

Out from Inside

by bigboobedcanuck

The heat in the subway station is stifling after his air-conditioned journey and although the air is hot and muggy outside, Justin still breathes it in with a gulp of relief as he emerges from underground.

Saturday night, and the Village is bustling. He walks by bars and restaurants with tiny patios that crowd the sidewalk, just feet from the bags of garbage that pile up endlessly. Sweat drips down the small of his back and he wipes his forehead, at the grime that has settled on his skin.

The colourful lamps that light Washington Square Park buzz with insects. Justin always cuts through the park on his way home and tonight is no different. NYU students and every kind of person you could imagine lounge about. Justin stops by the chess tables, which sit underneath signs advising against any sort of betting. The signs are routinely ignored, as you would expect.

Justin finds an empty side of a bench and pulls out his little sketchbook from his messenger bag. He's subtle when he draws, doesn't make a big production of it. People act differently when they know they're being watched. Their posture will change immediately, and there's no point in continuing.

He settles in and time floats by, the noise of the park like a cocoon.

It could be hours later when his cell phone rings. He sees the number and smiles — it's late, and Gus is probably giving Brian a hard time about going to bed. He flips the phone open and says, "Mel and Lindz have only been in Mexico for like, three hours. Don't tell me you already need help."

The only response is the wheeze of Brian's breathing, which sounds off kilter. "Brian? What's wrong?" There is another ragged breath, but nothing else. "Brian, say something, you're freaking me out."

"They're dead."

And just like that, the world is new.

*

The plane crash killed everyone aboard instantly, but Justin can't help but wonder if they were awake as it dove towards the ground. He hopes not, and can't stop the tears from sliding down his cheeks yet again.

His mother picks him up from the bus station as dawn breaks, the heat already making their skin sticky when they touch. She hugs him tightly and he clings to her in a way he hasn't in many years.

She takes him to Michael and Ben's house, where the family has gathered. Carl opens the door and

hugs Justin gruffly before moving on to Jennifer. Justin inches his way into the living room.

Jenny Rebecca squalls in Michael's arms, and he bounces her almost frantically. Debbie and Ben hover nearby and everyone watches intently, as if making this two-year-old stop crying is the key to something important.

Michael notices him, and all eyes turn to Justin before automatically swiveling around to Brian. Brian sits in an armchair in the corner, Gus curled up in his lap, still awake. Gus sits up straighter and takes his thumb from his mouth as he calls Justin's name.

"Hey, little man." Justin kneels down and kisses Gus, pulling him into a hug. He looks up at Brian over Gus's shoulder, but Brian is focused on the bookshelf lining the wall. Before he gets up, Justin squeezes Brian's hand.

Then Deb is there with a rib-cracking hug and there are more hugs and tears and murmurs with Emmett and Ted and Ben. J.R. finally stops crying, and Justin kisses Michael and whispers words of comfort that he knows don't mean anything, but needs to say anyway.

At the foot of the stairs, Justin looks around the room at all the people he loves. Brian remains in the corner, face impassive and turned away as he holds Gus to him.

When Brian carries Gus upstairs a few minutes later, Justin follows. He waits outside the guest room, squinting as the sun floods the hallway with light. Brian comes out, closing the door softly behind him.

Their eyes meet, and Justin holds firm as Brian gives way around him.

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Justin lingers at the top of the bedroom steps as Brian helps Gus change out of his suit. It is black and exquisitely tailored, and of course the son of Brian Kinney wears nothing but the best.

The funeral was joint, despite the Petersons' protests. They had shared angry words with Brian, and Justin hasn't had a chance to ask Brian what it was about, although he's sure he knows.

Brian tells Gus to get into his pajamas. Gus doesn't argue, and looks tiny in Brian's bed, his eyes already closing as Brian pulls the shutters.

It has been a long day.

Brian heads right to the bar, and passes Justin a scotch without comment. They both still wear their funeral attire, and Justin unknots his tie. He's fumbling with it when Brian presses up behind him, his hands making quick work of Justin's pants.

They're quiet, only soft moans and harsh breathing cutting the silence as Brian bends Justin over the counter. Brian kisses his neck, his fingers gripping Justin's hand on the cold steel as he pushes inside

him.

Justin rocks back, turning his head to find Brian's lips. It's been a month since their last visit, and Justin wonders why they ever stayed apart for so long, what could have been so important. They come quickly, and Brian is heavy on Justin's back as he shudders his release.

They stay like that for a long time, Brian pressing small kisses to Justin's shoulder where he has pulled back the material of his shirt.

"I miss you," Brian murmurs.

Justin turns and they kiss slowly, lips soft. "I love you, too," he whispers.

A loud knock at the door makes them jump apart like teenagers and they quickly clean up and straighten their clothes. The door is pounded on again, and Brian opens it to find Lindsay's parents, their faces pinched and red.

"Where is our grandson? He's not staying here with you." Mrs. Peterson's voice is practically a shriek and she takes a step into the loft.

The bedroom door creaks open and with a squeeze of Brian's hand, Justin hurries up to Gus, ushers him into the bathroom.

"What's going on?" Gus's eyes are wide.

"Nothing, everything's okay. Come on, let's play paddy cake again." Justin sits down on the bathroom floor cross-legged and Gus follows suit. Gus obediently raises his palms, and they begin the game.

