three, which I have no name for. It's too important to name.

Wow, that sounded stupid.

"Am I still on fire?" I asked him.

He squinted at me for a little bit, then nodded. "Hey, you think your soul could make me come?"

"I think...probably, yeah."

I rolled on top of him to test the theory, straddled his hips and nuzzled his nose and kissed him wetly. He moaned very loudly and ran his hands up and down my arms, onto my back. The contact was almost overwhelming, and I realized we hadn't really been touching at all since we took the peyote. That had obviously been a mistake. It felt unbelievable.

I started rocking against him and, I swear to god, I almost came right there. I felt like he was inside me already. Like he was inside me everywhere. There was denim and cotton between our cocks, but it felt like there was nothing at all. It felt like our skin was melting together through the fabric.

His hands slid down, under my briefs and onto my ass, and he squeezed and pulled at me as we kissed and kissed, and I don't even know how to begin describing those kisses- how much he was saying with them, and how loudly he was saying it. Eventually I had to tear my mouth away from his because I was actually a little bit afraid of it.

I licked his neck, and he made a noise I've never heard him make before. Something high pitched and needy. He was needy. He was still pulling at me, writhing underneath me, and when I looked into his eyes I saw something hungry and wild there.

Brian's never needy. Brian has more sex than any human was ever designed to endure. He wants it all the time, but he never ever needs it. But he did that night. He needed it.

"God, Jus'...Jus'in," he breathed hotly against my cheek. "Your cock is so...Fuck me. Fuck me, Justin."

I can't believe he asked for that. Not even asked. He was fucking begging. His voice...he was begging, and I can't believe it. I still can't believe it.

"Do it," he said, when I just sat there staring at him. "Fucking do it."

My hands were shaking when I pulled off his jeans, when I put on the condom, and by the time I slid into him, quick and hard like he seemed to want it, my entire body was trembling.

He cried out like a wounded animal, and I continued to stare. I was fascinated. He was fascinating.

I started moving, as smooth and methodical as I could manage, but then he grabbed my face and threw me off.

"Never gonna fuck another guy?" he asked urgently, locking his eyes on mine. "Ever?"

His words vibrated through me, like an electric shock. I didn't know why he was asking me that, why that was suddenly important.

"Never," I told him, and that was probably a pretty stupid thing to promise, but I honestly couldn't imagine why I ever would.

"Sure?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"S'no point," I said. "Never be this good with anyone else."

"Never?"

"Never...never ever ever..."

I had to look away then, to drop my head against his shoulder and close my eyes, because the rest of my body was about to spontaneously combust. My cock was thrusting violently, completely of its own accord, completely out of my control. I felt like his flesh was everywhere around me, like his blood was rushing through me. Like his heart was in my chest, and it burned and ached.

I had to concentrate. Had to calm down. It was too much.

"So beautiful," I said. "You're so beautiful. Perfect."

"Jus-Justin. Not. Ugh. Perf...M'not."

"You are to me. For me."

I kissed his neck, and then his cheek. All over his face. His sweet, fuckable mouth.

"Love you," I whispered against his lips. "I love you."

"Don't," he said. Don't. "Fuck...love."

I tasted salt water in my mouth. Opened my eyes and saw it sliding down his face.

"Don't say that," I begged him. "Please, don't say that." I'd heard enough of that bullshit from him to last several lifetimes, and I knew he didn't even believe it himself. He didn't want me to stop loving him. He wanted my love, needed it, soaked it up like a dying plant drinks water. He always had and, hopefully, always would. It broke my heart to hear him turning it down, like he didn't deserve it. Like he thought I should just let him dry up and blow away.

"M'not good...for you," he panted. "Not good."

"You are good," I said, and he let out a shaky sob. I licked across his cheeks, under his nose, ate his tears and willed him to believe me. "Better than anyone."

He latched his mouth onto my shoulder, biting and shaking his head like a dog with a chew toy, and his arms tightened around me. I felt his cock twitch against my stomach, and then the hot splash of him on my skin, and that sent me hurtling towards an orgasm that was almost terrifying in its intensity.

When it was over, I stayed inside him, on top of him, for a long time, just kissing him everywhere I could reach, and letting him pull on my hair and bite me and cry.

I think I was probably crying by then too, but I don't really know for sure. It was getting hard for me to tell what was him and what was me. It was like we were one person almost. I know people say that all the time, and it sounds so cheezy and fake, and I never thought it was something you could actually feel, but I felt it that night, in the desert. Maybe the people who say that are on a lot of hallucinogenic drugs.

In any case, I felt what he felt- all the confusion and the fear and the self-loathing and the love, god, the love. I saw myself through his eyes- beautiful, pure, and eternal, like an element. Like fire. I hoped that he could feel what was

in me. I hoped that he knew how good he was in my heart. I wanted to coat his insides with it, so it would always be with him.

But eventually, I had to pull out and take a piss.

When I came back, he was curled up inside the sleeping bag, wiping his face. I knelt down next to him and touched his hair. He smiled thinly, weakly, falsely.

"That was supposed to be better shit than that," he said, and laughed uncomfortably. He held open the bag, and I crawled in.

"S'not so bad." I kissed his chest, and felt his fingers tangling in my hair, massaging my scalp.

"Sorry if I freaked you out."

"You didn't," I said, but that wasn't entirely true. I was pretty fucking freaked out. I'd never seen him like that before, never seen him cry like that- with the abandon of a child. Not even during that first horrible month after I got out of the hospital.

I pressed my ear to his chest and felt his breathing start to even out. The stars were still walking around, I noticed, but I didn't really want to look at that anymore. It was a little nauseating.

"Justin, I..." he started, then drifted off into a sigh. He was still playing with my hair. Our legs were sweaty and tangled together in the sleeping bag. I felt like there was nothing else in the universe- the desert and the sky were so fucking big. I wanted to know what he was thinking, without having to ask, but the connection wasn't the same as it had been when I was inside him.

"What?"

"Nothin', I just...I dunno what I'd do without you is all," he said quietly. "And I'm trying to remember exactly when that happened. And how. N'why..."

I knew the answers to all those questions, but I didn't want to tell him that. I knew it would freak him out, and he was already freaked out enough. He was already lying there, like a big open wound, bleeding all over the sand and into me, giving me everything.

"You don't have to worry what you'd do without me," I told him. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Don't really understand why..."

"I told you. You're perfect for me. You're good...so incredibly good to me."

He choked out a bitter little broken laugh, and I could feel his whole body tense up in preparation to deny it.

"How can you possibly say that? How can you think that, with everyone around you telling you what a monumental asshole I am? With me-"

"Everyone around me doesn't know shit," I interrupted him. "Nobody else sees what I do."

I leaned up on my elbow so that he could see my face, so that I could tell him with my eyes. He still looked absolutely miserable. Eyes red, skin blotchy, and mouth turned down

"Nobody else was there when I was crying from nightmares about Chris Hobbs, and you held me all night." His frown deepened at that, and he tried to look away, but I took his chin in my hand and forced him to keep his eyes on me. I felt more tears building and burning in my throat, thinking about it, but I willed myself to keep going until it was all out.

"Nobody was there when you made me care about doing art again, or when you saved me from having to drop out of school even though I'd fucking walked out on you, or any of the other zillion things you've done for me when no one else was looking. They don't know the way you touch me when we're alone. The way you look at me...They could never understand how much you give me every day. Every minute. And if anyone really believes you're the asshole you pretend to be, then they're fucking stupid."

He closed his eyes and shook his head, and I wanted to shake him. To kiss him. To make him see himself through my eyes, somehow.

"You're the most amazing person I've ever known," I told him, and pressed my lips to his forehead. I don't think he believed me, but he didn't argue with me anymore. Just held me quietly for a long time.

"S'gonna be great in San Francisco," he said, eventually. "You'll love it."

I just nodded, not entirely sure if he was talking about moving there, or just visiting. But then he went on.

"We'll find a great place to live...get you back in school. Finding a job at the top firm there's gonna be like taking candy from a baby. And I'll make partner before the year is out. And we'll be back in the Pitts for Christmas, wondering why the fuck it took us so long to get out."

He sounded so hopeful about it. Almost wistful, and I don't think I'd ever heard him wistful about anything before. How could I tell him no? After all that...

"S'a nice dream," I said.

"Not a dream. It's the future. Our future."

And that was pretty much it for me. I never in a million years thought I'd ever hear him talking about "our future" together. Never thought that he'd open himself up this way, make himself so incredibly vulnerable. I thought I'd probably give him anything, do anything he asked and never resent him for it, and if this was all he was asking...how could I say no?

He was right. It was gonna be great in San Francisco, and I was gonna love it. Because we'd be together, living our future.

I fell asleep tangled around him in the sleeping bag, with the stars still dancing above us, and dreamt about everything and nothing. About our future.

Promised Land



I woke up feeling like I'd slept on a mattress filled with bowling balls. Everything on my body ached like a motherfucker, including my head, which felt like it had an anvil dropped on it in the middle of the night. I couldn't see straight, my throat was coated in desert sand, and my stomach was undulating all over my torso. It was goddamned hot and I'd never in my life wanted a shower as much as I did at that moment.

