

Three's A Crowd
By Julia

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“What’s the point of having a fucking cell phone if you don’t keep it switched on?” exclaimed Brian and he placed his own cell back onto his desk.

“You okay boss?” asked Cynthia, Brian’s PA, as she looked around the door into his office. Brian had been unaware he’d actually spoken those words out loud and was caught a little off balance by her question.

“What? ... oh yeah ... thanks” he muttered and hit the Enter key on the keyboard. All afternoon, he’d been trying to concentrate on the presentation to a new account he was supposed to be making in a couple of days, but just couldn’t keep his mind on it and, once again, Brian’s thoughts returned to Mark.

Mark Reynolds was three years his senior and Manager of the local art Gallery, in addition to overseeing an associate gallery in New York and Brian still couldn’t work out how Mark had managed it and, it had to be said, neither could any of Brian’s friends.

Brian Kinney; 32-year-old successful ad. exec. and confirmed bachelor, but the truth of the matter was that Brian appeared to have fallen in love; well, as much as any man can who says he doesn’t actually believe in such a notion.

It could have been the copious amounts of alcohol consumed the weekend when Brian had attended the advertising convention in New York six months earlier; taking every opportunity to network and at the same time check out the competition for the Vanguard Advertising Agency for whom he worked and found himself staying in the same hotel as fellow Pittsburgh-resident, Mark Reynolds.

Or it could have been the fact that Mark was a very attractive man who could be taken for anything up to ten years younger than his actual age and kept himself extremely fit.

More likely, it was a combination of the two that had found them sharing a mutual attraction and it hadn’t taken long for Brian to end up in the other man’s bed. Then, once back in Pittsburgh, Mark had, quite by chance, found himself at Woody’s on the same nights as Brian, even though Mark hadn’t stepped inside the place for years.

And Mark had played it clever; played it cool. Even played Brian at his own game, some would say and now it was Brian who was making all the running.

It hadn’t taken Mark long at all to work out the type of guy Brian was. He saw enough of himself in the fuck-em-and-leave-em-wanting Mr. Kinney to know how to yank Brian’s chain just sufficient to make him curious enough to come back for more. And whereas Brian had always refused requests for repeat performances, Mark’s aloofness: an almost

indifference towards him, had him hooked.

Who the hell was Mark Reynolds to think his encounter with the great Brian Kinney could be brushed aside as just an “okay” fuck? A reaction which prompted Brian to go all out and prove just how hot he actually was; what a catch he would be and playing right into the other man’s hands.

And Brian did, much to his amazement and even horror and, when he realized the trap he’d fallen into, it was too late; Mark had actually started to get under his skin. And when Mark had said he loved him; for the first time in his life, Brian had heard those words from a lover and found himself believing them.

They were even pretty alike physically; both brunets, both tall, with Mark just a little heavier than Brian and an obvious top. Brian had only just managed to maintain dominance in this area, with Mark usually giving way in the end and knowing, like a lot of tops, that Brian wasn’t exactly adverse to cock every now and again.

Brian hadn’t given up his lifestyle too quickly. He’d continued to do the clubs a couple of times a week when work allowed; picking up tricks and stating he wasn’t ready to be tied down just yet and Mark had been completely okay with that, saying he hoped Brian realized that he wasn’t exactly a monk on his weekly trips to the Big Apple. But Mark could tell Brian was beginning to get bored with the ritual of casual pick-ups which only resulted in an empty bed and sleeping alone, or probably, more significantly, waking up and facing the day alone.

Brian had watched as more and more of his friends and acquaintances had started to pair up; become couples and though he’d rather lose a kidney than admit it; he was starting to feel a little left out in the cold. Though not yet exactly old, he dreaded turning into one of those dried up old queens chasing the young guys; seeing how they were laughed at behind their backs: Pathetic.

There was a day when he’d even laughed at them himself but he was getting closer to becoming one of them all the time. And even though Brian still couldn’t be sure exactly how he felt about the man, maybe hooking up with Mark wasn’t such an awful idea after all; the prospect of growing older and on his own was becoming far less appealing.

Mark had then started to talk about the possibility of moving in together; an idea that Brian had baulked at when first mentioned, unable to conceive of ever wanting to totally give up his independence or for that matter, give up the loft.

The loft; the top floor of a converted warehouse, had been Brian’s first major purchase following an exceptionally good year at the Ryder Advertising Agency when Brian had brought in over \$1 million of business. Then as now, following the purchase of the agency by Gardner Vance, Brian was their best ad. exec. and was about to be made partner. But with its one main room with bathroom and bedroom a raised area, the loft was really only big enough for one and giving it up would be his final capitulation and acceptance that his life as a single man was over; one that Brian was finding difficult to

accept, despite being steadily drawn further into Mark's life and circle of friends.

Mark's apartment was larger, but he'd accepted that Brian wouldn't feel comfortable just moving into another man's domain and had suggested they look for somewhere bigger to live together; somewhere that was neutral territory and Brian had eventually agreed and had even put his loft on the market.

"Brian, is this really what you want?" asked Lindsay at the loft early one Friday evening as she bounced her young son on her knee.

When Brian had introduced Mark to the gang that had been a first in itself. None of Brian's conquests had ever made it that far and certainly had never become part of his group of friends. And in actual fact, neither had Mark.

When invited to various events and gatherings, it always appeared that Mark made Brian hang back a little; now sitting on the sidelines instead of being usually at the centre of whatever was happening, saying he felt he didn't fit in; that Brian's friends looked down on him or were jealous of their relationship.

With subtle remarks, Mark had made Brian believe his friends didn't approve of them; something Brian resented. If people didn't like his choices, well, fuck them. They were HIS choices after all; they should be able to live with them. But deep down, Brian knew how much he valued certain people's opinions, even if he'd never let them know that. And Lindsay was one of those people.

Lindsay could always get to Brian in ways other people couldn't and as his and Mark's relationship was getting serious enough for Brian to have agreed to give up his home, then as one of his oldest and most trusted friends, Lindsay felt she just had to ask.

"Da ... da", Gus was holding his hands out to his Father and Brian smiled at the boy. He'd always known when Brian was present: right from the start, by the sound of his voice, but at Lindsay's question Brian shrugged as he reached out for the youngster.

"Why wouldn't I?" countered Brian, taking the boy from her and setting him down on his knee. "Mark's quite a catch ... he's hot ... comfortably off ..."

"But ... moving in with him ... becoming a couple and giving up the loft? This is your final stance of independence and I know how much this place means to you ..." stated Lindsay and Brian glanced at her, knowing full well what she was referring to.

Brian's early struggles were known only to his closest friends; growing up in a household where a Father showed his affection by slapping his young son; slaps that had developed into punches as the boy grew older and a religiously devout Mother who offered little protection.

As a child, Brian's home had been a battleground and, whenever he could, he'd escaped to the home of Michael Novotny, the friend he'd made when he was fourteen and once

having left home to take up a scholarship to Carnegie-Melon had lived in a succession of cramped apartments until he'd started to make a name for himself at the advertising agency.

Buying the loft had been Brian's declaration that he'd become something to be proud of. His parents had never shown the slightest interest in their son's well being; his Father often informing the youngster that he should in fact have been aborted, creating in Brian a deep-rooted sense of worthlessness; one that nagged away at him still.

Even as an adult, his parents hadn't accepted him. Having been informed by Jack that he was dying of cancer, Brian had tried to give a little of himself; telling his Father he was gay. Jack's reply was that his fucking faggot of a son should be the one who was dying, not him and Brian mourned the relationship he'd never had with his Dad; the relationship he was never going to have. And now, ruffling the hair on the head of his own offspring, was determined the same relationship would not be passed down from Father to son on this occasion.

His Mother, Joan, had been no better. She'd come to the loft one day unexpectedly and found Brian with another man; leaving abruptly and telling her son he would go to hell. But Brian wasn't really surprised at that: after all, he'd thought he already had been to hell, those young years living with his family.

And then when the bonuses he'd earned had meant he could buy his first real home and a stylish one at that; when he was earning enough money to be beholden to no one, he'd hoped he'd cast off the past, where money had never been plentiful. How could it be, with a heavy drinker in the house and a commitment to a collection plate that depleted most of his parent's meager income?

"Well then, what about Gus?" asked Lindsay. "In the few times I've met Mark he's never once asked about your son. I can't see him wanting to have much to do with him and I bet you anything you like it won't be long before you decide to back off even further ..."

"That's not fair, Lindz ... " interrupted Brian. "I love my son. Okay ... so I don't spend as much time with him as I should, but that doesn't mean I don't care and I'll always be here for him ... for both of you," and Brian sighed, but Lindsay was right, Mark had never taken an interest in Gus.

"Anyway, Mark wants us to move in together ... it's the next logical step ..." continued Brian and now Lindsay was sure this wasn't Brian speaking.

"Christ, Brian ... Mark sure has his claws into you ..."

"No he hasn't" snapped Brian. "No one could make me do something I didn't want to ..."

"Well ... do you love him?" asked Lindsay, directly.

"Would I be doing this if I didn't?" countered Brian.

“I don’t know, Brian ... but that wasn’t really an answer to my question,” came Lindsay, right back at him.

Brian looked back at his son and refused to say anything further on that one, but at the back of his mind, Brian had questioned just why he had agreed to move in with Mark. Was he really that scared of growing old on his own that he’d settle for the first man who’d persevered enough to land him?

And as for love: what the fuck did he know about that anyway? But who’s to say this wasn’t love? How was he supposed to know one way or the other?

Lindsay sighed. “Brian, what the hell’s happened to you?” she asked him. “Where did the fuck-em-only-once, no-apologies-no-regrets Brian Kinney that we all know ... and love ... go?”

“You’re not exactly old now, are you? You’ve got plenty of time for all this,” she continued and Lindsay was genuinely concerned for him.

In all the time they’d known each other since college, this was so completely out of character for Brian. The man who had stated more than once that he didn’t believe in love; that all that was bullshit and an excuse people used just to get laid, was moving headlong into a relationship with a man that Lindsay doubted very much that Brian loved; was even doubtful that Brian knew the true meaning of love, other than that he now so obviously felt for his son.

When Lindsay had first approached Brian and asked him to be the father of the child she and Melanie so desperately wanted, Brian had agreed, thinking he could remain totally detached from the proceedings. And though Brian could never be a full-time Dad, even by his own admission, the love he’d developed for his son was undeniable.

And if Mark was right for Brian: could give Brian everything he needed; open up her friend’s eyes and heart to the wonders of being in love, then Lindsay would be thrilled. But something about Mark had nagged at her from the start, the way he seemed to be railroading Brian into something she doubted he was ready for, just because he felt he was going to be left alone; almost needing to acquire Brian as just another possession.

“We’ve all got to grow up sometime, Lindz ... even me. Isn’t that right ... Sonny-boy?” asked Brian of his son and the boy gurgled happily in response.

Over the next few days, Brian kept going over in his head his conversation with Lindsay. She’d been the only one of his friends who’d had the courage to come right out and ask him directly about his relationship with Mark and he had to admit that the doubts he’d felt before Mark had worn him down were starting to re-surface.

Like the man’s apparent unwillingness to take no for an answer; his declaration of love and endless flattering, which admittedly, Brian had enjoyed hearing, but were now

sounding a little false and hollow and not helped by the fact that he could hardly contact Mark whenever he was away. He always had his damned cell switched off.

As part of Mark's job included overseeing the New York gallery, this entailed him spending one night and one day away in that city each week. Then, every Friday, Mark would do his duty and visit his Mother.

Mrs. Reynolds didn't approve of her son's lifestyle, something at least Brian could relate to, and this meant that Mark had always visited her alone. And, as it was quite a long drive, he stayed over and drove back the following morning.

Well, at least that's what he told Brian.

"I wish you didn't have to leave", said the blond, stretching out against the dark blue silk sheets as the older man emerged from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and his body shining after his hot shower.

The younger man had still been asleep when he got up and now Mark smiled as he watched him; the incredibly pale skin almost translucent against the dark bedding and, for a moment, he almost lost his resolve.

"I have to, babe," he answered him, hardly able to tear his eyes away from the man's naked body sprawled out on the bed in front of him. "I have to fly to the New York gallery to sort out the mess they're in with the show scheduled for next month", and he lent down and kissed the blond on the lips.

Mark hadn't needed to try very hard to capture Justin. When it came to getting what he desired, Mark's dogged determination was matched with the patience of a saint and as the brunet pulled away, Justin sat up and caught hold of the towel; pulling it away from the man's body.

"You could always catch a later flight," he whispered and, looking into Justin's big blue eyes, Mark sighed. "What the fuck ..." and he allowed Justin to pull him back down onto the bed. "I never could resist blonds ..." whispered Mark into the young man's ear.

Justin Taylor: 20 years old and, for the moment, just drifting. He'd initially met Mark at the Gay and Lesbian Centre, when the then 17 year old had exhibited some of his artwork for the first time at an exhibition put on for charity. Mark had immediately recognized the blond's talent and had even put a couple of Justin's early pieces into the gallery.

Justin had lived for his art, but was practical enough to know that it was unlikely he'd ever be able to make a full time career out of it and had planned to qualify as a graphic artist and even moving into animation eventually and use his spare time to draw from the heart the subjects of his own choosing.

But that was before the bashing.

Two years before, Justin had been the victim of a gay bashing. An unprovoked attack which nearly killed him and, at the time, Justin almost wished it had. The brain damage had resulted in loss of motor skills to his right hand: his drawing hand. So he'd dropped out of school and almost dropped out of life, taking only menial jobs like delivering flyers, stacking shelves or retrieving shopping carts; anything that didn't remind him of what he once had.

And then he'd run into Mark again. Mark was involved with the Pittsburgh Art Alliance, encouraging young, unknown local artists to exhibit their talent and he'd managed to convince Justin to give it a go and it had set the young man wondering whether he could recover anything of what he'd lost.

Mark found himself attracted to the young blond, finding opportunities to seek him out where he worked or at the small apartment where Justin lived on the pretext of discussing the show and they had slowly started a relationship.

And before long, Mark had fallen in love with him; well, at least that's what he told Justin and the younger man had wanted to believe him. Wanted to, but somehow he still suspected that Mark saw other men.

He knew about the trip Mark took to New York every week and they could only see each other on certain nights. But Mark had told him he was the only one who counted. Well, fine: he'd have to accept that for now and Mark had hinted that it wouldn't be long before he wanted to settle down and Justin planned to be around when that happened.

With the exhibition now just a few weeks away, Justin had completed a couple of pieces. It had been hard work, given that his hand cramped and gave out on him if he tried to do too much at a time, but once he'd got started, the passion that used to consume him had begun to flow back.

Liberty Avenue was included as one of the venues for this year's art show with business owners having been asked to invite local artists to exhibit their works on their premises and in their windows for the duration of the show. Then, on one of the days, it would be arranged for the artists to be on hand to answer any questions about their art and, hopefully, sell their work.

With the two pieces completed and nearing the completion of a third, Justin had tried several of the businesses along Liberty Avenue that had expressed interest in showing young artists' work, but so far had struck out; they all had someone lined up and just when he thought he might give up, Justin entered 'Torso' a men's wear store and that's where he met Emmett Honeycutt.

"Sweetie," said Emmett, eyeing the young man appreciatively as he dressed one of the manikins in the window, "what the fuck do I know about art?"

"You don't have to" replied Justin. "But the store is on the list and as you haven't got

anyone signed up yet ... I was kind of hoping ..." Emmett looked over at him and sighed. The young man was very cute and the store owner had agreed to participate in the show, so ...

Justin agreed to exhibit at least three pieces at the store and he then continued down Liberty Avenue. He wasn't terribly familiar with the neighborhood and had only ventured out onto the street, with its gay clubs, bars and business, a few times since accepting he was gay and then only at night, but a "Help Wanted" sign in the window of the Liberty Diner caught his attention and Justin wandered in. He could always use the extra cash and bussing tables would at least keep him inside during inclement weather when he was usually rescuing abandoned shopping carts from around the parking lot at the Giant Eagle supermarket.

The noise of the place hit him as soon as he opened the door; it was buzzing and the woman behind the counter was yelling at someone in the kitchen at the top of her voice and Justin assumed she was in charge.

"Excuse me ... excuse me"

"Yes, honey, what can I do for you?" Debbie Novotny asked him; coffee pot in one hand, order pad in the other and she was a sight to behold, with her flaming red hair and waistcoat covered by colorful buttons; PFLAG and every other gay initiative going.

"Hey ... can we get our order?" hollered a guy in one of the booths and Debbie rolled her eyes. "I'll be with you shortly honey" she called and muttered " ... but I've only got one pair of hands," under her breath and the bell rang from the kitchen; an order was ready to take to one of the tables.

Debbie put the coffee pot back on the hot plate behind the counter and Justin followed her as she headed to collect the meal from the kitchen and it was obvious she was on her own and getting more than just a little frazzled.

"Mam ... about the sign in the window ..."

"Waitress, can we have more coffee over here ..."

"Sign ... what sign?" asked Debbie, hurrying to deliver the meal and then going back for the coffee pot.

"It says you're looking for help ..."

"Oh ... that one ... why ... you interested?" and having poured out the coffees as requested, Debbie took a breath and turned back at last to study the young man.

"Christ ... you're a cutie," she exclaimed, taking in Justin's blond hair, blue eyes and cute, turned up nose. "But have you ever bussed tables before?" and Justin bit his lip and shook his head. "Well ... no ... but I'm a quick learner ... and you do look as if you

need someone ...”

Another bell from the kitchen sealed Justin’s fate. “You want the job it’s yours. When can you start?” asked Debbie and Justin shrugged. “When would you want me?”

“Can you start now?” asked Debbie. “Only the waitress called in sick and I need more regular help ...” and Justin hesitated, trying to think what else he had to do today and soon realized he had nothing lined up.

“Sure”, he answered her, in disbelief at the speed with which he’d been offered the job.

“Great,” came the reply. “Go and wash up and then grab an apron from behind the counter ... but ... you’d be on trial for a couple of days ... see how you get on. Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah ... I’m okay with that” smiled Justin and Debbie smiled back.

Justin soon started to get the hang of things and when the rush died down a little, Debbie got a chance to talk to the young man, who was already making quite an impression on the customers.

“So, why aren’t you still in school?” she asked him, when the diner became quiet enough for them to grab a quick coffee and take a five minute break. Justin was sitting at one of the stools at the counter and he looked down into his cup and shook his head.

“I kinda dropped out ...” he answered, offering nothing more, but Debbie was never one to let things drop if she was curious. “How come? A bright kid like you ... you don’t wanna be bussing tables all your life now, do you?” but Justin only shrugged and Debbie couldn’t fail to notice the sadness in the blond’s face and decided not to press further; at least not for now.

The end of Justin’s shift came around and he took off his apron and started to count the tips he’d made; pleased and surprised at how much there was after just a few short hours. Debbie watched him and smiled. “You got the job ... if you want it ... forget about the trial”, she told him.

“Great ... thanks Debbie”, replied Justin, looking up at her and he smiled the biggest smile Debbie had ever seen on anyone.

“Christ ... you keep that smile coming and the customers will be fighting to get into this place ...” she stated and Justin couldn’t stop the color creeping across his face and he offered her the wad of bills.

“No ... you keep it Sunshine ... you earned it”.

“Sunshine?” queried Justin and Debbie chuckled.

“Well, with a smile that lights up the place like that ... what else could I call you?” and Justin smiled even wider.

“What shifts can you offer me, Debbie?” asked the blond. “Only, I work some days at the Giant Eagle ... but I’d rather be working here ...”

“Well,” answered Debbie, “Let’s see what we can work out”.

Putting their heads together, Debbie sorted what shifts she could offer Justin and the young man went away very happy. He’d have to work out some notice at the supermarket before he could take on too many more shifts at the diner, but Debbie was prepared to wait and the shifts here meant he’d still have time to persevere with his art.

“See you tomorrow ... the breakfast shift?” asked Debbie as Justin collected his coat.

“Sure thing ... bright and early?”

“Bright and early” smiled Debbie back at him and she watched him leave.

As good as his word, Justin arrived at the Diner the following morning for the early shift. In fact, he’d arrived a few minutes before Debbie and he was stomping his feet in the doorway in order to keep warm.

“Christ, Sunshine ... you’re keen” greeted Debbie as she unlocked the door and they made their way inside the diner and out of the cold.

“Well, to be honest,” answered Justin, taking off his barely adequate coat and scarf, “it’s warmer here than back at my place”, and Debbie nodded; she understood that all right. Bringing up her son single-handed and caring for her sick brother, money had always been in short supply and keeping the house heated in harsh winters had been a constant struggle.

And Debbie couldn’t help wondering what Justin’s story was. In just one shift she’d known she’d got someone far more capable than working as a busboy at a diner. Why wasn’t he in school? Didn’t he have a family to support him? And, as Justin put on the coffee pot, Debbie saw how he seemed to favor his right hand. She hadn’t noticed it the day before; she’d probably been too busy and he certainly seemed to be able to cope okay, but Debbie couldn’t help wondering how he’d acquired that weakness.

A little later, on his way to work further down the street, Emmett Honeycutt stopped by for breakfast and was more than a little surprised to find the young artist who’d been in the store working there.

“Morning Em ... “ greeted Debbie. “What’ll you have?”

“Morning Debbie” answered Emmett, removing his gloves. “It’s a cold one out there this morning so ... I think ... I’ll have the pancakes and some coffee, please” and he sat down

on one of the stools at the counter.

“Pancakes and coffee,” repeated Debbie. “Comin’ up” and she took the order to the kitchen and Emmett recognized the young man who’d come to the store the day before.

“Well, hello, sweetie ... I didn’t know you were working here,” said Emmett.

“I just started,” replied Justin and Emmett grinned, leaning back on his stool to admire the younger man’s bubble butt.

“Then I guess I’m going to be spending even more time in here than I did before,” and Debbie swiped his arm with her order pad.

“Keep your hands off the help,” she told him, but she was smiling and everyone knew she was teasing.

“How do you know Justin, Emmett?” asked Debbie when the young blond was out of earshot and Emmett swallowed the last of the pancakes and took a sip of coffee before he answered her.

“He came into the store yesterday ... he’d got some drawings he wanted to show as part of this year’s the art exhibition ...”

“Oh yeah,” answered Debbie. “We had a girl come in a few days ago ... she’s gonna be putting some of her work up in here ...” and Emmett continued. “Well, Justin’s gonna be putting three pictures up in the store ... he’s very good ... I can tell ... even if I don’t know diddly squat about art” and the man chuckled and now Debbie had a feeling she must know the young blond from somewhere.

Before long, the morning rush was in full swing and Emmett was soon joined by Teddy and the two men decided to take a booth. Ted was an accountant and he and Em were the best of friends, friends who’d occasionally wondered if their futures saw them together as a couple, but so far hadn’t taken the next step, fearful that their friendship would suffer if things didn’t work out between them; but two closer friends was harder to find.

Debbie’s son Michael and her son-in-law Ben stopped by for breakfast, as they did from time to time, before Michael opened up the comic book store he owned and before Ben attended the college where he was English Professor.

Debbie had thought of Ben as her son-in-law long before he and Michael had got married up in Canada earlier that year; a status that was negated as soon as they got back to the US border. But they wore their rings proudly and as far as they, their family and friends were concerned, were as married as two people could be; they didn’t really need a piece of paper to confirm that fact.

As usual, much of the conversation tended to move towards Brian and Mark and Debbie

tutted as soon as she heard Mark's name linked with the man she'd practically brought up as her own alongside Michael and there was something about Mark she definitely didn't like.

"Are they coming to dinner on Sunday?" asked Michael, referring to one of his Mother's legendary meals and he took his breakfast plate from her. "I doubt it," replied Debbie. "If you ask me, Mr. Reynolds thinks he's too high and mighty to be seen at one of our family dinners" and Debbie sighed.

"I know I've been praying for someone to come along and show Brian that it is possible for him to fall in love ... I just wish it wasn't Mark ..."

"Who's that?" interrupted Teddy, who had spotted Justin emerging from the storeroom and Debbie turned around to see whom he was referring to. She turned back and chuckled.

"That's Justin ... he's a real cutie, isn't he?" she answered him.

The doorbell rang, signifying yet another customer had entered the diner; Justin had been standing in front of the counter and he now glanced in the direction of the sound.

For a moment, everything seemed to stop as the tall brunet walked into the diner and Justin's jaw dropped as the most beautiful man he'd ever seen walked towards him; stopping to exchange greetings with Debbie, Michael, Ben, Ted and Emmett and then took a vacant stool at the counter.

For a moment, Justin completely forgot about Mark, but there was something about this man that reminded him of the one whose bed he shared on a regular basis.

Brian couldn't fail to notice the cute blond and when the young man had turned to him to ask him for his order, Brian suddenly found himself looking into the most beautiful baby blues he'd ever seen and he saw how the color crept across Justin's face as he smiled at the younger man.

Brian knew full well the effect he had on guys; something he'd missed out on just recently. Nice to know he still had it.

Brian ordered his usual black coffee and watched as the young man walked around the counter. Justin was having trouble keeping his breathing steady as he placed the cup and saucer in front of Brian and then poured out his coffee; glancing up at him as he finished.

"Thank you", said the man with smiling hazel eyes flecked with gold and they held Justin's own for several long seconds before the bell from the kitchen signaled another order to be delivered; but the look they'd shared as Justin smiled weakly as he dragged himself away from the man's gaze didn't go unnoticed by Debbie.

“Shame on you, Brian Kinney”, she whispered in his ear, “and you practically a married man”.

Debbie’s words suddenly brought Brian back to reality. Years of habit were going to take a little longer to break than he realized and Debbie was right; he’d made a commitment, of sorts to Mark, so maybe he should give the guy a fair break. Who knows, it might suit him.

But a guy can still look, can’t he? And besides, he was a little young in any case and if that’s all that it was that had passed between him and the blond then what was the harm in just a little flirtation? But that didn’t explain the feeling Brian had with him the rest of the day: a feeling that someone or something had looked deep into his soul. And he couldn’t forget those beautiful blue eyes.

Now more than six months had passed since they’d first met and even Brian had to admit he was a little surprised at how quickly things had moved on with Mark. He’d already had one or two people interested in the loft and he realized he was moving ever closer to the point of no return.

He was steadily moving away from his old life and had become aware how less he was now seeing of the old gang and when he did he felt a little apart from them. Like this morning at the diner when he’d sat at the counter instead of in the booth alongside the gang where it would have been easier to be part of the early morning banter that used to pass between them and a feeling of losing something significant was starting to creep over him.

And Brian smiled as he remembered the blond’s reaction to him; he was really cute, but then a pang of guilt came over him and that definitely was a first; after all, when did Brian ever feel guilty about having the hots for anyone? But hearing Debbie remind him of his commitment made him feel he was being disloyal.

And Mark did make Brian feel good about himself and Brian had even begun to believe Mark’s words of love; realizing how much he’d desired to hear those words spoken; filling an empty void inside him.

As a child, Brian had only ever witnessed affection being bestowed on others; his own parents had never been forthcoming in that department. The only love Brian had ever known was that from a surrogate Mother and from a few close friends. And it wasn’t just during sex that Mark had uttered such endearments, but had told him he loved him in the cold harsh light of day and looking into Mark’s eyes, Brian had believed him.

Mark was adventurous in bed and pretty noisy with it and Brian loved to hear him gasp for breath: his moans of delight and how he shouted out Brian’s name in the throes of orgasm: an acknowledgment that Brian was the cause of the other man’s pleasure.

Probably because they were of similar build and strength, sex with Mark was exhilarating and exhausting, though Brian was often left feeling a little dissatisfied deep

down inside and he wasn't sure why he should feel like that. Was it because it would normally start out as a contest for dominance? One that Brian had become to suspect was just a game on Mark's part given that he usually gave himself up to him in the end; usually, but not always.

Brian hadn't bottomed for anyone since he was a teenager and the first time Mark had indicated it was his intention to top had come as quite a surprise. But the man had initially been relatively patient and gentle: allowing Brian to adjust slowly to the penetration, before powering into him with a strength and determination that surprised Brian; and this was another one of those times.

Brian's orgasm had been intense: the man's hand in his hair and Brian clinging to the mattress; silently begging for release, which eventually came and all the while trying desperately not to let Mark know exactly what he was doing to him; not wanting to reveal his vulnerabilities. And when release came for both of them, Mark had then collapsed on top of him; pushing Brian down into the mattress before rolling off him; leaving them both totally spent. But it also left Brian feeling a little used and something that he'd been deliberating over for a few days now had to be said.

"I'm not going to sell the loft," said Brian quietly, once both men had recovered their breath sufficiently to speak. "What?" asked Mark, rolling on to his side to look at him and he discarded the condom and tossed it in the trash. "But I thought we agreed" and Brian thought he saw a glimpse of anger in the other man's eyes as he spoke.

"I know ... but I decided to lease it instead ... that way ..." Brian's voice trailed off, unwilling as he was to voice his confusion and the odd doubt that had started to come over him in the last couple of days.

"In other words you'll have somewhere you can run back to at the first sign of things not working out between us" stated Mark and this time, he didn't bother to hide his anger.

Brian sat up and moved to the edge of the bed and closed his eyes, hoping this wasn't going to turn into an argument. "If you didn't want us to move in together .. why didn't you say something earlier?" Mark asked him and he grabbed his clothes and started to dress: not even bothering to shower.

"Mark ..." Brian reached out to take the man's hand, but was brushed aside.