Justin can hear that they're shouting outside, but the words are indistinct, like the sound of a TV through a neighbour's wall. He claps hands with Gus and they both sing the song quietly. After a few rounds, Gus stops and looks at Justin solemnly.

"When are my mommies coming back from heaven?"

Justin somehow manages to swallow the lump in his throat. "They're not. But it's okay, everything will be okay."

"But first they were just going to Mexico, and they were going to come back. Why did they go to heaven instead?"

"We don't get to choose when we go. Sometimes it just happens."

"But I want them to stay here. I want to go home. Are you sure they're not there?" Tears slide down Gus's cheeks.

"I'm sure, Gus. But they loved you very much, just remember that, okay?"

"Then why did they go?" Gus sobs and Justin pulls him into his arms, unable to answer. He's not sure how much later it is when Brian finds them like that, the loft silent once more.

Brian puts Gus back into bed, and he and Justin join him after they change. Gus sleeps between them, and as Justin drifts away, the exhaustion of the last few days catching up, he knows that Brian lies awake.

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Deb has clearly been up all night cooking, and breakfast is a feast. Justin tries to get away with a couple of pieces of toast, but ends up with pancakes and lasagna. He's not sure when lasagna became a breakfast item, but it makes Deb happy, so he eats it. Brian stands by the kitchen door, blowing smoke outside.

Emmett's new boyfriend Adam hovers near him awkwardly, and Justin feels a stab of pity for him.

"So, you'll take Jenny Rebecca?" Adam asks Michael and Ben.

"Yeah, I talked to Mel's parents yesterday. We're setting a schedule so they can have her a few nights a month. And they can come and visit whenever they want." Michael is pale and worn out and Ben smiles at him encouragingly. The smile doesn't quite reach his eyes, and for a second, Justin wonders if it will be possible to ever be truly happy again. It doesn't feel like it.

Adam nods and politely asks, "And Gus?"

Gus sits in front of the TV, blankly watching a cartoon, and doesn't seem to be listening to their conversation. Everyone but Justin seems to shift uncomfortably in their seats, and Ted clears his throat.

"Well," Deb says, "I think his grandparents want—"

"He's staying with me." Brian's voice is firm, brooks no argument.

Deb is the first one to speak. "But, honey...raising a child...do you really think—"

"Yes, I really think. Gus is going to want for nothing."

Ben puts on his reasonable tone and says, "Of course not. And we all know you love Gus. But it's not just about money—"

"You don't think he knows that?" Justin's voice rises, and Brian puts a hand on his arm. This is the first time Brian has said it out loud, that he's going to take Gus.

Justin never doubted it.

"I'm going to take care of my son. The Petersons are hiring a lawyer, and I've informed them that I'll fight them until the day Gus is eighteen if I have to."

"Everything will have to change," Deb says. She looks at Brian speculatively, a challenge in her eyes.

"It already has," Brian replies. "And I'm going to take care of my son."

After a few moments of silence, Michael smiles. "Then you know we're all behind you."

There is a chorus of agreement and Deb hugs Brian tightly as everyone pledges support. Brian shrugs them off and goes to join Gus in front of the TV. Ted asks Justin when he has to go back to New York, but Justin pretends he doesn't hear, and goes to watch SpongeBob.

*

Brian looks through the papers again and leans back on the couch. "I still can't fucking believe it."

Justin glances over from the kitchen, where he removes the skin from a chicken leg with medical precision. "Shh, you'll wake Gus."

Brian leans over, peers into the bedroom. "Sonny Boy needed his nap, I don't think a tank could wake him." But his voice is softer anyway.

Justin finishes up and joins Brian on the couch, his feet curled beneath him. "It's going to make their case pretty hard to win."

"I just can't believe she did it."

"What's so hard to believe? You're his father."

"You do remember Melanie, right?" As soon as the words leave his mouth, regret paints Brian's face, and they sit in silence as seconds tick by slowly. "I mean...we didn't always get along."

Justin inches closer, his arm snaking around Brian's shoulders. "I know. But she knew you loved him. And that you'll do the right thing. It should definitely help with the judge, right?"

"Well, lucky for me, biology still counts for a hell of a lot in this country. But considering I gave up my parental rights to her, and she pretty much gave them back in her will, it definitely won't hurt."

Brian looks at the paper in his hands. "And isn't it just typical, the bitch isn't even around to thank." His voice cracks, and he shakes his head, trying to stop the tears.

Justin holds him close, failing to stop his own tears from falling. "It's okay, it's okay." Brian hasn't been able to talk about Lindsay, hasn't once said her name. Justin knows that will have to wait.

Brian's lips move against Justin's hair. "How is this real?"

Justin wishes he had an answer.

*

The house is as Justin remembers it, still empty and beautiful, the sun shining in the huge windows and making the wooden floors gleam. He had stopped asking about it six months after he went to New York, when Brian told him again he hadn't gotten the right offer yet.

Justin traces his fingers over the carved wood of the banister and closes his eyes for a moment, hearing Brian's proposal again in his mind, like it was yesterday. A pang of longing stretches through him, pulls him tight.

Brian leads Gus by the hand and shows him the different rooms. Gus is quiet, and Justin knows he is thinking of the house in Toronto, the house Justin never could squeeze in a visit to. The regret hits him like a truck now, and he has to sit on the stairs, needs to catch his breath.