Then realization flooded into me. The recollection of last night replayed in my head like a song you despise. What the fucking fuck was I doing here? Why the fucking fuck did I say those things to him last night? And me, begging him to fuck me like some little fucking faggot. It was the drugs. God, I hope it was only the drugs.

I dreamt last night too. A fucking lot of lucid, mind wrenching, in my face revelations. My fucking life passed before my eyes. I was sure I wasn't gonna wake up from it. But it wasn't my whole life. It was my life with him. Everything we ever did and every single thing we said ever said to one another. And among the dreams was what I am certain was the replay of what happened in Vegas. The part I couldn't remember. The part where I said that he screwed up my life. If that's what it was, I realized just how fucked up I'd been. And how fucking fucked I was now. I'd told him last night we were gonna move. Together. What in fucking hell was I thinking?

When we left Pittsburgh I was already a hundred grand in the hole and the little I'd sold off from my home only put a mere dent in it. If I was going to sell the loft and move to California, there was no way I could afford to buy something even in the ballpark of comparable. Let alone the fact that no one was going to give me a fucking loan because I had no goddamn job, and of course, that little matter of my ass being in the red. I still could sell the 'Vette, but again, it'd hardly be enough to cover it all.

I could see it now, Justin and me, a happy fucking pair of fags in their one room, slum apartment, frying up cans of Spam and boiling water for Ramen noodles for dinner. And Justin would probably be working at some shithole diner, just like at home, only he'd be working sixty hours a week so that we could afford to have clean fucking underwear. Meanwhile, I'd be working some tedious entry-level copywriting position because the job market fucking sucks and the few executive level positions that were out there are now gone. Yeah, this had all been a very bad idea.

If I'd never met him, life would have stayed so fucking much simpler.

"You're up!" he said, plopping down next to me. I tried to focus my eyes on him, but it just made the earth spin out of control around him. "Want a wiener?"

I sat up finally and he put a paper plate down on my lap. I got a whiff of the shriveled up hot dog he'd apparently mutilated for me to eat for breakfast. I had to close my eyes and look away. "Get this shit away from me." I tossed it aside and covered my face with my hands. "How fucking old are those, anyway? You're gonna make the both of us sick."

"Sorry," he said in a snotty tone, "just thought you'd be hungry. And even if you weren't, you should eat something, you-"

"Just...just shut the fuck up, okay?" I couldn't take it, couldn't talk to him, and every thing he did was pissing me off. The way he was breathing, the way he was moving. And by this time I was feeling so sick, I needed to get in some air conditioning fucking soon. "Pack up our shit. It's time to go," I growled.

It didn't get any better from there.

He drove the whole way to Frisco, not because I wanted that, but because I closed my eyes for a minute in the car and before I knew it he was poking at me, asking me where he was supposed to go. I had missed everything. The mountains, that first glimpse of the ocean, the fucking Welcome to San Francisco sign. That moment when everything was supposed to feel better because we'd arrived.

I still wasn't ready to wake up, but when I peeked at him with one eye, I saw him trying to read the map and drive at the same time.

"What the fuck are you doing? You're gonna smash the fucking car!" I grabbed the map out of his hands.

"Well I asked you about a hundred times where I was supposed to go, but you weren't waking up. I just need to know if I'm supposed to turn somewhere soon."

"Shoulda turned way before here. Hang a right at the light. Here. Here. HERE!"

"All right I can hear you!" he yelled back at me. "God, why are you being such a prick?"

"Just bein' me," I said sarcastically. I pointed out where to turn to get us back in the right direction and added, "Isn't that what you 'fell in love with' in the first place?"

"You're not 'being you', you're being an asshole."

"Love it or leave me."

"Do you have multiple personality disorder or something? Or are you just...really, *really* tired?"

I didn't answer that and instead motioned for him to pull up to the front of a hotel and give the car to a valet. "I'll go in and get us a room."

"This is where you wanna stay?"

Fuck me. "What? Is it not to your liking, your highness?"

"No it's just... it looks kinda expensive, is all..."

Oh god, not this again. "Please don't start that shit with me or I'm gonna fucking put you on a plane and send you back to Pittsburgh."

"Well, maybe that's not such a bad idea if this is how you're gonna be."

I hadn't expected that answer. I just sat there, starting to feel queasy and overheated again. Eventually he sighed and pulled up like I'd asked. I got out of the car right away to check in because I didn't know how much time I had until I was really gonna need a receptacle to puke in, and because I was nervous that my VISA wasn't gonna clear. Didn't want him to be there if either of those things happened.

But everything checked out okay, thank god, and I ran up the stairs to our room, because time was running out for me. I knew I wasn't going to be able to keep it together much longer. And when I got into the room, I collapsed to my knees in the bathroom and heaved the contents of my stomach into the toilet. And heaved. And heaved again. And heaved even after there was nothing left.

Eventually I felt a hand on my back. Justin was asking me if I was okay. If I needed a doctor. Rubbing my sweaty back with his hand. I didn't answer. Only fell back on my ass and tried to get my breathing to return to normal and stop my body from shuddering.

He started patting my face down with a cold, wet washcloth, and it felt fucking fantastic. What a fucking lightweight I was. Who knew it would be fucking peyote of all the narcotics in the world that would knock me down, strip me of my humanity, turn me into a babbling, puking, fucking crying mess. I grabbed the washcloth from him and covered my face with it.

"Better?" he asked. What a fucking loaded question.

I didn't answer but pushed past him and flopped onto the couch, hoping he'd catch a clue and finally just leave me the fuck alone. All of this care taking was fucking grating on my nerves and I didn't know how much more I could take of it. At least Mikey knew when to give it a fucking rest. But instead I saw a bottle of water held out in front of me.

"Brian, are you all right?" he asked again, his voice soft and soothing. "Are you sure you don't need a doctor?"

I grabbed the bottle and drank half of it down. A bottle of water that I could have bought at the 7-11 for half the price this hotel was going to charge me for it. "I don't need anything," I mumbled.

He sat down on the chair next to me. "Well...would you talk to me, at least? You're really kind of scaring me."

"I don't want to talk," I snapped. "What's there to talk about, anyway? What a fucking bad idea this was? About how I'm gonna run out of money in like, two weeks if I don't find a goddamn job tomorrow?" I chuckled bitterly. "Or how about we discuss how you ruined my god-*damned* life?" My voice was quiet, and even-tempered. I almost felt like I wasn't saying the words myself, like I was only thinking them.

I didn't look at him, and he didn't respond, not right away. I finished the water and got up in search of alcohol to replenish my now unfortunately sober system. I dug through the mini bar and grabbed every bottle that was there. I downed three airplane-sized bottles of Absolut before he spoke again.

"Wh-why are you saying these things?" His voice was starting to break - he was starting to break - and part of me was glad. Part of me hated him for it.

"Because," I said, breaking into a gin bottle, "You asked me, didn't you?" I waved my arm out in front of me as I spoke. "Talk to me, Brian'...'tell me what's on your goddamned mind!" "

He got up off the chair and approached me. In a voice I could barely hear he pleaded with me, "I just...I just need to know how...how did I ruin your life? You said...last night you said...I just don't understand, is all..."

Oh was that all?

I drank two more bottles of gin, but was still frustratingly sober. I could feel the next words bubbling inside me, just like when I'd barely made it to the toilet to puke my guts out. Just like when I spilled my guts to him in the desert. It had to come out.

"My whole entire life is so fucked," I started, as though it were the first time I'd ever said it, and drank yet another bottle of god knows what now. "Before your little blonde ass showed up on Liberty Avenue, things were going just fine. I was 'Brian-fucking-Kinney'. Pittsburgh's top advertising executive and God's gift to gay P-A."

"And then," I went on, looking over at him, yet not entirely focusing. Pointing in his direction, I repeated, "And then you came into the picture. And you would not go the FUCK away." For the first time, the tone of my voice was raised. "You just... hung on, and hung on, and hung...the FUCK...on!"

I have a vague recollection of looking at him just then, and the seeing petrified look on his face. He was biting his lip and picking at his fingernails. His chest was rising and falling quickly. But I went on.

"And then! Then! Then, after I thought I'd given you everything I could possibly give you," I stepped closer and grabbed him by both arms and shook him, "you threw it back in my GODDAMNED FACE!" Suddenly I wasn't me anymore. I think I was screaming at this point. And I was shaking Justin exactly the same fucking way my dad used to shake me. Hard enough to dislocate bones. Pressing my fingertips into his biceps and squeezing him like a lemon.

I stopped shaking him and I could see the tears starting to stream down his face. And still I went on, even though there was a rising feeling of disgust and a searing pain in my gut from seeing the way he looked, continued to squeeze his arms even though his face was turning bright red.

"And now? Now that I gave it all back again, look at where it fucking got me! I lost my goddamn JOB because of you!!"

I paused, like I thought he was going to have something to offer, some excuse for being honest. For having integrity. For being selfless. For forcing me to be the same way.

I shook him again. "Shit! Do you have any IDEA how much money I could have been making?" I yelled. "I'd be in New fucking York City!"

Suddenly he looked blurry to me. I was crying. Fucking crying. Again. And he was still quiet.

"FUCK you, Justin Taylor," I said, more quietly this time, my voice raw and cracking. "Fuck. You. GOD! Do you know how much I fucking HATE you? Fuck you," I whispered.