"I thought we had something good going for us", stated the other man, pushing his feet into his shoes. "But obviously I think more about this relationship than you do" and without bothering to say goodbye, Mark grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

Brian realized that if he let Mark go now; like this, that it could be the start of the end for their relationship; that things might never get back to how they'd been and he had to make a quick decision; is that what he really wanted?

"Are we still going to Debbie's on Sunday?" called Brian after him, the decision having

been made and Mark stopped abruptly; he sighed and then turned around; a little surprised that Brian had actually called him back.

“Do we have to?” he asked and he saw Brian look away. Mark closed his eyes; he knew he was asking Brian to give up certain things and maybe he was pushing him just a little too fast. When they were moved in together, there would be time enough to steer him away from his old life. Taking meals at a diner and eating in a cramped kitchen in a small house with people with whom he had nothing in common had very little appeal, but he knew he had to tread carefully or risk losing Brian all together.

“Okay”, agreed Mark, reluctantly. “I’ll pick you up” and slowly he walked back across the polished wooden floor and up to Brian’s bedroom. Leaning down, he took Brian’s chin in his hand and tilted the man’s face towards him.

“I do love you,” whispered Mark, “it’s just ...”

“I know” acknowledged Brian. “Debbie can be pretty hard to take sometimes ... but she is practically my Mother ...” and Mark nodded and smiled. And then he kissed him and the harsh words of before melted away and Brian grinned as Mark started to undo his shirt.

Dinner at the Novotny’s was as awful for Mark as he’d remembered from previous times and the gang had been quite surprised that he’d actually come along and had even brought flowers for Debbie, an action which had earned him a kiss from Brian; maybe he was trying after all, but when they were joined by Lindsay, Melanie and Gus, Mark wondered if things could get any worse.

Debbie’s idea of home-cooking didn’t really appeal to Mark, who loved to cook himself and when he and Brian were spending the night together either at Mark’s or at the loft, the other man had insisted on making dinner. Once, when he’d kept Brian waiting outside his apartment, Mark had mentioned giving him a key, but somehow had never got around to it, even though Brian had felt obliged somehow to give Mark a key to the loft and would often return from work to find a meal ready for him.

Brian found this extremely difficult to start with: all this domesticity. He’d never been used to meals waiting for him: not even as a kid.

His Mom hardly ever cooked, as she never knew when his Father would return; either from an evening at the bowling or from the social club he went to with the boys from work. Brian and his older sister, Claire, had pretty much fended for themselves when they returned from school and with whatever they found in the refrigerator or the store cupboards, which wasn’t usually much. Back then, the only time Brian ever ate properly, was when he was hiding out at Debbie’s and he was still uncomfortable with someone just doing stuff for him.

But unlike his parent’s house where family meals taken at a table had been virtually non-existent, but when they did happen were almost silent and fraught with tension,

meals at Debbie's had always been noisy, happy affairs. And now Brian sat next to his son and helped him eat his dinner; the experience obviously something the two of them enjoyed and Mark fought to keep his jealousy of the toddler disguised. Then after dinner, when the youngster was sitting on his Father's knee, Brian's tickling, despite warnings from Lindz, resulted in part of Gus's dinner returning and this time shared with Mark.

The man was not impressed: vomit not normally a fashion accessory and Brian's "I told you not to wear a suit" did nothing to ease the situation.

Lindsay had taken Gus up to the bathroom to clean him up and Debbie had tried sponging down Mark's jacket, but the man tore it off himself in disgust and in the end Debbie had put it inside a large food storage bag for him to take home. Brian offered to take Mark's suit to the dry cleaners, but he declined and the evening drew to a premature close, with Mark declaring he stank of puke and needed to go home and take a shower.

Reluctantly, Brian apologized to the gang for their early exit and he gave Debbie a kiss and she gave him a knowing and sympathetic smile and patted him on the cheek. He also kissed Lindsay and a cleaned-up Gus and then he and Mark made their goodbyes and Mark drove Brian home, saying he wouldn't stop over, but would call him in the morning.

They kissed through the open car window and then Brian watched Mark drive away before making his way up to the loft, feeling more than just a little disappointed. Maybe Mark had a right to feel a bit pissed off, after all, Brian remembered a few times when Gus upchucked over him in his early days of Fatherhood; and not an experience he'd enjoyed at the time.

It was early days for Mark, Brian told himself; being a Father wasn't for everyone and he remembered how much he'd struggled to come to terms with parenthood and maybe it would be expecting too much of Mark in any case to jump right in and be Gus's other Dad so early on.

When he got inside the loft, Brian poured himself a glass of beer; feeling the warmth of the liquid as it hit his stomach and he rang Debbie. He thanked her for dinner, saying he hoped their leaving early didn't ruin the evening. Debbie had bitten her tongue and told Brian it hadn't been a problem, but that she'd been sorry to see them go so early and that they must come over again; soon.

She was desperate not to alienate either Brian or Mark; she had a feeling it wouldn't take much for Mark to gradually ease Brian away from his family and she was determined not to let that happen.

Maybe Brian really was in love and maybe he wasn't. Maybe Mark was the right man and maybe he wasn't. But whatever came of their relationship, if it all went down the pan, Debbie wanted to make sure that Brian knew his family would be around to pick up

the pieces; even if he was stubborn enough to not want to let them. And in order to do that, they mustn't lose contact.

Debbie's reassurance had gladdened Brian. He knew she didn't really approve of his relationship with Mark, but would accept it if that's what he wanted. Debbie was pretty hard to beat when it came to loyalty and support and from age 14, Brian had known that he'd been part of her extended family and that she'd be there for him like she would her own.

Now as he stepped out of the shower and headed for bed, Brian finished the last of the drink he'd poured himself earlier. He hadn't expected to spend the night on his own and he missed the man not sharing his bed.

But as Brian fell asleep, it wasn't Mark's face that floated before him in those moments between being awake and when sleep finally overtook him. Instead, it was a face, pale and flawless with beautiful big blue eyes that accompanied Brian to his slumbers.

Mark was still pretty pissed when he got home and he stripped off his clothes in the bathroom and stepped straight in the shower; he'd have to take the suit to the dry cleaners in the morning.

Mark believed he was in love with Brian and why wouldn't he be? He was hot, successful and very desirable and apparently, he'd succeeded with Brian where many had tried and failed.

And he had tried to get on with Brian's friends; the people that he insisted on referring to as family, but didn't really understand why Brian had stuck with them all these years and couldn't help feeling how in some ways, Brian looked a little out of place in his designer wear, eating with the guys in the diner.

He knew that Brian could aspire to far greater heights; he already had a job that was bringing in more than a decent salary and when Mark had him to himself he would finally be able to entice Brian away from the old gang once and for all and sever the ties between Brian and his son and possess him completely.

They would be a formidable couple and could move in all the right circles; the friends Mark had made through his gallery connections. They looked good together; everyone acknowledged that and just thinking about Brian whilst under the hot water of the shower aroused him.

It was now the following day and just as well Justin had the late shift at the diner. Mark had called him at the apartment the previous evening and asked him to come over; it wasn't one of their usual nights and it was getting late and Mark had sent a cab to collect him and as soon as the younger man arrived he could see Mark was in a strange mood; edgy one moment; loving and caring the next.

"Don't mind me", he'd told him, hurriedly pulling Justin's sweater up over his head. "It's

just been a shitty day,” and with no further explanation, he’d started to cover Justin’s throat in light, fleeting kisses.

He’d practically pinned Justin to the bed; thrusting into him with an intensity the blond hadn’t experienced with him before and wasn’t sure whether he was being punished for something.

“Mark ... is everything okay? Have I done something?” asked Justin, now leaning back against the pillows. Mark was sitting on the edge of the bed with his back to him and Justin heard the man sigh before Mark turned round and reached out to brush his face.

“No ... it’s not you ... it’s ... it’s this damn art show ... nothing seems to be coming together like it should and what with the problems in the New York gallery ...” but Mark could see the concern in Justin’s face and the confusion about the older man’s feelings for him.

Shit; he was sure he’d blown it with Brian earlier, reacting as he had to Gus’s accident and then refusing to stay over and he would have to call Brian in the morning and apologize to get things back on track. But he shouldn’t take his anger out on Justin; he didn’t want to upset the blond as well.

Mark had often asked himself what the hell was he doing? Brian should be enough for any man to contend with, but there was something about the blond.

Brian had been such hard work to begin with and in some ways still needed treating carefully. Mark had realized Brian’s emotions were pretty fragile, despite the hard as nails façade the man wore and his arrogance had, in actual fact, masked feelings of self-doubt. But he’d been determined: seeking him out and being in the same bars as Brian and had ignored the obvious irritation the other man had felt in the beginning until gradually, Brian had got used to him being around and had actually started to enjoy his company.

He was a strange one, Mark conceded; a hard nut to crack with his shell-like exterior keeping people out, but Mark could see the vulnerability underneath all the bravado; seeing initially the distrust in Brian’s eyes when Mark had told him he loved him for the first time. But he’d kept on saying it in the hope that Brian would eventually believe him and now it seemed he did.

But then there was Justin. Pale skin, blond hair and blue eyes; physically smaller and totally opposite from Brian and Mark wanted to look out for him. He remembered the bashing and marveled how Justin had come through it at all and was proud that in some small way he’d been able to encourage Justin to try his art again.

And he loved him; he loved them both.

“Tell you what,” said Mark, taking Justin’s hand “why don’t you come with me the next time I go to New York? ... you’d enjoy looking around the gallery” and he moved in

closer: snuggling up behind Justin's ear. "Just think ... nice hotel ... room service ..." whispered Mark, and Justin sighed at his touch, which sent a shiver through his body.

"I'd like that," whispered Justin and Mark kissed the blond's belly and worked his way downwards: towards his goal.

He'd only got a few hours sleep and had tried to catch up on his rest before spending some time on his art for the show before his shift and Justin stifled a yawn. He wanted to ask Debbie about taking some time off, but he knew he hadn't exactly been on top form since turning in today and every time he'd gone to mention it someone had been yelling for their order.

Debbie could see Justin must have had a heavy night and that he was chewing something over and had decided not to make him sweat any longer, even though she'd been enjoying watching him continually go to say something and then change his mind.

"Okay, kiddo ... out with it" said Debbie as Justin came behind the counter to pick up the coffee pot and he looked at her in surprise; she chuckled.

"Well, it's obvious you've been going to ask me something since you got in here...so ..."

Justin looked down at the floor and then back at Debbie: a look that would melt anyone's heart. "The thing is Debbie ... my boyfriend has asked me if I'd like go to New York with him. It would just be for one night and a day ... but I know I haven't been working here very long ... so if you say no it's okay ... I'd understand and I guess they'll be other chances ..."

"Whoa, Sunshine ... take a breath. Well, that explains why you're walking round like a zombie today ..." said Debbie and she chuckled.

"So ... you gotta boyfriend?" she continued and Justin nodded.

"Well, yeah ... sort of. I mean, he's quite a bit older than me and I'm pretty sure he still sees other guys from time to time, but that's okay ... it's not like we're married or anything ..." and Debbie grinned.

"An older man huh? Is he wealthy?" she asked him and Justin looked shocked.

"He's reasonably comfortable, I guess. But that's not why I'm with him ..."

"Just joshing" chuckled Debbie. "But when a man asks you to go away with him, well, that can be pretty serious ..." Debbie teased him and then broke into a broad smile.

"I guess we can do without you for that long ... as long as Kiki doesn't go down with another case of ... whatever it is she keeps going down with ... again"

"You go and have yourself a good time ... as long as I get to hear all about it ... and I do

mean ALL about it” and Debbie winked at him and Justin grinned in embarrassment.

Mark had called Brian just after he’d got into the office and apologized if he’d been out of line; going off like he had at Debbie’s dinner. “Am I forgiven?” the man asked him and Brian smiled and told him not to worry and offered again to pay for the suit to be cleaned, an offer which Mark declined.

“When will I see you?” asked Brian. “I don’t think it’ll be until after my next trip to New York ... I’ve just got too much to do” answered Mark. “But how about I then buy you dinner? We could try that new Italian place ... I’ve heard pretty good reports about it ...”

“Okay” answered Brian. “It’s a date”.

“Love you,” stated Mark. “Me too” answered Brian quietly and he smiled and they both rang off.

As Mark had thought, he wasn’t able to see Brian again after the night they’d had dinner at Debbie’s, but they did speak on the phone every day.

Then, on his next trip to New York, as promised, Mark picked Justin up and they drove together to the airport where Mark left his car and they took an afternoon flight. Then, on arrival in the Big Apple and after checking in at the hotel, they had dinner and went to a club that Mark often used.

The following morning, they made use of room service and ordered breakfast in their room. Mark didn’t want to waste time going down to the restaurant; the longer he spent in bed with Justin the better.

Even though Mark was occupied for most of the day, Justin enjoyed the gallery and they managed a quick lunch together before Mark had to resume his duties.

Then, after the gallery had closed for the day and Mark had completed all the paperwork, they headed out for dinner before catching a flight back to Pittsburgh.

“Thank you” said Justin and he kissed Mark once they’d got inside the car: away from the cold night air and Mark smiled and put his hand to the back of Justin’s neck and brought him in for another kiss. “We’ll do it again ... soon ... I promise,” said the older man and he released Justin and put a hand on the blond’s knee.

“Now, if you’ll only let me find you a decent place to live ...” but Justin shook his head.

“No, Mark ... I’ve told you ... I don’t want to be ... well, kept ... I suppose” and Justin sighed. “I know I’m sort of in limbo at the moment ...” continued the blond.

“At least you’ve started back with your art ... “ interrupted Mark.

“True,” continued Justin, “but I don’t know how much I can do yet ... or even if there’s

still a future in it for me ...”

“Justin, if there’s anything I can do ...”

“I know,” said Justin, taking Mark’s hand. “And I do appreciate it ...” and Mark smiled again; thinking of the ways the blond could show his appreciation.

Relaxed and happy, Justin lent back in the seat, telling himself how lucky he was to have found such a caring and considerate man; not to mention how hot he was and before long, the car’s heating now working efficiently, Justin started to drift off to sleep on their journey back into the city.

What should have been one of the most happiest memories of Justin’s life then suddenly turned into a nightmare when, having hit an isolated ice patch on the way back from the airport on this bitterly cold winter’s night, Mark’s life was hanging by a thread and Brian and Justin’s were thrown into turmoil.

Justin had very little recollection of either the accident or the ride in the ambulance and though not badly hurt, he was in shock. The car had skidded, hit the curb and then spun before hitting a tree; slamming into it on the driver’s side. If it hadn’t been for the seatbelt he was wearing, Justin probably wouldn’t have survived. As it was, the car, already weakened, had caved in having hit the tree and Mark had been cut free but was barely alive.

It was the smell of the hospital that first hit Justin: bringing back all too vivid memories of his bashing. The doctor on duty, by chance, was the same one who’d attended Justin in the emergency room two years before and had recognized him immediately. He didn’t have to ask about his history or wait for Justin’s medical records before he ordered an MRI scan; he knew that any further head injury could prove to be fatal.

However, Justin was extremely lucky. He had several badly bruised ribs and a few cuts and abrasions, but there was no further head trauma. However, he would be kept in overnight for observation and given painkillers to help his breathing made difficult by the damage to his ribcage and something to help him sleep, but the news wasn’t so good about Mark.

Mark was on life support and Justin realized he hadn’t got a clue who should be called and informed about him. The nurse had asked Justin whom he wanted her to inform on his behalf and he’d shaken his head. Once he’d come out, his Father had wanted nothing to do with him and though his Mother loved her son, she’d had difficulty coming to terms with Justin’s sexuality or acting against his Father’s wishes and Justin had withdrawn from her. As far as he was concerned he was on his own, but he did ask that Mark’s family not be told that he’d been with him and the nurse had smiled knowingly, for Justin had no idea whether Mark’s family knew he was gay; that could be one shock too many.

Going through Mark’s wallet, the Police found next of kin listed as Margaret Delaney;

sister, and were in the process of contacting her, but then the man had gone into cardiac arrest. The medical team fought as hard as they could, but with no success. Mark was pronounced dead at 01:45 am.

Justin's head was swimming and he could hardly take in what was going on around him. There had been such activity around Mark's bed before, but now there was only silence; everyone had gone and all the machines had been switched off.

He couldn't say goodbye to Mark here: not in such a cold, clinical hospital room. That would have to come later and it was only after he'd let the nursing staff take him back to his own room, did the enormity of what had happened hit him.

Mark was gone. Not only had he lost his lover, but also the man who'd encouraged him to try his art again and the man with whom Justin thought he might have a future. And, as the painkillers and sedatives started to kick in, Justin could no longer hold in the tears for a love lost and what might have been.

The phone woke Brian just before 01:20 am. with a call from a woman he'd never met, but who apparently knew about him.

It would seem that Mark had told his sister about Brian and the fact that they were talking about moving in together had seemed to Margaret to indicate that her brother was in a serious relationship; one she thought was long over due.

He'd mentioned that Brian was selling his loft on Trenton and as there was only one Kinney in the phone book for that area, Margaret had taken down his number and then called him as her husband was taking her to the hospital; Mark's condition had sounded serious and she thought Brian should be there.

By the time Brian arrived, however, it was too late; Mark was dead. Margaret had already been in to see him and was taking a few quiet moments whilst her husband was talking to the staff about what arrangements were needed.

Brian could see the likeness; Margaret was older than Mark and she too was tall and slim and had Mark's eyes: Eyes that were now filled with tears.

She took Brian's hand as he sat down beside her and she tried to smile. "So ... you're Brian ... you're the man my brother was going to move in with ..." and Brian swallowed, barely able to absorb what was being said to him.

"What happened?" managed Brian eventually and Margaret took a deep breath: managing to stifle a sob. "An accident coming back from the airport ..." and Brian nodded; of course, Mark's trip to New York.

Brian looked over his shoulder in the direction of the door outside of which they were sitting. "I'm sorry," said Margaret. "Of course ... you'll want to see him ... say goodbye ..." and she stood up and walked towards the door and she opened it.

Silently, Brian followed her into the room and hesitated only briefly before walking towards the bed. The man looked unmarked, though he'd suffered terrible internal injuries, but his face was relaxed and so very beautiful and Brian brushed Mark's cheek with the back of his hand; he was still warm.

"I'll leave you with him," said Margaret softly, squeezing Brian's arm and she turned and left, closing the door behind her.

Slowly, Brian pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed and he exhaled slowly then, hesitantly, he took Mark's lifeless hand; so much was going on in his head, but he was unable to get his thoughts into any sort of order.

Here was a man who'd told Brian he loved him; the first man Brian had ever allowed in to his life and, quite possibly, the last. He'd taken a risk with Mark; almost against his better judgment, but he actually thought there might have been a chance; a chance of love; something he'd never thought possible, nor had even desired. Well, at least that's what he'd convinced himself all his life. After all, it's much easier to say you don't want something if you believe you can never have it.

For when the people who are supposed to love you the most are the ones that hurt you the most, well that more or less kills your faith in love; the unconditional love between parent and child. And there was no doubt that Brian's experiences in childhood had helped to fashion his opinions on love; he simply didn't believe in it and certainly not love between two gay men.

Well, not until he'd dared to after Mark had come along. And now it was over before it had barely begun; gone and Brian knew he was never likely to find anything that remotely resembled love again.

Brian sat in the silence for several minutes and then, softly, there was a knock on the door and Margaret entered. "Brian," she said gently, "the medical team ... they need to ..."

"Yes, of course," said Brian and, getting up from the chair he lent down and kissed Mark on the forehead and whispered goodbye, leaving the room in a daze and not yet having shed a single tear.

Outside in the corridor, Margaret pointed to two holdalls on the floor. "The Police have just brought these ... they've taken the car to the impound. I really don't think I can deal with this right now ..." and at last, the strength Margaret had was lost and she collapsed against her husband.

"I'll deal with them ... you don't have to worry," said Brian.

"Thank you," answered Mr. Delaney. "Will you take them back to Mark's?"

“I would,” replied Brian, “but Mark never got around to giving me a key”.

“Here,” said Margaret, trying to recover her composure and she opened her purse. “The Police left Mark’s keys ... you’d better have them” and she took them out and gave them to Brian.

“About the arrangements,” continued Margaret. “It will be a family funeral, but you’ll be there of course ... “ and Brian nodded. “Anyway, we can talk about that later” and she put her hand on Brian’s arm. “We’ll talk soon ...” and she smiled faintly and, leaning on her husband, Margaret left Brian standing in the corridor.

Brian closed his eyes briefly and then, looking down at the bags, asked himself what he should do next. It occurred to him suddenly to wonder why Mark had taken so much with him on just an overnight trip and he studied the bags carefully. One of them was fairly new and expensive, that was obviously Mark’s, but the other one Brian didn’t recognize.

The tag on the second hold all said, ‘Justin Taylor – St. James’ Academy’ and Brian unzipped it and found some toiletries and then took out a few items of clothing, including a short-sleeved shirt and smart navy pants, several sizes too small for Mark and he frowned; what the fuck did this mean? Had Mark had a passenger or maybe he’d picked up a hitchhiker, despite all the dangers that could pose?

Going to the nurses’ station, Brian found the nurse on duty was someone he knew from the back room of Babylon; someone he recognized, but whose name he couldn’t recall right now. However, the man knew Brian; as did most people in the clubs and bars before Mark came along.

“Bad business” said Peter, who had witnessed the exchange between Brian and the Delaney’s and who’d been informed by Margaret that Mark’s partner was on his way. He’d also been the nurse who had taken down Justin’s details and could now understand why the young man didn’t want it known that he’d been with the deceased at the time of the accident. Was Peter glad he wasn’t going to get into that!

Brian nodded. “There’s something I don’t understand ... were there two accidents tonight?” but Peter shook his head, “No,” he answered him. “Just Mr. Reynolds ...”

Suddenly, the doors flew open and into the Emergency Room rushed the paramedics and Peter hurriedly excused himself in order to take down the details of the man being wheeled in on the gurney and couldn’t help feeling relieved at being released from Brian’s questions.

“Thomas Bradford ... 55 ... heart attack,” informed the medic and Peter helped steer the man the short distance down the corridor to the nearest vacant room.

Brian sighed and watched them go and then turned back to the desk. Quickly looking over his shoulder in order to make sure no one was watching him, he placed Mark’s hold

all on the floor and then lent over and turned the patient list around in order to read it. Justin Taylor: transferred to room 302.

Brian repositioned the list to how he'd found it and then picked up Mark's bag and walked off down the corridor. It didn't take him more than ten seconds to make up his mind what he was going to do next.

Brian wasn't challenged as he made his way from the elevator and, silently, he entered Justin's room and put down both hold alls and he slowly walked up to the bed. The young man was sleeping and the lights were on low, but even so, Brian could make out the perfect features of the blond from the diner.

Justin, so that's what his name was. He looked so fragile; his blond hair framing his face; the remnants of tears on his cheeks. He looked so young and vulnerable and Brian wanted to reach out and brush the tears away, but then he stopped himself.

This was surely no hitchhiker. But this young man had been in Mark's car with him on the way back from the airport and his hold all contained a change of clothes and Brian closed his eyes as a feeling of nausea came over him. Had Mark taken Justin to New York with him and maybe even into his bed?

Realizing he'd obviously get no answers here tonight, Brian slowly turned and walked away, but before he reached the door, he heard a mumbling and then a stifled sob and he turned around. Half-awake and half-asleep, Justin was crying softly and he heard him call out Mark's name.

Confused and angry, Brian returned to Justin's side; hearing his partner's name on the young man's lips and then the blond's eyes flickered open; open, but filled with tears and still unable to process what was happening; a look of helplessness that totally overwhelmed Brian and his anger disappeared as quickly as it had come.

In Justin's dreamlike state as he opened his eyes, all he could make out in the soft lighting was the form of a man who, through his tears and his anguish, looked like his lover and Justin whispered Mark's name again and held out a trembling hand.

Brian hesitated and briefly closed his eyes, but it was too late; the look of shock and despair on the blond's face reached out to him, even though he was sure he was looking at a young man who had been sleeping with his lover; his partner and, slowly, Brian sat down on the edge of Justin's bed and took his hand.

Justin's eyelashes, wet with tears, flickered as gently, Brian brushed Justin's hair away from his eyes. "Shh ... go back to sleep ..." he whispered and he waited until Justin's sobbing ceased and the young man had fallen into a deep sleep before he left, taking Mark's hold all with him.

Though early on in their relationship both Brian and Mark had continued having sex with other men, that had ceased for Brian in an attempt at commitment and he'd

assumed it had for Mark as well, but an overwhelming feeling of betrayal overtook Brian as he took one final look at the blond and then turned and walked away.

The next couple of days found Brian feeling as if he were existing in a void; nothing around him seemed real with the consequences of what had actually happened only now starting to kick in.

Margaret and her husband, George, had telephoned again, this time leaving their own number for Brian to contact them if he needed to. And his friends had, one by one, visited to offer their condolences and support, even though Brian felt that one or two of them, though not actually wishing the man dead, were a little relieved that Mark was no longer in Brian's life. And did Brian feel that way too?

Brian hadn't mentioned his suspicions about Mark and Justin yet to anyone. Maybe it was something to do with not speaking ill of the dead or maybe it was that Brian wasn't ready yet to face up to the possible reality about his and Mark's relationship. But when he took Mark's hold all back to the man's apartment, Brian couldn't help himself, but had looked around for evidence of another man; someone else that Mark might have been involved with, but could find nothing.

No clothes of a different style or size were hanging in Mark's closet or were in the drawers of the dressers and no toiletries; other than the odd sweater or the toothbrush that Brian himself had kept at Mark's apartment.

Margaret had asked Brian if he would like to pick out the clothes for Mark to be buried in and Brian had chosen the most expensive suit, along with a shirt and tie and he smiled; Mark had sure looked hot in these.

And Brian ran his hand along the shelves where Mark kept his CD, video and DVD collection, finding the odd one that he had bought him as a gift, but otherwise no evidence of anyone else.

But then he'd unpacked Mark's hold all and had found the receipt for the hotel. A double room; not odd in itself, but it included room service; breakfast for two and Brian sat on the sofa with the receipt in his hand and for the first time, gave way to all the mixed emotions that were going around in his head.

He'd believed Mark when the man said he loved him and now, even finding the damning evidence, he still wanted to believe that; had started to believe it possible for him to love Mark in return. Had he been that much of an idiot and was this just confirmation that love didn't really exist, but was merely a fantasy that only fools believed in?

With a mixture of anger, confusion and disappointment, Brian screwed up the hotel receipt and tossed it in the trashcan in the kitchen and vowed he would never make the same mistake again; the feeling now of betrayal increasing until the pain in his chest became almost unbearable. Love just wasn't worth all this hurt. He should never have given in to such a foolish notion, but stayed with what he'd believed in prior to meeting

Mark.

That he didn't do boyfriends; that love, especially love for queers was unattainable and not even to be considered as something that might be real and achievable.

And his thoughts returned to Justin. The young man was incredibly cute; Brian had thought that himself, he wouldn't deny it. But at least he hadn't acted on his initial attraction to the blond: believing himself to be in a relationship. Something apparently, that hadn't occurred to Mark.

And what of the young man? Had he pursued Mark or had Mark gone after him? Was he to be a final fling before committing himself to Brian or was the blond Mark's little bit on the side; someone he'd intended to carry on seeing even after he'd moved in with Brian?

Brian couldn't ignore it; he'd have to confront Justin and ask him.

"Well, finally!" exclaimed Debbie as Justin walked into the diner. "I thought you said one night and a day ... that was three days ago Sunshine ... " and she pointed an accusing finger at him.

"And don't think you can just start with the waterworks ..." Debbie continued, but the look on Justin's face as the tears that had welled up into his eyes brimmed over stopped her, as she realized this wasn't the blond just trying to avoid getting fired, but that something quite serious must have happened.

"What is it, sweetie?" asked Debbie, gently and putting her arm around his shoulders, but Justin backed away; any more concern from Debbie and that would finish him off all together.

"I ... I was in an accident," said Justin, wiping the tears from his eyes. "Are you okay?" asked Debbie, backing off a little and Justin nodded. "Just a few bruises ... nothing major".

"Anyone else hurt?" she asked and the look Justin gave her told her this was something he just wasn't ready to talk about. "Then what are you doing here? Go home ..." but Justin shook his head.

"I need the money, Debbie," he answered her. "Please don't make me go home ... I'd rather be here ... with people ..." and Debbie nodded.

"Okay ... but if it gets too much ..." and she patted his arm.

Justin was barely holding it together and was mixing up orders, but Debbie didn't have the heart to make him go home. She understood how the young man would need the money and she too wanted to be around people when something really bad had happened. She only wished he'd tell her exactly what that was; she might be able to help

him. This seemed to be a time for tragedies, she concluded.

As the day wore on, Justin was getting more and more tired. His ribs still hurt him, even though he'd managed to disguise just how much from Debbie and his head was foggy.

He'd been discharged from the hospital, thankful at least that his Mom had still kept up his medical insurance and had gone home to a cold, unwelcoming apartment and had cried for the last two days; never one able to disguise or ignore his feelings.

But the rent was due and there was no food in the place and at least when he worked he was warm and occupied and Debbie had always allowed him to have the 'special' for the day, so at least he had one decent hot meal inside him.

But Justin rubbed his forehead and now became aware that over the last hour, his mind wasn't just in a fog, but a real headache was starting to form and he closed his eyes. He hadn't had one of 'those' headaches for a while now; the sort he'd had regularly after the bashing. They had, thankfully, diminished in the time since, unless he got upset, or was worried about something and then they'd come on, much like this one was threatening to and would leave him debilitated and helpless with the pain: a headache that only pills and sleep would cure.