When he catches up to Gus and Brian, they're picking out a bedroom for Gus. There are many to choose from. As they look around a small room with lots of light, Justin says, "This would be an awesome studio."

Brian laughs uneasily. "Don't you think you'll get enough of that in New York?"

"New York?"

"The Big Apple? The Naked City? The place you live?"

"The place I used to live."

Suddenly the mood has changed. "Gus, go ask Pete and Maria to show you the stables, okay?" Brian had hired the couple as caretakers while he looked for the buyer he never seemed to be able to find. Gus nods and leaves without a word.

"Justin."

"Brian." Justin squares his shoulders, ready for the fight.

"You can't give up your life."

"I'm not."

Brian sighs. "It's barely been over a year, you need to give yourself more time there."

"More time to be away from the people I love?"

"More time to launch your career, to be the best artist you can be, to—"

"Miss out on what really matters?"

"So your art doesn't matter anymore? Bullshit."

"It matters," Justin says. "But so do you. So does Gus."

"And we'll be here. But you can't give up your life. I won't let you."

"Oh, really?" Anger begins to thrum through Justin's veins. "You won't let me? Who the fuck do you think you are?"

Brian remains cool and collected, much to Justin's irritation. "You're upset. This is no time to make decisions. Go back to New York, and I'm sure things will go back to normal."

"Oh, so I'll just go back there and what, Mel and Lindz won't be dead? You won't be raising your son alone?"

Brian looks down, doesn't answer.

"Things are never going to be normal again, Brian. At least...not the same kind of normal."

"You can't give up your career."

"You're giving up Babylon, aren't you? And the loft?"

"That's different."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"Because it is."

"Oh, thanks for clearing that up."

Brian's eyes blaze. "Because if I'm going to raise Gus, I'm going to be the best fucking father I can be. And if that means early nights and helping with his homework and making fucking sandwiches for the PTA, then that's what I'm going to do. I owe him that." He takes a deep breath and Justin barely hears his next words. "I owe *her* that."

"And I have no part in any of this?" Brian doesn't answer, and Justin swallows hard. "Don't you want me here anymore?"

Brian makes a noise in his throat and turns away. "I can't ask you to sacrifice everything you've worked for."

Justin wraps his arms around Brian from behind. "Love *is* sacrifice. I thought you finally understood

that.”

Brian turns and kisses him, his hands tight in Justin’s hair. “You know I love you. And I want you.” He leans their foreheads together, his next words a whisper. “I need you.”

“See, was that so hard?” Justin smiles, really smiles for the first time in a week. “We’ll make the best fucking sandwiches the PTA has ever tasted.”

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The next morning, Brian tugs Justin into the shower while Gus is still sleeping. They lock the door behind them and the water is barely running before Brian is on his knees, sucking Justin into his mouth, his finger sliding into Justin’s ass.

Justin gasps and Brian grins up at him, his tongue gliding along the underside of Justin’s cock. “You like that, Sunshine?” He puts another finger into Justin’s hole.

“Yes, god, yes.” Justin’s head lolls back against the glass.

After a final flick of his tongue, Brian is up and rolling a condom on his dick, kissing Justin before turning him around.

“No, I want to see your face,” Justin says, turning back and kissing Brian hungrily.

“Always so demanding.” Brian slaps Justin’s ass before opening the shower door. He quickly grabs a couple of the thick red towels, spreading them haphazardly on the floor before pressing Justin down.

Justin throws his legs over Brian’s shoulders and bites his lip to stop a loud moan from escaping when Brian thrusts into him. Brian angles in deeper and Justin yanks his head down for a kiss so he won’t start yelling loud enough to wake not only Gus, but possibly the whole building.

The shower still runs and Justin can feel drops of water falling on his skin, knows that they’ll probably have a hell of a mess to clean up. But as Brian’s hand starts stroking his cock in tandem with the push of his hips, Justin can’t seem to care.

He comes hard over Brian’s hand, his ass clenching down and making Brian groan loudly as he shudders to completion. Brian rolls off him and they lie on the floor, catching their breath.

Brian lifts his hand and sucks his fingers into his mouth, one by one. He smirks when Justin’s cock twitches.

*

“So, I talked to Annika today,” Justin says as he puts the groceries away in the cupboard. They’re only in the loft another week, but Gus can’t live on Thai take-out alone.

Brian peers back from the fridge where he rearranges some oranges to fit in Gus's full-cream milk. "And what did she have to say for herself?"

Justin takes a deep breath. "She said I can stay with her for a week or so every month. I was thinking I can still go to the right parties, see and be seen. Shake my cute ass for the people who pull the strings. I mean, it's not like we can't afford the airfare." Justin frowns. "Well, you can. I mean, if that's okay with you."

"I suppose I might be able to spare a few hundred dollars every month for you to pursue your dream." He grins devilishly. "As long as you keep putting out, of course."

Justin glances over at Gus, engrossed in a video game. He kisses Brian and squeezes his ass. "I'll think about it."

Brian is suddenly serious. "Justin, are you sure? About this? All of it?"

"I've never been so sure of anything." He kisses him again, traces his fingers over the faint lines beside Brian's mouth. "I can paint here, and go there when I need to. I'm not giving up my life. Just...making some adjustments."

Brian smiles and kisses him back, but Justin thinks the shadow in his eyes still lingers.