I was shaking profusely by now, just like I had moments ago on the bathroom floor. I blinked and a ton of water spilt out of my eyes. I could see him more clearly now. He was sucking his lips inward, trying his damndest not to sob out loud. There should have been hatred in his eyes, but I couldn't find it. Only determination and...something else.

I pulled him to my chest and wrapped my arms tightly around him. "I hate you...hate you...hate you so much," I whispered one more time and rubbed my wet cheek into his hair. He held on to me even more tightly.

Finally he sniffled and sobbed out loud. "I...I'm sorry, Brian, I..." But he couldn't go on. He just cried. Shit. I am such an asshole.

I took his head in my hands and kissed him. All over his face. I lapped up his tears and rubbed my own sweaty, snotty, teary face into his. "Justin," I whispered, leaning my forehead into his, "Justin... this wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't in the plan for me, you know?"

He nodded and wrapped his arms even more tightly around my waist, like he thought I was going to run away.

"Damn you for doing this to me," I went on, my voice still quiet and raw. "For making me care so goddamn much it hurts. I wasn't supposed to care. You forced me to do something I'm scared to death of doing."

He squeezed me again. "S'not anything to be afraid of," he said quietly.

"Oh yeah. It is. Because," I paused and took a deep breath, because what was to come out of my mouth next did so not of my own volition. I tried to keep it down, but like everything else I'd just done and said, it had to come out.

"Wh...what if I can't, Justin?" I asked in a whisper I'm surprised he could even hear. "What if I do it wrong? And what if I...what if you figure out that I'm no superhero and...and I let you down?"

He pulled back and let go of me finally, futilely wiping his face. He swallowed, and smiled as much as he could muster. Smiled. "You can't."

He fucking smiled.

"But I just did."

"Well, I'm still here aren't I?" Still smiling.

"Yeah, but for how long?"

"Until you shove me on a plane?"

I stood there, stunned for a minute, and when the words sunk in, I found myself smiling. "Do you want me to?"

He shook his head and sniffled, wiping snot from his nose. Still. Fucking. Smiling.

"Why ARE you still here, Justin?"

"Because I love you. Unconditionally."

I saw it again. The determination and...the something else. The kid just keeps hanging on. I may never for the life of me figure out why he believes I'm important enough to hang on to, but I guess I'm a lucky fucker at any rate.

"And...I remember what you told me. You told me not to forget, next time you're a fucking asshole."

I laughed through my nose. "So it's my fault."

He punched my upper arm softly. "Fraid so."

I moved away, toward the window, and lit up a cigarette, opening the curtains and staring out on to the bay. I fixated my gaze on Alcatraz and blew smoke into the window.

"What do you wanna do, Brian?"

"I have no fucking idea," I sighed, still staring out the window. "We could commit suicide together. That'd be romantic."

"Yyyeah...that's an option, I suppose." He joined me at the window and put an arm around my waist. I handed him my cigarette and let him take a drag. "You don't have to know," he said and handed it back. "You don't have to have all the answers. We can figure it out together...if you want."

"Together..." I chuckled.

"Unless you'd prefer to be alone, like before, when things were so great for you..."

I gave him back the cigarette and stared at him intently for a moment.

"S'up to you," he told me. "I'm not your stalker anymore."

I turned back to the window and stared out again, watching the seagulls dive for fish. "Can't hardly remember what that was like," I whispered. "I'm just another queer. Freak of nature. Except," I paused and chuckled, the bitterness heavy in my tone, "Except when it comes to you."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means..." I turned my head toward him, "It means you make it okay." I looked away again. "Not even Mikey could do that."

I heard him click his tongue. "You're *not* a freak of nature," he said, tightening his grip on my waist. Don't you remember what I told you at the Aquarium? About the lesbian seagulls and the queer sea lions? It's not against nature to be what we are, it's just part of it."

I shrugged. "You and I may know that, but..." I took a deep breath, "the rest of them, like... Stockwell, like...my mother, like...your dad. They don't even wanna know it."

"Well whose problem is that?"

"It just...it woulda been easier," I admitted.

"What, if you'd been straight?"

"I wouldn't have had to hate my dad, you wouldn't have had to get kicked out of your house. Coulda married Lindsey and been all...good and straight," I laughed. "You never woulda met me, you never would have almost died."

"You don't know that. Maybe something else would've killed me for real. Maybe, if I'd never met you, the same fucking thing would've happened except you wouldn't have been there to save me."

I pinched my eyes shut. Didn't even want to imagine that scenario.

"There are so many things that could've been different. My life would probably be easier if I was like, taller or something. Or really interested in finance." He leaned his head into my arm and I wrapped it around his shoulder. "This is what we are. And I'm not sorry for any of it."

"I know," I said and pulled him even closer, "s'what makes you the bigger man."

"It's what YOU taught me. Do you regret being with me?"

"Never, I..." I cringed again, recalling what had just happened. "I'm sorry. That I said all that, Justin, I-"

"Well then, don't regret being gay. 'Cause, you know, they kinda go together. I mean, unless you want me to get a sex change or something. But I have a feeling we'd both regret that."

I laughed out loud and I felt a fucking tremendous weight just sort of float away from me. "So," I sighed, "what the fuck are we doing here?"

"Taking a much-needed vacation?"

Yeah, that sounded like the best fucking idea so far. "Sure. Until the money runs out. But maybe then we can escape to Mexico."

"Mmmmaybe we should um...not spend ALL the money," he said tentatively.

"Don't worry about it. My plan is to pimp your ass."

"As long as you're thinking of the future," he smiled, and I saw a whole lot of relief in his eyes.

"C'mere," I said and pulled him around to my chest, holding him tightly again. "Sorry if I scared you," I said quietly.

He rubbed his cheek into mine. "S'okay. Just don't fucking do it again."

"Maybe you oughtta see about putting me on some sort of medication, then."

"Or maybe you should just stop self-medicating so much. I can live with a little moodiness, but if you keep telling me you hate me, I'm gonna start believing you."

"Well," I sighed and let go, suddenly realizing how urgent it was that I shower and brush my fucking teeth, "you know what they say about hate and fine lines..."

When I reached the bathroom door he said, "Oh, and Brian?"

I lifted my brows in response.

"I'm still having fun."

The universe has really given Brian Kinney some unfair advantages, I thought, watching him lounge by the hotel pool with his Banana Boat tanning oil, while I huddled under an umbrella, glopping more SPF five thousand onto my itchy red skin. He looked like a fucking bronzed god, and I looked like a shriveled up little strawberry. It just wasn't right.

It was nice to see him relaxing, though. Smiling. Dozing. Drinking something froofy and frozen because it tasted good. I think his little cathartic meltdown did wonders for his soul. And in a way, it did wonders for mine.

I guess that sounds weird, considering the things he said, and the fact that, on the surface, it all confirmed my very worst fears about his feelings. But I know Brian far too well to take things at their surface value. I know that he only means what he says some of the time, and that he hardly ever says what he means. I know that when he was clinging to me like a life raft, sobbing and telling me that he hated me, that it was the closest he's ever come to saying I love you.

Yeah, he had me fooled for a few minutes. Fooled and fucking terrified, but it wasn't long before I recognized the misery and the stark terror in his eyes, and realized that I was watching Brian Kinney's last stand. His last best defense. He was trying to smash apart everything that had happened the night before, trying to prove to me that I was wrong, that he really was a monumental asshole, and that loving him was a terrible, terrible mistake.

Lucky for him, I'm not that easy to get rid of. You'd think he'd know that by now. You'd think he would've realized years ago that I'm not that easy to fool. That no matter what he says, he'll never get me to stop loving him with all my heart, and I know that he doesn't really want me to stop. He might think it would be better for me if I did, and maybe he's right about that, but it doesn't matter because it's not gonna happen.

Maybe there was some truth in what he said. Maybe there were some small seeds of resentment lingering inside him, but once he got them out, they were gone forever. And it was a huge fucking relief to watch them disintegrate right in front of my eyes.

The whole thing was a huge relief, really, and when it was over we started having fun again. We had an amazing dinner that night, and an even more amazing fuck, and now we were swimming and drinking pina coladas, and getting ready for another fabulous night on our summer vacation. And it was okay that it was just a vacation. It was absolutely okay.

Once I'd gotten every square inch of my body covered with that stupid, useless lotion, I decided to brave the sun and take the chair next to Brian. He had one of my sketchbooks with him, and seemed to be doodling in it for some reason.

"What're you doing?" I asked him. He turned towards me and lifted his sunglasses. Gave me a smile that seemed almost nervous.

"I've got a little question for you," he said. "Sort of a...proposal."

"Proposal?"

He took my hand, and looked very seriously into my eyes, and for a panicked moment I actually imagined him proposing marriage. And I imagined my reaction, which would probably be to laugh hysterically, and then vomit. Which is sort of weird, 'cause once upon a time, that was my lame and secret fantasy.

"Justin Taylor, will you be my....partner?"

"Huh?"

He tore the page he'd been writing on out of the sketchbook and handed it to me. There was an elaborate, but poorly drawn letterhead on the top, in black magic marker. It said Kinney Taylor, Inc. I stared down at it, then back up at him, then back down again. I didn't really understand. I thought maybe it was a joke, and I wasn't getting the punchline.