Debbie suddenly realized Justin hadn't been around for a little while and went to look for him, first in the men's room and then in the storeroom and that's where she found him; sitting on the floor and curled up in a ball.

"Justin ... you really should go home ..." and the young man could barely raise his head to look at her.

"Are you hurting? Do you need to see a doctor?" asked Debbie, kneeling beside him and she saw how Justin struggled to look at her; his eyes dark rimmed and heavy and he swallowed before answering.

"I don't need a doctor," he assured her. "But I probably should have told you about the headaches ..." he said, falteringly. "But they don't happen too much now ... not like they used to" and Debbie finally realized where she knew this young man from and couldn't believe she hadn't recognized him sooner, for his picture had been all over the local paper at one point.

"Oh my God," exclaimed Debbie, quietly. "You're the kid that got bashed a couple of years back ... I thought I knew you from somewhere".

"You wait right there ... I'll see if someone can give you a ride home ... no arguments" she told him and Justin tried to nod, knowing there was no way he'd be able to finish his shift.

Brian had even contemplated going back to work, but Gardner had told him he didn't want him back at least for another few days and that he shouldn't push himself, but to

give himself time to grieve.

Grief; was that what he was actually going through? Brian couldn't be sure. Numb with shock? Yes. The inability to process what had actually happened and what this now meant for him? Yes, he was certainly experiencing that. Maybe this was grief.

The last grief Brian had felt had been for his Father and that had surprised him at the time. Why would he grieve for someone who constantly beat on him and who had so little regard for him? But saying goodbye to the only man who would ever be his Father had been difficult for all that, but that sense of loss and never being able to recover a longed-for but unattainable relationship was totally different to what he was feeling now.

Yes, he'd felt cheated when his Father died: cheated of a Father's love for his son, albeit an emotion he'd never detected from the man and was now never likely to.

But for a lover, partner even: someone whom he thought he might actually grow old with, but one it seemed had been secretly sleeping with someone else? Brian wasn't sure if he was grieving for Mark or not. Or, again, was he grieving the loss of a notion called love rather than for the man himself?

And what of the anger that Brian found was creeping in from time to time? Was that a normal reaction? Was he angry with the man for cheating on him, or was he angry with Mark for leaving him?

Still trying to understand the emotions he was going through, Brian realized he had to confront them if he would ever be able to put Mark to rest. Brian had never been good at recognizing his feelings; even accepting that he had any, but this time was different as he had, for the first time in his life, believed himself to be in love.

So he went in search of the answers.

Leaving Justin in the storeroom, Debbie went out into the diner as Brian came in through the front door and she hesitated for just a moment. Brian didn't normally go out of his way to do people favors, believing everyone should make it on their own, but if it meant for a little while that he could focus on something other than his own pain, then perhaps that wouldn't be a bad thing. Besides, he could hardly ever refuse Debbie.

She'd been to see him at the loft as soon as she'd heard about Mark and her concern was genuine even if she hadn't liked the man. Debbie had known how difficult it must have been for Brian to actually accept another man's love and she feared for him now that was gone. Even if Mark hadn't been perfect, at least the declaration of his feelings had at last reached the man she thought was destined to live his life alone; something Debbie couldn't contemplate for herself and had long wished for Brian to find and accept love.

But when she'd gone to see him, Brian had seemed detached and she was worried that he would totally deny any feelings he had; unable to admit his love for the man who was

gone or acknowledge the grief he must surely feel; How can you share someone's life and contemplate a future together and not grieve their passing?

However, Debbie knew Brian well enough to understand he didn't need to hear her keep on saying how sorry she was about Mark, that was a given and though it wasn't exactly business as usual, she knew better than to treat him with too much sympathy.

Which is why she asked him to help her out.

"Brian ... have you got your car with you?" she asked him and Brian nodded.

"Yeah ... it's just outside".

"Good," she answered him. "I need your help ..." and she indicated that he should follow her.

Puzzled, Brian followed Debbie into the storeroom only to be confronted by the very person he'd come looking for, but he hadn't expected to find the young man in this condition.

After he'd returned to the loft from the hospital, Brian had slept only fitfully and then, in the morning, had started to ring around some of his and Mark's friends to tell them the news. All day he chewed over one particular phone call and in the end he couldn't resist and he'd rung the hospital and said he was Justin's uncle and had been informed that the young man hadn't been badly hurt and that he'd only just been discharged but, looking at the state he was in now, that didn't appear to be the case.

"You remember this kid ..." whispered Debbie. "He's the one who got bashed a couple of years ago. Seems he's been in an accident and now he's got one of the headaches he used to get. Be a honey ... give him a ride home ..." and Brian closed his eyes. Yes, of course he recalled the assault, but this wasn't what he'd been expecting when he'd come in search of Justin.

He'd expected to be angry when confronting the young man and had been prepared to demand answers from him about his relationship with Mark, but now Brian looked at Debbie and then at Justin and his anger dissolved. Debbie's concern was obvious and her usual motherly instincts had taken over, and looking at the pain and distress on Justin's face suppressed all other intentions that Brian had come to the diner with.

"Okay" he agreed eventually and he turned to walk away but Debbie stopped him.

"Brian ... he needs a little help ..." and he turned back to see Justin struggling to get to his feet.

"Justin, honey ... Brian's going to take you home and don't you dare rush back now ... you hear me?" Debbie told the young man and he smiled weakly in appreciation. Then, Debbie went to fetch his coat and scarf, which she put on him, and, with Brian

supporting him, they made it to Brian's car and Justin gave him directions back to his apartment.

Brian frowned when he drew up outside the address Justin had given him and he glanced at the young man. They'd driven there in absolute silence, but Brian could now see the silent tears streaming down the blond's face.

The building was old and looked pretty run down and getting the young man inside and up the stairs had been a slow process. Justin fumbled with his key and Brian took it from his hand and opened the door and they walked inside; Brian shivered.

"Christ ... it's cold in here," exclaimed Brian and he helped Justin to the sofa. "What do you need?" he asked him. "My pills ... they're in the bathroom cabinet," replied Justin weakly and Brian went to find them. The taps gurgled and the plumbing rattled alarmingly as Brian filled a glass with water, which he took, along with the pills, back to Justin.

The young man's strength had left him and he struggled to open up the container and then took out two pills, which he washed down with most of the water.

"What happens now?" Brian asked him. "They'll kick in soon," answered Justin, "and then I'll sleep for hours ..." and Brian saw Justin now trembling with the cold and the young man thrust his hands into his pockets and closed his eyes.

"What?" exclaimed Brian, "in this icebox? You'll freeze to death," and he sighed; no matter what his feelings for this young man, he couldn't leave him like this. Looking around, Brian saw on the floor the hold all he recognized from the hospital and hesitated only momentarily before picking it up.

"What are you doing?" asked Justin, groggily, as he opened his eyes.

"You're coming back to my place," answered Brian. "You can't stay here" and, exploring Justin's closet, he found a change of clothes, enough for a couple of days and Brian packed them in the hold all.

Justin didn't have the strength or the will to argue and, taking him by the elbow, Brian lifted him from the sofa and, with extreme care, guided him back down to his car.

By the time they got to the loft it was getting late and Justin was practically out on his feet and Brian left him propped against the wall outside the sliding door to his home while he quickly unlocked it and threw the hold all inside. Justin could go no further unaided and, picking him up, Brian carried the young man across the floor and up the few steps to the bedroom and laid him down carefully onto the bed.

Brian went back to close the door and then lent his forehead against the cold metal. What the fuck was he doing; bringing the blond back here? What the hell was he thinking of? But there was something about the young man that seemed to reach Brian

in a way that not even Mark had managed to and in a way that Brian couldn't yet understand. But the fact that he was in such obvious pain; and not from just the headache, had found a niche in Brian's defenses.

He picked up the hold all and retraced his steps; dropping the bag on the floor by his own closet and Brian then went back to Justin. The blond was already asleep and carefully, so as not to waken him, Brian removed the young man's clothing down to his underwear and placed him under the covers.

Pulling out a spare blanket and pillow from the top of the closet, Brian made himself up a bed on the sofa and changed into some sweats. He tried to get some sleep: something which eluded him for several hours, so near as he was to the blond in his bed; the bed he'd shared with Mark.

Justin had been asleep for about five hours when Brian's own slumbers were disturbed and for a moment, he couldn't remember why he was sleeping on the sofa. But a muffled cry from the bedroom brought him fully awake and, throwing back the blanket, he went to check on Justin.

The young man's breathing was labored, such was the pain still in his ribs and he was mumbling. Brian couldn't be sure what he was saying, but he thought he heard Mark's name and for a moment, a fleeting sense of anger passed through him once more.

His lover's name was again on this young man's lips and he asked himself repeatedly what the hell was he thinking in bringing the blond here? He should have just left him to take his chances back at his own apartment, regardless of the fact that this winter was even colder than usual and Justin obviously couldn't afford anywhere with decent heating and a quick glance around the place had told Brian that he owned very little of any value.

And then he looked again at the pain on Justin's face and heard the muted sobs and Brian sighed; knowing full well he couldn't just have abandoned him like that and he wondered if Mark had fooled the blond like he had him. Maybe Mark had told Justin he cared for him: making promises of love and of a future for them together.

If that were the case then how could Brian be angry with him or even blame him. After all, he'd also fallen for Mark in much the same way and he could see now how Justin was shaking in his sleep, which really wasn't surprising.

As well as losing his lover, Justin might very easily have been killed or badly hurt himself. He was obviously extremely upset and probably still in shock or maybe he was feeling cold. So, pulling back the covers, Brian climbed into bed beside the young man and moved up close; wondering whether he should actually touch him and let him know he was there; that he wasn't alone.

Brian and Mark had never spooned or lay in each other's arms after sex or just to feel close to one another. Brian had never cuddled up to anyone, but as he tried to soothe

Justin with gentle words, the young man, sensing Brian's presence though still asleep, slowly rolled towards him and now lay with his head on Brian's chest.

Brian swallowed, unable to decide how he was feeling; such was his confusion about their situation. But it seemed to him the young man needed comforting; maybe they both did and Brian brought his arm around Justin's shoulders and, before long, both men were asleep.

Justin had woken at first light and, in doing so, also woke Brian. The blond had looked embarrassed; waking up with the older man and for a moment, Justin's heart missed a beat. Brian was so like Mark that for a just a minute he thought the man was still alive, only to realize he was in the arms of a virtual stranger, in an unfamiliar bed.

Their eyes held each other's for what seemed an eternity until Justin spoke at last. "I'm sorry ... I ..." he stuttered, trying to recall the events that had led him there.

"It's okay," answered Brian. "It doesn't mean anything ... you were ... well, pretty out of it last night ... I'll go and put on some coffee" and he threw back the covers and got out of bed and padded, bare-footed, to the kitchen.

Waking up and finding himself in bed with the young man, for a moment, Brian had wondered how he got there and then he remembered. But other memories also came back to him. Like how good it had been to hold him: to feel the softness of his skin, the silkiness of the blond hair and to feel Justin's breath on his chest.

And he wondered why it was he'd never held Mark in that way, but the very fact that he'd enjoyed being so close to Justin brought a wave of guilt flowing over him; a feeling that Brian found bewildering and he pushed the thought to the back of his mind as he tried to put a few feet of distance between him and the blond to give him time to get his head together.

Justin tried to sit up; probably a little too quickly, in order to take in his surroundings and his head pounded a little and the pain in his ribs still made breathing difficult, so he lay back against the pillows and he could hear Brian moving around in the kitchen. The man was beautiful; even hotter than Mark and, on impulse, he stretched out his hand to feel the warmth of the bed where Brian had been lying. But then his heart lurched into his mouth and he remembered again his lover lying dead in the hospital bed and he tried desperately to keep it together.

"How are you doing?" Brian asked him, several minutes later, as he put the coffee cup down on the nightstand and Justin opened his eyes and rubbed his temple.

"My head's better ... it's still there a little ... but not like it was ... my ribs still hurt like hell though," said Justin, attempting to sit up again and this time he made it without his head hurting too much and, so that he didn't have to stretch, Brian passed him his coffee cup. "Thanks," said Justin, taking the cup and their fingers brushed slightly as the cup was transferred from one to another and both men fought to hide the reaction they both

felt at the exchange; one of confusion and the tantalizing nearness of the other man.

Brian withdrew in order to stand at the foot of the bed. "I'm glad you're feeling better ... do you get the bad head aches often?" he asked him and carefully, Justin shook his head.

"Not like I used to ... only if I get ... only if there's anything heavy going on" and Brian nodded.

"I hadn't realized you were the kid that got bashed ... that was rough"

"Tell me about it" answered Justin and he took a swallow from his cup.

"The other kid ... is it right he only got community service?" asked Brian and Justin nodded. "That sucks," replied the older man and Justin shrugged.

"The Judge said he must have been provoked ... like I wanted my head caved in ..." and Justin closed his eyes and sighed at the memory and injustice done to him.

"I'm sorry about last night," apologized Justin again and Brian hesitated, wondering if this was an opportunity to ask about his relationship with Mark and holding his own coffee cup, Brian sat down at the bottom of the bed.

"Debbie said you had an accident?" asked Brian, taking a sip of coffee and Justin closed his eyes and nodded.

"Yeah ... my ... my boyfriend was killed ..." and his voice trailed off and he fought to keep his emotions in check; not wanting to fall apart in front of Brian and unknowing how he'd given himself away in his sleep.

"That's rough," answered Brian and his heart were beating so fast he thought Justin would surely hear it. "Were you together long?" he asked but the blond slowly shook his head.

"No ... not really. I met Mark a few years back ... but we didn't get together again until a couple of months ago ..." Brian looked down into his cup and his heart missed a beat when he heard Justin say Mark's name out loud and he sighed. Surely at that time, he'd been with Mark. But obviously he hadn't been enough for the man and Mark had sought comfort, or sex, or whatever, with the blond as well as being with him.

But the young man obviously had no idea he'd been sharing Mark with someone with whom he was supposed to be in a serious relationship; serious enough to consider moving in together and planning a future. It would be easy to blame Justin, but Brian was sure he was the innocent in all this. Naïve maybe: but surely unaware of the fact that his lover was deeply involved with another man. They'd both been cheated on; how could he blame Justin for something that wasn't his fault.

For Brian was sure that Justin had no idea that the bed he'd slept in was one Brian had

shared with Mark; that there had, in fact, been three people in their relationship. Any animosity Brian may have felt towards the young blond disappeared in the acknowledgement of his innocence. If for one moment, Justin had known of Brian's existence there was no way he could have hidden it from him, either in the despair he'd seen in him last night or by way of their casual conversation and the ease in which he'd mentioned Mark's name. As far as Justin was concerned, he obviously had nothing to hide or to feel guilty about.

"Is it okay if I take a shower?" asked Justin. "Then I can get out of your way ..." and he swallowed the last of his coffee.

"You don't have to rush off," assured Brian. "You can stay a while. That place of yours is pretty cold ... have you thought about getting somewhere else?"

Justin sighed; how many times had Mark offered to find him somewhere better, the inference being that he would pay. But Justin didn't want to be a kept man; he valued his independence. It was his affirmation that he could cope on his own following the bashing and he wasn't going to give up that independence lightly.

"It's all I can afford at the moment," he replied and, having finished his coffee, Justin slowly reached out and placed the cup on the nightstand.

Having put down the cup he started to rub his right hand. Cramping in his hand always followed one of his headaches, but hopefully, this wouldn't last too long.

"What's going on with that?" asked Brian; taking a swallow from his cup and watching as the young man flexed his fingers.

"It's the motor skills ... after I got bashed I couldn't even pick up a paperclip. It took weeks of therapy before I could even think about using a pencil ..." and he looked at Brian and saw the question in his eyes.

"I'm an artist," explained Justin. "Or at least I was ... I still am ... maybe. That's how I met Mark ... he manages ... he managed the art gallery here in Pittsburgh ..." and Brian nodded and forced a sympathetic smile.

At least there was an explanation now of the link between Mark and Justin: Gallery Manager and artist. Obviously that was how they'd come together; through a shared passion for art that had led to a passion for each other. And Brian closed his eyes and wondered at the logic of it all. It actually all made perfect sense.

Throwing back the covers, Justin got slowly to his feet and stood still for a few moments; getting his balance. "You gonna make it okay?" asked Brian, automatically stretching out a steadying hand, which he placed in the small of Justin's back.

"Yeah ... thanks ... I'll be fine," answered Justin and he'd taken a quick breath at the physical contact and moved away from Brian's touch and, recognizing his hold all on the

floor, he stooped slowly to pick it up.

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Brian, “so you can take your time ... oh and don’t worry about Debbie ... she’ll hold your job for you,” and, with a slight smile, Justin turned to go in the bathroom: closing the door behind him and grateful for being able to remove himself from the older man’s gaze.

Brian watched him go and then, as he swallowed the last of his cold coffee, a knock at the door interrupted his thoughts and he went to find out who was calling at this hour. Sliding open the heavy metal door, he discovered Lindsay standing there, having stopped by on the way to taking Gus to day care.

But instead of inviting her in, Brian instead stepped outside, pulling the door almost closed behind him and Lindsay’s eyes narrowed, wondering why he would prevent her from entering the loft.

“I can’t stay too long ... Mel and Gus are waiting downstairs,” explained Lindsay. “But I thought I’d call by and see if you’re okay,” she stated and Brian nodded. “I’m fine Lindz ... really ... I am” but he made no move to invite her in.

Lindsay tried to look passed him into the loft, but Brian didn’t move out of her way and now Lindsay swore she could hear the shower running. “You’ve got someone with you” she stated in surprise. “Christ, Brian ... Mark’s not even cold ...”

“It’s not like that,” insisted Brian.

“No?” asked Lindsay. “Well, then ... what is it like?” she demanded.

“It... it’s Justin,” said Brian quietly and Lindsay frowned.

“Justin?” she repeated, trying to recall whom Brian was meaning as he obviously thought she would know who he was talking about.

“Yeah ... you know,” stated Brian, “the young guy who works at the diner” and Lindsay looked at him, unable to hide her disappointment.

“Brian ... how could you ...”

“Lindsay, I’m telling you ... it’s not what you think. He ... he had an accident ... he wasn’t too good for a while ... I just let him stay here last night ... that’s all”.

“Another accident?” queried Lindsay, and Brian looked away and she studied his face.

“No,” said Lindsay, reading Brian’s expression. “It wasn’t another accident ... was it? But I thought Mark had been on his way back from the airport after one of his trips to New York ...” and Brian closed his eyes as the meaning of his silence dawned on Lindsay.

“Brian... how can you let him stay here?” she asked him.

“It’s not his fault that his boyfriend cheated on him,” stated Brian.

“Mark didn’t cheat on Justin,” corrected Lindsay in disbelief. “Mark cheated on you ... how can you defend him like that?”

“I’m not defending him,” said Brian; jumping in a little too quickly, but Lindsay could always see straight through him.

“Oh my God,” said his friend at last, breaking the silence that had developed between them. “You’ve got feelings for him ...”

“No I haven’t ... don’t be ridiculous,” insisted Brian, but Lindsay’s eyes narrowed as she read the confusion on his face.

“Christ, Brian ... I hope you know what you’re doing,” stated Lindsay and then, without a further word, Brian opened the door and he retreated back into the loft: leaving Lindsay standing outside alone.

For the next ten minutes, Brian occupied himself checking his emails; trying to decide what he was going to do. He’d more or less told Justin he could stay at the loft as long as he needed, but how long was that likely to be and could he stand him being there and not blurt out his own relationship with Mark?

Should he instead try and go into work, or just take himself out and leave the young man to rest further? Or, should he tell Justin of the relationship they shared; destroying once and for all any faith the young man had in Mark and what they’d meant to each other? After all, his own faith had been so completely destroyed; but could he do that to another and someone in such obvious pain? But the strange thing was, Brian had virtually discounted his own pain since taking charge of Justin.

And was Lindsay right? Was it possible that he did have feelings for the young blond? Is that why he’d brought him here, even after he was sure he’d been sleeping with Mark behind his back? Or was it just that he was a link with Mark; a connection that Brian didn’t want to lose just yet?

Following his shower, Justin had more color in his complexion although he was still favoring his ribs and, now dressed, he made his way down to the living room. “Well, you look a whole lot better,” said Brian, trying to give the young man a lift and he got up from the computer.

“Yeah ... thanks ... I feel it,” Justin answered him, but the expression on his face didn’t fit his words: he looked anything but fine.

“There’s some juice in the fridge and there should be some bread if you wanna make yourself some toast ... I’ll go and grab a shower myself,” said Brian and he excused

himself and headed for the bathroom.

Justin made his way to the kitchen and found the guava juice in the refrigerator and he poured himself a glass. Then he heard the water running and the temptation was just far too great. Brian hadn't closed the bathroom door; he rarely needed to and now Justin quietly crossed the floor and climbed the steps.

Peering around the bathroom door, he could see the man in the shower; his back towards him and Justin was able to take in Brian's beautifully long legs, his small, perfect ass and the definition of his body; not overly muscular, but wonderfully toned and slim. And then Justin bit his lip. How could he sully Mark's memory by admiring another man's body when his lover was barely cold? And filled with guilt, Justin returned to the living room.

How long should he stay there? Was the man's invitation genuine? Was he just being polite? Or was there some other motive?

He was sure Brian had caught his awkwardness around him; at the diner and before, when he'd discovered he'd slept in the man's arms. But surely he wasn't thinking of making a move on him. No: he was just being extremely kind, generous and compassionate and Justin was very grateful. The last thing he wanted to do right now was return to an empty, freezing apartment on his own, but then, in a matter of seconds, his world was thrown into even more disarray.

Brian stepped out of the stall and started to towel himself down, wishing he'd brought clean clothes into the bathroom with him. Not that he was prudish, heaven forbid! but whilst he was in the shower, he'd caught movement out of the corner of his eye and realized Justin had been watching him and, although the younger man obviously knew nothing about his relationship with Mark, he wondered if the blond was as confused about his feelings as he was.

It must have been pretty full on, Brian decided, for the young man to wake up and find himself in Brian's bed; sleeping in his arms, but the last thing Brian needed was some grieving and heartbroken guy; someone not much more than just a kid; confusing compassion and kindness for something stronger and Brian cursed himself.

Christ, he was getting soft! If this what having consideration for someone else's feelings meant, something Brian had struggled with but discovered had to happen if you wanted a partnership to work, then he'd have to watch his step. He was confused enough without getting into anything with Justin and Brian caught his breath; was he actually already considering the possibility of another relationship?

No: No way. Not another relationship: ever. Just fucking: getting in and out with the minimum of bullshit and the maximum of pleasure, that's what it would be from now on. He was never going back there; having someone as his partner. That was for the Munchers or Ben and Michael. He'd got his fingers burned; he'd done with repeat performances.

Pulling on the sweats he'd slept in, Brian stepped outside the bathroom and looked for Justin, but he was nowhere to be seen. He'd gone, taking his hold all with him.

Grabbing a sweater and putting it on hurriedly, but still barefooted, Brian ran quickly down into the street and looked for him, but the young man was nowhere to be seen and it was far too cold to hang around.

Confused as to Justin's sudden departure, Brian returned to the loft and noticed the message light flashing on his answer phone; the phone must have gone whilst he was in the shower and he hadn't heard it and he pressed the Play button.

'Brian ... it's Margaret. I wanted to let you know that Mark's funeral is scheduled for Tuesday ... and ... as ... his partner ... I'm really hoping you'll want to be involved in the service. I know how difficult this must be for you ... it is for all of us ... Anyway, I think they'll be a lot of people there ... more than I expected ... Mark had a lot of friends ... especially connected to the gallery ... so ... please call me so that we can fix a time to meet up and discuss the arrangements and I just wanted to assure you that we wouldn't dream of excluding you ... you were too important to Mark for us to do that. I hope to hear from you soon ...'

Justin must have heard the message and realized that the Mark mentioned was the same man he'd been involved with; the same man they'd both been involved with. Otherwise, why would he run away like that and Brian closed his eyes, hoping to God the young man was going to be okay.

Justin couldn't face going into the diner and so he rang and told Debbie he'd understand if she didn't want to hold his job for him, but the truth was he was getting pretty desperate for money. The art show was in just over a week's time and he hoped that maybe he'd sell one of his pictures, but for the moment, he couldn't risk running into Brian again.

Debbie always seemed to know when there was something going on under the surface and had coaxed out of him that the man he'd gone to New York with had been killed in the accident. She told him to stay away for a few more days and not to worry and reassured him that she'd keep his job open for him. Her heart had gone out to the young man who'd already endured more tragedy in his young life than most people and she wanted to help him as much as she could.

Justin thanked her and put down the phone; not sure if that's the answer he really wanted. After all, all it did was prolong the decision he had to make: to give up his job altogether or to return to the diner and face Brian.

When he'd heard the message left on Brian's answer phone, Justin's whole world had collapsed around him. Not only had he lost his lover, but it would seem the man who'd come to his rescue had been in a relationship with him also. Even more than that, the woman had referred to Brian as Mark's partner. But Justin had begun to think that he

was Mark's lover and partner and then he realized how little he really knew about Mark's life.

Mark had taken him to the gallery in New York; miles away from Pittsburgh, but back home, it dawned on him that they never ventured outside the bedroom, either his or Mark's. Was that all Mark had seen in him, he wondered? Was he just a piece of blond ass: a diversion away from his true relationship with Brian?

If Brian hadn't been on the scene, would he have had Mark all to himself? Probably not, Justin concluded and now doubted whether Mark could ever have loved just one man. But maybe he'd loved them both in his own way and Justin could see the attraction in Brian, having decided he was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen that time when he'd come into the diner.

And, when he'd woken up and realized it wasn't Mark who'd been holding him; comforting him, why had Brian done that? Was it some perverse way of getting back at him for cheating with Mark? Would Brian have told him the truth about his and Mark's relationship, or would he have continued asking Justin about his boyfriend, all the while knowing the young man had been sleeping with his own lover?

Justin's head was swimming. Brian had seemed concerned about him, which at the time seemed so genuine, but now he wasn't so sure and the fact that Mark had been so deeply involved with another, cut Justin to the quick.

The day of the funeral finally arrived, and the service had been very well attended, by Brian's friends, as well as Mark's friends and family; and Brian had said his piece, all the time wondering if the blond was okay.

He'd not been able to get Justin out of his head and had even gone to the diner looking for the blond and, discovering he hadn't been back there, casually enquired about him. Debbie had said he was taking a few days off; "Poor Kid, seems like his boyfriend was killed," she'd told Brian, putting her hand on his and Brian had nodded his understanding.

Driving home, Brian had taken a detour and found himself standing outside Justin's door and, hearing music playing quietly inside, he knocked.

There was no answer but the music was suddenly switched off. "Justin ... it's Brian ... Brian Kinney. I know you're there ... won't you open the door?"

After several minutes and still no response, Brian reached inside his jacket pocket and took out a business card and a pen.

"Here's the details of Mark's funeral ... in case you decide you want to go," Brian called to him, through the closed door and he wrote on the card the time and place of both the service and then the burial and he bent down and pushed the card under the door.

Now, standing at the graveside for the burial, Brian was sure he'd seen a figure right on the edge of the group; almost hiding behind one of the larger tombstones and, after Mark had been laid to rest and everyone had made their way back to the cars, Brian made an excuse to return to the graveside, in time to find Justin laying his own small bunch of flowers and he looked so lost and alone.

"Justin ..." the sound of Brian's voice startled him and the young man got up quickly and started to walk away. Brian took a few hurried steps and caught up with him easily; Justin's ribs preventing him from moving any faster and Brian took him by the arm.

"You don't have to run away from me ..." he told him and Justin stopped and turned to face him and Brian noticed how pale and tired he looked.

"How are you?" asked Brian quietly.

"Okay ... I guess," answered Justin. "You?"

"About the same," replied Brian and he looked away; an uncomfortable silence now between them.

"I didn't know ..." Justin told him eventually and Brian nodded.

"Neither did I," he replied, looking back at him.

"Are you coming to the house?" asked Brian. "We're going back to Mark's sister's..." but Justin shook his head. "Why not?" continued Brian, "you've as much right to be there as I have ..."

"No I haven't," replied Justin in amazement at the other man's attitude. "You were his partner ..."

"And you were his lover," answered Brian.

"Who's that with Brian?" asked Michael. The gang had all come to support Brian and were standing by the remaining cars; waiting for him to return so they could all go on to Margaret's and Michael shielded his eyes against the bright winter sun.

Debbie peered in the direction of Mark's grave and frowned in puzzlement. "It looks like Justin ... what the hell's he doing here? He hasn't turned up for work the last few days ... he said his boyfriend had been killed ... maybe it's his funeral too ..." and she looked around trying to identify another group of mourners, but then suddenly the penny dropped and Lindsay's look confirmed it.

"Holy shit ... Justin was seeing Mark too?" asked Debbie and Lindsay nodded slowly and Melanie moved in and linked her arm through her partner's in support of her. Lindsay was certainly no gossip and hadn't intended to pass on information that should only come from Brian, but maybe it would be easier if the truth came out this way, rather

than their friend having to tell them; face to face.

“You mean Mark was cheating on Brian ... and with that little asshole?” asked Michael; angry at how his friend must be feeling at discovering the truth about his partner and the young blond.

“Come on Michael,” said Ben, putting his arm around his partner’s shoulders. “We don’t know the full circumstances and Brian seems to be handling himself okay ... doesn’t look like he’s particularly angry at Justin or anything. Maybe we should wait and hear the full story before we start condemning people?”