*

The first night in the new house, Gus sleeps with Brian and Justin, too afraid to stay alone in his room down the hall. Brian tries to get him to sleep in his own bed, but each night, Gus begs and pleads and falls asleep between them, his breathing hitched by the tears he has shed. After two weeks, Brian stands firm, and Gus's cries echo down the hallway. Brian and Justin lie on top of the sheets, bodies tense, eyes on the ceiling.

"We can't give in," Justin reassures. "He'll get used to it. It'll be fine."

Brian sighs. "I know." Later, when there is only silence, Brian and Justin tiptoe down the hall. Gus has finally cried himself to sleep, his teddy bear clutched in his arms. They watch him for a few minutes, Justin's arms wrapped around Brian, his lips soft on the back of Brian's neck. They creep back to bed and Brian closes the door behind them. His eyes gleam with hunger and need in the moonlight, and Justin spreads himself wantonly on the bed, ready and waiting.

Everything is taste and touch, tongues and lips, fingers and hands. On his hands and knees, Justin gasps and moans as Brian's tongue flicks in and out, his breath hot, teeth teasing. When Brian slides his cock all the way inside, he whispers in Justin's ear that he'll have to buy him a gag. Justin comes, head thrown back, eyes closed.

*

After school one day, Gus asks if his friend can come and play. It's only been a few weeks, and

Justin's happy Gus is making friends. He seems to like the structure of school, then coming home to rattle around the house with Justin. Justin drives him and picks him up every day in a new Volkswagen, which Justin had insisted on, even though Brian wanted to buy a Lexus. Justin and Gus spend a lot of time making art in the studio, and sometimes he looks at something Gus has painted and gets more ideas that he ever thought possible.

When Brian comes home from work, Gus and his new friend Susan are watching a movie while Justin makes dinner. When Brian takes a long time to come into the kitchen to kiss him, Justin goes to him. Brian's stopped in the doorway of the den, eyes on the TV, a tight expression on his face.

"Hey," Justin breathes, sliding his arm around Brian's waist. He follows Brian's gaze to the TV, where Peter Pan battles Captain Hook. "What is it?"

Brian shakes himself out of his reverie, paints a smile on his face. "Nothing. What's for dinner?"

Justin pulls him to the kitchen, kisses him until the smile is real. "Steak. Gus is a growing boy."

Brian chuckles, slides his hand over Justin's crotch. "He's not the only one."

"Yeah, well, if we ever want Gus to have another friend over, we'd better cut it out."

They disentangle and Brian goes to change. Justin has to talk himself out of nipping upstairs to give him a hand.

*

Justin wakes in the night, alone. He pokes his head in Gus's room, where Gus sleeps deeply, the covers around his knees. Justin quietly goes downstairs and sees the blue glow from the den before he hears the low sounds of the television. Brian sits on the couch in his sweat pants, his fingers worrying the frayed end of his t-shirt. *Peter Pan* plays, and Brian seems riveted by it.

Justin watches from the doorway, is tempted to go get his sketchbook. In the end, he just sits down beside Brian, who doesn't even glance over, eyes still locked on the TV. They watch in silence until Wendy returns to the real world, leaving Peter behind.

Brian's sobs are quiet at first, before they shake his shoulders, bow his head into his hands. Justin leans close, wishes there was something to say, something to make it better. Something.

"I miss her so fucking much, Justin," he grits out.

"I know," Justin whispers, eyes wet, breath short.

"Why Lindsay?"

"I don't know."

"It's not fair."

Justin agrees. Brian's tears fall for a long time, his head finding Justin's lap, legs curled up on the couch. Justin strokes Brian's hair as the movie plays on, Peter and Tinkerbell returning to Neverland in a shower of pixie dust.

*

Michael, Ben and J.R. come to visit a lot. Brian and Michael go for long walks while Ben and Justin talk about nothing, everything. Brian always looks lighter afterwards, smiles with an ease that Justin loves to see. One night as Justin makes dinner for them all, Gus helps him in the kitchen.

"Justin?"

Justin doesn't look up from the tomato he's slicing. "Did you put all the potato peels in the composting bin?"

"Yes," Gus replies.

"Good boy."

"Justin?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you my daddy, too?"

Justin puts down the knife and turns to find Gus looking up at him, the open expression on his face constricting Justin's heart. Brian gets up from the kitchen table as Ben and Michael look on, J.R. sleeping in Ben's arms. Brian kneels down, takes hold of Gus's shoulders.

"Do you want Justin to be your daddy?"

Gus nods and says, "I love Justin."

"So do I," Brian tells him.

Justin cuts the onions next, and wipes his eyes against the back of his hand.

*

One morning, Brian takes a gulp of coffee and says, "Shit. We've got to buy that little girl a birthday present for her party on Saturday." He reaches for the pen on the counter and scratches some words on the notepad lying there before he takes another swig from his mug. "Gotta go, I've got a meeting first thing." He kisses Justin and Justin can hear him saying goodbye to Gus in the hallway, Gus's shrieks of laughter meaning that Brian is tickling him before he swings him up into his arms.

Justin looks at the words on the pad. *Buy doll*, it simply says. Justin's breakfast turns cold as he contemplates these words. He holds the paper in his hand, its smooth surface tangible beneath his fingers. He eventually smiles to himself, and calls his mother.

*

Babylon is the same as ever, thumping music, flowing booze, men crushed together on the dance floor. The smell of sweat and sex permeates everything like cigarette smoke that soaks into your skin, gets on your clothes.