"Huh?" I asked again.

"You're a better artist than anyone on my old staff ever was," he said quickly. "And I know Pittsburgh's business community better than the back room at Babylon ...I figure we'd be a hell of a team."

It sounded like a speech- something he'd been rehearsing in his brain for hours, maybe even days- and I just kept staring at him, mulling the words over in my head. Team. Partner. Business. He was asking me to start a business with him. To start his agency. Our agency. Holy fucking Christ.

"Are you serious?" I asked him. He couldn't be serious.

"Why not?"

Why not? Why not...God, there were so many reasons why not. I didn't even know where to start.

"I-I've got like, negative zero business experience," I said.

He shrugged. "That's probably gonna be an advantage."

"I'm only twenty. And I've got no capital to contribute, and I didn't finish school and my mom will kill me if I don't go back ever, and I only have one tie, and it's ugly..."

"We can turn the loft into an office easily," he said, ignoring my rambling. "And my car appraised at fifty grand here in homo valley. So, we can stay just long enough to get it sold, take the money back to the Pitts, and start working for our first million."

I felt that rushing sensation sweeping through me, the falling, roller coaster, spinning wildly out of control and not caring feeling that I only get from Brian, and I didn't know if it was fear or excitement or both, but I loved it. I loved it.

"Are you...you're really serious about this. You want me to be your partner? I mean...that's...I could just work for you, you know."

"How are you gonna pay me back for school that way? A partner makes way more money than an ordinary art department peon."

"Yeah, but...that's less money for you, probably, when it all works out."

He sighed and grabbed the paper back from me irritably. "All right. Forget it then."

He's such a baby sometimes. It's really kind of funny.

"No, no, I want to! I want...that. I want to be your partner."

And I did. I wanted it. I wanted it a lot. Even if I was frighteningly under qualified.

He smiled, small and sweet, and reached over to squeeze my thigh.

"Well then, what do you say we go upstairs and shake on it," he suggested, running his finger in circles, nearly brushing against my balls.

"You do realize this means you're gonna be stuck with me now?" I asked. He leaned over and stuck his tongue down my throat as an answer.

"We're gonna be poor for a while," he told me in the elevator, on the way back up to the room. His hand was inside my shorts, and he was running his nose all over my neck.

"Mmm," I sighed. "I can do poor..."

"We won't even have a cool car anymore."

The doors opened with a ding, and he pulled me towards our room by the front of my swimsuit.

"Don't care about the car," I said, and he shook his head.

"No, guess you wouldn't..."

"What does that mean?"

"Means you're simple," he said, pressing me against our door as he dug through his pocket for the key card.

"I am not simple! I'm very complex."

"If you were so complex, you'd be really torn up about selling the car."

I raised an eyebrow at him, and he managed to get the door open and shove me inside. He pushed me onto the bed, which kind of hurt thanks to my sunburn, but I was so turned on I didn't really care.

"I think you're confusing complex with superficial," I said, as he crawled on top of me, pulled down my shorts.
"Besides, didn't you just get that car 'cause you were bored without me?"

He stopped moving and stared up at me from my stomach, mouth agape and eyebrows crunching together. "What the fuck? Who told you that? Did Michael tell you that?!"

"No, I figured it out all by my little self," I told him, laughing. It was just a guess, really, but it was obvious from his reaction that it was completely accurate.

"Fucker," he snarled, and grabbed my wrists, pinned me to the mattress and ground himself against me. I lifted my legs and ran my feet up the back of his thighs. "I'm gonna get that fucking car back. We're gonna make enough in a year for me to buy it back, and you'll be able to see by then how important it is for our quality of life."

I just laughed some more, and he kissed me.

"Ready, partner?" he asked me, after he'd gotten on the condom and positioned himself, and I felt my mouth drying out, my chest constricting. I really was starting to love the sound of that.

He fucked me for hours, and I thought about the first time we were together- how frightened and excited and inexperienced I was- and how similar a situation this was going to be. Brian was going to have to teach me everything, and my parents were going to freak out, and my whole life would be full of new and strange things, and I would be in completely over my head. Nothing would be secure or predictable, and I had no idea if I could really handle any of it.

I couldn't wait to start.

I ran the ad for the car and started getting calls the same day. I showed it nonstop from nine in the morning until two in the afternoon, with a few serious interests, but every offer was ridiculously low. I listed it at sixty thousand, hoping I could get fifty, willing to take forty-five if I had to. But so far no biters.

I was leaning against the car, reconsidering my sales tactic and strategy, when a bleached blonde surfer "dude" approached me. A really hot, bleached blonde surfer dude, wearing only a pair of bright blue surf shorts that showed off the sizeable bulge in the front. His pecs were hard as rocks and his legs were thick as tree trunks. My cock responded immediately.

"You Brian Kinney?" he asked.

"In the flesh." I extended my hand. "And you are..."

He took and shook it, then hung on to run his fingers over my skin. "Jerry Lewis. In the flesh."

He was trying to meet my seduction, but you can't tell a guy that's your name and expect him to keep a straight face.

"No, seriously, dude, it really is," he affirmed and proceeded to show me his license. It checked out.

He was the first one interested in driving the thing. I went with him and we drove around the bay, then found some place out of the way to fuck. By then I was so horny I was more than ready to get on with it. I ripped his shorts down and plunged in before he even had a chance to attempt to kiss me.

And then I went to reach for the guy's ass and it was...nonexistent. Just a flat line from his lower back to his thighs, separated by a crease. I kept my hands on his hips instead, and reached for his cock. I could have wrapped my fingers around it twice it was so fucking thin. I let go of it. It was freaking me out a little.

I pumped harder and leaned my head down on the back of his. Instead of soft, smooth, and silky, it was crusty, it smelled like a bleached cunt, and it scratched my face worse than beard stubble.

Then something inexplicable happened. Something that hadn't happened since the time Justin and I were not fucking. I was bored. My body was responding, going through the motions, but if the guy had suddenly vanished into thin air, it wouldn't have mattered.

I could hear from the noises he was making and from the way he was squeezing me that he was getting damn close, but like some kind of fucking woman, I didn't even feel like I was on the brink yet.

All I could think of was the guy that compared his reaction to fucking me to his reaction to Citizen Kane. And if something like that that happened here, I'm sure I'd wasted precious time, energy, and gas on this guy. So I closed my eyes, and did the same fucking thing I did every damn time I was with someone else, only this time it was voluntary.

I thought about him.

But not about him and me fucking. I thought about him and me starting a company together, I thought about the late nights eating Thai and brainstorming, fucking on the table, sleeping, getting up and working some more. I thought about our first client cocktail party, our first office. I thought about doing our first million-dollar year. I thought

about coming back here, and all the other places we'd gone on this doomed expedition, when we actually had the fucking time and money to spend.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, dude..." Jerry Lewis laughed, "I'm good, buddy."

Apparently I'd finished. We'd finished.

"That was one bitchin' fuck! Phew!"

I pulled out of him. "Bitchin'..."

He laughed and pulled up his shorts. "Yeah, totally off the Richter, dude."

"Totally."

Well, at least he'd enjoyed himself.

"Got some spoooge on the ride, though. Whoops."

I looked at where he was pointing and saw that it was starting to dry already. "Fuck," I complained and opened the trunk in search of a chamois.

"Dude, it's totally cool, I'm gonna take it and have this baby detailed to the max anyways," he told me.

"So...you're gonna take it, then?"

"Oh yeah, it's the sweetest fucking ride I've ever been in!"

"Sure it's not too small for your surfboard?"

He laughed, "Yeah, but that's what the Jeep is for. This is like, purely for off-beach activities, if you catch my drift."

"Uh-huh."

"Now I know that like, your ad said sixty thou, but uh, I'm thinkin' more like, fifty would be cool, yeah?"

I remained stoic. Fifty thousand dollars. Thank you thank you.

"I was hoping not to go lower than fifty-five. Dude."

"Okay-okay-okay-okay," he said, holding his hands up like he was directing traffic, "dude, listen to this: How 'bout fifty-three, cash, right now. My bank is like, five minutes away, I'll get you a cashier's check in like, no time."

"Like, okay. It's a deal."

Cowa-fucking-bunga.

Turns out that this guy was independently wealthy, living on a family inheritance and spent his days fucking guys and riding waves. He was "bitching" about how he was going to have to build a new garage just for this car. He didn't want to squeeze one more vehicle into the existing eight-car one. I knew should have held out for the sixty thou.

He dropped me back at the hotel and I stood at the front, watching him speed off, leaving me there with nothing but the piece of paper that was supposed to get us started on a new road. Us. As in him and me. Together. It was too fucking weird to contemplate for too long.

Justin was gone when I returned to the room. I plopped down on the bed with a heavy sigh. I couldn't believe I'd fucked the guy. And not so much that I'd done it, but that I'd done it and that it had sucked. I couldn't help feeling like a fifty-three thousand dollar whore. Funny that after ten years in marketing and advertising this is what it took to make me feel dirty.

I was almost asleep when Justin came back. "D'you sell the car?" he asked.

I nodded, staring at the water spots on the ceiling.

"Well, that's...that's awesome, isn't it?? I mean, the first day and all." He threw the towel he had wrapped around his shoulders onto the chair, and laid down on his side next to me. "So, how much?"