Brian had eventually worn him down and, at last, Justin agreed to go back to the house and together they now approached the group waiting by the remaining cars.

“Justin’s coming with us,” announced Brian; his tone leaving no room for discussion, but he saw the exchanged glances and guessed that Lindsay had let on and he threw her a withering glance and Lindsay tried to smile. Then Debbie, Lindsay, Melanie, Brian and Justin took one car and Michael, Ben, Ted and Emmett the other; all of them exchanging looks as the young blond took his seat next to Brian.

Thankfully, with Debbie in the car, there was no awkward silences; and though respectful of the occasion, she was able to keep a conversation of sorts going, addressing each of them in turn; attempting to bring everyone into the dialogue, but she couldn’t fail to notice how Brian and Justin never spoke directly to one another and how Brian mostly just looked out of the window.

Justin hesitated getting out of the car, but taking him by the elbow, Brian steered him passed the group and inside to meet Margaret.

Margaret and Brian kissed as she came to greet them and then Brian introduced the young blond by his side. “Margaret, I’d like you to meet Justin Taylor. Justin’s an artist and was ... a very good friend of Mark’s,” and Justin glanced up at him, thankful that he’d not described him as anything more and hadn’t used this occasion to humiliate either him or Mark.

Margaret took Justin by the hand and greeted him warmly. “I’m so pleased you could make it,” she told him. “Mark does seem to have so many wonderful friends ...” and now she took him further into the room and introduced him to a group of people associated with the gallery.

Brian ran his fingers through his hair as Debbie came to stand by his side. “That was very generous ...” she said to him quietly and Brian looked down at her and they each took a glass of sherry from a waiter making his way through the crowded room.

“Lindsay ...” stated Brian and Debbie nodded. “She didn’t let on deliberately, Brian ... but seeing you and Justin together at Mark’s graveside ... it just sort of came out ...”

“It’s not his fault,” continued Brian at last and he sighed. “I need a real drink ...” and putting down the untouched glasses on a nearby table, they went to find the refreshments.

And as Justin was talking to some of Mark’s friends from the gallery, he glanced over at Brian and caught the man’s eye: They both smiled.

On several occasions, Brian found himself watching Justin as the young man talked with Mark’s associates from the gallery and, as he was doing so now, was totally unaware that Lindsay had approached him.

Brian had previously been standing with the gang and the conversation had been polite and lightweight and Brian could see that Michael was dying to say something, but looks from Debbie and Ben kept his friend’s observations at bay and Brian was glad. He just wasn’t in the mood for any discussion on Mark’s relationship with Justin right now.

Ted and Emmett had known when it was polite to leave and, having given Brian more support than he could have expected had already left and Brian had moved away from the group and was standing by the windows and turned away from Justin’s direction to look out into the darkness; the winter nights now closing in.

“Brian ... I’m sorry I let it out about ... well ... you know,” stated Lindsay, touching him lightly on the arm.

“It’s okay, Lindsay,” said Brian, managing a smile. “It really doesn’t matter ... I guessed it would all come out sometime”.

“I can’t imagine what must be more difficult for you,” Lindsay continued, quietly, “the funeral ... or Justin being here,” but Brian only shrugged and took another swallow of his drink.

“Why did you bring him here?” she asked him and Lindsay was genuinely curious: curious and concerned at Brian’s motives.

“To be honest, Lindz,” replied Brian, “I’m not really sure now. ... I guess... I guess I thought he should have the chance to say goodbye to Mark properly and then today ... when I saw him ... he looked so lost ...” and Brian sighed and for the first time, Lindsay saw the pain in Brian’s eyes as he stared straight out of the window again, but seeing nothing. Right now, Justin wasn’t the only one who looked lost: lost, alone and unsure of what to do next.

“Come on,” said Lindsay, “let’s go home”.

“But what about ...”

“Justin will be fine”, she continued. “He’s not your responsibility,” and Brian closed his eyes briefly before nodding. Yes, it was time to go home and he swallowed the last of his

drink and put the glass down on a nearby table. Together, they made their goodbyes to Margaret and Lindsay kissed Melanie and whispered in her ear that she wanted to make sure Brian got home okay and Mel had nodded her understanding.

Brian said goodbye to the rest of the gang who'd also decided it was now time to go and he managed to avoid getting into any conversation with Michael. He knew his friend would only be looking out for him, but right now he didn't need to hear what a shit Justin was. And as Brian threw a glance in the blond's direction; the younger man too engrossed in conversation to see him leave; Brian knew it wasn't only Justin. It takes two to tango and if anyone was to blame then surely it had to be Mark; he was the one involved heavily with two men.

And Brian knew he'd had a part to play; after all if he'd given Mark what the man had wanted, then he wouldn't have needed to go elsewhere.

And now having said goodbye to his partner and watched him being lowered into the ground, Brian also felt he was saying goodbye to any hope he might have had of love; the one thing he'd denied himself for so long and struggled to accept and unlikely to find again.

Brian had left his car at Margaret's in order to travel to the funeral home in the cortege and insisted on driving back to the loft, even though Lindsay could see the turmoil that was going on inside him.

Getting home, Brian took off his heavy winter coat and suit jacket and loosened his tie and then he headed straight for the bottle of beam. "You want anything?" he asked Lindsay, but she shook her head as she took off her coat. One of them was going to have to remain sober and somehow she didn't think that was going to be Brian and he demonstrated that fact by pouring himself a large one, which he downed in one swallow.

"Go easy with that, Brian," cautioned Lindsay, taking a seat on the sofa.

"Who are you ... my Mother?" he came right back at her and pouring himself another and then Brian immediately regretted his tone and he sighed and went to sit beside her.

"What the fuck was I doing, Lindsay ... even thinking I could settle down with just one man ..."

"It wasn't you, Brian", assured Lindsay. "You gave it your best shot ... Mark knew what he was getting in to ... he knew who you were right from the start. It was Mark who screwed up ... you shouldn't blame yourself", and Brian tried to smile. Lindsay was doing her best at trying to get him to see how it really was, but Brian had convinced himself that the blame must lay partly with him at least.

Obviously he hadn't been enough; the man had needed more and had found what he was looking for in Justin.

Brian sighed. "You don't have to baby-sit me, Lindz ... go home to your wife and our son ... please ... I'd rather be on my own in any case ..."

"Are you sure?" asked Lindsay and Brian nodded.

"I've got plenty of work I need to be catching up with ... I've got behind with everything ... so you go ... I'll be fine" and he took another swallow from his glass.

Lindsay looked at him and, not for the first time, started to worry as she watched him take the drink and saw the mask he was now wearing; the one he'd always used so skillfully to disguise how he was really feeling.

But that wasn't the only thing that Brian was now hiding behind and Lindsay's heart sank. There they were; no mistaking them; the barriers were coming down again.

For most of his life, up until he'd met Mark at least, no one could get passed the walls that Brian put up around himself; a shield to keep out anything and everyone who might make him feel. A few trusted friends had been allowed, on rare occasions, to see the real Brian Kinney, but no one had ever been successful in penetrating the force field that repelled all who dared to try and get close enough to have a relationship that was more than friendship.

As a defense mechanism against pain, the barriers had worked pretty damn well, but they'd also kept out love; the philosophy being that something can't hurt you when it goes if you've never let it in to begin with; what you haven't got you'll never miss.

"You know where I am if you need me," Lindsay said softly and even though she hated leaving him like this, she knew Brian didn't want anyone around him at the moment; Anyone who might happen to catch a glimpse of weakness in the armor and Brian nodded and Lindsay kissed him lightly on the cheek before she rose from the sofa, collecting her coat and closing the door to the loft behind her.

Brian closed his eyes: suddenly feeling very tired and the last thing he could actually concentrate on now was work. No: the bottle of beam was the only thing that deserved his undivided attention.

With everything that had happened before Mark's funeral; the shock following the accident and dealing with Mark's death; the arrangements and then the funeral itself and on top of everything the discovery of Mark's involvement with another man: with so much happening, Brian had felt at least that there was still something to hang on to; something that was keeping him afloat. But now that everything that needed to be done had been and Mark was laid to rest, there was nothing more left to cling to and Brian felt as if he'd been cut adrift with no knowledge of the direction in which he was heading.

Midday the day after the funeral and the noise just wouldn't stop, but eventually, it permeated through Brian's unconscious state until he came fully awake; someone was banging on the door and they weren't giving up.

He groaned and, getting up from the bed where he'd collapsed the night before and still dressed apart from his shoes and socks, he kicked the empty bottle of beer; sending it spinning and then Brian staggered across the polished wooden floor and slid open the door.

"Finally ... what if there'd been a fire?" pointed out Debbie and she marched passed him and into the loft.

"Debbie ... what are you doing here?" asked Brian, still trying to bring everything back into focus.

"Well, someone's got to keep you fed," she answered him, "because I doubt that you're bothering ..." and she held out before her the casserole dish.

"Tuna and macaroni ... it was your favorite when you were a kid."

"No it wasn't," replied Brian and he rubbed his temple and wished the pounding in his head would stop.

"Don't argue with me ... you fucking loved it," insisted Debbie and Brian gave in to the path of least resistance; he didn't have the strength or the will to argue with her.

"You want me to heat it up for you now?" asked Debbie, moving into the kitchen and Brian's stomach churned; food was the last thing he could face right this minute and carefully, he shook his head.

"Maybe later," he answered her and Debbie frowned and placed the dish in the refrigerator. "Don't forget it," she instructed him and Brian nodded.

Brian started to turn towards the door, expecting Debbie to leave, but instead she reached for the coffee pot. "You go and get yourself cleaned up and I'll put the coffee on ... you look like you could use it ... oh and close the door ... it's colder than a witch's tit out there today" she instructed and before Brian could protest, Debbie filled the jug with water and found the fresh coffee.

Brian inwardly sighed, knowing it was no use. Short of bodily throwing her out of the loft, he knew he wasn't going to get rid of Debbie that easy and he slid the door closed and made his way to the bathroom.

A quick shower and fresh change of clothes later, Brian emerged from the bedroom ready to face Debbie and she passed him a steaming cup of coffee and went to sit on the sofa; Brian took a sip of the hot liquid before following her. A 'Debbie' conversation wasn't something he was really looking forward to right now, but that was obviously her intention and it looked like she wasn't going to give up, so he might just as well get it over with.

Never one to let a person wallow in self-pity, Debbie had got a pretty good idea what was going on following a telephone conversation she'd had late the previous night with Lindsay, after Lindz had left Brian and gone back home; the upshot being that Brian obviously blamed himself for the demise in his and Mark's relationship to a point where the man had looked elsewhere and she wasn't about to let Brian retreat and take refuge behind the barricades again.

"Can we get this over with?" asked Brian and Debbie looked at him and smiled. "I guessed you'd know the other reason why I came over and don't think I'm going to let you off the hook just because of what you're going through" she continued and she put her cup down on the coffee table and turned to face him.

"You're blaming yourself for the fact that Mark took up with Justin ... that you think it's your fault ... that maybe you weren't enough for him. But let me tell you right now ... that's bullshit".

"Is it?" replied Brian. "If I'd been able to love Mark ... like he'd wanted ... he wouldn't have gone elsewhere for what I couldn't give him ... "

"Christ, Brian, " continued Debbie; cutting him off, "You'd be enough for any man ... surely you know that much at least. I mean ... look at you ... you're successful ... you've worked hard and have a good job and bring home a damn good salary ... and you have a terrific home."

"You've got ... well ... style. That and you don't scrub up half bad ..." and she winked at him and Brian managed a smile; a smile that suddenly disappeared and he looked down into his cup.

Reaching out, Debbie put her hand under his chin and tilted his head up to face her. "Whatever it was that brought Mark and Justin together ... it wasn't down to you" Debbie said quietly and she saw how the tears welled up in Brian's eyes.

"You've got spirit ... guts," continued Debbie, "and most guys wouldn't be able to keep up with you ... let alone have time ... or the stamina for someone else," she chuckled. "If Mark went looking for something more ... well ... it's because he didn't appreciate what he had when he found you."

Brian had fought but eventually lost the struggle to keep the tears at bay and, putting down his coffee cup, he lent forward to hug the woman that had been more of a Mother to him since he was aged 14 than his own had ever been and he dearly wanted to maintain this contact, but how he hated her seeing his tears.

"Thanks Mom," whispered Brian, pulling back to look at her and Debbie smiled.

"I just want both my boys to be happy," she answered him; cupping his face in her hand and Brian let out a little gasp. There it was again, Debbie's commitment to him in referring to him as a son just like her own. And then Brian slid down the sofa so that he

now lay on his side with his head in her lap and Debbie could feel his trembling, but didn't have to witness the tears.

"I know how hard it was for you to hear Mark tell you he loved you," stated Debbie quietly and stroking Brian's hair. "And I understand that you think you don't really know what love is. Jesus, growing up with Jack and Joan ..." and Debbie bit her lip; Brian didn't really need to be reminded of how little love there was in the Kinney household when he was a kid; he'd had the bruises to do that.

"I guess I just don't know how to give ..." whispered Brian; a thought that he'd said out loud before he caught himself and Debbie's heart went out to him; this grown man who was still such a little boy inside; a little boy who didn't understand his worth and who'd ached for praise and affection and yes, damn it, even approval, although he'd never admit it; from his own parents. After all, isn't that what unconditional love is supposed to mean? And in denying Brian such basic rights, Jack and Joan had also denied him the ability to both give and receive the most fundamental right of all: love.

"Yes you do," corrected Debbie. "Though I have to admit ... you scare me sometimes ... 'cos it seems like you end up doing the right thing but for the wrong reasons. Still ... I guess you get there in the end".

"Because ... and I know you probably won't want to believe me when I tell you this ... but I know that under that no-apologies-no-regrets bull, there beats the heart of a man who's every bit as decent and loving as the next ... that you just don't like people to know it ... in case it gets thrown back in your face ..."

"Like it did with Mark ..." interrupted Brian; his voice shaking.

"And I know how much that hurts," continued Debbie.

"Justin's very different to you and it is possible to love people for different reasons. Mark probably loved you both and didn't want to let either of you go ..."

"Don't make excuses, Debbie," said Brian, sniffing back the tears. "If I gave Mark everything he needed it wouldn't have mattered if Justin came on the scene."

"It's me...it has to be. What the fuck was I thinking...believing that's what I wanted ..."

"Because," replied Debbie, "deep down it's what everyone wants ... love ... to not be alone in the middle of the night ... having someone to share things with ... the good and the bad. We all need someone there for us, Brian ... even you," said Debbie and how she wished he'd believe her words.

"And there will be someone ... I know there will," she continued. "There's a guy out there that you'll fall in love with and will love you back with all his heart. Don't give up hope ..."

“Well, I won’t hold my breath,” stated Brian; pulling himself together and still not entirely convinced, but maybe Debbie’s words did bring comfort and a little hope, but Brian wasn’t sure he had the courage to go through this again.

It wasn’t just the cramping that came on after he’d been drawing so long that hampered Justin. The apartment was so cold, he could hardly feel the pencil after a few minutes and besides, he knew he had to go back into work. He was desperately short of money and at least the diner was warm.

In the end, Justin was forced to go back to work, despite dreading running into Brian and he arrived early; turning up for his shift way before time and as the breakfast rush hadn’t yet turned into the lunchtime rush, he was able to sit in the corner booth and continue with his drawing; he still had this one to complete before the art show where he hoped he might be fortunate to make a sale.

Going back to Mark’s sister’s: after Brian wore him down, saying he needed to say goodbye to Mark properly and be a part of the ritual had, he realized, been the best thing. Brian had been right; he’d needed to do it.

Brian hadn’t seen him, but Justin had arrived at the cemetery in good time to witness the small service that laid Mark finally to rest, but the man’s generosity in insisting he return with him to the house had astounded him; Justin didn’t think he’d be so accommodating if the circumstances had been reversed and he was sorry Brian had left before he’d had a chance to thank him properly.

Now, working on his drawing, he was so engrossed in what he was doing he failed to notice the man come into the diner for a quick coffee on his way from a meeting with a potential client before returning to the office.

Brian noticed the blond in the corner booth: head down and concentrating on whatever he was doing and occasionally rubbing his hand and he ordered his coffee and sat down on the stool at the counter.

“How long’s he been back?” Brian asked Debbie quietly as he picked up his cup and he indicated Justin. Neither of them had mentioned their conversation back at the loft the day after Mark’s funeral and Brian knew confidently that Debbie would never repeat what had passed between them.

“Started back today ... got in early so he could work on his picture,” replied Debbie. “Poor kid ... said something about his place being so cold ...”

“Yeah...it is,” agreed Brian and he got up off his stool and moved towards the young man.

Justin became gradually aware of someone standing over him and then Brian spoke. “You’re good ... damn good” and he slid in the booth opposite him.

“Thanks,” said Justin quietly and he flexed his fingers as his hand begun to shake, but Justin wasn’t sure whether it was the cramping that made his hand shake or Brian’s presence.

“Why aren’t you at art school?” Brian asked him and Justin put down his pencil and sighed.

“I’d never be able to keep up ... not now ... it just takes me too long ...”

“That’s a pity,” answered Brian. “You’ve obviously got talent ... shame to see it go to waste”

“Anyway,” continued Justin. “It takes money and ... well ... I haven’t had any contact with my parents for months. Not since my Dad told me that in order to live in his house I would have to give up my disgusting lifestyle and that he wouldn’t pay for me to go to PIFA ... he wants me to do a business degree ...” and Justin looked at his watch and then started to tidy up the table ready to start his shift.

Justin had shrugged when he’d spoken the words and tried to make light of them, but Brian had seen the obvious sadness in his face when he spoke of his parents and their attitude to his sexuality; being apart from them had obviously upset the young man very much despite of their feelings towards him.

“Well, that’s not love,” stated Brian, “that’s hate ... trying to make you into something you’re not ... denying who you really are”.

Justin hesitated for a moment and then asked, “when did you tell your parents ... that you were gay I mean?” and Brian took a deep breath and lent back in his seat.

“Well, it was actually only a few years ago. I told my Dad ... just after he told me he was dying of cancer. His reaction was that ... that it should have been me dying not him. And my dear, loving Mother found out when she came to the loft and found me with a guy ... and told me I was going to hell ...”

“Jesus” stated Justin, unable to disguise the shock he felt, both at the callousness of Brian’s parents and the honesty with which Brian spoke. Suddenly, realizing what he’d divulged so easily, Brian looked away from the younger man’s gaze and wondered what the hell had prompted him to come right out and tell him things that he never liked to discuss with the people who’d known him since he was a kid.

Watching Brian’s face as he’d realized what he told him, Justin felt the man was closing down; withdrawing from him and he was desperate for Brian not to feel uncomfortable and Justin tried to change the subject; wanting him to know how grateful he was.

“I never got the chance to thank you ... for making me go back to the house after the funeral. You were right ... I needed to be a part of things ... it ... it made it easier to say goodbye ...”

“Even though you weren’t able to tell everyone what you’d meant to Mark?” asked Brian and

Justin shrugged. “Well, that’s just it ... I’m not sure any more ... I mean ... I know what he told me ...” and Justin stopped himself from going any further.

“It’s okay ... you can say it. Mark told you he loved you ... right?” asked Brian and Justin nodded. “Yeah ... well ... he told me the same thing ... so I guess that puts us in the same boat” continued Brian.

“I’m sorry,” said Justin quietly: seeing the pain Brian was struggling to conceal, but Brian shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it ... it doesn’t matter any more” he said flatly, but something told Justin it mattered so much more than the older man was willing to let on.

“Justin, honey ...” called Debbie, and tapping her watch. “Just finishing up” replied Justin and he tidied up his work and then put it safely under the counter and put on his apron, ready to start his shift.

Getting up from the booth, Brian went over and took a swig of cold coffee from the cup he’d left on the counter and he left without saying another word.

Brian couldn’t explain it, but Justin’s struggle; merely to survive had touched him more than he could ever have imagined. He remembered reading about the kid who’d been bashed, but had dismissed it as something tragic that should never have happened and at the time something that hadn’t affected him personally and there was so many more important things to think about; like; when was he next going to get laid.

But having met the young man and watched how he persevered with his art, leaving home and the support of his family who tried to make him into something he wasn’t and struggling to keep a roof over his head; well Brian could relate to that. His parents had never supported him. True, they hadn’t known he was gay until he was almost thirty, but even without that revelation he’d never got a dime’s worth of support from his old man. It was a soccer scholarship that got him into Carnegie-Melon and then damned hard work, and not a little flair, that had got Brian this far and with a partnership in the agency in the offing.

He knew he didn’t owe Justin anything and some people would have said he was out of his mind to even be thinking about looking out for him, but for some strange reason, that’s exactly how Brian felt; that maybe he was doing what Mark should have been all along.

Deciding to walk back to the office after a meeting instead of taking a cab, Brian noticed several works of art, of all descriptions, on show in the storefronts of various businesses along Liberty Avenue as he returned to work.

Having reached “Torso”, Brian stopped to admire the drawings in the window and read the name and smiled; it was Justin’s work and, before he’d really had time to think what he was doing, Brian entered the store; the first of two visits he was to make that day.

The day that Justin had arranged to be on hand in “Torso” to answer any enquiries about his work had arrived, but, as he opened the door, he was puzzled why his pictures were no longer in the window.

“Em ... where are my drawings? Have you moved them?” asked Justin, as Emmett was putting some newly delivered stock out onto the racks.

“Mmm?” came the answer.

“My work ...” repeated Justin, now somewhat concerned. “What happened to them?”

“Oh ... your pictures you mean?” asked Emmett and Justin nodded. “They were sold.”

“Sold?” repeated Justin, “But I hadn’t even decided on a price ... and who would want to buy all three?”

“Beats me sugar”, replied Emmett, rather absentmindedly, but then he reached into the pocket of his jeans. “Oh ... he left you this,” and he handed Justin an envelope.

“Who did?” asked the blond and Emmett tilted his head to one side.

“Let me see ... it was a guy ... sort of old ... short ... fat ... and balding” came the reply and totally shocked, Justin opened the envelope and took out what was inside.

“It’s a banker’s check ... for ... Jesus ...” and Emmett looked over the young man’s shoulder and let out a low whistle.

“Well, he sure liked your pictures. What are you going to do with all that cash?” but Justin just shook his head, unable to take in his good fortune.

Turning up for his shift, Debbie couldn’t help but see the bounce in Justin’s step as he and Emmett entered the diner. Justin, with time on his hands now he had sold his drawings, had helped Em put out the last of the delivery and Em had even persuaded Justin to purchase a nice new blue shirt now he’d come into not an inconsiderable sum of money; something Justin hadn’t been able to do in a long time since he’d had so little cash coming in.

Brian had come in a little earlier and was sitting at a booth with Michael and Ben. To say Brian and Michael had exchanged words would be putting it mildly. Brian had let it be known that under no circumstances was Justin to be blamed for what Mark had done and that if he, Brian, bore him no malice, then Michael had no right to either. Michael hadn’t liked it, but the way Ben looked at him told Michael he had no choice but to

accept his friend's decision.

"There goes that sunshine smile again," stated Debbie as Justin came back after washing up before starting his shift.

"I sold my drawings" beamed the blond.

"Honey, that's terrific news ... did you hear that everyone ... Justin sold his work" said Debbie, addressing the group and Emmett slid into the booth beside Brian.

"Yes and for a handsome sum too" added Emmett, picking up the menu. "Who bought them?" asked Ben as Justin brought over the coffee pot.

"Well ... that's the strangest thing ..." replied Justin. "I don't know ... he paid by banker's check".

"What did he look like?" asked Ben, addressing both Emmett and Justin and holding out his cup for Justin to fill. "An old guy ... short ... fat ... and balding" replied Justin and Brian turned to look at Emmett who smiled back at him widely.

"I'll get you back for that" whispered Brian in Em's ear once Justin was out of range, but Emmett tilted his head and just kept on grinning.

"Brian, Clive's asking if you can go down to the art department and take a look at the Liberty Air campaign ... he says it's just about done."

"Thanks, Cynthia," replied Brian, picking up the messages from his P.A.'s desk and walking towards his office. Now back at work, Brian had thrown himself relentlessly into several campaigns: anything to stop from spending so many hours at home alone. Time was when he wasn't out tricking he'd probably have been with Michael, but not any more. There'd come the time when even Brian Kinney believed he was now getting a little too old for the club scene and besides Michael now had Ben. And though Brian had tried to convince himself he preferred his own company, he soon got bored staring at four walls. And at least at work he had something else to concentrate on: something other than keep going over his and Mark's relationship.

"There's also one there from Michael," called Cynthia. "Says can you get back to him soon" and Brian nodded to her as he opened his office door and then crossed the room to his desk.

Placing his attaché case on the floor, Brian sat down and took a deep breath before making the call. "Michael ..."

"Hi Brian ... Mom's asking if you can come to dinner on Sunday".

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," replied Brian, remembering the last time he'd had dinner at Debbie's; when there'd been a little scene after Gus had thrown up over Mark

and they'd had to leave early. That had been the last time he'd seen Mark: hardly a memory that lingered fondly.

"Come on Brian ... it'd be just like old times ..." and Brian briefly closed his eyes and sighed.

"Okay ... I'll be there," and he put down the phone. Just like old times ... dinner with the gang: great. It felt like he was taking a backward step when not too long ago he'd started to think he had a future of his own instead of his only family being part of Debbie's extended one, despite the fact he loved her dearly and wouldn't be without her or his friends, even though they'd never get to hear it.

Going down to the art department, Brian found Clive adding the finishing touches to their latest campaign; Liberty Air and likely to be very lucrative and was surprised to find the head of the department using a piece of equipment he hadn't seen before. Clive was using a Pen Tool to draw directly on to the computer monitor: adding both color and shapes to his designs.

"What's that?" asked Brian, who suddenly realized he really should come down to the art department more often and Clive passed it to him. "Here ... you try it ..."

Sitting down beside him, Brian lent across and started to draw on the screen to good effect and, not totally inept himself, he wondered what a much more artistic talent could produce using such equipment.

"I guess this stuff is pretty expensive, right?" asked Brian and Clive laughed. "Yeah, you could say that ... which is why I couldn't believe it when Gardner agreed to buy the latest upgrade ..."

Staggering up two flights of stairs, Brian cursed and not for the first time, the lack of an elevator in the old apartment building and he just managed to reach Justin's door in time before he started to lose his grip on the large box he was carrying; it wasn't particularly heavy, just awkward and he wedged it between himself and the wall.

Justin opened the door after the first knock and couldn't hide his surprise at finding who his visitor was. "Don't just stand there ... give me a hand," asked Brian and Justin flung the door open wide and helped him inside with the box, which between them, they placed on the floor.

"There's two other boxes down in the car ... you wanna help me with them?" asked Brian and he turned on his heel and headed back downstairs without waiting for an answer: Justin hesitating momentarily before following him.

Brian handed Justin one of the boxes from his car and picked up the other himself and then they both made their way back upstairs. "What is all this?" asked Justin and Brian started the explanation he'd been rehearsing on the way over.

“Did I tell you I’m in advertising?” he asked him, calling back over his shoulder as Justin followed him up the stairs.

“Yeah,” replied the blond, “you gave me your card ... remember?” and Brian smiled; yes, of course he had.

“Well, the agency is updating some of the equipment and this was going begging ... I thought you’d find it interesting ...”

Back inside the apartment and taking off his jacket despite the cold, Brian unpacked the boxes and then, having set up the computer, he held out the Pen Tool. “Have you seen one of these before?” he asked him and Justin’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah ... but I’ve never used anything like it ... it’s pretty expensive stuff”.

“Well, give it a go,” invited Brian and he pulled up a chair in order for Justin to sit down and the blond looked at him before he took the pen from Brian and the older man stepped back and watched, with more than just a little apprehension, as Justin began to draw directly on to the monitor.

For the next fifteen minutes, Justin was totally engrossed in what he was doing and what he achieved, even in that short time surprised him greatly.

“This is incredible”, said the blond when he eventually looked up from what he was doing and Brian smiled.

“Why don’t I send out for something to eat while you see what it can really do?” he asked and Justin nodded.

For the next two hours, Justin worked on producing various pictures, often sitting back in his chair and deep in thought. Glad to be getting something in their stomachs to stave off the cold, Brian had sent out for Chinese, which in the end Justin only picked at and Brian generally stayed out of his way, not wanting to intrude on the young man’s creativity.

As he ate, Brian watched the blond at work; loving the way the young man was so engrossed in what he was doing; seeing his intensity in working out what he wanted to produce and he smiled at the look of total concentration on Justin’s face. And not for the first time did Brian notice the beautiful blue eyes, now wide open with incredulity as the printer produced the hard copies of his pictures.

“These are amazing,” offered Brian: taking the pictures and laying them out on the table.

“The computer did most of it ...” Justin started to say and now standing closely by Brian’s side.

“Bull,” came Brian straight back at him. “No piece of machinery is able to create

something like this ... these pictures come alive ... that's down to you ... I bet you'd get into PIFA on the strength of them ..." and Brian looked at the younger man, who had suddenly become very quiet and who now went to sit on the sofa.

"What's wrong?" asked Brian, suddenly concerned at Justin's obvious distress and the young man shook his head.

"It's just ... it's just so different to what I've done before. I love the fine work it takes to produce a pencil drawing ... the detail ... but this ..." and the blond sighed and took a deep breath and Brian could hear the tremor in his voice.

"This is finally admitting I'm never going to be able to get back to where I was before ... that I'll never know how good I might have been ..." said Justin quietly; dismay coupled with anger and then he covered his face with his hands as the tears came.