"Well, fancy meeting you here!" Emmett bounces towards them and claps gleefully. Ted and Blake make their way over and soon they're all dancing. It's not quite just like old times until Michael and Ben arrive, and then Justin thinks that maybe he can believe in magic. The songs are all new, but they haven't changed, and he and Brian move together like they always have. They dance for hours and fuck in the backroom, all eyes on them. Justin bends over, his hands braced on the wall as Brian thrusts into him. A young trick crawls before Justin, sucks him off while Brian sets the rhythm from behind.

It's just past one a.m. when Michael and Ben say their goodbyes, go home to relieve J.R.'s babysitter. Jennifer is staying the night out at the house, so Brian and Justin don't need to worry, don't need to rush. They look at each other in the pulsing, coloured light.

"I guess we'd better get home," Brian says. Justin nods and presses their foreheads together, breathes him in before their lips meet.

Brian smiles and leads Justin out, glittery confetti drifting to the floor in their wake.

The Sequel:

To Face Unafraid

Justin groans as something lands on his foot before bouncing in a flurry of noise and motion.

"Santa came, Santa came!" Gus squeals as he hops on the bed, his little hands tapping Justin and Brian's bodies urgently.

Brian groans and shifts beside him, but Justin keeps his eyes resolutely shut. Maybe Gus will go back to bed if Justin just stays very, very still. "He's early," Brian mutters.

"Santa came!" Gus bounces again.

The threads of sleep begin to curl away and Justin opens his eyes to find Gus staring down expectantly. Justin tries to remember what day it is. "Gus, it's only the fifteenth. Santa hasn't come yet."

"But he did, look!" Gus points to the large window. "Santa brought snow!"

"That was Mother Nature," Brian says, yawning and stretching his arms over his head.

Gus's face creases with confusion. "But I thought Santa made snow."

"Nope, he's too busy making presents for all the good little boys and girls," Justin tells him. A quick glance at the clock shows that it is barely seven o'clock in the morning. "It's Sunday, Gus. I thought we agreed that daddies get to sleep in on Sunday."

Gus bites his lip and looks down guiltily, his fingers tracing the rocket ships on his pyjamas. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

Justin's eyes meet Brian's and they can't help but smile.

"Well, I guess it's okay just this once," Brian decrees. "Since it snowed and all."

Gus's face brightens immediately and he jumps eagerly. "Can we make a snowman? Can we?"

"After we make coffee," Brian groans.

Gus bounds to the window and peeks up over the sill, standing on his tiptoes. With a sigh, Justin throws the duvet off and goes to the window. A blanket of snow covers the grounds, the trees all capped in white.

With another thought about how heavy Gus is getting, Justin lifts him up into his arms, perching him on his hip. Justin thinks of a new painting as they watch the snow drifting down in big, fat flakes. Meanwhile, Brian stumbles to the bathroom behind them, muttering a curse as he bangs his toe on the door frame.

*

That night, Justin idly washes the pots and pans while watching the snow still fall, illuminated by the strings of coloured lights the gardener had put up on the bushes behind the house. The lights out back were nothing compared to the display in the front. Brian felt that if he was going to decorate, it had to be done right. But tastefully, of course. Ever tasteful.

Justin hears Brian's feet on the stairs and after a minute remarks, "You're going to have a messy drive in the morning."

Brian makes a sound that indicates he heard, but says nothing else. After a while, he mutters, "You keep forgetting that you don't need to do the dishes here. We have a housekeeper for a reason, you know."

Justin shrugs, his hands immersed in the soapy water. "I hate leaving pots overnight, the food gets

stuck on. I feel bad when Maria has to scrub them in the morning.”

“That’s what she gets paid for.” Brian’s voice is becoming sharp. “You can do dishes when you’re on one of your sojourns to New York.”

Justin puts the last pan on the drying rack and pulls the plug. As he dries his hands on a dish towel, he turns to regard Brian, sitting at the kitchen table, eyes on a piece of coloured paper in his hand. “Why are you picking a fight?”

Brian doesn’t look up, but sighs. “Gus wrote another letter to Santa.”

“I thought he already did that at school.”

“He did, but he said he doesn’t trust his teacher or the mailman to deliver it on time. But he knows that I won’t let him down.”

Justin smiles and pulls out another chair at the table. He reaches over and places his hand on Brian’s forearm. “Well, you *are* Super Dad.”

Brian doesn’t crack a smile, and can’t meet Justin’s eyes. He finally slides the letter across the table and Justin looks down at Gus’s childish scrawl. “A puppy, a bike, a race car — if nothing, you’ve taught him to aim high—” The words suddenly die in Justin’s throat as his eyes scan the list. At the end, Gus has written simply, *My Mommies*.”

“Oh, Brian,” he murmurs.

“I want this to be a good Christmas for him. It’s his first one here, the first one...without them. It’s barely been six months and he misses them so much, and there’s nothing I can fucking do.”

“You’re already doing it.” Justin feels the burn of tears at his eyes and blinks hard. “We’ll help Gus get through this. We’re going to do everything we can to make it a wonderful Christmas. That’s all we can do. That’s all *you* can do. You’ll have to explain to him that...they’re really not coming back.”

Brian takes a deep breath and blows it out as he grasps Justin’s hand. He nods and then rolls his tongue into his cheek. “You still shouldn’t waste your time with the dishes.”