"Fifty-three. Dude," I said flatly and turned to look at him briefly. His eyes and nose were red from the chlorine, and his hair was damp. I wondered if he'd talked to anyone while I was gone.

"Fifty-three? Holy crap, Brian! That's like, a whole lot more than you thought you'd get."

I nodded again.

"Well, we should go celebrate!"

I nodded, this time adding a sigh.

"We...shouldn't...go celebrate?"

"I fucked him," I confessed, "the guy that bought the car."

He actually fucking laughed at that. "I know. I figured you would."

"Well, aren't you going to get upset?"

"Why would I be upset?"

I looked at him finally. He was smiling. A shit-eating grin that nearly had me wondering if he'd seen it all happen. If he had read my thoughts.

And then I noticed them. The small round blue circles on his upper arms. I thought about what I'd do if it had been someone else who had given him those bruises. But I did that to him. Me. And here he was, lying practically on top of me, fucking smiling at me like he never even noticed they were there. He even went out swimming, out in public, with his arms looking like that, where people could see him and wonder who did that to him. I did. I had done it to him.

I swallowed down the bile that had risen in my throat. "Why aren't you?"

He shrugged and waved his hand. "Because...I stopped hoping for that to change a long time ago. If I got mad every time you fucked some random guy, I'd need anger management classes."

I sighed again and looked back at the ceiling. I watched him out of the corner of my eye, drying his hair with the towel and brushing it out. He stepped into the bathroom to take a piss.

"His name," I expounded over the sound of him peeing, "was Jerry Lewis."

He really giggled at that, for a long time, and it was contagious enough for me to finally smile and laugh myself a little. He re-emerged from the bathroom and said, "You're shitting me. You fucked Jerry Lewis. That is rich."

"Yeah, and so was he. A fucking filthy rich bleached-blond surfer."

"Dude," he teased, curling up closer to me. "So, how was he?"

I exhaled a laugh, recalling the guy's skinny dick. "Well, uh-mm..., I got off."

"That good, huh?"

I looked up at him just enough to see him leaning in to kiss me. I think he just meant to do it quick, but I grabbed his wet head and kept him there for a while. I needed to get the taste of surfer out of my mouth. And show Justin that I hadn't actually tasted him. I could at least be that loyal to him.

"You're not pissed," I asked as we broke away. "At all? Not even.... not even a twinge?"

"Do you WANT me to be pissed?" he asked and put his top leg over one of mine.

I did. I wanted him to be pissed. I can handle that. It's this other weird feeling, this combination of disgust and indifference and guilt, even, that's the part that's annoyingly confounding.

"Are you turned on?" I tried another angle.

"Nnnnot by that, particularly," he laughed and kissed my cheek, then laid his head on my chest. "I dunno, I've worked really hard to get to the point where I have no reaction to it whatsoever. It's sorta like children becoming desensitized to violence on television or whatever."

I nodded slowly and put an arm around him, letting him snuggle up closer, and rested my hand on his bare back.

"And I mean," he went on, "most people who promise to be faithful wind up cheating anyway, and then lie about it. You've always been honest. That's worth way more than any stupid empty promises."

I smiled briefly. Leave it to him to put a saintly spin on my asshole characteristics. Yeah, this kid was fucking born for advertising.

"I should take a shower," I told him when he started kissing my neck, "I'm sure I stink."

"No you don't," he assured me and took a hefty whiff. "Smells like you. Just you."

We lay there for quite a while, touching each other and kissing, nearly drifting off to sleep. Every once in a while I felt like I should be talking, but I couldn't come up with anything to say. And every once in a while I felt like we should be fucking, but for some reason, I didn't feel compelled to start. Ridiculous as it seems, it was enough just to be like this.

"So...are we going out or what?" he asked finally.

I groaned, only half-awake.

"Hey..." he interrupted before I could answer, "what the hell is that?"

"What is what?"

"That black thing, on the nightstand, with the curly cord..." He dove over me and grabbed it. "It's the fucking car charger!" he laughed and smacked my chest with it. "You said you lost it!"

"Well, whaddya know, it was in the trunk the whole time," I said, feigning ignorance.

"You are such a shit, you did that on purpose. You just didn't want me talking to anyone when we left. Fuck," he laughed some more, then kissed me. He was right. But now I knew it probably wouldn't have made a bit of difference anyway. Stupid bastard would follow me to the North Pole and back if I wanted to go. The fucking FBI could have come after him and he would have told them to fuck off.

I tossed the thing aside and sat up, turning to gently push down on Justin's shoulders. Once he was down flat I set my elbows on either side of his neck and grabbed a hold of his head with my hands before leaning down to kiss him. He hummed and ran his hands up the sides of my torso and up my back.

"Justin..." I whispered, moving down to his neck.

"Mmmm...yeah...s'nice," he sighed.

I started to suck on his neck while hugging his head with my arms, then moved my head up to rub my nose in his slightly damp head. He smelled like chlorine, but his hair felt smooth and soft on my cheeks.

I moved on top of him, pushing his legs apart and insinuating myself there, my groin on his. He moaned and bent his legs, wrapping them around my ass so his heels pressed into my thighs. I ground my hips into his still damp swimming trunks, and when he opened his mouth to moan I slipped my tongue inside.

"Mmmmyou...wanted to go out," I reminded him in between kisses, "we can go out if you want."

"Mmmno, this is nice too," he smiled, panting. "Maybe later," he said and craned his neck upward to kiss me again.

"Whaddayou wanna do now?" I whispered into his ear. "Tell me."

"I wanna stay here, I want you to...to make love to me."

"Kay."

I lifted myself up on my knees, pulling Justin's trunks off, pausing to caress his erection a moment before removing my own clothes. Then I ran my hand down his chest and over his hips, back up again, and down again, over his abdomen. Just so I could watch his face, eyes closed and flinching in pleasure with every movement that tingled or tickled.

As hard as I tried not to, I couldn't keep my gaze from settling on the marks on his arms. I sat there a moment and tried to come up with a reason, an excuse, an explanation, an apology, but all I could do was run my fingers over his shoulders and biceps super lightly. I did it over and over, like I thought it would make them disappear.

"Brian..." he whispered. I looked up at him and he was shaking his head. Not because he was in pain, but because he wanted me to not worry about it. He reached up and ran his hands down my arms lightly and held both my hands in his a moment. And with a look he absolved me once again.

Finally I returned to his cock, pressing it against mine and rubbing them together with one hand. Justin's back arched and his head rolled back and forth. I stared at him, willing him to look back at me. Eventually he did.

He smiled when his eyes met mine. "Brian..." he sighed. "I'm..."

"Having a good time?"

"Better. I'mmmmmmm...", he whimpered and lifted his hips upward, "happy."

I wanted to ask him why he was happy, why he had felt the need to tell me that, but "Justin, ugh, Justin..." was all that came out of me.

I rubbed us faster and harder and watched him writhe beneath me, his face getting redder by the second. "Mmms'good. Ughhh...Brian...s'too....too good." He grabbed my wrists and held them still. "C'mon, I want you inside me."

I teased him by shaking my head and leaning down to kiss him hard. "Ever heard of taking your time?"

"I thought that was for dykes," he winked.

I plunged my tongue back in his mouth and he moaned and sucked at it. Soon he was whimpering and pressing himself up against me, pushing my ass even tighter to him.

"Wass'matter?" I chuckled.

He let out the breath he'd been holding. "Nothin'..." He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Jus' feel like...like I can't get close enough sometimes." He nuzzled my nose.

"Okay." Enough prolonging.

I pushed up and reached for a condom and the tube. I handed Justin the condom to put on me while I squeezed out the lube. I slicked up a couple of my fingers and put one in him, then pulled out and added another. He dropped the condom and writhed. I smiled and kept pumping.

He gasped and lifted his hips, "Mmmffuh...mmmc'mere...fuhh..." He grasped the air trying to get a hold on me with one hand and search for the condom with the other.

I grabbed his wrists with my free hand. "Relax." I ripped the condom out of its package and handed it back to him. I leaned in closer so he could finish the job. He slipped it on me, nice and slow and I groaned, grabbing onto his wrists again. He squeezed me tightly once before letting go.

Then I eased his legs up over my shoulders and pushed the tip of my cock in. He groaned immediately and his hands flew back to grab the headboard. I pulled all the way out and pushed in again, this time a little further.

"Mmm...fucking-ahh," he whimpered.

I did it again, pulling all the way out and this time going all the way in, shoving Justin's legs higher.

He squeezed his eyes shut and moaned, loudly. "Mmmgod...Brian...mmm'ere..." He used one hand to grab for my head, pulled me by the hair and started kissing the hell out of me. Whimpered and bit and sucked at my lips.

I sped up and every breath I took was marked with a grunt.

"S'better? Better than he was?" he panted.

"Aw...fuck yeah," I groaned.

He bit my ear and for some reason that was the thing that made me lose all control. I rammed into him hard, making him slide up and down the bedspread with each thrust. Soon there was nothing but the motion, the rhythmic squeak of the bed, and the building, building, building sensation in my groin.

"Ah, Justin, Justin...ugh..."