After the bashing, Justin had all but given up hope of continuing with his art until he'd met up again with Mark. But even though he'd enjoyed returning to the craft in which he'd been so talented, he realized the toll it took in producing even one drawing: It was just such damned hard work.

Brian closed his eyes; this wasn't what was supposed to happen. He was hoping to show Justin what he could achieve; not what he'd lost and he knew he couldn't ignore the despair the young man was now feeling and he crossed the room to sit down on the sofa beside him and hesitating for only a second, Brian put his arm around the younger man's shoulders and instinctively, Justin moved towards him.

Brian held his breath as Justin moved in to him and, slowly, Brian encircled him with his arms, trying to quell the trembling coursing through the young man's body. This hadn't been his intention; or even his desire, but now, with the blond in his arms, Brian could smell the shampoo lingering in Justin's hair and, automatically, he placed his hand on Justin's head so that he could feel the silkiness of the blond strands.

Struggling to retain his senses, Brian tried to concentrate on the situation in hand. "I'm sorry Justin," he said, quietly. "I didn't mean for this to happen ... but this doesn't mean you can't move on ... there are different forms of art ... this stuff still takes an incredible amount of talent ..." but at this moment, Justin couldn't be consoled with merely words.

Without a sound in the room, but for the gentle hum of the hard drive, Justin clung to Brian, but this time, unlike the last when he'd been in the older man's arms, Justin was fully awake and totally aware of what was happening; feeling the tension in the man's hold and wondering was he too aware of what was passing between them?

For Justin had all but forgotten Mark: the lover he was still mourning, as he snuggled in Brian's arms and feeling totally and utterly safe and protected. And with his chin now on the older man's shoulder, Justin turned his head and nestled into Brian's neck.

Brian could feel Justin's warm breath against his skin and told himself this shouldn't be

happening; that he'd just said goodbye to his partner. He knew this wasn't one friend comforting another; you could hardly call them that, they barely knew each other. No, it was actually far more than that and Brian started to admit the genuine attraction he felt towards this young man; something he'd felt the moment he'd first laid eyes on him but had ignored in trying to remain committed to Mark.

But Brian couldn't resist pulling Justin in even tighter and he closed his eyes: wanting to keep this moment forever and slowly, he relaxed. This felt so good, so instinctive; so very natural.

Justin could feel the tension evaporate from Brian and he pulled away from him slightly in order to look into the older man's face; that beautiful face which was now so close to his own. They stared into each other's eyes for what seemed an eternity until Brian's gaze shifted to Justin's mouth and he saw the young man's lips part slightly.

With his hand at the back of Justin's head, Brian brought the younger man in even closer: so that their lips were just brushing together and then he pulled away again. The look in Justin's eyes gave Brian permission to proceed and, putting his hand to Brian's face as confirmation, their mouths came together and Justin's lips parted further, allowing Brian's eager tongue unhindered entry.

Entering Justin's mouth: their tongues jostling briefly for supremacy, Brian licked the inside of the warm cavern and then, breathing through his nose, the older man deepened the kiss and Justin responded, both men's eyes closed tightly, savoring the moment.

With one hand between Justin's shoulder blades and the other buried in the blond hair, Brian was no longer conscious of where he was or what had led up to this. All he could register was the taste of the younger man, the feel of his body and of Justin's fingers running through his hair: a touch that left a tingling sensation on Brian's scalp.

Suddenly, Brian opened his eyes. What the fuck was he doing? This was the young man who'd been sleeping with his partner: someone Brian who, despite his better judgment, had chosen to help out as a friend. But friends didn't act like this and, seeing Mark's face float in front of him, Brian pushed back: breaking the contact with Justin.

"I ... I'm sorry ... I didn't mean ... I think I should leave ..." stuttered Brian, now freeing himself from Justin's hold and pushing himself up of the sofa.

"Brian ..." Justin tried to take the man's hand, but was pushed away. "We can't ignore what just happened ..." but Brian had turned his back.

"Yes we can ... we have to," stated the older man and, having crossed the floor and putting a safe distance between them, Brian turned back to face him.

"I...we've just buried someone we thought we were in love with...someone who was in love ...or whatever the fuck you wanna call it...with both of us. You're too vulnerable

right now ...”

“And you’re not?” asked Justin and Brian closed his eyes and turned away again. How could he ever admit how vulnerable he really was, especially to Justin and confess that during his all too brief relationship with Mark that he’d begun to get used to the idea of sharing his life with someone else; that maybe being in love wasn’t such a bad thing after all? A love however, that had been tainted by Mark’s lies and deceit.

Seeing the horror and dismay in the older man’s face, Justin didn’t need to be told what had happened: he could feel it himself and he fought to get his heart rate back to normal. Regardless of the feelings he still had for Mark, Justin couldn’t hide his disappointment at the older man’s apparent rejection, despite the fact their situation could hardly be described as commonplace.

They weren’t two people who’d just come together through a mutual attraction. They’d been brought together owing to their love of the same man: a man who was now dead and yet who still stood between them.

“What about the computer?” asked Justin, feebly, getting up from the sofa and moving towards Brian as the older man grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

“Keep it ... good luck with school,” came the reply and he opened the door and stepped out into the hall. “See you around,” said Brian and then he turned and left.

Slowly, Justin closed the door and then returned to the sofa and sat with his head in his hands; trying to work out what had just happened.

He’d been immediately attracted to Brian that first time at the diner and from the look on Brian’s face and in his eyes he knew the older man must feel the same thing, despite both their reluctance to admit it.

But what about Mark; the man was barely in his grave, how could he even think about the possibility of getting involved with anyone; let alone the man he’d been sharing him with?

Trying to push from his mind his confused feelings about what had happened between himself and Brian, Justin returned to the computer. Although he’d been hugely disappointed at Brian’s rejection, he’d understood the man’s reluctance: after all, they’d both been hurt by someone they’d had feelings for and long after Brian had left, he stayed up working; seeing what he could produce and generally talking himself into giving art another go. Tomorrow he would find out what the chances were of getting into PIFA.

Tidying everything up, Justin glanced back at the computer as he switched off the light as he went to bed and he frowned. There was no way this equipment was previously used he realized; it all looked too new.

Shit: there was no way he could keep it; somehow he would have to give it back and he wondered again what Brian's motives were.

If the equipment had come from Mark, well then Justin would probably have accepted it: but Brian? They'd briefly shared a kiss; a kiss cut short by Brian's apparent guilt and now there was no way he could accept expensive gifts like this and Justin sighed as he rolled over and eventually fell asleep.

Needing to know just where he stood, Justin made an appointment to see the Principal at PIFA, who remembered the young man's talents and that he'd once made an application, but had been unable to take up the place, owing to his injuries and he was interested to see what the young man had to say.

Justin nervously handed over the pictures he'd been producing on the computer and his heart sank as he waited, wondering why was it taking so long for the man to give him his decision.

"These are ... well ... very dark and quite disturbing ..." came the eventual statement and Justin waited anxiously for the decision.

"But they are extremely good and we would undoubtedly offer you a place on the strength of them ..." and Justin let out a deep sigh of relief. He would love to take up the place, but he would need the computer. Maybe if he made Brian see that it was just a loan, then he could accept it then.

But when he returned home, a further bombshell awaited him.

Arriving later in the day for his shift at the diner, it didn't take Debbie long to spot something was wrong. "What's up, Kiddo?" she asked him and thinking how much more shit did this kid have to take.

"My building's been sold for some sort of redevelopment," replied Justin, "and we've all been given notices to quit. What am I going to do Debbie? I could only just afford to live there ... there's no way I'm going to be able to go back to school and afford to live anywhere else".

"You're going back to school?" asked Debbie and Justin looked at her.

"Yeah ... I'm sorry ... I was going to talk to you about my shifts ..." but Debbie interrupted him

"but that's great news, honey ... there's no way you should give up on that ... and don't worry about your shifts ... we'll work something out. But right now we need to find you a place to live ... let's just have a think ..." Debbie smiled; the answer was right under her nose.

"I have a spare room ... you could rent that ... there's just me and my brother, Vic, now

that Michael's moved out".

"Are you sure?" asked Justin, hardly able to believe his luck.

Debbie chuckled. "You go home and pack up your stuff ... I'll get one of the boys here to give you a hand in bringing it over to mine later ..." and Justin gave Debbie a big hug; maybe things were starting to go right after all.

For the next couple of days, Justin was so involved with moving into Debbie's and working out when he was going to start at PIFA that he never got a chance to get in touch with Brian and tell him he would only accept the computer if it was agreed between them that it was a loan, and so far Brian hadn't stepped inside the diner since the night he'd turned up at the apartment.

Justin loved the relaxed if slightly haphazard house that Debbie kept along with her brother, with its décor and furniture that hadn't been updated since the seventies; not that he knew anything about that decade. But Vic was friendly and accommodating, though he had to watch his health carefully, being HIV+ and could tell him about what it was like when he came out as a gay man; facing more bigotry than Justin could ever imagine and Vic would smile at the disbelief on the young man's face and was glad that he hadn't known those times.

"There was no PFLAG or Gay and Lesbian Centre back then," Vic told him as they were sitting at the table and Debbie passed her brother his evening meal. "No one would even talk about it ... let alone come out and admit to being gay ... queer-bashing was an all weather sport ..."

"Still is, apparently," said Debbie, ruffling Justin's hair and the young man smiled up at her. He'd got used to Debbie and the motherly way in which she treated all the kids that came into the diner. She wasn't his own Mom, but it was good to know she cared about him.

"Well, are you all settled in?" she asked him, placing Justin's dinner in front of him and Justin nodded.

"Yes ... thanks Deb and I start back at school in a couple weeks and there's a few things I have to get first. It's lucky I sold those pictures ..."

"It sure is," agreed Debbie, now bringing her own meal to the table.

"I figure I've got enough money to last for a while, but after that I'm not sure what I'm going to do," said the young man, picking up his fork.

"Don't worry honey," said Debbie, reaching out and touching the back of Justin's hand. "In my experience, these things generally have a habit of working themselves out".

"I hope so," replied Justin, "and I guess I could give my Dad another try ... but I don't

hold out much hope on that score and he earns too much for me to get a grant ... even though he won't support me in the one thing I want to do" and Justin took a mouthful of his dinner.

At least for now, he had a roof over his head, food in his stomach and someone it seemed, willing to look out for him.

"Hi Mom ... what's for dinner?" asked Michael as he and Ben entered the house and Debbie put her hand on her hip and turned around from the stove.

"Well, Hi Mom ... and how are you today? Glad to see you've got your priorities right ..." she growled at him, giving him a slight slap as Michael and then Ben gave her a kiss. This was part of the Mother and son ritual that took place almost every time they got together; admonishment coupled with love.

The doorbell rang and Ben offered to get it. Ted and Emmett had met Mel, Lindz and Gus on the doorstep and all were chattering away as they made their way into the warmth. "Something smells good," observed Emmett and Debbie grinned. "And Vic's made a coconut cream pie for dessert," she informed them as the group all kissed her in turn and Vic started to lay the table; all too small, but made for a friendly, intimate gathering.

The doorbell rang again and Ben, having just ushered in the earlier group, took up his duties once more and opened the door to Brian. The gang fell silent for a moment and Brian couldn't help but notice their response to him and for a second, he considered turning around and going home, but then they all called their greetings and started chatting again and the awkwardness had passed. Brian smiled to himself: Yes, this was going to be like old times and it actually felt good.

"There's too many places," observed Michael as Debbie started to dish up the dinner and then the group turned as they heard footsteps coming down the stairs in time to see Justin standing there and putting on his jacket.

"What's he doing here?" asked Michael.

"He lives here," stated Debbie and then she called over to the young man. "Where do you think you're going, Sunshine?" she asked him and looking more than just a little embarrassed, Justin looked over the group, knowing full well that Brian was likely to be among them.

"You're having a family dinner ..."

"Yes, we are," confirmed Debbie. "And seeing as how you're living here now ... you're family ... so find yourself a place and tuck in".

Brian was standing at the back of the group and the moment he realized Justin was present he closed his eyes; this was all he needed. But at the same time he realized how

pleased he was to see the young man. He hadn't had time to go in the diner since their meeting, or at least that's what he'd told himself. But deep down he knew he'd been avoiding the place: not wanting to confront him or, more likely, not wanting to confront his own feelings.

Michael looked at his Mother in total disbelief. How could she do this? How could she offer a home to a potential home-wrecker; someone who'd contributed to his best friend's misery once having discovered his partner's unfaithfulness?

But Debbie wasn't dumb; as well as genuinely wanting to offer Justin a home, she knew that Brian needed to face up to whatever feelings he had for Mark and Justin before he could move on. But it hadn't escaped her notice at how their eyes now lingered on one another as Justin shook off his jacket or how, as the others started to be seated that Justin managed to sit opposite Brian at the table: Emmett smiling as the blond beat him to the chair.

Justin soon fell in with the gang's gentle bantering and even Michael had to admit the blond was good company and it wasn't long before Justin and Brian were exchanging like for like and Lindsay glanced in Mel's direction. No, she wasn't imagining it; something was definitely passing between the two men.

There was an obvious attraction, despite how it had come about. Lindz and Mel both knew of course that Brian had offered Justin a place at the loft after the accident and Lindz had wondered then at the wisdom of Brian's actions. But as dinner progressed, Brian had begun to look more and more relaxed in Justin's company and often held his gaze during conversation.

Justin's heart had been beating fit to burst, but he'd been determined to get the chair opposite Brian at the dinner table; Lindsay already sitting on one side of him and Michael the other. Initially, having discovered Brian's presence, he'd wanted to sit next to him, but at least this way he could look at him more easily and, even though he thought he'd detected an initial unease, it had soon disappeared.

And now seeing how comfortable Brian appeared to be, Justin hoped he would be able to broach the subject of the computer and make the man see he would accept it only as a loan and not as a gift. And maybe also, he'd be willing to talk about what happened the previous evening.

At first, Brian tried to ignore the young man sitting opposite him, but then he actually found himself wishing he were sitting alongside him. The table settings were so close together, that would undoubtedly have meant them touching; knees, elbows and Brian told himself to calm down. What the hell was he thinking; hadn't he fled Justin's apartment after they'd kissed? A kiss he'd tried to tell himself had meant nothing; a kiss that made his heart beat faster and his blood pound in his ears and made him sweat just to think of it. No, it was nothing: just a kiss, right? Sure.

After dinner as the table was being cleared away and with far too many people already in

the kitchen helping, Brian disappeared out the back door where he quietly lit a cigarette. He'd given up smoking for Mark and, as he drew on the nicotine, its bitterness struck him and he wondered why he'd thought it necessary that he needed to light up at this time.

Seeing Brian leave, Justin quietly followed and suddenly appeared at the man's elbow. Brian wasn't surprised; he'd half been expecting, or maybe even hoping, that Justin would follow him out into the crisp night air.

Unlike Brian, Justin had never been afraid to confront his emotions and he needed to try and make some sort of sense about what had happened a few nights ago as well as talk to Brian about his gift.

"Brian ..." Brian closed his eyes at the sound of Justin's voice; knowing what was likely to follow, but dreading it all the same. "About the other night ..."

Brian pushed himself off the wall where he'd been leaning to stand square on to Justin; the younger man's pale face illuminated by the light over the back door.

"That should never have happened ... I shouldn't have let it ..."

"But it did ... and we can't ignore it," insisted Justin. "Or at least ... I can't," and Brian sighed and lent back against the wall.

"Are you telling me you didn't feel anything?" asked Justin. "Cos it didn't seem like that to me ..."

"Justin ... it was a kiss ... it meant shit ..."

"I don't believe that," said Justin and he stood in front of Brian.

"Look at me and tell me it meant nothing," he demanded and looking Brian straight in the eye. Brian held his breath before closing his eyes and turning his head away.

"Like I thought ... you know it meant something ... we both do".

"Have you forgotten Mark already?" asked Brian harshly and looking back at him; the cigarette now foul-tasting in his mouth and he dropped it and ground it out with his heel.

"Of course I haven't forgotten Mark", replied Justin, feeling as if Brian's question had hit him in the stomach and he tried to stop himself from shaking; whether from anger or the coldness of the night, he couldn't tell.

"But I also remember how he was happy to fool around with both of us" he continued. "And I know how that makes me feel ... and I bet you feel the same way too ..."

“And how’s that ... come on ... you seem to have all the answers,” demanded Brian and he dug his hands into his jeans pockets against the cold.

“Cheated ... deceived ... lied to ...” replied Justin, lowering his voice in the realization that not too far away was a group of people who were now probably wondering where they’d both disappeared to and Brian once again closed his eyes; trying to block out Justin’s words and the look of anger and misery on his face.

The words were the very same as those he’d been saying to himself all along and the look on Justin’s face was the same look he’d seen coming back at him from the shaving mirror; it seemed they had so much in common.

Brian couldn’t speak, let alone move or even think straight as Justin searched his face for any trace of reaction to the blond’s own feelings in this situation and, when he found none, Justin caught a sob in his throat and he turned away; taking Brian’s silence as a sign of his uncaring or antipathy of Justin’s own suffering in this sorry little scenario.

Suddenly and automatically, Brian reached out for him but Justin pulled away from his grasp. But, as he glanced back at him, in the flicker of an eyelid and even in the low light, Justin saw the pain in the older man’s eyes and realized just how much his words had brought home to him their situation; their shared grief at the loss of someone they’d dared to love and their joint disappointment at Mark’s behavior; shattering their illusions of his feelings towards them and of their futures.

Slowly, needing to tell him just how much he understood and wanting to take away his pain, Justin reached up and cupped Brian’s face with his hand and the man closed his eyes. Somehow, Brian knew for sure that here was someone who comprehended exactly how he was feeling; something no one had ever been able to do before; not Mark and not even Michael.

Even though they’d shared virtually everything since teenagers, there were still some things that Michael would never understand, but looking into Justin’s eyes, Brian could see someone who was able to accept as well as give of himself; something Brian had tried desperately to do and slowly, he removed Justin’s hand from his face and held it; feeling Justin tremble and wanting to tell the young man that it was okay.

This time, there was no hesitation as Justin moved forward and their mouths came together.

With his arms around Brian’s neck and Brian holding the younger man as close as was physically possible, they were now no longer conscious of the coldness of the night air. The two men felt their connection deeply: a kiss they both acknowledged and accepted and were hungry for.

There was no walking away this time.

Finally, both men now needing desperately to breath, the kiss was broken. But neither of

them seemed to want to sever the contact and, stretching up on tiptoes, Justin put his chin on Brian's shoulder and they hugged.

"What happens now?" whispered Justin, eventually and he pulled back to look into the older man's face.

Justin had felt such a deep attachment with Brian during the kiss; a kiss filled with such a passion and hunger, that he'd tried to maintain it as long as possible in order to reach out to him; wanting to let the other man know that here was someone who could be trusted with Brian's feelings.

Brian, on the other hand, had never learned to trust his emotions; he swallowed.

"What happens now?" he repeated and then Brian paused before continuing. "Nothing happens now. We both go back inside ... thank Debbie for dinner ... and then I leave ... alone," said Brian, coldly.

"What?" asked Justin, disbelieving that Brian still refused to acknowledge the attraction they shared and hurt by his tone: dashing all hopes he might have had that they would continue what they now appeared to have started.

"It's too soon ..." said Brian, quietly, "for either of us ... and I'm not even sure I want another relationship ..."

Justin stepped back, putting a little distance between them. "Why are you doing this?" he asked him: searching Brian's eyes for some kind of answer. "Why are you refusing to see what's right in front of you?" and then he stepped in closer. "I could be so good for you ..." said the younger man sincerely; looking up into Brian's face, but there was no response.

Brian looked at the ground: unable to look Justin in the eye. The blond was probably right; he would undoubtedly be very good for him and Brian had begun to realize he cared about what happened to him. But to put himself through allowing someone into his life and then having him leave again? There was no way he could do that. No, it was better this way; no involvement; no attachment and a heart intact.

Seeing Brian retreat inside himself, Justin sighed and, once again, he brushed Brian's cheek with his hand; pleased that the man didn't at least move away from his touch.

"When you know what you want ... I'll still be here," Justin whispered and determined not to accept defeat. His face was barely inches away from Brian's and the older man met his gaze; dismayed at the tears he saw shining in the young man's eyes, but refusing to acknowledge them.

Barely able to keep the tears at bay, Justin rushed inside and, ignoring the enquiring glances, ran passed the group now sitting in the living room and fled up the stairs. Brian came in a moment later, determined to ignore the accusing stares he was sure would

come his way.

Debbie was still tidying up the kitchen when Justin came in and she could tell from his face as well as his speed in passing her, that something had obviously upset him. And then when Brian followed shortly, her eyes narrowed as he bent to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Thanks for dinner, Debs ... I have to go ... I have an early start in the morning ...” and he tried to walk away. His encounter with Justin had hit him like a sledgehammer; both in hearing how the young man’s pain was exactly like his own and then seeing the tears and knowing he was responsible; he had to get away.

“Hold it ...” Debbie instructed and barring his exit. “What the fuck happened out there?” she whispered.

“Nothing,” replied Brian, but Debbie could read him better than a lot of people and she didn’t believe that for one moment. Keeping her voice low so the group couldn’t hear her, she placed her hand on his arm.

“Whatever the hell’s going on here ... and don’t think I haven’t noticed how you two look at each other ... just go easy ... on yourself as well as Justin ... you’ve both been through a helluva lot, but he’s not a bad kid, Brian.”

“I know,” replied Brian quietly and Debbie smiled: seeing the confirmation in his eyes. So, Brian had been paying attention after all; he must surely see the magnetism that seemed to be pulling him and Justin together. Debbie had noticed it and if she had, well, then some of the others at least must have witnessed it too.

Brian had to see it; but admitting it, that was something different.

Extracting himself from Debbie and moving into the living room, Brian bent to kiss Gus who was sitting on Melanie’s knee. “You’re leaving ... already?” asked Lindsay. “But you’ve hardly spent any time with your son ...”

“I know ... maybe I could have him next weekend?” asked Brian and Lindsay nodded, dismayed at how little time Brian seemed to spend with Gus these days.

“Okay ... I’ll call you later” she answered him and then she tilted her head towards him to allow him to kiss her and then, making his goodbyes, Brian left.

“I wonder what’s upset Justin?” asked Emmett, knowing full well that something must have passed between the young man and Brian; they’d been missing for so long.

“Maybe I should go and check on him,” said Debbie, but Michael rose from his chair.

“No ... I’ll go,” he stated and he made his way upstairs.

Justin could barely see his way back to his room for the tears. How could Brian brush off what had happened between them just like that and for the second time? He knew the man was suffering, but he was suffering too. Couldn't he allow him in? Couldn't Brian allow Justin to heal him? Couldn't they heal each other?

There was a quiet knock on the bedroom door and it was opened slowly. "May I come in?" asked Michael and Justin wiped his eyes and sat up on the bed and he drew his pillow into his stomach despite its dampness from his tears.

"Sure," he answered, "it's your room."

"Not any more" replied Michael and he closed the door behind him and then crossed the floor and sat down on the bed beside the young man.

"Don't get your hopes up," advised Michael, not needing to say the name of the man causing the blond such pain, but Justin shook his head.

"You weren't there when he kissed me. It meant so much...but he won't admit it ... we could be so good together ..."

Michael sighed. "There's something you have to understand about Brian...he doesn't do boyfriends".

"That's bull ... what about Mark?" asked the blond.

"Mark ... well, Mark just came along at a time when Brian was low," replied Michael. "I'd got together with Ben ... Brian couldn't face doing the clubs on his own ... he didn't want to be one of the pathetic old guys he'd laughed at ..."

"He's not old," stated Justin and Michael grinned.

"He'd be glad to hear you say that ... but he has been on his own for a long time. For most of his life the only one looking out for Brian ... was Brian."

"Sure, I was always here and Mom was always ready with a meal and a hug and he used to spend the night when things weren't too great with his folks ... but he was always so independent ... never accepting any help from anyone".

"He's always said that the only one you can rely on is yourself ..."

"But it doesn't have to be that way," interrupted Justin. "He needs me ..." he stated quietly, a hint of wistfulness in his voice and Michael smiled.

"I used to think that too ..." and Justin narrowed his eyes as he looked at him.

"You love him too ... don't you?" asked the blond and Michael looked down at his hands.

“Yes, I do ... and there was a time ... “ and then he sighed.

“But I gave up on that notion ... and now I’m with Ben. But that doesn’t mean I don’t still love Brian as a friend and he knows I’m always here for him ... we’ve always been there for each other ever since we were fourteen.”

“Wasn’t there anyone serious before Mark?” asked Justin and Michael shook his head.

“No ... never and it’s quite likely ... given what happened ... that Brian figures he’s better off without anyone ...” but now it was Justin’s turn to shake his head. He was determined to make damned sure that Brian knew that there was someone who would care about him; whatever it took to make him see it.

Several days later and Brian still hadn’t set foot back inside the diner and Justin knew full well that this time the man was definitely avoiding him. How was he ever going to make Brian see that Mark wasn’t the only thing they shared? The more he thought about him, the more Justin realized he was falling in love with the man and was convinced Brian had similar feelings. He had to have; nothing made sense otherwise.

Why had Brian paid so much attention to his welfare when he took him home from the diner when one of his headaches struck: refusing to leave the stricken young man in his freezing apartment and taking him back to his own home; his own bed?

Why had he been so concerned for him that Justin woke up to find himself in Brian’s arms: the older man obviously wanting to comfort him?

Why had he taken him back to Mark’s sisters after the funeral instead of excluding him from the proceedings, as anyone else certainly would have done; allowing Justin to experience the grieving process he so badly needed?

Why had he bothered to bring him the computer: encouraging him to pursue his place at PIFA and enabling him to produce the artwork of which he was so capable: a computer that was obviously brand new and expensive?

And why had the man kissed him with so much passion and fire and an obvious need: not once but twice, if he hadn’t felt anything for him?

Somehow, he had to get to Brian and make him understand that despite the hurt he now felt, it shouldn’t prevent him from trying again. That he, Justin, would never betray Brian like Mark had done; that having fallen in love with him and telling him just how much he cared that he would never hurt him.

Brian couldn’t get the scene with Justin out of his mind and he played it over in his head time and time again. Watching the distress the young man was feeling as he walked away from him broke his heart; a heart he was trying to protect, but apparently to little effect.

He already felt a deep connection with Justin; whether Brian wanted to acknowledge it or not. But the need for self-preservation had taken over and he'd let him go: unable to reach out to him and tell him that he did care. From the time he'd seen Justin so distressed in the hospital following the accident to the kisses they'd shared, Brian had an inextricable feeling that there was a bond between them that would be difficult to break, however much he tried.

It was 8:30pm. and Brian was just finishing off the presentation he was giving in the morning and he stretched up in his chair, trying to ease the tension in his back. He looked at his watch; he hadn't realized it was so late and his stomach was telling him he hadn't eaten all day.

Tidying up his desk and heading home, Brian debated whether he should get take out or order in. He always watched what he ate and never normally consumed carbs after 7:00pm. and he was still trying to make up his mind when he realized he was approaching the diner and he pulled over and parked up.

Brian sat in the car for fifteen minutes; peering into the diner's bright lights across the street and watching customers come and go before he finally made up his mind what he was going to do. Entering the establishment and taking a seat at one of the booths, Brian picked up the menu, even though he knew it by heart and he glanced over and saw Justin leave an order at the kitchen; the young man with his back to him and so far hadn't seen him.

But Debbie had seen him come in, whilst she was taking an order, which she then took to the kitchen. She'd turned back in time to see Justin's expression when he saw Brian and, once again, she caught them looking at each other briefly and then both quickly turning away. Justin looked over at her, waiting for her to respond to Brian, but instead, Debbie chose to enter into conversation with the occupants of another booth.

Ever since that dinner, she'd been trying to work out what had been happening between the two men. Justin hadn't mentioned what had passed between them in her back yard and Brian hadn't been by, but right now, it would seem they couldn't decide whether to ignore or acknowledge one another.

Just how attracted to each other were they she wondered and Debbie was more than just a little interested in watching where this encounter might lead.

Justin had been hoping Debbie would go and take Brian's order; he needed time to think, suddenly confronted with him like this. He'd wondered when he might see him again, or even whether he should go to the loft and try to force some sort of confrontation between them; a conversation that probably shouldn't take place in public. And seeing that Debbie had no intention whatsoever of helping him out here, Justin took a deep breath before approaching the man.

Brian was determined to appear unaffected by Justin's close presence, even though he felt those baby blue's boring right into him and took his time in choosing his meal and

keeping Justin waiting.

Despite what he'd told the younger man; that it was far too soon following on from Mark's death to even contemplate another relationship, even if he'd wanted to, he'd started to wonder what it might be like to be with the blond. After all, he was cute and he did have a great ass and that was definitely the way to go from now on. Something tried and trusted: No attachment: no emotion: just fucking. There was a strong attraction; perhaps he should suggest a drink at Woody's or arrange to meet him at Babylon or maybe have dinner together.

No, dinner was out: that was way too romantic. But maybe it wouldn't hurt to have a drink or go dancing. At least he'd prove to the guys that he wasn't too old to attract a cute young guy like Justin.

That was until he looked up from the menu and into those beautiful blue eyes. Keeping sex and emotion separate where Justin was concerned was likely to prove extremely difficult, he realized; a shock that had only just started to register.

"Busy night?" he asked the blond, trying to remain casual. "Not especially," came the answer, all too quickly and Justin bit his lip. He hadn't meant to answer so abruptly: wanting instead to maintain a cool, professional demeanor after Brian's coldness towards him previously; following the kiss at Debbie's.