“Duly noted,” Justin says as he leans over and draws Brian’s lips to his own. Brian’s hand cradles his head and their tongues wind together. When Justin finds himself on the kitchen floor, he huffs out a laugh before Brian’s body covers him and he can barely gasp in breaths between kisses.

“Fuck me,” he moans, grabbing at Brian’s belt. For a minute, he forgets that they’re not at the loft, and that Gus is upstairs and there aren’t condoms and lube scattered conveniently throughout the house.

With effort, Brian wrenches himself away and yanks Justin to his feet. They race up the stairs quietly and Justin locks the bedroom door behind them. They barely make it to the bed, Justin’s knees

hitting the floor as he leans over it, Brian behind him. They'll have rug burns on their knees later, but as Brian pushes into him, the only thing Justin thinks about is the pleasure. It's rough and Brian's fingers will leave bruises on the pale skin of Justin's hips that will match the marks his mouth will leave on his neck.

Justin feels sorry for people who say children ruin their sex life.

*

Two days before Christmas, Justin picks Gus up from his last day of school before the holidays. The kids are all high on cookies and chocolate, but Gus is strangely subdued as he trudges to the car, the teacher beside him. Justin gets out and greets them on the sidewalk, leaning down to hug and kiss Gus.

The teacher smiles tightly. "Hello Mr. Taylor." She clasps her hands behind her back.

"Hi Mrs. Sears." After a few moments he adds, "What's up?" As Gus settles himself into the car, Justin and the teacher walk a few steps away.

"Well, I'm afraid there's been a bit of a problem with Gus."

"What happened?" Justin hopes with a sinking sensation that they won't have to punish Gus right before Christmas.

"Gus has been singing a certain Christmas song and apparently some of the other children have mimicked him, and there are some upset parents."

"Don't tell me — something about Batman smelling and Robin laying eggs?"

She snorts and tucks a lock of graying hair behind her ear. "No, although that is still a popular ditty with each new generation. I'm afraid Gus has been singing a variation on 'I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus' that some parents find objectionable."

"Uh, what does he have Mommy doing?" Please don't let it be *blowing* Santa Claus, Justin prays.

She clears her throat. "Well, the problem is that it's *Daddy* kissing Santa."

Justin stares at her for a beat before laughter bursts out of him. "That's it? That's the big problem?"

Her eyes narrow. "You have to remember that it is offensive to some of the other families. Not all children are raised in...open-minded homes. I have to try to keep everyone happy."

Shaking his head, Justin says, "If they don't like Daddy kissing Santa Claus, then they can tell their kids not to sing the song. But Gus's creativity isn't going to be stifled because of other people's prejudices. Understand?"

“Mr. Taylor—”

“It’s their problem, not ours.”

Mrs. Sears sighs. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. But sometimes it becomes my problem.” She hugs her arms around her waist and moves to go back inside. A few feet away she turns back. “By the way, the cookies Gus made were delicious. And thank your husband for the symphony tickets.”

Justin tamps down the impulse to say that Brian isn’t his husband. “I will. Merry Christmas, Mrs. Sears.”

Her smile is genuine. “And to you, Mr. Taylor.” With that, she hurries back inside, the brisk wind swirling the fallen snow over the walkway.

In the car, Gus watches Justin glumly as they head back home. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Justin smiles.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Daddy?” Gus has started calling Justin that, and Justin’s heart still clenches just a bit every time he hears it.

“Yeah?”

“Santa’s definitely not bringing my Mommies back, right?”

Justin swallows roughly. “Right. Daddy explained it, remember?”

He nods. “I wanted to check. Just in case.”

Justin reaches over and runs his hand through Gus’s hair. “You’ve got lots of people who love you. You know that, right?” Gus nods. “But it’s okay to miss them, too.”

Gus’s eyes are big and solemn. “Do you miss them?”

Justin takes a deep breath, flashes of Lindsay and Melanie flicking through his mind like a slideshow on high speed. “Yeah, I do.”

“Me, too.” After a few moments of silence, Gus asks, “Wanna sing?” and they launch into a harmony-free duet about Daddy and Santa Claus underneath some mistletoe.

*

Jenny toddles by at warp speed, Gus happily trailing after her into Michael and Ben's kitchen. "When did she get so fast?" Justin asks, amazed.

"Seems like it was overnight," Ben replies, smiling proudly. He and Michael look at each other and beam, and Justin notices Brian's small eye roll from across the room.

Emmett sashays out of the kitchen with another dish of delicious-smelling food that he adds to the dining room table buffet. "Before you know it, these two little munchkins will be driving."

Justin tries to picture Gus as a teenager, but it's impossible. He glances at Brian and finds Brian's eyes on him. A small smile lifts the corners of Brian's mouth and then Deb is yelling at them all to start eating.

"Come on, we can't disobey the General on Christmas Eve," Carl says as he heaves himself out of an armchair.

"Wait, there's a time when we *can* disobey Deb?" Hunter's eyebrow arches and Deb swats him on the ass.

"It all smells so delicious," Jen enthuses.

"Just wait until tomorrow when your son cooks Christmas dinner," Deb says with a wink.

Justin's been preparing all week, but he has to admit that Maria's been helping. A lot. "I just hope it'll be okay," Justin shrugs.

"Okay? Sunshine, it'll be fantastic, you hear me?" Deb pinches his cheek and kisses him, wiping the stain of lipstick from his lips with her thumb.