I got to watch his orgasm after mine was over, his face contorting and his breathing rapid, until he reached his peak, when he opened his mouth wide and grunted without sound. My chest was coated with him when I collapsed on top.

"Love you...love you...love you..." he whispered, licking the sweat off my forehead.

When my breathing had returned to normal, I asked him if he was ready to go back home.

"Mmmthink so, yeah."

I rolled off of him with a grunt. "S'gonna be a lot of work, you know. Day n' night. Working, not fucking."

"Surely we'll be able to fit the fucking in somewhere," he giggled. "I have the utmost faith in that."

I chuckled and kissed his temple.

"S'gonna be great."

I sighed. I was excited, but not blindly optimistic. I hoped he realized how serious I was. How serious all of this was.

"Were we going somewhere?" I laughed after we'd laid there for a long time.

"Mmmaybe. S'matter, old man? Too worn out?" He propped himself up on one elbow and kissed my cheek.

"Fuck off," I laughed. "Did I say that?"

He shrugged. "No, but maybe I'm just projecting," he admitted through a yawn, then dropped his cheek down on my chest.

I wondered to myself if this was the way it was always going to be, as in, just me and him. After what happened with surfer boy, I wondered if this was the beginning of the end for Brian Kinney. But I was still horny as fuck, that part hadn't changed. Only it wasn't for just any kind of sex. "S'kinda pointless..." I mumbled.

"Going out?"

It took a minute to realize I'd said that out loud. "Huh? Oh yeah, right. Going out."

He lifted himself up on his elbow. "What did you really mean?"

Crap. I just hated when he did this to me. I shrugged and tried to instead reach for my cigarettes, but he grabbed my wrist before I could get to them.

"Tell me!" he insisted.

I tried wrenching away. "Nothin', come on..."

He stared at me imploringly, then finally sighed and let me go. I fished two cigarettes out and lit them for us.

"Besides," I began, handing him his, "I think you know already."

He took a nice long drag. "Yeah, well, I know a lotta things. I know all the words to 'Vogue,' for instance. But sometimes I actually like to listen to it anyway."

I gave him a strange look. "Vogue...?"

"Okay, musical preferences really not the point, but I happen to enjoy Madonna on occasion-usually a drunken occasion, but that's irrelevant. The point is, it makes me happy, ya know, once in awhile, to hear it."

I nodded and finished my cigarette in silence.

I used to have a Brian collection. I kept it under my bed, in an old Nike shoebox. The collection consisted of a picture of the two of us from my art show at the center, a ticket stub from the disgusting porno theatre he used to bring me to, a hunk of hair I'd cut off his head when he was passed out drunk one time, a couple of sketches I'd done of him, the underwear I'd stolen the first night we were together, and lots and lots of ads. I used to cut them out of magazines- the ones he told me were his- and show them to Daphne, so she could see how clever and talented he was.

I thought about the collection our last night in San Francisco, and how glamorous and unreal his life seemed to me back then. How impressive it all was. And now that was gonna be us. We were gonna be making ads like that together.

I actually considered telling Brian about his box of stalkerdom, mostly because it seemed like he was feeling strangely insecure that night. He pulled me out of about seven different bars, muttering lame excuses about how crowded they were, or how empty, or how there were fire code violations, but I noticed that every time he decided it was time to leave, there happened to be someone staring at me, or moving close to me on the dance floor. He pulled me onto his lap and started chewing on my ear when one of our bartenders got a little smiley and flirty with me, and

he clung to me like a piece of wet seaweed after I'd pointed out a guy in one place who looked a lot like Johnny Depp.

I figured the box story might make him feel superior enough to stop fretting about me running off with Joe Gayguy, but I decided to keep it to myself in the end. It was just too embarrassing, for one thing, and for another, I guess I was kind of enjoying his possessive behavior. It was kinda hot.

After we'd been through about fifteen different bars, though, I was starting to get a little worn out. And hungry. I suggested food, and we found a deserted pizza parlor at three in the morning, stumbled in, and ordered an entire pie.

I told him about the phone call I'd made to my mother that morning. How I'd explained that we were coming home tomorrow, and planning on starting our own business after that. I think she was more puzzled than anything else.

"If Brian needs a job, I could probably help him find something in real estate," she'd told me.

Brian got a big kick out of that one.

I was certain she'd have compiled a long list of reasons that this was a terrible idea by the time we got home, but it didn't matter. She'd change her mind when we made our first million, when I could buy her a new car, and start a college fund for Molly.

I asked him if he'd managed to get in touch with Michael, and he told me about the messages they'd been leaving for each other, back and forth. Apparently Michael's consisted of things like, "Sorry I missed your call. Ben and I were fucking." Or, "Sorry I missed your call. Things have been crazy at the store. I did three grand this month! Hope you two lovebirds are having fun..."

"He's really pissed at you," I said. "You shoulda called him a long time ago."

"He's not pissed. Don't even think he noticed I was gone. Mikey's finally got a life..."

He sighed and sucked down some coffee, and I shook my head at his stupidity.

"Don't you know how to read him at all?" I asked. "He's even more transparent than you are. He may have a life, but he's still totally pissed."

He smiled a little, but didn't seem to believe me. He'd see when we got back, though. I was sure of that.

When our pizza came, I told him I'd called Daphne too, and that she was really excited for us. Really supportive.

"She'd support you if you told her you were going to clown school," he said.

"Uh-uh, not true. She's been very unsupportive of some of my decisions."

"Like what? Fashion choices?"

"No, boyfriend ones. She hated Ian."

He froze and stared at me for a minute, eyes narrowed, and I smiled around my pizza.

"Always knew I loved that girl," he said.

"She loves you too," I told him. "Even plotted with me to win you back. She suggested a suicide attempt, but then we decided that since stalking worked so well the first time..."

"Aha, so it all goes back to Daphne."

We decided, using drunken logic, that it was really Daphne's fault Brian had lost his job, and that she owed us several thousands of dollars in back pay, which we would be forced to collect from her when we returned to the

Pitts. Then, once the pizza was gone and the coffee was cold, Brian told me he wanted to go fuck on the Golden Gate Bridge.

It sounded like a dubious plan- one that could very easily lead to our arrests and/or deaths- but what better way to end our journey than with some dangerous sex? Plus, I figured the Golden Gate Bridge was at least as strange a place as Alcatraz, and I still wanted to top that one.

Once we got out there, though, I started to waver. The thing was fucking enormous, for one thing. I'd never seen such a huge, imposing structure before. I'm not afraid of heights or anything, but that bastard was *high*.

"What did you expect? The Bridges of fucking Madison County?" Brian asked, when I commented on the size.

"Well, no, but... how are we even gonna get up there?" The walkway was closed, since it was four o'clock in the morning, and I wasn't about to drop my pants in the middle of the goddamn street.

"We'll just sneak around the tolls and jump up from the road," he said, like that was a perfectly normal thing to do. He was walking, though, and I had no choice but to follow at that point.

Getting past the tolls did turn out to be pretty simple- the guy must've been asleep or completely high not to have seen us- and there were hardly any cars on the road, so I guess it wasn't all that dangerous. But I was still nervous. I kept expecting spotlights to go on and sirens to blare and a voice to come over a loudspeaker announcing that there were unauthorized pedestrians on the bridge, and to tell us to stop moving or we'd be shot on sight. None of that happened, though. We just hopped over the railing and onto the walkway, like Brian said, and no one was the wiser.

He wanted to walk to the highest point, of course,

so we trekked up to the peak of the pedestrian bridge, and I tried not to look down or think about the way the ground seemed to rumble and shimmy under me every time a car drove past us.

When we'd reached our destination, though, I looked up, down, and around, and I've gotta say, I'd never seen anything more beautiful in my life. The city looked amazing from there- all lit up and sparkly, like a Promised Land oughtta be- and the lights and the moon reflected off the water in this completely perfect way. The drop down had to be about a thousand miles, but it wasn't scary any more. It was exhilarating. I wished we'd brought the camera.

"Not afraid of heights are ya?" Brian asked, wrapping his arms around me from behind, pressing me against the railing.

"No way. This is great."

He reached around to put a penny in my palm, then closed my hand with his fingers.

"What's this for?" I asked him.

"Wish," he said, and kissed me under my ear. We tossed the penny into the ocean together, and I wished that we would always be this close, that nothing would ever come between us again, that I wouldn't disappoint him. So, technically that's three wishes, but they were all sort of related.

I tried to keep my eye on the penny, to see how far it had to fall before it hit the water, but it seemed to disappear into the darkness almost immediately.

"Feels like I could fly," I told him. "Wonder how many 'suicides' are really just drugged out freaks, thinking they can defy gravity."

"Hmm, let's test that theory..."

He moved out from behind me and leaned so far over the railing I almost pissed myself. He was tipsy and laughing, and could've easily fallen right over. I grabbed onto the waistband of his jeans and pulled him backwards.

"Be careful, you idiot!" I snapped at him, and he kept laughing.

"Don't be such a pussy," he said.

"I'm not a pussy! It's dangerous."

"Mmm, yeah. And what would you do without me?" he asked.

"Dunno," I told him. "Probably wither up and die, I suppose."

He smiled and wrapped his arms around my neck, leaned down to kiss me for a really long time. I clung to him, like he might blow away, into the ocean, at any moment. Then he spun me around, pressing my chest into the railing again, and started undoing my pants from behind.