But now Justin's thoughts were all over the place, having seen him again. He realized he probably shouldn't try and force anything with Brian right now; that might just push him away for good. But how could he let the man know he cared without putting any pressure on him? And if he played it too cool, Brian might think he didn't care at all.

But then he saw a slight smile curl on Brian's mouth. Damn the man. He knew exactly the effect he was having on the young blond, but just wouldn't let him in: not where it counted: always keeping him at a safe distance. Well, maybe two could play at that game.

"I'll have the pink plate special," said Brian eventually, mentally putting healthy eating on hold and he placed the menu down on the table and he leaned back and put his arm over the back of the seat.

"Coming up" replied Justin, as he wrote down the order and he started to walk away.

"Oh ..." said Brian, putting his hand on Justin's bare arm, preventing him from moving off. "And a coffee ..."

It was several seconds before Justin could pull himself together sufficiently to extract himself from Brian. The touch of his hand reminded him of just how close they'd been the other night and he felt a tingling sensation from this head to his toes and was sure the man allowed his hand to linger just a moment longer than was absolutely necessary and Brian smiled at him as he released him and finally let him go.

Justin walked away with his blood rushing in his ears and Brian ran his thumb over the inside of his hand, trying to recall the feel of Justin's soft skin. He too was reminded of their encounters; at Justin's apartment and then at Debbie's, when Brian had finally given way to his better judgment and, just all too fleetingly, had allowed himself to feel.

Justin took Brian's order to the kitchen and then collected the coffee pot and a cup and saucer and poured Brian's drink out at the table. "Thanks" said Brian as Justin moved away to return the coffee pot to the hot plate; the older man watching him go; Justin feeling his eyes boring into his back.

Brian's order didn't take too long to prepare and he sat drinking his coffee whilst he waited and, when it arrived, Justin smiled weakly as he placed his meal in front of him. And Brian couldn't help himself and he continued to watch as Justin responded to another bell from the kitchen.

After observing Justin deliver the order, Brian was about to turn back to his meal when his gaze rested on Debbie; she was watching him and Brian closed his eyes as he turned around. Putting her order book and pencil in her pocket, Debbie slid into the booth opposite Brian, who now picked up his fork.

"Hi, Brian."

"Debbie ...", acknowledged the man and he popped a forkful of food into his mouth.

"We haven't seen you here at this time in months" she stated, but Brian only shrugged.

"Now, I'm sure it can't be the menu that's brought you here ... as wonderful as it is ..." she stated, smiling at him.

"Well ... everything's up to its usual standards ..." quipped Brian and Debbie grinned. "Well, I'm glad you approve of the service ..." and Brian glanced at her; wondering by her tone what she was actually referring to.

When Justin had delivered Brian's meal, he'd seen the empty coffee cup and knew he should go over and refill it and he was relieved to see Debbie now sitting down and talking with Brian and felt more confident about returning to Brian's table.

Brian ate whilst he and Debbie talked: conversation, which to Justin, seemed to stop abruptly as he approached. He poured out Brian's coffee and quickly moved away: Brian watching him from the corner of his eye.

"Brian ..." Brian sighed, he knew that tone of voice; it was virtually the same as the one Lindz had used back at the loft that evening way back, when she'd asked him about his relationship with Mark.

"You know ... and far be it for me to speak ill of the dead ... but ... I never was really sure

that Mark was the one for you ...” stated Debbie and Brian put down his fork.

“Well, you’re not the first one who said that,” admitted Brian. “But it was my choice ... my decision ... and everyone should have accepted that ... despite ...” and Brian cut himself short, unable to admit out loud that perhaps it hadn’t been good judgment after all and he pushed his half-eaten meal away, suddenly losing his appetite.

“Well, maybe we didn’t give Mark a chance like we should have,” stated Debbie. “But it was so strange to actually see you with someone ... we were bound to be concerned”.

“You’d waited so long to let someone in to your life ... I just didn’t want it to be the wrong one ... that would be worse than being on your own in my book” and Brian looked at Debbie and then picked up his cup and downed his coffee. She was right; being with the wrong partner would be worse than being alone.

“Look ... I know it hasn’t been very long,” said Debbie, looking across the diner, “but remember ... there are always other fish in the sea ... and now you’ve dipped your toes in the water ...” and Brian turned around to see what she was looking at and his gaze fell on Justin and Brian looked downwards before he finally looked up at her and she winked at him and reached out to pat his face before she got up from the booth in response to the bell from the kitchen.

Brian sat at the booth going over Debbie’s words. So, it would seem she at least knew that there was something between him and Justin that couldn’t be ignored; something that transcended a purely physical attraction and something she might even be encouraging and, before getting up and paying for his meal, Brian sought out Justin once more; only to see him laughing and flirting outrageously with an attractive man about Brian’s own age; a scene that brought the bitterness of bile into Brian’s mouth; was it jealousy he could taste he wondered?

But what he didn’t see was Justin keeping a watchful eye on his response to the little act he was putting on or the disappointment on Justin’s face that matched his own as he watched the older man walk out the door.

“Right ... that’s it ... we’re meeting Brian at Woody’s later and then heading on to Babylon ... I’ll call Em ... see if he and Ted want to go,” stated Michael, making a second call on his cell phone. Ben had dropped by the comic book store on his way home from class to collect Michael and had hoped for a quiet night at home, but obviously, his partner had other ideas.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” asked Ben. “Asking Brian to go to Babylon I mean ... so soon after everything ... and well ... none of us are exactly kids any more Michael?”

“Look, it’s been ages and I practically had to plead with him to go ... told him I really wanted to ... but the sooner he gets back to being the old Brian the better ... and the only way I know he can do that is to get back on the scene” answered Michael “and if that means keeping him company until he sets his sights on some hot chick ... well ...” and he

put his hand up to Ben, indicating an answer to his call.

“Hi Em ... are you up for Babylon tonight?” he asked into the cell phone.

“What’s all that about do you think?” asked Ted as Emmett replaced his cell phone in his pocket. They’d gone to the diner and were sitting at the counter, waiting for their order to arrive, when Michael called to ask them if they’d like to go to Babylon.

“I’m not really sure,” answered Emmett, as confused as Ted.

“It’s been months since we’ve been to Babylon and I don’t think Brian set foot in the place after he’d starting seeing Mark,” he continued and Ted smiled at him. “Sounds like Michael’s up to something if you ask me ...”

“What’s my son been up to?” asked Debbie, bringing both men their meals and placing them on the counter in front of them.

“He’s got Brian to agree to go to Woody’s tonight,” answered Emmett “and then we’re all going on to Babylon ...”

“Well, I guess he was going to have to get out there again sooner or later,” replied Debbie and she looked at Justin and saw him yawn. He was standing between Ted and the kitchen, waiting for a rush order and Justin glanced at her and smiled and she smiled back. Yep, he’d heard their conversation all right.

Brian had hardly stepped inside the diner since their last encounter and the young man hadn’t had any opportunity to get the man on his own; not that Brian had indicated any intention of wanting to have anything to do with him. But maybe if he went to the club and made sure Brian saw him there; he knew the man was attracted to him; he just had to remind him how much.

Wednesday night and after a few drinks at Woody’s, the gang were pretty relaxed; even Brian, after a glass of Beam inside him.

Michael had caught him in a good mood: calling him up on the pretence of talking about Debbie’s birthday in a few days. Brian had just closed a campaign likely to go national and before he knew it, he’d agreed to go out dancing. He’d thought about calling back and cancelling and then decided what the hell; what would it hurt. Consequently he’d spent almost an hour choosing what to wear for his first venture back into the scene and in the end settled on a pair of black pants so tight he almost had to be poured into them and a black wife beater.

Not bad for a 32 year old, he told himself, standing in front of the mirror and indeed heads had turned the moment he stepped into Woody’s. It was good to be back and at least here the place wasn’t just full of kids: unlike Babylon.

11:30 and there was already a queue outside the door, but it didn’t take too long before

the gang were admitted into the club; the dance floor already heaving with the throng of hot bodies.

Ted, Emmett and Brian headed for the bar, and despite his earlier misgivings, Ben soon dragged Michael out onto the dance floor; determined to get in at least one dance before his partner insisted that he keep Brian company and Ben had nodded and kissed him; knowing how deep their friendship linked them, but also knowing their own relationship was under no threat from it.

Michael had dragged an initially reluctant Brian onto the floor and it wasn't long before the old familiarity of the club and the scene came flooding back. Even if the gang were among the oldest there, Brian could hold his own with the best of them and soon found himself fending off several unwanted advances.

Mark had never been into the club scene so at least Brian didn't feel awkward or even guilty that he was back in familiar territory without him, even though so far he'd not seen anyone who remotely interested him: But suddenly that all changed.

Justin had started back at school a few days earlier and it wasn't easy, juggling his classes, assignments and working at the diner. But the tiredness he'd felt earlier had been shrugged off as he dashed home after the end of his shift to get ready for a night's dancing. And out he went, wearing dark blue pants and the nice new blue shirt he'd bought at 'Torso'; the fabric reflecting the color of his eyes and Justin had climbed the steps up to the gallery and had spotted Brian dancing with Michael straight away.

Casting an eye over the floor, Justin's gaze rested on a man a little older than himself and smiling, he acknowledged the man's request and made his way down to the floor, hoping that before too long, Brian would be aware of his presence.

Justin and the man were soon gyrating to the music; the guy standing behind him and Justin leaning into him and he had to admit the guy was hot. He thought he'd caught Brian looking in his direction, but so far the man had done nothing to indicate he even knew Justin was there, let alone show any signs of interest.

But Brian had spotted Justin standing up on the gallery and had watched him descend the steps to join the guy waiting for him on the dance floor. He couldn't be sure whether Justin knew he was there or not, but the sight of him dancing so closely with the man brought a pain in his chest he couldn't ignore.

Brian watched as the man whispered in Justin's ear; he wanted to go to the back room. Justin hesitated; he hadn't had sex with anyone since Mark had died and for a moment, wondered that it was too soon to forget the feelings he once had. But why the hell shouldn't he go? If Mark was cheating on him why the hell should he feel guilty once the man was dead and Justin nodded and the trick took his hand and led him away. Justin glanced in Brian's direction. He was sure the man must have seen him but obviously didn't give a damn. Well, Justin didn't give a damn either: for Brian or Mark. Why should he? After all, this was just a fuck and nothing else.

Brian watched him go; it was obvious where the two of them were heading and now his feet felt like two lead weights.

“Hey ... are you okay?” asked Michael: wondering why Brian had stopped dancing.

“Yeah ... I ... I’m sorry Mikey,” yelled Brian in his friend’s ear. “Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all ... I’m gonna call it a night ...” and abruptly, Brian walked off the dance floor, leaving Michael standing on his own; Ben had seen what had happened and went to join Michael.

“What happened there?” he asked him. “Damned if I know,” stated Michael and they finished the dance together.

Justin stopped at the top of the stairs leading down to the back room and the trick looked around at him.

“I’m sorry ... I can’t do this ...” and Justin pulled away from the guy. Suddenly, Justin knew that on this occasion, anonymous sex; regardless of the detachment he felt to the man, just wasn’t for him, but he’d managed to take just half a dozen steps before the man caught him by the elbow and spun him around.

“Where the fuck are you going ... you little cock tease ...”

“Fuck off ... leave me alone ...” and Justin tried to pull away, but the man refused to budge and actually tightened his grip, preventing Justin’s escape.

“He said leave him alone.” Suddenly, Brian was standing between Justin and the trick; forcing him to let go of Justin’s arm and Brian glared down at the man, daring him to take him on. This type of physical altercation was normally unappealing, but seeing Justin having difficulty in shaking the guy off, Brian couldn’t ignore his situation.

Coming to Justin’s rescue was getting to be a habit, but somehow being there when the blond needed someone to help him out felt okay.

The man took just a few seconds before he knew he was on a hiding to nothing.

“He’s all yours” he growled at Brian and then turned on his heel.

“Thanks ... ” said Justin, quietly and rubbing his arm, but Brian just smiled. “Look ... about what happened at Debbie’s ...” continued the blond.

“You wanna drink?” asked Brian, cutting him off. “Okay ...” replied Justin and he followed him to the bar.

“I thought you were going home ...” stated Michael, now standing with the gang at the bar and then he saw Justin and he took Brian by the elbow. “What the fuck are you

doing?” he asked him; trying to make himself heard over the music but not wanting to shout loud enough so that the blond would hear him.

“We’re just having a drink, Michael,” answered Brian and he pulled away from him.

Having ordered their drinks, Brian indicated a rarity at Babylon; a vacant quiet corner and they sat back from the crowd, finding a little peace in the busy club: Brian wanting to get away from the enquiring looks of his friends and out of earshot.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you,” said Justin, after taking a sip of his drink. “They gave me a place at PIFA ... I started back this week ...” and Brian smiled. “Well ... they’d be mad not to ... the talent you’ve got”.

“And I’ve you to thank ...” continued the blond.

“Bullshit,” snapped Brian. “You’re the one with the talent ... it’s all down to you”.

“But about the computer ...” Brian closed his eyes and Justin saw a flicker of disappointment on the older man’s face and he suddenly realized the last thing Brian needed now was for him to reject his gift.

Justin bit his lip. Maybe now wasn’t the time to tell him would only keep it if Brian allowed him to think of its purchase as a loan, but if he did that then he wouldn’t be true to himself and he hoped Brian was the sort of man who would recognize that.

“I know it’s expensive ... and I want to pay you back. It wasn’t an old one that was being thrown out ... was it?” he asked him and Brian smiled and took a sip of his drink. Justin was no freeloader and despite the disappointment he felt, Brian totally understood that he wouldn’t accept it for free; that Justin was someone who wanted to stand on his own two feet and that was fine; he could respect that.

“You can’t afford it,” said Brian and that was the fact of it.

“Not now, I know,” replied Justin. “But I will ... one day” and Brian nodded.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I believe you will” and he swallowed the rest of his drink down in one.

Justin sighed, thankful that Brian hadn’t been offended or had felt rejected. But at the same time he smiled to himself: It felt good; having someone like Brian around as a safety net and then he realized what Brian’s comment had implied; that maybe he expected Justin to be around for quite some time.

“So ... isn’t it a school night?” asked Brian and Justin nodded. “Then I guess we should get you home ...” Justin thought about objecting; after all he was hardly a kid who should be told what time to go to bed and to get up for school in the morning. But somehow, this level of concern from Brian was totally acceptable and besides, there was the ride home in the car to look forward to.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up outside of Debbie's, Brian cut the engine and they sat in the dark; the car only illuminated by the street lamp Brian had parked under and neither of them speaking for a full two minutes.

"So ..." said Brian eventually.

"So ..." echoed Justin and they both smiled; feeling a little awkward and not sure how they should end the evening.

"Sunshine huh?" asked Brian and Justin grinned and even in the sparse lighting, he could see the young man's face light up with the most beautiful smile Brian knew he had ever seen and wondered why he was such a fool, constantly rejecting him; always keeping him at a safe distance.

Justin put his hand at the back of Brian's neck and the man turned to face him. Slowly, Brian lent in and kissed him; nothing hurried or needy, but a kiss deepened; given and received with an abiding affection and a flicker of acceptance.

"Will I see you?" asked Justin, once the kiss was broken. "I'm pretty busy this week ..." "I'm out of town on Friday," replied Brian, now regretting his agreement to go to a client rather than the client traveling to Pittsburgh. "But it's Debbie's birthday on Saturday ... are you going to the dinner?"

"I've not been invited," replied Justin.

"Well ... then I'm inviting you."

"Are you asking me out on a date?" chuckled Justin.

"Don't push it," replied Brian, but Justin saw the amusement in the older man's eyes and he smiled. He would think of it as a date, even if Brian didn't and he got out of the car.

"See you Saturday," said Justin and he turned to go up the steps.

Brian caught himself smiling as he watched the young man turn around and wave before entering the house and then Brian closed his eyes. Damn, that did sound remarkably like he was asking the blond out on a date; he'd have to watch himself, Justin was threatening to get close.

Brian started the engine and pulled away, now really looking forward to the weekend and seeing Justin, but thankfully in the company of others. Then, if things felt comfortable, well, he'd just have to see how they went on from there: nothing serious: just a bit of fun.

Well, that's what Brian was telling himself and Justin let the curtain fall back into place

as the car's taillights disappeared from view.

"Mom's birthday dinner was supposed to be a surprise," complained Michael and just about everyone around him grinned; when was it ever possible to keep anything secret from Debbie?

"Well, I didn't say anything," said Emmett, as Michael looked accusingly around the group now seated in the restaurant; everyone putting up their hands saying "Not me ... not guilty," but when Michael and Ben had arrived at Debs to find her already in her best dress, they knew they'd been sprung.

And then later, at the restaurant: "You look really nice, Debbie," said Ted, pulling out Debbie's chair so that she could sit down.

"Why thank you Theodore," she replied, "and just as well I don't rely on my son here to tell me what's going on ... otherwise I could have turned up at this fancy restaurant in something smelling of French-fries. And a girl likes to look her best on her birthday ... especially in the company of so many handsome men," and she patted Ted's cheek and smiled at the rest of the group.

It was Saturday night and when Michael, Ben and Debbie had arrived at Luigi's, Vic, Em, Ted, Lindsay and Melanie were already there and they thought they were only waiting for Brian: fashionably late as usual and they hadn't long been seated when Michael's chin practically hit the table as the door opened and in walked Brian ... with Justin.

Justin had been pretty busy with school and his shifts at the diner and actually hadn't had that much time to think about Brian since the ride home from Babylon and the invitation to join in with the birthday dinner, but Brian had surprised Justin by calling in at the diner earlier in the day and when Debbie was out of earshot, managing to say to him that he'd pick him up at 7:45, giving Michael, Ben and Debbie time to get away.

As it was, it was after 8:00 when Brian arrived to find Justin wearing figure-hugging pants and a white tee, which looked to be several sizes too small and which clung to his body; something Brian couldn't fail to notice or appreciate.

"You figure on going on somewhere after dinner?" Brian had asked him as Justin opened the door to him and the blond had smiled as he'd grabbed his jacket.

"Maybe," he answered him. "But you don't look too shabby either," Justin complimented back and Brian smiled in return. Looks like both men sort of had the same idea: see how the evening pans out and if everything looks to be going okay, well then they were suitably dressed to go on to a club.

And now at the restaurant, they were seated at a long, narrow table, in a relatively quiet corner, with Brian and Justin opposite each other at one end. At the other end of the table, Debbie was enjoying herself immensely and was genuinely touched by the

presents each of the guests had given her.

“It’s not much ... and it’s not as good as it could have been ... I didn’t have too much time ...” said Justin quietly as he gave Debbie her present and she kissed his cheek.

“Sunshine ... I wasn’t expecting anything from you honey ... you should be saving your money ...” and she unrolled the rolled up drawing and gasped. It was a picture of her and Michael; Mother and son and she looked up at him and patted his face; trying desperately to keep back the tears. And then Debbie hugged Michael as she showed him the picture.

Michael was caught totally unprepared by the gift and just how beautiful it was; Justin had obviously gone to a lot of trouble. “Thank you,” he told him as Justin walked back to his seat and he frowned. This wasn’t part of the plan; he wasn’t supposed to like the blond, but he was beginning to realize the sort of young man Justin was; honest, likeable, hardworking and wanting to do right by everyone.

Brian observed Justin’s face as he gave Debbie her birthday present and the way he’d watched her hug Michael: unable to ignore the undeniable sadness in the young man’s eyes. He obviously missed his own family and especially his Mother and Brian wondered what sort of woman would turn her back on her own son, especially one who’d suffered as much as Justin had. But then his own Mother had turned her back; having discovered Brian was gay. But he hadn’t had his head bashed in; what sort of Mother would ignore her son after something like that?

“Are you okay?” Brian whispered to him across the table as Justin sat down and the young man nodded.

“I miss her that’s all ... my Mom I mean,” whispered Justin in reply and Brian bit his tongue, only just stopping himself from saying that Justin shouldn’t bother himself about her if she hadn’t been worried about him enough to keep in touch; that wasn’t what the young man needed to hear right now. She was his Mom and he loved her; regardless of how she’d treated him and Brian almost regretted that he couldn’t think about his own Mother the same way.

Justin’s mood soon lightened as the meal got underway, with the group laughing and swapping banter and making sure he was included. But he often just listened and observed the others: happy to be part of this little family.

He’d felt it during the dinner at Debbie’s and now, again, he realized why it was this band of people did indeed regard each other as family. Often condemned and discriminated against; they understood each other and stood shoulder to shoulder; united in defiance against the outside world and its bigotry. But in actual fact they were closer than family.

How does the old saying go? You can choose your friends ... But here was a family by choice and Justin was beginning to see just how lucky he was to now be regarded as part

of it.

Justin realized that Brian had been watching him; once again concerned about him and he now looked across at the older man and smiled; one of his trademark Sunshine smiles and Brian grinned back, obviously relieved that Justin's mood had lifted and they settled into enjoying the meal and enjoying the evening; both of them becoming more and more comfortable in each other's company.

And Justin loved the way Brian's eyes twinkled like now; when he was genuinely happy, but he had the impression that it didn't actually happen very often.

Brian had only told him briefly about his own family, but enough for Justin to know he hadn't had the same contented childhood as Justin had experienced and then Michael had mentioned that it used to get rough for Brian at home.

It didn't take a genius to understand Brian's apparent coldness and distrust when faced with someone who offered him affection; childhood memories last a lifetime. But Justin was convinced that given the chance, he could make Brian happy. The more time he spent with him, the more Justin was falling for Brian. It wasn't just that he was the hottest guy he'd ever seen: hotter even than Mark. The man had displayed a deep caring nature; something it seemed that wasn't often on show, for whatever reason, and that the cool exterior most likely masked a seething mass inside; someone fraught with conflicting emotions; afraid of giving too much and never getting anything in return.

True, Mark had shown his affection during their relationship, or so Justin had thought. But in the short time he'd known Brian, compared to Mark, Brian had demonstrated far more concern for a relative stranger than he could ever imagine Mark being capable of.

The wine flowed and everyone was nicely relaxed and it hadn't gone unnoticed how Justin and Brian were at ease with one another and had been talking quietly across the narrow table and never at a loss for conversation, which was often flirtatious and heavy with innuendo.

Justin ate enough for two and soon cleared his plate and then started on Brian's; the older man far too conscious of his image to consume the large portion that he'd been presented with and Justin obviously burned it all off with the boundless energy that he'd been blessed with.

And it would seem that Justin could converse about practically any subject; apparently the result of a very expensive private education and Brian was beginning to wonder if he would ever pause for breath or how he didn't get a massive attack of indigestion, for once having started to talk, he was difficult to stop. But the older man was happy to let him rant on; seeing Justin's enthusiasm for just about everything he was doing, but especially of course, for his art. And whilst Justin talked, Brian took the opportunity to look at him: taking him in.

He loved the way Justin used his hands; those extremely talented fingers, to emphasize

what he was saying and even found himself wondering how those fingers would feel, caressing his body.

Brian watched Justin's mouth as he spoke; those ruby red extremely kissable lips and he speculated just how much longer he was going to be able to hold out before the need to crush them with his own became so uncontrollable.

And as for those eyes gazing into his own; two pools of blue liquid drawing him in, threatening to drown him and Brian slowly realized there was no way he was going to be able to ignore much longer the pull Justin had on him. The blond obviously found him equally attractive, but that had never been a problem; Brian had always had more than his fair share of guys after him. But somehow this was different.

Getting Justin into bed wouldn't be a problem, but getting him to leave might be and despite the feelings Brian was developing for the blond, he wasn't sure which would require the greatest courage; to either ask him to stay or tell him to go.

Mentally, Brian shook his head. No; if they were going anywhere, it would just be for sex and nothing else; Justin would have to understand that. But maybe it just wasn't worth getting in to, for Brian had the deep suspicion that maybe it could never be just sex with Justin; their connection was too deep for that.

And that's when it happened.

Whilst he'd been talking, Justin realized how quiet Brian was and how the older man appeared to enjoy listening to what he was saying. Brian would fix those beautiful hazel eyes on him and it didn't take much for Justin to realize just how attracted to him Brian was. He was right, the feeling was mutual and Justin ached for them to take the next step.

Over the course of the evening it became apparent that the young man had possibly consumed just a little too much wine and suddenly a deliciously evil thought popped into his head.

As Brian took a mouthful of wine, he felt something slide up his leg and rest on the chair between his thighs. He spluttered on his drink in surprise and Em, sitting by his side, tried to pat him on the back, but was waved away; Brian managing to get out hoarsely something about the wine going down the wrong way.

Brian looked at Justin, whose face was a picture of wide-eyed innocence, putting another spoonful of chocolate death in his mouth. He poked out his tongue and deliberately licked the spoon and then sucked on it; holding Brian's gaze and then he responded to a question from Lindz, who was sitting beside him.

Brian had been leaning with his elbows on the narrow table; wine glass in one hand and found himself screwing up his napkin with his other hand as slowly, Justin's foot progressed further between his legs; thank God for the tablecloth hiding what was

happening.

Having slipped off his shoe, Justin couldn't resist the urge to see how long Brian could hold out and spurred on by Dutch courage, knew exactly what he was doing.

Justin's toes reached Brian's crotch and he started to wiggle them; rubbing against the bulge now growing beneath the material of the man's pants.

Brian briefly closed his eyes: Christ, he was going to cum in his jeans there and then and when he opened his eyes again, Justin was leaning back in his chair; barely able to conceal the grin on this mouth; unable to keep it from showing in his eyes.

There was no way Brian couldn't react and he suddenly moved back his chair: the legs scraping on the floor and holding his napkin in front of him and muttering something about needing the bathroom.

"Are you okay, Brian?" asked Lindsay after him, startled by the speed with which Brian had risen from his chair.

"I'll go check on him," offered Justin; struggling to get his shoe back on and he quickly followed Brian to the men's room.

Brian had just disappeared into a cubicle and was shutting the door when Justin put out his hand; stopping it from closing. They stared at each other for a moment and then Brian moved aside and Justin stepped in: closing the door behind him.

They swapped positions and leaning against the door, Brian watched as Justin unzipped him and then knelt down in front of him. Having released Brian's cock from the confines of his pants, it took a few sweet, gentle tugs for Justin to get the response he was looking for and Brian leaned his head back and closed his eyes as Justin took the leaking member into his mouth and began to take small, light licks along his shaft, extracting a low moan as Brian ran his fingers through Justin's silky hair.

Spurred on by Brian's obvious pleasure, Justin began to take longer licks and then started to pay attention to one of Brian's balls, licking it slowly and then moving on to the other and now Brian held the younger man's head in his hands; keeping him in place as he thrust himself further into Justin's warm mouth.

Justin retreated slightly and took a quick breath and looked up: meeting Brian's gaze. He could tell how turned on the man was and reveled in the fact that he was the cause and returned to his ministrations, much to Brian's relief.

Brian watched him; the blond's head now bobbing up and down with even more enthusiasm; seeing just how turned on Brian was had encouraged Justin even further.

He opened his throat; taking Brian in even deeper and then closing around him; a technique he'd honed to perfection, and he pulled Brian's jeans down further so that he

could reach behind and started to squeeze and then part the man's buttocks. Justin's fingers probed Brian's hole, but without lube he wouldn't go any further; he didn't want to hurt him. But the dual sensations brought on an orgasm far more intense and consuming than Brian could remember and when he climaxed, Justin drank thirstily and continued sucking until Brian became soft.

Brian's breathing had become quick and shallow and he now tried to take deeper breaths; drawing the oxygen deep into his lungs as he tried to get his heart rate back to normal and slowly began to focus on Justin as the young man stood and then reached up to kiss him, allowing Brian to taste himself on those ruby red lips.

"That was hot," said Brian, still panting heavily.

"I like dick," said Justin seriously, as if merely stating his preference for lemon bars over chocolate brownies. "I like sucking dick," he continued. "And I'm good at it, too" and now he grinned and Brian nodded and grinned in return as he dressed himself.

"Well ... I guess we better get back ... the others will be wondering what we're doing," said Justin, sadly.

"Yeah ... I guess we had," agreed Brian; who would much rather have stayed in the men's room with Justin than go back to the table under the watchful scrutiny of their companions.

Brian returned to the table first with Justin following on a minute behind him. It hadn't passed by anyone how long the two men had been missing and several glances shot around the table; with Debbie especially taking note and Michael narrowed his eyes as he studied Brian. Yes, he definitely had that freshly fucked look he knew so well and he saw how Brian and Justin continually kept each other's gaze as the dinner was coming to a close and sharing a sly, secretive smile.

The evening came to an end and making their goodbyes, the party stepped out into the cold, where their taxis were waiting for them; Ted, Emmett, Mel and Lindsay were sharing and left first.

"Shall we give you a ride home Justin? We can squeeze you in ..." asked Michael, as he, Vic, Ben and Debbie approached their taxi.

"He's going with me," stated Brian, before the younger man had a chance to respond and he couldn't miss the knowing smile Debbie gave him or indeed the look from Michael.

"Goodnight you two," Ben closed the car door behind Vic and Debbie and then took Michael by the arm and walked him around to the other side of the vehicle. It was obvious that his partner still resented the relationship that had started to form between Brian and Justin and needed a gentle reminder that it was none of his business who Brian chose to ... chose to what? Date ... sleep with? Ben still wasn't sure what was going

on between the two men exactly, but Brian seemed to be relaxed and contented in Justin's company and that surely couldn't be a bad thing.