"Yeah, because you and Mom are totally going to help me, whether I like it or not."

Jen and Deb look at each other and smile guiltily. "You can never have too much help on Christmas, sweetheart," Jen says.

Emmett's phone rings and he steps outside, a troubled look on his face. As he spoons Swedish meatballs onto his plate, Justin quietly asks Ted, "What's up with Em?"

"Drew's been calling a lot lately. Wants to get back together, says he misses Em too much, and that he's done playing around."

"What about Adam?" Justin realizes he hasn't seen him around lately.

"Let's just say our Emmett is torn between two men."

"And what about you?" Justin had noticed Blake's absence and hadn't wanted to say anything in case he and Ted had broken up.

Ted smiles and spears a roasted potato. "Blake's seeing his family for the first time in years. I talked to him an hour ago and things seem to be going well. And they are definitely going well for us."

Justin squeezes Ted's shoulder and presses a kiss to his cheek. "I'm glad to hear it."

Ted looks slightly taken aback, but smiles widely. "Thanks. And I'm glad things are good between you and Brian. I wish...I mean, obviously I wish things hadn't happened like they did, but in a way...I've never seen Brian so happy."

As Justin eats his dinner, he watches Brian laughing with Michael, and finds it strange that he's used to life being this way now.

*

Justin feels like he's only just closed his eyes after putting all the presents under the tree when Gus is jumping up and down excitedly on the bed, squealing that Santa has come for real this time.

"Better go wake up Grandma and Aunt Molly," Brian tells him, voice thick with sleep.

For a few minutes, there is blissful silence once more in the early morning light and Justin snuggles closer into Brian's side. Then Molly is standing at the foot of the bed, arms crossed over her chest.

"I could have stayed at Dad's, you know. So if we have to get up, so do you." She tugs the duvet down and stalks out. A moment later, Gus barrels back in, and both Brian and Justin groan and rouse themselves.

It's not yet eight o'clock when Daphne arrives, bleary-eyed and soft in Justin's arms as they hug at the front door. "I haven't been up this early on Christmas in years," Daphne says, yawning.

"Me either." Justin looks to her car in the driveway. "Did you bring it?"

She huffs good-naturedly. "*Of course.*"

"It wasn't any trouble?"

"No, everything was fine. Besides, the look on Gus's face will be worth it. Not to mention the look on Brian's." She grins and presses a bag of presents into Justin's hand.

Inside, Jen is cooking up breakfast and Brian is gulping down coffee. "Well, well, Ms. Chanders," Brian draws.

"Mr. Kinney," she says, planting a kiss on his cheek before moving to hug Jen and Molly. "Where's Gus?"

"Practically running laps around the Christmas tree. The good news is that he'll be exhausted by

noon," Molly says.

Gus bounds into the kitchen and Daphne kneels down to pull him into a tight hug. "How's my big boy?"

"Fine! Ready to open presents! Or they might go bad."

Everyone laughs, but Gus remains serious. "We've got to eat breakfast first, Sonny Boy," Brian tells him.

Gus whines, "But who cares about breakfast?"

"Why don't you go get everyone's stocking and bring them into the kitchen," Justin suggests. "We can open them while we eat."

Gus springs into action and soon returns, dragging the bulging stockings behind him. Daphne blinks in surprise when she sees there's one for her. "Justin, you didn't need to..."

Justin smiles. "I can't take the credit."

Everyone swivels to look at Brian, now on possibly his third cup of coffee. He shrugs. "What? You're here on Christmas, you get a stocking."

They all open their stockings and commend Santa on his good taste in gifts, and when Gus runs back to the tree, Brian tells them that Cynthia will be glad to hear she chose well. After barely being allowed to swallow their breakfast, Gus herds them into the den, where the large Christmas tree and its presents awaits.

The gardener had picked the tree out and hauled it in a few weeks earlier, but Justin, Brian and Gus had decorated it. Brian had barely even needed any convincing, and Justin was pretty sure he had only protested out of habit.

After they strung the lights, Brian had moved to put the star on the top of the tree, making Justin gasp. Brian had frozen in place, arm outstretched and said, "What?"

"You have to put the star on last," Justin had said, horror in his hushed tones.

"Why?"

"Because!"

"Because why?"

"Just...because! Brian, it's wrong to put it on first. Very wrong."

Brian's eyebrow had arched. "So you wouldn't like it if I..." He trailed off and moved his arm near the

top of the tree again.

“Daddy!” Gus yelled out, while Justin went up on his toes to try to snatch the star away. Brian grinned and tried to dodge him, and they ended up on the floor, snagged in garlands of tinsel, Gus giggling and jumping on them. When the time had come to finally put the star on, Brian had lifted Gus up onto his shoulders so he could do the honours.

As they open presents, Justin admires the tree proudly, blushing when Brian catches him. When they are finally left with just a collection of bows and brightly coloured paper littering the carpet, Daphne slips out. Molly gazes at her new tiny iPod in awe, and Jennifer tells Brian once more that it was too much. Gus doesn’t really know where to start with all his toys, but his attention is captured when a dog barks in the hallway.

Brian’s head snaps around and a moment later he’s fixing Justin with a glare. “What was—”

“A PUPPY!” Gus flings himself towards Daphne, who is carrying a little ball of brown fur.

“Look what Santa left for you, Gus!” Daphne exclaims as she crouches down to his level.