"Mmdon't do it too hard or we might both wind up in the ocean," I warned him. The railing shook a little against my chest, as if to confirm my fears.

"Sounds exciting," he said, reaching into my underwear to pull out my cock. "Fucking midair..."

"What? What did you say?" I turned my head back to look at him, to see if I was just imagining that he'd said it, to see if I was just imagining this entire thing. I had a terrible moment where I was sure it was all another dream- that I was going to wake up alone, humping a cushion on Daphne's couch.

"Well, we'd still be fucking when we fell off, right?"

"No, that's not...I had a-a dream. You learned to levitate, and we were...that's how I described it. To Daphne, when we were having that conversation I just told you about. Fucking midair. We were fucking midair. God, I hope it wasn't a premonition of us falling to our deaths."

"Did we fall in the dream?" he asked, and started stroking me. Slowly. So gently. I felt the tip of his nose on the back of my neck, running lightly up and down, back and forth. The wind was cool, blowing through my hair and tickling my face. When I looked down, I didn't see the railing. Didn't see anything but ocean and lights and miles and miles of air. It was becoming difficult to concentrate on the conversation.

"Mmm...no," I answered eventually. "We just kept fucking."

"Well, then I wouldn't worry about it. Sounds like it was just a precognitive memory of the mind-blowing sex we're about to have."

"S'how I chose to interpret it at the time."

"Bet it was good fodder for thousands of jerk-offs," he said, and licked around the edges of my ear. His cock was out now too, and the feel of it, hard and heavy against me, was enough to make me dizzy. A car whooshed past us, and it seemed like the entire bridge was rattling and swaying for a minute. I wondered if the person driving could see us at all, if they knew. I wondered if anyone else had ever been insane enough to fuck up here.

"Mmno," I sighed. "Was too sad to jerk off. Too sad to do anything but whine and mope...no wonder Daph told me to kill myself."

"Too sad to fuck off? Jesus, that's all I did. Do. S'all I do. When I'm depressed, I mean."

I smiled and pressed back against him, thinking of all the nights he must've laid awake, touching himself and imagining it was me. Nothing sexier in the world.

"S'pose it's a good stress reliever," I said.

"I know a better one."

He tore open a condom with his teeth, put it on, spread me open and slid inside, never once letting go of my cock. We both groaned, and I threw my head back against his shoulder, let go of the railing so that I could touch his hair and his arms.

Once my hands and eyes were off the thin piece of metal standing between me and the endless plummet to the sea, it felt like it wasn't there at all. Like the entire bridge wasn't there at all. It felt like he was the only thing keeping me from falling. I thought if we jumped, it would be okay, and I almost wanted to. It was vertigo, in the best possible way. It felt like we were flying.

"Ugh, Justin," he grunted. "Never been like this...never like this with anybody else."

"Like what?" I asked, even though I knew. Oh, how well I knew.

"This...this...Justin..." He broke off, and started gnawing on my neck. And it was okay that he didn't finish, cause I knew.

Everything was sparkling and spinning and light. Everything around us, and everything inside of us, and it was so beautiful and so perfect that I almost wanted to cry because nothing could be this perfect, could it?

But it could. It could, and it was, and it would be, because we were Brian Fucking Kinney and Justin Fucking Taylor, and we were gonna be beautiful. We were gonna be brilliant.

Who's Been Sleeping in My Bed?



I had just enough miles to get us First Class tickets back to Pittsburgh, another of my few and final leftovers from Vanguard. Justin was really excited when he found out. He'd never flown in First Class before. He loved being the first ones called to board the plane, and he looked around at the rest of the tired souls in the terminal to see if anyone was watching us, and was disappointed that no one really seemed to care about our psuedo-importance. We sat at the back of the section and Justin marveled at how much room there was in the seats. He then proceeded to drape my arm around him, lean his head on my chest and hook his ankle around mine.

I wasn't going to drink anything on the flight, but the more I tried to relax, the more I couldn't stop focusing on what lay ahead of us. I hadn't exactly left everyone at home with a satisfactory explanation and I knew it was going to look to everyone like I'd absconded with Justin against his will. As though I could still manipulate him like I once could. As though I ever really could in the first place. But, like Justin had said, they didn't really know the truth, and consequently I knew I was in for the hardest sell of my life convincing these people that I wasn't yet again single-handedly ruining this poor boy's life.

It's a shame I wasn't going to have the time or energy to spend on that pitch, now that I would be starting my business. Our business.

I did miss my son, though. That was a funny feeling, only exacerbated by hearing him babble on the other end of the phone when I called Lindsay. Word had already traveled back to her via Justin's mother about the business. Of course she was on our side, and swooned annoyingly as though I'd told her he and I had run off to get fucking married or something.

So I finally caved and ordered Scotch and soda. Justin, who was drooling on me by this point, woke up and asked in a teasing whine if we were there yet.

"Almost," I said, and leaned over to kiss him. He smiled and I smiled and we just sorta stared at each other, until the flight attendant brought our drinks. I took one big swallow of mine and said to him, "You don't have to do this you know."

He of course turned and looked at me like I was insane, but this was something I had to be absolutely sure about, before we even set foot in Pennsylvania. "If you've got any doubts, or if you decide you just don't want to this, I'll...I'll understand."

"I wouldn't've said yes if I didn't wanna, Brian."

"Yeah, I know, but it...it's more than just having your name on some letterhead. I really want you to be sure."

"I *am* sure. Are *you* sure?"

"About my own involvement? Absolutely."

"No," he corrected, "about mine."

"Do I think you can do it? Absolutely. But I don't want you to do this if..." I broke off, looking for the right way to say it. "If it's just because I asked you to."

"Brian, it is *not* just because you asked me to."

I checked another slant. "What if your mom insists you not go through with it?"

He shrugged. "Then I guess she can go hang out with my dad in the land of perpetual disapproval. It doesn't have anything to do with her."

I nodded. If he could stand up to her, then he was probably pretty damn sure. I lifted my hand off his shoulder to play with his hair. "S'gonna be a LOT of work. I'm talking day and night. All night."

He rubbed his cheek into my shoulder. "S'good thing I'm so young and energetic."

"And not the kind of all nighters you pull with Michael working on comics," I went on. "It's gonna be a lot of inane, mundane, boring as all hell work."

"As long as you think you can be patient with me, I'll be fine."

"And how 'bout you with me?"

"Somehow I think I'm gonna be the slower partner in this endeavor...but yeah, I'll be patient. Aren't I always?"

I laughed. I knew he was thinking about the drug induced demon possession that happened in the hotel room, now almost two weeks ago. "Yeah. You're a goddamned saint," I told him and kissed his head.

"I just hope...I mean, if for some reason or other it doesn't work out, I don't want it to ruin anything else."

My heart skipped a few beats at that consideration. "You afraid it might?"

"S'really the only thing I'm afraid of."

"Yeah well," I said and kissed him again, "we can't live our lives worrying about that."

"I know," he nodded. "But like, if it gets to the point where you're starting to hate me because of business stuff, let me know so I can sell my shares."

I laughed. "Oh wait, guess I forgot to tell you that part of this agreement. This partnership is only severed upon the death of one or both parties." I dipped my head down and kissed his lips this time. He made a tiny moaning noise and reached his hand up to my face, not letting me break it off right away. I flicked my tongue out to taste his lips and he sucked it into his mouth forcefully, his tongue wrapping around it. It was a bit overzealous of a kiss for an airplane cabin, but I couldn't push him away. It almost felt like he was trying to say something to me and it would have been rude to interrupt him.

"Well then I guess you'll just have to kill me if you decide you can't work with me," he giggled. "Are you nervous, Brian?"

"Nervous?" Why was he asking me that? I wondered. Was it because he saw that in me, or was it because he was nervous about this himself? "Never," I told him. "I just...want to make sure you're gonna be happy...with all this."

He reached up to his shoulder and held my hand. "I will. I am."

I nodded, chuckling a little, and downed the rest of my watery drink. "You're a fool. A fucking fool."

He turned his head and kissed me. "See, how could I be unhappy with such supportive words from my partner?"

Partner...

"We're gonna be great," he went on. "The perfect team."

Truth be said, I'd never been more sure about something. I always knew one day I'd be working for myself, and I probably should have been five years ago. But I was busy, wrapped up in my own vanity, too lazy to really sacrifice the time and the six-figure income. And, I guess maybe a very small part of me was a little chicken shit to try. But now fate and circumstance had stripped me of all of those things I was afraid to let go of and I was about to embark on a real trip. We were. One that had actual promise in it. Promises I could keep to him. Accomplishments, not mere distractions. And real and actual happiness. Not the kind that comes from mind altering drugs.

Later in the flight we got the camera out and silently looked at every single shot we took. I didn't ask him if he was having a good time. I didn't have to.

When we got home, there were four naked men in our bed. I was too exhausted to be genuinely angry. It was more of a dull, buzzing irritation; similar to the feeling I'd had at the Cleveland airport, during our second fucking three-hour layover.

"Ugh, didn't you call and tell him we were coming back?" I asked Brian, tossing my suitcase in the general direction of the orgy.

"I did."