"Where are we going?" asked Justin as the car carrying the birthday girl pulled away and hoping Brian might suggest going back to the loft.

"I thought we'd go to Babylon ... it's still early" and he chose to ignore the flicker of disappointment in Justin's eyes; knowing full well where the young man would have preferred to go.

They danced closely; without a look in anyone else's direction and totally absorbed in the beat and Brian now knew exactly what he wanted to do to Justin; and so did the blond. Brian was determined to keep the anticipation going as long as possible, but suddenly, mid-dance, he stopped and without a word took Justin by the hand. But not to the back room, he didn't want a public display for this. He wanted the younger man all to himself and practically running, they made their way to Brian's car and Brian barely kept to the speed limit on the way to the loft.

They'd undressed each other frantically and now Brian got his wish and forced them both to calm down and with Justin now caressing his body with his long artistic fingers under the blue lights in the bedroom, Brian shuddered with pleasure at his touch; a reaction Justin couldn't fail to notice or thrill to.

Brian rolled Justin on to his back and they kissed long and deep and then starting at the younger man's throat, Brian kissed along his collarbone and then moved down to his left nipple, licking and sucking it before moving on to the right nipple. Justin arched his back as Brian licked down his chest and over his stomach, pausing to dip his tongue into his navel and then Brian grinned. Justin had been expecting him to repay the compliment of earlier, but no; he would have to wait for that.

Brian straightened up and then lent over Justin to reach the nightstand; opening the drawer to find the condoms and lube: he tore off the wrapping and Justin held out his hand. Hesitating briefly, Brian handed Justin the condom and the younger man sat up and lent forward to put it on him. Brian closed his eyes briefly as Justin's fingers enclosed around him. "Careful, we don't want this over with too soon," Brian warned him.

Lifting Justin's legs over his shoulders, Brian positioned himself and squeezed out an ample amount of lube onto his fingers and begun to spread it in and around Justin's hole; the younger man gasping with the sudden coldness and aching to feel Brian inside him.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Justin reached up and pulled Brian towards him; their faces now just a couple of inches apart. Brian put his hand beneath Justin's chin and slowly, brought their mouths together; eyes closed shut and Brian felt himself falling; spiraling ever downwards into a bottomless pit; unable to save himself.

Justin fought to keep his breathing under control; he so desperately wanted Brian inside him; filling him, but the urge to kiss him had become too great. He wanted the man to know that it wasn't just about sex for him; Justin's feelings ran deeper than that and he badly wanted the man to understand.

Trying to regain his senses, Brian forced himself to open his eyes: running his tongue along Justin's bottom lip and nipping him lightly with his teeth as he withdrew.

Trying not to hurry; desperately wanting to prolong this moment; this feeling for as long as possible, slowly and carefully, Brian entered Justin; a little at first and then further before stopping; waiting for the younger man to adjust to his size.

Justin felt as if his entire body were on fire as Brian pressed in and the older man felt the blond pushing against him; willing him in deeper and deeper as Brian began the slow strokes. Justin gave himself willingly and openly and with every fiber of his being.

Justin moaned. "Faster ... " he breathed and clinging to the sheet.

"Not yet," whispered Brian; tantalizingly prolonging the younger man's release he so desperately needed and Justin reached down and took his cock in his hand, stroking himself slowly in time with Brian's own thrusts.

Breathing hard, Justin watched Brian's face totally lost in the pleasure of him and slowly, so slowly, Brian began to quicken his thrusts.

Now, with both men close to the edge, Brian suddenly opened his eyes to find Justin watching him intensely; a look that reached down to his very soul and indeed Brian was lost; possibly forever.

Brian was the first to fall into the abyss, filling the condom with Justin only moments later, sending spurts of cum over both of them. Reaching his orgasm with one more push, Brian had felt Justin clench around him: heightening his climax, before falling forward as Justin embraced him. Now soft, Brian slipped out of the blond and collapsed alongside him, trying to bring his breathing back under control.

Slowly, Justin turned and reaching out, ran his fingers through Brian's hair and Brian raised his head to look at him: meeting his gaze. Justin was searching his face for how he felt and Brian closed his eyes and turned his head before sitting up and moving to the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong ... have I done something?" asked Justin quietly; moving closer to him and he knelt on the bed behind him and put his hand on Brian's shoulder. Brian shook his head, trying to work out just exactly how he was feeling. After all, it wasn't too long ago that he was contemplating spending the rest of his life with another man; a man now buried in the ground and how could he tell Justin that just to have him here scared the shit out of him? Was he ready to go that route again and with the young man who regularly slept with his partner?

“You’re not still thinking about Mark?” asked Justin quietly and Brian took a deep breath and unable to speak: confirming Justin’s worst thoughts. “It’s not too soon to move on ...”

“That’s so easy for you,” said Brian. “But I don’t know if I can ... I ... I’m no good at this ... especially after ...”

“That’s bull,” said Justin, rubbing the back of Brian’s neck and Brian closed his eyes, a feeling of panic suddenly starting to overcome him.

Justin had got too close; way too close and Brian knew that if he didn’t bring this to an end soon, he might never get away, despite the feelings he knew were growing for the younger man and that it would only be a matter of time until he had his heart broken all over again. Because it would be so easy to fall in love with Justin: so much easier than the feelings he’d developed for Mark.

Falling for Mark had been a reaction to the realization that he was likely to be left on his own with so many of his circle of friends forming relationships. Something that Brian had scoffed at often, saying monogamy wasn’t possible between gay men. But Brian had begun to realize how isolated he was becoming. Isolated and sad; turning up to parties on his own; hitting on waiters; a quick fuck or blow job in any dark or not so dark corner, leaving with complete strangers, but waking up alone. How pathetic was that.

No, when Mark had come along and shown the merest hint of interest, Brian had to prove he could still cut it and before he’d known it, they were a couple and Brian had started to breathe a sigh of relief. After his initial reluctance to give up the tricking, he realized he wouldn’t have to try any more; he was part of a couple. It wouldn’t matter if he no longer chased anything that moved, he could say he was trying to stay committed to Mark; a commitment that had proven to be in vain; given Mark’s behavior.

And he could see why Mark would fall for Justin. As well as being the cutest guy he’d seen in a very long while with his perfect pale complexion and big blue eyes, Justin’s youthful enthusiasm could carry anyone along with him. And Justin understood commitment; Brian knew that and also knew that Justin would probably ask too much of him.

No, Brian had to protect himself. He was still in good shape; he could still cut it even now, despite his doubts. Hadn’t he proved that at Babylon the other night and didn’t he have the blond in his bed right this minute? Christ, where had his confidence gone? He never used to worry about hitting on guys. It was always a given that Brian could get any guy he wanted and usually did.

No repeat performances. That had been his mantra for so many years; the one that had protected him; prevented anyone from getting too close; close enough to hurt him. Why hadn’t he just stuck with that all along?

“You blame me ... don’t you?” said the younger man suddenly: trying to find a reason for Brian’s silence. “But I didn’t go chasing after Mark ... he came after me ...” stated Justin.

Suddenly, Brian had visions of Mark in bed with Justin: doing what he’d just been doing with the blond and he felt his stomach churn, visualizing them together. Maybe this was his way out; Justin had given him the very reason he could use to end this right here and now, before he got in any deeper. But deep down he knew it wasn’t really feelings of guilt that was making him push Justin away, although that’s what the blond was assuming. It was feelings of jealousy. But who was he jealous of? Justin for sleeping with Mark or Mark for sleeping with Justin?

Justin sighed. Maybe it had been too much to expect Brian to forget that Mark and he had been together. It had to hurt; knowing your partner had sought the arms of another, younger man, regardless of what Brian said or did.

Justin slid off the bed and started to dress and not bothering to shower. He thought he’d reached Brian; that Brian had understood he had no knowledge of Mark’s relationship with him. That it had been equally a shock to Justin to discover Mark had a partner as it had for Brian to discover that Mark had a lover. But Brian obviously felt guilty about bedding Justin so soon after Mark’s death; that had to be the reason he was pushing him away. Had Mark’s cheating left that deep a scar: a wound that would be too hard to heal?

Maybe everything he’d thought he’d seen in Brian had been a fantasy after all; that Brian had only seemed to care for him out of some sort of guilt about Mark’s behavior towards them both and that he’d just wished for someone to come along and care what happened to him after Mark’s death. He’d obviously read much more into Brian’s behavior than was actually there.

Now dressed, Justin went to walk away and then turned back. He reached out and stroked Brian’s hair and saw how the man closed his eyes at the touch of his hand. “You shouldn’t feel guilty ... about Mark I mean and I know this scares the shit out of you, doesn’t it?” asked Justin and Brian marveled again how Justin’s words echoed his own thoughts.

“But it can be so worth it,” assured Justin. “If only you’d take the risk ... “ and then Justin turned and walked down the steps and out of the loft.

Fighting back the tears as he left: the feeling of rejection so overwhelming, Justin knew he’d lost the fight. He felt totally exhausted. He’d tried so hard to get through to Brian and failed. The man couldn’t or wouldn’t believe they had a chance together. Whoever had fucked him up had done a pretty good job and Justin suspected it wasn’t just Mark’s cheating on Brian that caused the man to shut down. After all, didn’t everyone experience someone cheating on them at some time? No, this probably went much deeper and now it looked like he wouldn’t get the chance to show him it could be different.

Trying to push every thought of Brian from his mind and throwing himself into his art, Justin was beginning to worry about when his money was going to run out and had conceded that he would have to approach his Father for funds if he was going to be able to continue at PIFA; unable as he was to get a scholarship, owing to his Father being a high earner.

Craig Taylor turned him down flat. But if his son wanted to transfer to Dartmouth, well that would have been a different matter.

“I’m never going to be a business man,” Justin had told him. “But I’ll always be your son ... and I’ll always be gay,” and he’d seen the disgust in his Father’s face as the man had turned away from him; the hurt continuing as he made his way to school, with tear-filled, unseeing eyes that had left him stepping off the curb straight into the path of an oncoming vehicle. The car had swerved and come to an abrupt halt, with Justin jolted back to reality.

Thankfully, at the last moment, Ted had seen Justin step into his path and had managed to avoid him, but brought the traffic to a stop behind him and lucky to escape being hit by another vehicle.

“Justin ... are you all right?” Ted wound down the car window and called out to the young man, ignoring the car horns blaring around him. He lent over and pushed open the passenger door. “Get in ... come on ... get in”.

Justin hesitated for a moment and then got in beside Ted and closed the door. “Where are you going?” Ted asked him and with his voice shaking, Justin answered him. “Back to school” and so Ted put the car into gear and moved off.

They rode in silence until finally Ted asked “That was close ... you must have something pretty serious on your mind for you to step out into traffic just like that”. Hoping to get a reply, Ted glanced at Justin and saw the young man turn away and refusing to answer him.

Ted brought the car to a halt outside PIFA. “Justin ... is there anything I can do?” Justin shook his head.

“Not unless you want to invest in a penniless artist who one day may or may not be worth a damn thing ...” Justin sighed and turned to Ted; answering the man’s questioning look. “My Dad’s refusing to pay for me to stay at PIFA. I’m not sure how long I’m going to be able to continue ... the money from the paintings I sold?” and Ted nodded; he’d heard about the young man’s good fortune with those. “Well, that’s not going to last forever and I don’t know what I’m going to do when that runs out ... but I guess that’s my problem” and Justin quickly opened the car door and got out. “Thanks for the ride” and he closed the car door and turned away, leaving Ted watching him go.

As much as he wanted to, Brian couldn’t stay away from the diner and tried to time his visits to coincide with Justin’s shifts, though always attempting to seem casual. There

wasn't much dialogue between them, other than Brian giving Justin his order and asking generally how things were going; which usually resulted in a few words in reply, but the tension between the two men had begun to subside and though their conversations were usually short, they were friendly and nothing was ever mentioned of how close they'd once actually threatened to become.

If only Justin knew just how much Brian's heart ached every time the blond spoke to him or how his heart pounded when he saw the young man talking and laughing with any of the other young men that frequented the diner.

"If only you'd take the risk". Justin's words kept going around in his head and though Brian had never considered himself to be a coward, he knew that avoiding any chance of a relationship, with anyone, was being just that.

Why didn't he have the nerve? Did he value himself that little; was he really that shallow that he thought he couldn't sustain the commitment it would take to form a loving, lasting relationship? No one looking on would have guessed at Brian's lack of self-esteem; the man seemed so together, at least on the surface. But it's amazing what a beautiful face and body can conceal about what's really going on inside.

But in that case, what was he doing when he'd begun the relationship with Mark? How had it been that Mark had been the first person that'd ever got through to him? Given, Mark was persistent about telling him he loved him; something that Brian was only just beginning to accept when Mark had died and deep down, Brian hoped that Mark indeed had loved him, even just a little, despite going elsewhere for whatever Brian couldn't give him in the end.

Or was he just swept away with Mark's enthusiasm, allowing the man to virtually take over his life and had been happy to go along with that at the time?

But Mark had never reached him the way that Justin had; even in the relatively short time Brian had known Justin he'd learned that. The young man's honesty far outstripped Mark's and the way Justin had looked at him and touched him and made love with him; far more intensely than Mark ever had. And Justin had been willing to give of himself completely.

But it was too late; there could be no going back. How could there be? He'd made sure of that, that night at the loft, when Justin had left thinking Brian had rejected him; that he didn't care, even though that was further from the truth than Justin would ever know.

"That kid has such talent ... it's a damn shame if he isn't able to continue", said Ted, quietly, after picking up his drink and joining the gang at the pool table.

"What are you talking about?" asked Brian, picking up his cue and lining up his shot. He missed and the look of shock on his face brought grins to his companions.

Ted had spotted Justin talking with a group of young friends from the diner at the end of

the bar; it was Friday night and they were all at Woody's.

"I gave him a ride to school a couple of days ago ... no ... there's nothing going on like that!" exclaimed Ted as Emmett looked at him questioningly. "But he walked straight out into traffic right in front of me ... didn't even see me. He was pretty upset ... apparently his Father had turned him down ... won't fund him through PIFA and he's not sure how long he's going to be able to carry on."

"Well now, that's a real shame ... isn't there something we can do?" asked Emmett.

"It's expensive guys ..." said Ben, "these days ... putting a kid through school" and he sent the 8-ball spinning into the marked pocket.

"Shit", Brian reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his wallet and peeled off a few bills, which he handed to a grinning Ben.

"Why, thank you ..." said Ben, taking them off him.

"Then I guess the drinks are on you ..." said Brian, holding onto the bills briefly before releasing them. Ben closed his eyes and chuckled.

"It would seem that way ..." he agreed and he headed for the bar.

"I don't see why you think it's up to us to help him," said Michael, sullenly as the group moved away from the pool table and took up seats nearby.

"Well, he is family ..." offered Emmett.

"Hardly, he just happens to be living at my Mother's ..." answered Michael as Ben put the beer glasses down on the table.

Brian frowned as he picked up his beer. He hated hearing Michael speak of Justin this way. As far as he was concerned, he was still part of the family group, even though he had very little to do with him; something that Brian was bitterly beginning to regret.

Ignoring the stares of the gang, Brian picked up his beer and made his way towards Justin; catching his eye and drawing him away from the group he was with.

"The agency I'm with, they're looking for an intern...pay's not huge, but if you're interested ..."

"They're paying?" asked Justin, eagerly; any prospect of additional money welcome and Brian nodded. The truth was the agency was looking to appoint an intern and they didn't generally pay, but Brian would make sure something would come Justin's way.

"Yeah ... sure I'm interested ... as long as you don't think it will be a problem ... me being there ..." Brian shook his head.

“You’ll be down in the art department ... I’ll hardly see you ... shouldn’t be a problem. Come down around 10:00 on Monday ... I’ll let Clive Mullen ... know to be expecting you ... he’s the head of the art department and if you get through the interview they should take you on ... make sure you take some of your best work with you.”

“Okay ... thanks, Brian” answered Justin and Brian smiled weakly before returning to the gang.

“What was all that about?” asked Michael.

“Just business” answered Brian, refusing to expand any further.

Without any hitch, Justin passed his interview and with the school’s agreement, commenced his internship at Vanguard Advertising. Brian was right; they barely ever ran into each other; much to either man’s disappointment. Maybe innocently running into each other in the corridor or by the water cooler could have broken the ice and led to an invitation for coffee, but then Brian had to admit that probably wouldn’t be a good idea; not if he intended keeping Justin at arms length.

Justin was enjoying his work; even taking on the menial tasks and it did make him feel closer to Brian at least; knowing he was in an office not a million miles away. If only he could find the excuse to start up a conversation and spend a little time with him; anything that might make Brian change his mind about wanting him closer.

But even with the money from the internship; something that Brian had ended up paying for out of his own pocket; much to Gardner’s amusement, it wasn’t nearly enough to ensure Justin his place at PIFA. He was going to need much more serious money than that.

And that’s when the bolt out of the blue happened.

Justin was running an errand for Clive when he ran into James McElhenny.

“Justin?” James called after him; Justin had passed him by and hadn’t recognized him.

“Justin ... it’s James ... James McElhenny ... you remember ... from the gallery. We met at Mark’s funeral?” Justin studied the man and then the recognition dawned.

“Oh sure ... I’m sorry ... I didn’t recognize you.”

“That’s okay,” answered James. “It was a bit of an upsetting day ... it was such a shock to lose Mark like that” and Justin nodded in agreement.

“Well, you’ve saved me a job ... I’ve been trying to contact you ... but the address I was given seems to be in the process of being pulled down ...” Justin nodded

“Yeah, my old apartment building’s being re-developed or something ... I’ve been living with a friend ...”

“Stop by the gallery ... I want to discuss a showing” continued James.

“What?” asked Justin. “I’m sorry ... I don’t understand.”

“Well, those pictures of yours ... I don’t mind telling you they’ve had more than just a little interest shown in them. I was hoping you’d have some other work and that we could put a show together ... maybe in a couple of months time? And then I’d like to take them to the New York gallery. Call by tomorrow and we’ll talk ... only I can’t stop now ... I’m sort of late already. Here’s my number ...” and James pulled out his business card and handed it to Justin.

“You shouldn’t have any trouble selling them ... they’re quite remarkable ...” and James made his goodbyes and left Justin standing: open mouthed, on the sidewalk. Damn: he meant to ask who’d given the pictures to the gallery.

His paintings; Justin had forgotten all about them once they’d been sold and started to wonder again who’d actually bought them.

Now Justin was juggling his shifts at the diner and working his internship in with his school responsibilities, but he was loving it. He felt more alive now than at any time since the bashing. With the help of the computer given to him by Brian, he was producing more than he could ever have imagined. Sure, it wasn’t the same art as he was used to and now to do more fine work took longer and his hand hurt like hell after too long. But that didn’t matter either; at least that was something he could put down and pick up again as he wanted. Maybe he could combine a selection of both techniques for the show.

Justin wasn’t sure why, but Brian was the first person he wanted to tell about the offer of a show; especially when it could then go to New York.

It was getting late: after 7:30, when Justin made his way to Brian’s office at the first chance he had and he knocked on the door. It wasn’t unusual for Brian to still be there at that time, but he looked up in surprise at the sudden noise.

“Sorry ... I didn’t mean to startle you,” said Justin and he hesitated in the doorway: not wanting to go in without invitation.

“That’s okay ... come in. They’re working you hard downstairs if you’re still here” and Brian turned away from the computer and faced him.

“I’ve just finished up ... and I wanted to tell you ... I met a guy from the art gallery today and somehow those pictures that were bought at Torso found their way there ... they want to put on a show of my work”

“Well, that’s great,” said Brian, smiling. “You must be really proud.”

“Yes, I am,” agreed Justin. “I only wish I knew who bought them ... I’m hoping James ... from the gallery ... can tell me.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” said Brian, looking away from Justin’s gaze. “Just be glad they got them” and he turned back and smiled and Justin smiled in return.

Brian rubbed his forehead and turned back to his computer. He wished he could continue this conversation with Justin, but he daren’t give out the wrong signals.

“Headache?” asked Justin, moving closer and with obvious concern and Brian turned back.

“A little ... just been putting in a lot of hours lately”.

“Can’t you call it a day ... maybe ... maybe we could go and get something to eat?” asked Justin, mentally crossing his fingers.

Brian frowned. He was hungry and it couldn’t really hurt, as long as it didn’t progress to anything else.

“Okay,” he said at last. “But not the diner. There’s a little bistro just around the corner. It’s quiet, but the food’s good”. For some reason, Brian didn’t feel like being on show at the diner in full view of practically everyone he knew and it would be good to get Justin on his own; just to talk to; for just a little while.

“Are you buying?” asked Justin. “Only it sounds sort of expensive”. Brian smiled.

“I’m buying ... see it as one of the perks of the job ... dinner on the boss” and he closed down the computer and switched off the light. There’d be no more work done here tonight.

The atmosphere at the bistro was comfortable and the lights low. The conversation was light and pleasant and unthreatening, with neither man wanting to bring up the subject of their relationship. Brian talked about the agency and it was soon made clear to Justin just how hard Brian had worked to get where he was.

“What about your family?” Justin asked him. “They must be pretty proud of you and what you’ve achieved?”

Brian bit his lip and looked down at his plate. He sighed and wondered just how much he should let on to Justin. “My Mom’s pretty cold and doesn’t approve of me and my Dad ... well ... let’s just say that Jack liked a drink or two and leave it at that” and Brian took a large swallow of his drink and made it perfectly clear he didn’t want to discuss the subject any further.

“How about your folks?” Brian asked him. Justin sighed.

“Well, they were okay until I came out ... now my Dad doesn’t want to know me and my Mom ... well, she just goes along with what he says, I guess. But I do miss her ... and Molly, my little sister ... though I wouldn’t want her to know her big brother’s pining after her” and both men smiled. Brian looked at his watch; it was getting late.

He called for the bill and asked the waiter to get a taxi. Justin wondered why; Brian had only had one drink.

“I enjoyed tonight,” said Justin, as they made their way outside.

“So have I,” said Brian quietly, but instead of heading to his car, he stopped by a taxi parked in the curb. “He’ll take you home” said Brian and he opened the car door and indicated that Justin should get in.

Shocked and a little disappointed that Brian didn’t want to give him a ride home, Justin got in the taxi. “Goodnight ... I’ll probably see you at the office tomorrow” and Brian closed the door and the taxi pulled away before Justin had a chance to respond.

Brian watched as the taxi pulled away and only wished he’d had the courage to ask Justin back to the loft. He sighed and closed his eyes and acknowledged; not for the first time; just how fucked up he was. Terrified of relationships: of letting someone hardly more than a kid, get too close to him.

If Mark hadn’t died, maybe he’d have got passed all that and accepted that he was worthy of someone’s love. But Mark was gone and Brian had retreated back to his former state; keeping up the barriers and not letting anyone in because he was bound to fuck up and let them down.

On the taxi ride back to Debbie’s, Justin couldn’t help but wonder why it was that Brian hadn’t taken him home. He’d said he’d enjoyed the evening and at no time during their dinner together had Brian indicated anything different.

Or was it that he just didn’t trust himself and wanted Justin safely out of the way before he was tempted into something he was trying to avoid.

That had to be it. Brian was still attracted to him; wanted him even, but was afraid to let himself take it any further.

Justin smiled to himself with renewed conviction. Brian did want him; he just couldn’t admit it yet.

“Okay, Brian ... don’t worry,” assured James. “I told you when you brought the pictures in that I wouldn’t say where they came from if I was asked ... I don’t really understand why you don’t want him to know ... but that’s up to you”.

During dinner the previous evening, Brian had okayed it for Justin to meet with James about the proposed show during his intern hours, saying he would square it with Clive and Justin had called James first thing to fix a time.

Brian had also called James to remind him of his earlier promise. He'd met James through Mark and since Mark's death, James had been managing the art gallery.

"He's here ... I'd better go," said James quietly and he put down the phone and beckoned Justin into the office and rose from his chair and held out his hand.

After shaking hands, James indicated a chair to Justin and they both sat down. He could see by the young man's expression that he was already pretty excited at the prospect of his first art show and the two men spent the next few hours discussing whether the show would have a particular theme and what pieces of work Justin had already produced could be used and what he would need to do before the proposed date.

Justin had taken along several more pieces of his work and the mixture of techniques and styles he was capable of amazed James. "You're a very remarkable young man, Justin Taylor," he exclaimed. "I'm sure your work will generate a great deal of interest ... and from what I've seen it's a certainty that I'll want to take the show to New York".

Justin couldn't hide his pleasure and grinned widely; this was more than he could ever have expected, even in his wildest dreams and certainly not after the bashing when he'd thought art was no longer an option for him. After agreeing what he would need to do in the coming months, he gathered up his work and started to head for the door.

James had been hoping that Justin would forget about the pictures the gallery already possessed, but to his horror, just as the young man was leaving, he asked who had brought them in. James hadn't really had time to work out his answer, and when asked directly about them he blustered through it.

"Well ... I ... I'm not sure I can really remember ..." said James, unconvincingly and he could see the quizzical expression on Justin's face. After all, it wasn't really that long ago and if the pictures had made that much of an impression on him, then surely he would remember who had brought them into the gallery.

Seeing that Justin hadn't really believed him, the man stumbled even further.

"Well ... let me see ... yes ... I remember now. Middle-aged ... greying hair ... tall ... and slim ... yes, I'm sure that's him. I've probably got his name in the file somewhere, if you really want to know ..." he stated, hoping to God Justin wasn't going to ask him to find out.

Justin thanked him and turned to leave and frowned as he left the building. He remembered vividly the description given by Emmett of the man who had bought the pictures at 'Torso': "An old guy ... short ... fat ... and balding". Now, one of them was lying, but which one ... and why?

Rushing back to the agency, Justin was eager to tell Brian what had happened, but unfortunately, he was out at a meeting with a client. Never mind; it was an ideal excuse to meet up with him in order to talk about it later.

“Mr. Taylor ... good of you to join us” but Clive had been informed of Justin’s absence by Brian and was only teasing him. In the short time Justin had been working at the agency, Clive had started to like him immensely and could see that he had an exceptional gift as well as an eye for color and form. He wasn’t surprised at all that an art gallery might be interested in his work and only marveled that so much talent was contained within such a young man.

Brian’s work kept him pretty busy over the next week or so and apart from a quick conversation in the corridor, where Justin’s obvious excitement over the show came shining through, they hadn’t run into each other or found an excuse to seek each other out.

The next time Brian caught up with Justin was at the diner when the younger man had come in to do the late shift and having completed his intern hours for the day at the agency. The place was busy and Justin barely had time to say a few words and Brian watched as he rushed from table to table, with hardly a second to spare.

In fact, with completing additional pieces for the forthcoming show, as well as all his other commitments, Justin had no free time at all and even though Brian was secretly thrilled about how the young man’s life seemed to have taken an upwards turn, it also appeared to be taking him away.

Throughout the next few weeks, Brian and Justin’s lives took them even further apart. Brian’s heavy work schedule, partly prompted by Gardner’s hint at his impending partnership, had found him spending more and more time with clients and making out of town trips where necessary and spending far too much time in lonely and boring hotel rooms and bars.

This particular night on a cold, wet Chicago evening, sitting in the bar of a hotel chain which looked the same no matter what city you were in, the young blond at the end of the counter caught Brian’s eye.

He had a nice smile and bright blue eyes and even though it wasn’t Justin’s smile, the fact that it was directed at Brian with more than just a hint of invitation to sample the goods on display, found Brian realizing just how hungry he was for company.

He’d fought long and hard for the account he’d won that day; requiring all the skills he’d acquired in order to nail the contract and had wine and dined the clients until quite late and had eventually made his way back to his hotel and headed straight to the bar despite his tiredness. He’d ordered his usual beer and now seated at the counter was aware of the young man making his way towards him.

The blond sat on the vacant stool beside him; his intentions couldn't be any more obvious and he ordered a beer. "I'll pay for that," offered Brian and the young man looked at him and smiled.

"Here on business?" he asked him and Brian inwardly sighed. The lines never changed much, but he nodded, downed his drink in one and then ordered another.

The blond took a sip of his beer and placed the glass back on the counter and then lent over and ran his fingers along the collar of Brian's jacket. "Nice suit ... but I bet it looks even better off ..."

Without looking at the young man, Brian picked up his second drink and again, threw it down his throat in one swallow. Now he looked at him more closely: he was kinda cute in a hard-bitten sort of way, but there was an attraction of sorts between them, so what the hell.

Taking the blond up to his room, the atmosphere between them was distinctly detached and when the subject of money was mentioned, Brian was hardly surprised: why else would a young man such as this be hanging around hotel bars.

Initially, Brian had baulked at the thought of paying for it; he'd never had to up to now, but the young man was there and the need wasn't going to go away.

The sex turned out to be routine and hardly stimulating: with Brian realizing how cold and automatic were his responses to the young man servicing him. Because indeed that was how it felt; no emotion; just fucking and all the years that Brian had said that was the only thing he believed in were now proving to be empty words.

Comparing this sex with that he'd experienced with Justin left him feeling totally empty. In fact, what was becoming painfully crystal clear was the confirmation that the sex he'd had with Justin was indeed actually making love; something unexpectedly wonderful and fulfilling and the difference between the two acts so blatantly obvious.

And long after the young man had left and despite his tiredness and the amount of alcohol consumed that evening, Brian lay awake: staring into the blackness with sleep an elusive luxury.

With several weeks still left before the art show, Justin had begun to hand out invitations to his friends and his family group, with everyone promising they would be there. The gallery were going to a lot of expense and the publicity was extensive and they were hoping for a very good attendance. He still hadn't been able to catch up with Brian, but had left an invitation with Cynthia who promised she would pass it on.