Brian levels his gaze at Justin. “Gee, how wonderful of Santa.”

Justin blinks innocently. “Great, huh? Just look how happy our son is.”

Brian sighs and there’s no denying the joy on Gus’s face as the little brown labrador licks his face. “I guess that’s all that matters, then.”

Justin moves to Brian’s side and presses their lips together, Brian stiff and unyielding at first, but then warming up as he slides his arm over Justin’s shoulders.

“What are you going to call him, Gus?” Molly’s attention has finally been wrest away from her iPod.

Gus thinks very seriously, hands on hips. Finally he says, “Armani! That way Daddy will love him.”

The room explodes into laughter and Brian can’t keep the smile from his face.

*

Justin stands in the doorway and waves goodbye to Emmett and Drew, the last guests to leave. Emmett’s smile is bright and Drew is more relaxed than Justin remembers him. He makes a mental note to get all the details from Em at New Year’s as he closes the door with a sigh of relief. It’s only ten, but feels later. Christmas dinner was a fabulous success, and Justin is flush with the pride of being, as Brian put it earlier, a happy homemaker.

After a quick look at the kitchen, he decides the rest of the dishes can wait for morning this time, especially since it’ll be him doing them, Maria happy at home with her family for the week, a big Christmas bonus in her account. In the den, Brian is nowhere to be found, but the fire beckons in the

fireplace and Justin warms his hands, watching the flames.

He turns to admire the Christmas tree once more, noticing a small, unwrapped box below it. Puzzled, he kneels down and picks it up. It is at once familiar in his hands, and he sucks in a surprised breath.

There's a noise, and Justin looks up to see Brian in the doorway, the lights of the Christmas tree soft on his face. Brian moves towards him and sinks to his knees, joining him on the floor.

"Brian, what..."

Brian says nothing, just takes the box and opens it. The rings shine beautifully in the coloured lights and Justin swallows the lump that has suddenly developed in his throat. "Brian, we don't need these." But he wants them. Wants, wants, wants them.

Brian looks at him steadily. "No, we don't." He takes the smaller ring out. "But I spent way too much money on them to leave them in a box collecting dust." His smile is crooked and Justin hears everything else that goes unsaid as Brian slides the ring over Justin's finger.

With a hand that only trembles a bit, Justin does the same, pushing Brian's ring over his knuckle until it sits firmly in place. "I do," Justin whispers.

"So do I." Brian kisses him gently and they hold onto each other, hands grasping and tight.

A pine needle pokes through Justin's sweater as he falls back onto the carpet and he half winces and half laughs. "We should go upstairs so we can lock the door," he mumbles as Brian's mouth moves its way down his neck.

"After all that turkey, it would take a freight train to wake him." Brian opens Justin's pants and pulls his hardening cock free. As Brian takes it between his lips, Justin stops thinking.

Brian has come prepared and after his tongue works Justin's ass, he thrusts inside, Justin's legs up on his shoulders. They kiss almost desperately as Brian plunges in and out and Justin presses his palm to Brian's cheek. When he pulls away to breathe, he is transfixed by the sight of the wedding band gleaming on his finger. Brian smiles and turns his head, his mouth on Justin's hand, tongue sweeping over the metal there.

Justin squeezes his ass around Brian's cock, tries to draw him in deeper as he pulls his head down for another kiss. His knees push into his chest and he moans as Brian hits just the right spot inside him. Brian's balls slap against his ass and they both gasp, sweat forming on their skin as they rock together.

"I want to fuck you raw," Brian growls, and Justin nearly comes right there. "I want to come inside you, I want to feel everything."

The only response Justin can make is a garbled groan as Brian takes his cock in his hand, and Justin swears that he sees stars, but maybe it's just the tinsel shining on the tree. He comes over and over,

Brian joining him, muscles quivering.

They collapse in a heap, chests heaving, limbs heavy. Brian shifts to his side, legs still entangled with Justin's. They're quiet for a minute until Justin softly asks, "Why did you say that?"

Brian's eyes are steady once more. "Why do you think I said it?"

"Did you mean it?" It's silly, but his breath pauses in his chest.

Brian kisses him firmly. "I don't say things I don't mean." His fingers trail down Justin's chest. "But if you don't want to, if you want to still have...."

Justin laughs then. "You're all I've ever wanted." He sobers and regards Brian carefully. "But are you sure it's what you want? Are you sure I'm enough?"

Kissing him deeply, Brian's tongue sweeps into his mouth. "You're everything," he murmurs against his lips.

"But you've always needed..."

"Things change, Justin." He motions to the room around them, the roaring fire and Christmas tree, the house beyond. Their house, their fire, their Christmas tree. Their son sleeping upstairs. Their life.

Justin knows they'll have to wait months until they can be sure it's safe, but he already feels the quiver of excitement coiling in his belly. "Once we do this, there's no turning back."

Brian smiles faintly, a faraway look in his eyes. "I think I said that to you once. A long time ago."

Remembering a rain of glittery confetti and a pulsing beat, Justin smiles too. They lose themselves in each other once again, until a barking and whining puppy interrupts. Brian grumbles as he dresses quickly and takes Armani outside, even though the dog already gone to the bathroom in the hallway.

Justin goes to bed and waits. The snow drifts down outside the window, and Brian's skin is chilled when he returns, snow melting in his hair as Justin pulls him closer.