He started poking around the kitchen, looking through the cabinets and the freezer and, for some reason, the trash compactor, and I sat at the counter with my back to the bedroom.

It was strange to be here, in our empty shell of an apartment, after being away so long. After sleeping and fucking and living in so many different places. It almost felt like it wasn't even ours anymore, and that feeling was only exacerbated by the moaning and panting of strangers echoing off the walls. The inside of the car would've felt more like home.

"Hey, there's still some cherry ice cream in here," Brian said, on his second trip through the freezer. He tossed the carton over his shoulder, and I caught it and opened it up. It looked untouched, and mostly free of freezer burn. And I was fucking starving.

He handed me a spoon, and put two beers on the counter in front of me. They weren't our beers, but I think our tenant had forfeited any rights to his possessions at that point.

He sat down next to me, and we ate ice cream and drank beer, and I tried to pretend the place didn't sound and smell like a goddamn bathhouse. I wondered briefly if it was turning Brian on at all, but he just looked tired. God, we were both so fucking tired. And, honestly, he looked even more annoyed than I was. Maybe a little disgusted.

"I think you should ask for extra," I told him. "His lease is up. This is overtime."

"Yeah," he said. "That'd almost be enforceable if I'd had the presence of mind to get something in writing. Last time I use the honor system with a fag."

"Well, at least we know the bed still works."

He smiled and dropped his head to my shoulder, rubbed his face against my shirt like a sleepy toddler.

"Not that I'm really anxious to get onto it at this point..."

"Let's just unroll the sleeping bag and camp out on the floor tonight," he suggested. That sounded like a very good idea. The sleeping bag was filthy, but at least it was our filth.

The noises went on, and I think Brian might've fallen asleep on my shoulder for a little bit there, but eventually there was a particularly loud thump, and he lifted his head and glanced towards the ruckus.

"Shit, hasn't everyone come yet?" he snarled at them. Then, to me, "Reminds me of Ted's fucking Internet porn studio."

"Didn't you used to go there on your lunch break?"

"Yeah," he conceded. "More convenient than cruising the gym."

"I'd say this is pretty damn convenient. Like take out you didn't even know you ordered."

"More like someone's cold, dried up leftovers," he said. Then he stood up, kissed me on the forehead, and started walking. Two years ago, I would've worried that he was going to join in. Before our trip, I would've expected it, and accepted it, and gone to someone else's apartment to sleep. Now, it hardly even crossed my mind. I knew he wouldn't.

"All right, boys," he said, standing on the step leading to the bedroom, and clapping his hands once to get their attention. "Check out time's come and gone. All you faggots gotta get outta my house."

There was grumbling, and cursing, and someone actually called him a homophobe, which was really fucking funny, but slowly they all began to separate and search for their clothing.

They stumbled out, one by one: listless, wasted men who barely seemed aware that they were in someone else's home. A black guy with a shaved head and an assortment of piercings started wobbling towards me instead of the door, and put a hand on my thigh. I wasn't sure if he was trying to grope me, or to simply hold himself in an upright position. Whatever he was doing, Brian didn't like it.

"Hey, fucker," he said, and grabbed the guy's shoulder. Shoved him away, and he had to grab the counter to keep from falling over. "Hands the fuck off. What the hell's the matter with you? Didn't I just tell you to get the fuck out of my house?"

It was, again, kinda hot, but also a little scary. It could've easily escalated into a very violent scene, if the guy had been halfway coherent and given a shit. But, fortunately, he was not and did not, and his only reaction was to mutter something unintelligible under his breath and join his fuck buddies in their parade out of the loft.

Brian watched them go, anger quickly giving way to confusion as he examined their faces.

"Wait a minute..." he said, when they were finally gone and he was closing the door. "I didn't rent my apartment to any of those guys. I thought it was the redhead, but I think he was the one sucking me off when I met with the actual guy."

"You better check and see if anything's missing," I told him, wondering how he managed to let these things happen.

"All the important stuff's in Lindsay's basement, anyway," he said. "But I'm not leaving this place unattended until we can get a fucking locksmith in here, and it's fucking Friday, so..."

"We're stuck here all weekend," I finished for him. "Whatever will we do?"

His lips curled up in a small, seductive smile, and I thought of a time when he would've rather eaten a box of crickets than spend an entire weekend trapped in this loft with me- when he would've probably gotten me to housesit while he went out drinking and fucking and dancing, and I would've willingly lapped up the chance to simply exist in his space for a little while.

Believe it or not, sometimes I miss the excitement of that first lovesick year. Sometimes I miss the chase, the mystery, the never knowing for sure if I was the one he'd be taking home that night, and the sweet thrill of victory and anticipation when he finally chose me. Sometimes, but not very often.

Definitely not now. Now I was grateful for the relative calm, for the opportunity to relax.

We set up a little makeshift indoor camp on the living room floor, with the sleeping bag and whatever unsoiled pillows and blankets we could find, and I turned off most of the lights and lit a few candles. Brian dug out his iPod, and we sat around in our underwear, listening to his little mix, and eating the rest of the ice cream, and smoking the last joint.

"Maybe we should have a party in a couple days," I suggested. "Invite everyone over and tell them our big news."

"Big news?"

"About the business...remember?"

"Wouldn't exactly call it big news yet," he said, and started scraping the bottom of the empty ice cream carton with his spoon. "S'just an idea right now."

"Well, it's a big idea."

"Well I don't wanna make a big *deal* out of it. Not at this point, anyway."

I knew what he meant- knew that he was afraid we were going to fail, that I was going to be disappointed, that our friends would pity us, or be angry with him for dragging me down- and even though I wasn't afraid of any of that myself, I could certainly sympathize. I had my own fears.

Still couldn't resist teasing him, though.

"So, does that mean you don't wanna tell anybody, or does it mean you don't want me making giant banners and handing out flyers on Liberty Avenue?"

He rolled his eyes and nudged his shoulder against mine. "It means let's not make a big fucking announcement of it, that's all."

"All right, all right, I'll just mutter about it under my breath to whoever happens to be in the immediate vicinity."

"Exactly!"

I laughed and flopped down onto my back, and everything sort of spun. I realized I was too exhausted to even see straight anymore, and that I was going to fall asleep very soon, whether I wanted to or not.

Brian laid down next to me and handed me what was left of the joint.

"We should have a party, though," he said. "But fuck our stupid friends. We oughtta have one for potential clients."

"Here?"

"Why not? Usually those things are in stuffy hotel conference rooms with cheap booze and frozen cocktail weenies. We have it here, we'll be different. Innovative. We'll make an impression."

"Well, what kind of party would it be?" I asked, thinking of the various events Brian had hosted here, and wondering how many of our potential clients would enjoy those sorts of things. "Would it have a theme?"

"Yeah," he said. "Sign your life over to us."

"Maybe we should get Emmett to help..."

"Oh yeah," he nodded. "I'm sure we've got some favors to cash in on with him. And he'll make a shitload of contacts."

"And he loves us."

He tilted his head towards me and raised a skeptical eyebrow at that. "Loves you, maybe," he said.

"Oh, he loves you too. Everybody loves you. Except maybe Ted, but...he's got his own issues."

He laughed through his nose, and turned back to stare up at the ceiling. The fan was spinning, and he seemed momentarily absorbed by it.

"Shit," he said. "Can't believe we were in San Fran-Fucking-cisco less than twenty-four hours ago."

"Sorry we came back?"

He kept staring at the fan for a few minutes, pondering, then said, "S'no place like home, right?"

He kissed my cheek, and I rolled onto my side and curled myself around him. He tugged one of the blankets up over us, and I nuzzled my face against his chest. He smelled like pot and sweat and the airport. I felt his hand in my hair, gently playing, fingering the strands.

"I thought it would feel like we never left," I said. "But it doesn't really feel like that at all."

"Guess you can't go home again."

"Another home cliché? Are you sure you're up for this innovative slogan-making?"

"Shit," he said again, and giggled. He was pretty high, and probably as close to falling asleep as I was. "We better make this work. Because right now, we are so completely fucked."

"I am aware," I said around a yawn. "We'll make it work. You're a superhero, and I'm a fucking genius."

He laughed out loud at that, which was a little bit irritating.

"What? I am. I got a fifteen hundred on my SATs," I reminded him.

"S'that what you're gonna tell our potential clients?"

"I'm sure they'd be very impressed. I've also got a hundred and sixty IQ. We could put that on our business cards, with a picture of me naked on the back."

"Shit, we are fucking doomed," he said, and we both laughed, cause it was probably true.

I closed my eyes, finally, and saw flashes of our trip, flickering across my consciousness in a mental slideshow. I thought about everything we'd been through, all the ways he kept surprising me and the ways he didn't surprise me at all. I listened to the fan whirring over our heads, and Brian's breathing getting deeper and heavier with sleep, and

the mix he made playing softly in the background. I imagined this place filling up with furniture again- furniture we'd chosen together- and then I imagined it getting so cluttered that we had to branch out and rent an office. Hire employees. Rent an even bigger office. Take on as many clients as we could get until we were completely over-extended, without a scrap of time to ourselves. I imagined the world around us getting smaller and bigger and more and more overwhelming, and it should've been scary, but it really wasn't. Because at the center of it all was just me and Brian. And me and Brian were okay. We were good. We were on our way.

END