Having completed his hours at the agency for the day, Justin was making his way to 'Torso' in order to give Emmett his invitation and before taking up his shift at the diner. He also wanted to ask him again about the man who'd bought his pictures. But as he approached the store, a knot of people in the doorway prevented him from getting in.

Pushing his way through the small crowd, he found Emmett in a rather agitated state.

“Em ... what’s happened ... are you okay?” asked Justin, concerned at the man’s flustered state. “We’ve been robbed ...” came the answer.

“Scuse me ... give the man room ...” Ted appeared from the back of the store and ushering the onlookers aside, made his way towards them and he handed Emmett a glass of water.

“Here,” he told him, “drink this”.

“Thank you, Teddy,” replied Em, taking the glass and he took a sip of the cold liquid.

“What was stolen?” asked Justin, looking around the store and only now seeing the rail tipped over and the clothing scattered on the floor.

“A rather nice silver spandex top ... I’d actually had an eye on that one myself,” said Emmett, “and some very nice grey pants ... he had good taste ... I’ll give him that,” and Emmett drank down the remainder of the water before continuing.

“I’d turned my back and the kid was in and out of the store before I could do anything to stop him.”

“Have you called the Police?” asked Justin and Emmett smiled at him. “Sweetie, the chances of them catching him are probably zero, but I guess you’re right ... I probably should call them. Oh my god, I’ll have to call Mr. Donaldson ... the owner ... goodness knows what he’s going to say ...”

“Well,” said Ted, “You never know, the Police might get lucky ... once they’ve seen what’s on the security camera ...”

“There’s a security camera?” asked Justin, looking around and Emmett pointed to a camera on the outside of the store, high above the street, which was angled down to take in the doorway. “I’d never noticed it,” said Justin. “Is it connected to a security company?” and Emmett shook his head.

“No, it’s just rigged up to a gizmo in the office at the back of the store ... I have to keep changing the tape and then they’re kept for oh ... a few months or so and then we record over them ... let me get my breath back and then I better go make a few calls”.

Justin’s mind was working overtime. “Okay if I use the bathroom?” he asked.

“Sure,” replied Em. “Just mind you don’t step on the clothes ...”

Two minutes later and Justin had slipped into the office at the back of the store and he spotted the recorder and the shelf with the videos, each labeled with the dates they covered.

Mentally, Justin counted back and thankfully, found what he was looking for and then quickly, he picked out the video and pushed the rest together to hide the space. He would just borrow it for a while and bring it back later.

Relieved to find no one home, Justin quickly placed the video in the VCR and turned on the TV and, picking up the remote, he started to play the tape and hit Fast Forward. There he was; a tall, slim brunet in a heavy winter coat and Justin stopped the tape and then pressed Play once more.

Brian was standing outside of 'Torso' and looking into the window; he must be either coming from or going to a meeting as he was carrying his attaché case.

After a few moments, he seemed to have come to a decision and then he entered the store. Running the tape forward, there was Brian leaving. Justin frowned; he was still only carrying his attaché case.

Disappointment crept over him. He'd half been hoping that it was Brian who'd bought his pictures; another affirmation of the care for him that the man was trying to disguise. Still, the tape should show who had bought them, so he pressed Fast Forward once more.

Winding the tape on about an hour, Justin jumped as he saw Brian reappear and enter the store again to come out a few minutes later with a package. It would hardly be clothing; 'Torso' didn't carry Armani. No, it looked a little too square and flat for that.

"Congratulations, Brian ... you deserve it."

"Thanks Cynthia", said Brian and they clinked glasses.

He'd been called into Gardner's office a little earlier on and the man had given him the good news; his partnership in the agency had been confirmed and the papers drawn up. After Brian had agreed to the terms, they'd both signed on the dotted line and Gardner had opened a bottle of Champagne and poured Brian and himself a glass. However, he had a family gathering to attend and had finished up early, leaving Brian to celebrate his success with Cynthia.

"Going out on the town tonight?" asked his PA and Brian nodded. "Sure thing" he'd answered her and Cynthia stretched up to give him a peck on the cheek before leaving herself: reveling in her own new status.

There'd been two bottles of Champagne in Gardner's refrigerator and Brian helped himself to the second before collecting his coat and attaché case from his office and heading home.

"Welcome home, partner," said Brian to himself and he closed his eyes. It wasn't really that long ago that those words would have actually meant something, but now, as he

closed the loft door behind him and stood still for a moment, apart from the dull sound of traffic coming up from the street below, the loft was silent. Some celebration this was going to be.

Justin thought for one moment that Brian wasn't going to open the door; he was sure he was in; the man's car was parked in the street.

Having seen the tape, Justin had decided he would have to force the issue of Brian's feelings towards him after all. It was obvious the man had feelings for him, but why the hell couldn't he say so? What was he so afraid of?

Justin hated this not knowing and had come to the decision that he would have to confront Brian and take his chances; anything was better than being left in limbo. The least he would do was tell Brian that he loved him, for he knew in his heart and without a shadow of a doubt that he did and the man would have to hear it. And where that would lead them Justin didn't know, but he knew he'd have to try.

Justin could smell the alcohol on Brian's breath once he eventually opened the door. "What do you want?" asked the older man; holding the glass in his hand.

"We need to talk," answered Justin.

"We don't have anything to talk about," answered Brian, but the young man wasn't going to give in.

"Okay .. then I'll talk and you listen," said Justin, pushing passed a startled Brian; the older man's surprise at the blond's directness no barrier to Justin's determination as he entered the loft. The cushions from the sofa had been pulled onto the floor and on the coffee table were an empty Champagne bottle and a partly consumed bottle of beam.

"You having a party?" asked Justin and Brian nodded.

"Yeah ... party for one ..." he answered and he closed the door and padded, barefooted, across the floor back to the cushions and sat down.

"What's the occasion?" asked Justin, immediately sensing something wasn't quite right.

"I've been made partner at the agency," answered Brian and he picked up the bottle of beam and topped up his drink.

"Congratulations", said Justin and Brian held up his glass.

"Thanks ... you wanna join me?" he asked him, but the younger man shook his head.

"No thanks," he was determined to keep a clear head in order to say what he'd come to say.

“Why aren’t you out celebrating?” asked the blond.

“I am celebrating ...” insisted Brian.

“No ... with your friends I mean?” said Justin and Brian threw his drink down his throat and feeling the burn in his stomach before answering; the alcohol taking hold and Brian speaking before he had a chance to catch himself.

“Friends? That would be Lindsay AND Mel...Michael AND Ben...Ted AND Emmett...”

“Ted and Emmett?” asked Justin.

“Well,” answered Brian, “they might as well be a couple ...” and he stared down into his glass. Damn: how pathetic did that all sound.

Justin’s heart went out to him. Brian’s emptiness and, indeed, loneliness, just seeped out of every pore. Those closest to him had someone they could call on to share things with whilst he was on his own: the spare wheel. At least when Mark had been around, there were times when Brian hadn’t felt quite so alone, but now he obviously believed he had no one to turn to and who would be there for him alone and the feeling of isolation had grown worse with each passing day.

Brian couldn’t stand the silence, or indeed to think that Justin was feeling sorry for him and he fought to clear his head and bring the conversation back on track. “Okay ... out with it,” he said at last and looking up at him.

“It doesn’t matter ...” answered the young man. There was no way he could demand anything of Brian right now; the man was down enough as it was. He didn’t want to cause him any more pain.

“No...there was something you wanted to say...you might as well get it off your chest...”

Justin bit his lip; maybe he shouldn’t pass up this opportunity after all; he may never get another chance. “Okay,” he answered him and he crossed the floor towards Brian and then sat down, cross-legged, on one of the cushions and facing him.

“There’s some things I don’t understand and I’d like you to explain them to me ...”

“Shoot,” answered Brian and he reached for the bottle once more. Justin watched him; Brian was already pretty wasted and Justin didn’t want him passing out before he had a chance to finish what he wanted to say. But Brian’s alcohol tolerance was pretty high; he planned on being conscious for at least a little while longer; he was interested to hear what the blond had to say.

“Well,” said Justin, making himself comfortable and leaning forward, “Firstly...why did you bring me back here instead of leaving me at my apartment when I had that headache? I’d lived there for months on my own...I would have coped...despite the cold

...

“Secondly,” said Justin and counting the points off on his fingers, “you could have put me to bed on the sofa ... but instead you gave over your own bed to me ... and then I woke up to find you beside me ... holding me ...”

Brian looked away; not liking one bit how this conversation was heading as Justin continued.

“I can’t imagine anyone else inviting their partner’s lover to his funeral ... even you have to admit that was pretty weird ...”

“Then there’s the computer ... and telling me about the internship ...”

“Yeah,” interrupted Brian, looking back at him. “Clive says you’re doing pretty good ... I bet there’d be a place for you once you’ve graduated if you’re interested”. Brian was desperate to steer the conversation in a different direction, but Justin was having none of it.

“Don’t change the subject,” instructed the younger man, “because I haven’t even started on when you kissed me ... or when you brought me back here and made love to me ...and why the hell didn’t you tell me it was you who’d bought my pictures?”

Justin held Brian’s gaze; the shock on the older man’s face obvious. Justin had it all worked out; he knew exactly what Brian had done for him. He’d been sprung: big time.

How the hell was he going to deny any longer the feelings he had for Justin? He’d spent far too much time, money and emotion since Mark’s death trying to do right by him and though he’d thought initially that maybe he was acting with transferred guilt; doing things that Mark would have done for his young lover, Brian could no longer fool himself, or Justin.

He did have feelings. Strong feelings: undeniable feelings for this young man. But why the hell couldn’t he tell him? Why was he hiding behind his actions instead of just coming right out and saying so?

Justin reached out and cupped Brian’s face in his hand and the man closed his eyes and lent into it and then slowly, Brian felt Justin’s arms encircle him as the young man moved towards him; held him close; cradling him in his arms.

“I love you,” whispered Justin: voicing his own feelings. “Surely you must know that.”

Brian’s relationship with Mark had been a joke compared to how he felt about Justin and he began to sweat: but it wasn’t the alcohol or the heating in the loft. It was the realization of the depth of his love and the nearness of the young man and Brian desperately tried to keep his emotions in check. Shit: he didn’t want to do this: fall apart like this and in front of Justin.

Brian clung on for several long minutes; lost in a haze of relief; hearing words he thought he would never hear again and from someone as beautiful, talented and courageous as the young man now holding him and he could feel the heat from Justin's body. And then the young man pulled back and Brian opened his eyes: those beautiful hazel eyes that shone with moisture and Justin could feel him trembling.

Not too long ago, Brian would have shaken his head, dismissing the young man's words as not possible; it didn't happen: he didn't believe in love. And though Mark had said those words to him, they'd never had the impact that hearing them from Justin was having. Justin wasn't going to have to repeat them time and time again like Mark had done before he started to believe them. Justin's conviction in how he felt was so tangible it was as if his words reached into Brian's chest and entered his very heart and took possession of it.

"I know you can't say it," continued Justin, "and I'm not expecting you to ... not yet."

"But when you know that you can trust me ... when you believe just how much I love you and that I won't hurt you ... that's when you'll tell me," and Brian pulled Justin in again and held him tightly.

Brian had felt drained and too exhausted to even contemplate making love with Justin, but somehow, for the first time in his life, not having sex didn't seem to matter.

Justin had been the first to move and seeing how obviously fatigued Brian was, had guided him up to the bedroom, where they both stripped off and got into bed.

Lying naked in the younger man's arms; the total overwhelming feeling of being exactly where he was supposed to be, flowed through Brian. Justin was right, he couldn't say the words; not yet, even though he knew the young man ached to hear them, despite what he said, but he still wasn't sure he could trust himself not to screw things up. And with Justin's arms around him, Brian slept soundly and contentedly.

Holding the man he loved and whom he knew loved him, relief flooded over Justin. He was convinced that at last, Brian could accept how he felt, despite being unable to voice his own feelings in return and the younger man prayed that Brian would give them a chance.

With the winter sunshine flooding through the windows, Brian awoke to hear Justin pottering around the kitchen. They were both supposed to be at the agency that morning, but somehow Brian didn't think either of them would make it.

Justin had made some coffee and found some guava juice in the refrigerator and had put on some toast. Content in what he was doing, he was unaware that Brian had positioned himself so that he could watch him from the bedroom and the older man smiled; Justin was wearing Brian's robe and looked really cute, with the garment being several sizes too large and he could hear the blond humming to himself as he completed his tasks.

Quickly, Brian lay back on the pillows as Justin gathered everything together and made his way back up to the bedroom, intent on treating Brian to breakfast in bed and the older man wasn't about to spoil his surprise.

But Justin wasn't fooled; he could tell by Brian's breathing that the man wasn't asleep and he put the breakfast tray on the floor, got on to the bed and crawled up alongside Brian and lay so that their faces were almost touching. Brian opened his eyes and couldn't resist a grin.

"I knew you were awake," exclaimed Justin, grinning back and staring into Brian's eyes. Gently, he lent forward and kissed him; a long, lingering kiss that left them both wanting more, but Justin was concerned that Brian had been working far too hard and without anyone around to keep an eye on him, hadn't been taking care of himself and he lent down to pick up the breakfast tray. However, Brian knew exactly what he needed: what he was sure they both needed right now and that wasn't toast and coffee.

Gently pulling Justin back down, Brian undid the belt on the robe and opened it and the younger man sat up to enable Brian to pull the garment off his shoulders and without either of them speaking; words totally unnecessary, Brian lent down for another kiss; Justin arching his body up to meet him.

Brian pulled away and looked at Justin for a few moments and then lent forward to kiss him yet again. A gentle, deeply sensitive, yet passionate connection made between these two men: two men who were fast becoming as one.

Justin was desperate to feel Brian inside him; possessing him, as was Brian to enter him; to have Justin give himself and to return the love he was beginning to realize he need not fear.

As the two men reached the heights of their love-making: giving and receiving as much as they both possessed, Brian knew his life would never be the same again, not now he'd allowed Justin in. But did he have the courage to ask him to stay: to share his life completely with him? And afterwards, Justin asked him the same question he'd asked all that time ago in Debbie's backyard.

"What happens now?"

Brian shook his head. "I ... I don't know ... I need a little time ..." and he couldn't help but see the disappointment on Justin's face and he reached out and stroked the younger man's hair; wanting to reassure him. "But I do know I want you around ... but I need us to take it slow ... not rush things ... okay?" And Justin had smiled at him and reached up to kiss him; letting Brian now he wouldn't push things; that he would let things move at Brian's pace.

Brian called Cynthia to give the excuse that he'd been working from home and that Justin had been helping him and to let Clive know and that they would both be in later.

He could hear the unspoken questions in her voice, but he didn't care what she thought. Besides, he was a partner now; he should be able to pick and choose when he'd go into the office or when he felt like working from the loft and if he needed someone to assist him.

Trying to keep things light and normal, they showered and dressed; having decided they should go into work. Brian dropped Justin back at Debbie's and parked up further down the street. It was Deb's morning off and he didn't feel like answering any of her questions right now and he waited whilst Justin rushed in for a change of clothes before they both headed for the agency.

They kissed in the elevator before Justin got off at his floor and Brian rode up to his office. They hadn't made any firm plans when they would next meet up, but somehow Brian didn't think they would need to; that everything would fall naturally into place.

One of the partners walking into the Art Department was not an every day occurrence and heads turned in surprise at Brian's entrance: even more so when he headed straight for the intern and all conversation ceased.

It was obvious that theirs was not a casual acquaintance and Brian realized he would have to keep things professional; he didn't want Justin suffering any repercussions of his relationship with management. But it was nearly time to call it a day and as they left together the conversation started up again and both men knew they were likely to be the subject under discussion.

"Here," said Brian as they entered the elevator to make their way down to where Brian's car was parked and he handed something to Justin. He'd stepped out earlier to do a little shopping and hoped Justin would accept the gift.

"A cell phone?" asked Justin and Brian nodded and put his arm around the young man's shoulders. "I've programmed in my cell ... the office and the loft. Now we can get hold of each other whenever we want ..." and his sentence was cut off as Justin reached up to kiss him. Clearly, Brian wanted to know that he could contact him at any time; something that made Justin feel needed and it was a two-way thing: that he could contact Brian when he wanted.

"How the hell did that happen?" asked Melanie. She, Lindsay and Gus were seated at the diner and they were watching Brian and Justin sitting in a corner booth. Brian's arm was casually draped over the back of the seat, as close to being around Justin's shoulders as he could get without actually touching him and they were talking quietly and laughing together.

Over the last couple of weeks, the gang had suddenly realized that the two men were now openly talking more with each other; increasingly sitting together; touched each other when they thought none of the gang were looking and it had even been reported back that they'd been seen in Woody's and Babylon and to all intents and purposes, a couple; Not that either of them had mentioned directly their blossoming relationship.

Debbie came over to deliver the girls' orders and she grinned. "They look pretty cute, don't they?" she observed and Mel looked up in surprise.

"Cute? Well I don't think I'd ever describe Brian Kinney as cute ..."

"Mel ... don't be so harsh," scolded Lindsay. "It's obvious how they feel about each other ... you only have to look at them".

"Pity Brian can't spare some of that affection for his son," stated Melanie and Lindsay frowned. True, Brian had hardly spent any time at all with Gus recently, but she knew it wasn't because he didn't love him. Brian was just shit scared of fatherhood and of repeating his own Father's mistakes; something she could never explain to Mel and a subject she was constantly defending Brian on.

"I think we're being talked about," whispered Justin into Brian's ear, but neither man really cared what anyone else thought.

"I'm probably being berated as a terrible Father," conceded Brian: watching Melanie's expression and how she had looked at both him and Gus during her conversation with Lindsay. But he couldn't really blame her. He had to admit he didn't spend nearly enough time with Gus as he should or even really as much as he'd wanted to and he couldn't always blame it on the pressures of work.

Brian took Justin's hand under the table. "I know we said we'd spend the weekend together ... but ... would you mind if I spent part of it at least with Gus?"

"No ... why should I?" answered Justin. "But can I come along too?" Brian looked at him.

"Are you sure ... you don't have to?"

"I want to," answered Justin. "Gus is your son ... a part of your life and I want to share that with you ... if you'd let me ... I won't get in the way ... I can be working on a piece for the show ..."

To hear Justin say he wanted involvement with Gus made Brian realize he was falling in love with him even more. Mark had never wanted to be around his son and never enquired about him and not giving a damn who was watching, Brian lent over to Justin and kissed him; hardly a surprise to just about everyone present.

Extracting himself from the blond's hold, Brian got up and approached the girls and slid into the booth beside Lindz. "Well," said Lindsay, smiling. "I must say ... you're looking pretty pleased with yourself these days" and Brian couldn't really help grinning back; he'd tried to keep his relationship with Justin appearing cool, but he couldn't help it. Apart from at the agency, where they kept their relationship professional; except of course for when they both were working late and Justin's visits to Brian's office after hours; when they were together, he had to touch him and he was beginning to realize

that he didn't really care who saw it.

"I was wondering ... any chance I could have Gus on Saturday?" asked Brian and Lindsay and Mel both looked at each other and then Lindsay smiled at him.

"Of course ... Gus would love to spend time with his Father".

"Good," answered Brian. "I'll pick him up about ... 9:30?" and Lindsay nodded her agreement as Justin got up and joined Brian, and with arms around each other, the two men left the diner.

The surprise on Melanie's face at Brian's offer brought a smile from Lindsay. "See ... he's not such a bad Father after all," she stated.

"Who'da thought it?" wondered Brian. "It's Friday night ... I've got a hot date ... and I'm staying home!"

In the past, he wouldn't even have contemplated being home on a Friday, but would have spent until the early hours at Babylon. And as for having a date, there'd been no such thing until he'd started to see Mark.

Brian was actually beginning to feel a little grateful to Mark and was astounded that he should think so. But after all, the man had introduced him to the art of going out on a date; having dinner with someone or taking in a movie or theatre: Something Brian never dreamt he'd take part in and it still felt a little strange to be doing such things.

Not that Brian could really think of Justin as just a date; it was getting far too serious for that. And though they often did go dancing; as Brian loved to watch Justin moving to the music: feeling the beat coursing through them as their bodies gyrated to the rhythm, Brian was becoming quite happy for them just to stay at home, eat take out and watch a DVD.

So, was Brian becoming more romantic after all? He certainly didn't think so; and would never consider himself as such, even if Justin always enjoyed having the older man just to himself.

Never one for huge romantic gestures, Brian had been happy that Mark wasn't the type to spring too many surprises on him or bring him flowers; he didn't know how the hell he would have handled that. But he knew Justin was different; he was younger to start with and less cynical. Love to Justin was being open about how he felt and would often whisper words of affection without again saying out loud that he loved him: knowing that Brian still couldn't respond. And Brian would hold him close; hoping to God the young man understood.

And on this particular Friday night, Brian didn't want to overdo it and that was his excuse for spending the evening alone with Justin. He'd arranged to have Gus tomorrow; the last thing he needed was a hangover or sleep in late. He knew he had

some fences to mend with Lindz and Mel; he'd hardly been the doting Father, despite his best intentions.

Having lived with an abusive drunk for so many years, Brian had initially been terrified he would be like Jack; even after reassurances by Lindsay that she would never have asked him to be the Father of her child if for one moment she'd thought he'd turn out like his own Father.

Brian had collected Justin from Debbie's, as he was bringing a couple of pieces of his art to work on and they brought in Chinese and a DVD. And they sat comfortably on cushions on the floor and ate and watched the movie; something Brian never thought he'd be contented to do. But just being with Justin and sharing the simple, little things was beginning to become so terribly important; though Brian would never admit it to anyone.

It was Saturday morning and just before 9:00. "I need to go and get a few supplies," informed Justin, having brought some of his art to Brian's to work on. "I didn't realize... I'm running low ..."

"Okay," answered Brian and he made his way back up to the bedroom and searched in the nightstand drawer.

"Here ..." said Brian and he tossed the keys to Justin. "You better have these. I'll drop you off and then collect Gus. Can you make your own way back?"

"Sure," answered Justin and they made their way downstairs. He clutched the loft keys in his pocket: reveling in the ease with which Brian had given them to him.

Brian dropped Justin outside the art supplies store and headed for Lindsay and Mel's: arriving dead on the stroke of 9:30.

"Well, wonders will never cease," observed Melanie as she saw Brian park up outside. More than once when he'd made arrangements to see Gus, he'd let them down at the last minute, sometimes without even a phone call and hardly ever with an explanation. Maybe things were starting to change for the better after all.

Having stocked up on everything he needed, Justin was surprised to hear a familiar voice as he left the store and starting to make his way back to the loft.

"Justin?"

He turned around to see who'd spoken to him and found himself face to face with Daphne Chanders: his best friend at St. James' Academy and who'd been with him at the time he'd come out to his family and who'd been his shoulder to cry on after the bashing and when things went so bad with his Dad.

But then, when he left home, dropped out of school and had moved to a different part of

town, they'd lost contact; and it was so good to see her now.

With Justin trying to hang on to all his purchases, they hugged each other tightly. "Daphne ... it's great to see you ... I'm sorry I didn't keep in touch ..." said Justin, apologetically. "How's school going?"

Daphne pulled back to look at him. When she'd seen him last, he'd looked so unhappy and she'd been so worried about him, but now he looked fantastic; his old sparkle was back.

"Never mind about me," said Daphne; taking an interest in what Justin was holding. "Art supplies?" she asked him and he nodded.

"Everything is going so great, Daph ... I'm back with my art ... I've even got a show coming up ... and I've met the most beautiful man ..."

Daphne took him by the elbow, turned him around and got into step beside him. "This I have to hear about" she instructed and she steered him to the nearest coffee shop.

Brian called Justin's cell phone, but it was switched off and for a moment, he had a fleeting thought: a bitter reminder of how difficult it had always been to contact Mark on his cell and fought down a sudden surge of suspicion.

He'd taken Gus down to the swings at the park and wanted to let Justin know where they were and was more than just a little disappointed that he couldn't get hold of him. Maybe it was taking him longer to get the things he needed than he thought it would, but why switch off his cell?

And then when it turned decidedly colder, Brian took Gus back to the warmth of the loft, surprised to see that there was still no sign of Justin and he tried Justin's cell again and still there was no response. But then as he settled Gus down in front of one of his favorite cartoon videos, Brian heard the key in the lock.

"Hi ... what happened to you? I tried calling ... your cell's off"

"Is it? Sorry ..." answered Justin flatly and he closed the door and took off his coat and placed his purchases on the counter: all the while keeping his back to Brian.

Sensing something was terribly wrong, Brian slowly approached him and put his arm around Justin's shoulders. Without a word the younger man turned, lent into him and then the tears came.

Brian held Justin as he sobbed quietly: not questioning him or expecting any explanation and eventually as the tears subsided, the young man looked up at him.

"I ran into an old friend ... she told me ... she told me Mom and Dad got divorced and that they'd had to sell the house ... and now Mom and Molly are living in this little house

..." Justin covered his face with his hands and Brian could barely hear his words.

"It's all my fault ... I caused the break-up. If I'd done what my Dad wanted me to do ..."

"Hey," gently, Brian took Justin's hands and pulled them away from his face.

"It's not your fault," he said quietly. "If your Dad can't accept who you are, that's his problem ... not yours".

Justin nodded; wanting to believe Brian's words and allowed himself to be taken once more into Brian's arms.

His conversation with Daphne had initially been filled with everything that had happened to him since they'd last met; his relationship with Mark and then his death and then meeting Brian and how wonderful his life was now beginning to turn out.

But then he'd asked Daphne whether she'd seen anything of his family. She'd looked down into her coffee cup and he could see by her expression that she wished he hadn't asked.

Learning of his parent's divorce had literally torn Justin's heart in two; leaving him in no doubt that he was the cause of the rift between them. If only he hadn't come out: if only he'd agreed to go to Dartmouth like his Dad wanted him to and if only there hadn't been the bashing. Maybe then the family would still be together.

Justin went to the bathroom to wash his face whilst Brian fed his young son the lunch that Lindsay had prepared for him and when the meal had been digested, Brian laid Gus down on the bed for his nap.

Justin was forcing himself to concentrate on the piece of art he was completing for the show when Brian walked behind him and stroked his hair. Justin reached up and took his hand and Brian had lent down and kissed him before moving off into the kitchen.

Making lunch for them both, Brian ate in silence, whilst Justin ignored his food and lost himself in what he was doing; shutting himself off completely from the hurt that was threatening to tear him apart.

After a while, Justin lent away from the table and stretched his back and looked around him. There was no sign of Brian.

Brian had gone to check on Gus and the boy had looked so peaceful in his sleep that Brian had lain alongside him; enjoying just spending time and being with him and had dozed off and that's how Justin found them.

Brian took Gus back to Lindsay by 5:30. "Do you want to stay and help bathe him?" Lindsay had asked him and Brian hesitated.

“Sure ... I’d like that” and together they fed, bathed and put the youngster to bed, with Mel staying out of the way and hardly able to believe that Brian was at last showing signs of wanting to be more involved with his son.

“Thanks,” said Brian as Lindsay saw him to the door. “I enjoyed today ... being with him”.

“You can have him more often, Brian ... you know that,” said Lindsay. “I want Gus to grow up knowing his Father ...” and Brian had nodded.

“He will,” he assured her and then he turned and left.

Despite the early hour, Justin had fallen asleep over the table and practically carrying him, Brian had undressed him and put him to bed. Lying beside him in the low light; seeing the pain again on the young man’s face, reaffirmed how deeply Brian felt for him; wanting to comfort him and protect him.

Justin hadn’t spoken again of his family, but Brian knew how deeply hurt the young man was, even though he’d tried to concentrate on the art show that was almost upon them.

And then the day was here and Justin tried to be excited, but somehow all of this didn’t seem as important as it had.

He’d been at the gallery the night before, helping to display his art and now the nerves had set in. What if no one came? What if they hated his work? But the gallery was soon filled with friends and strangers alike: all marveling at Justin’s work and the talent of such a young man.

One particular drawing was proving very popular. “That is so beautiful ...”

Lindsay smiled at Justin and squeezed his arm. Gus was in his stroller and she squatted down beside him and pointed upwards. “Look ... Gus and Dada,” she said to him.

“Dada”, he repeated and Lindsay grinned.

With encouragement from both James and Brian, Justin was working the crowd and his easy manner, once he’d got over his nerves, had started to come through. His drawings were proving very popular and he’d already received several enquiries regarding their purchase and would-be buyers were informed that the show would be going on to New York before sales could be arranged.

Brian had stood back and watched as Justin moved easily among the gathering and he smiled. This was where Justin belonged and he now understood the importance of Justin’s craft to him. Art was Justin; Justin was art.

“He’s a wonderful young man,” said Lindsay to Brian, who had nodded in response. “Have you seen this?” she continued, indicating one of Justin’s pictures and Brian shook

his head. He'd only seen a few of the pieces and though he'd helped Justin take his work to the gallery, it had all been well protected and he'd let the experts deal with hanging them.

And that's when he saw it. The beautiful drawing that Justin had made of him and Gus: Father and son: asleep side-by-side, with the love that Brian felt for the youngster radiating from the drawing. For one of the few times in his life, Brian was speechless. He knew which drawing he was going to have to buy; no one else would ever own that one.

All the gang were there to support him; even a reluctant Michael, who had been brought along by Ben; determined that his partner would start to accept that Justin and Brian belonged together, and despite whatever else was going on in his life, Justin was thrilled at the response the show was receiving.

The attractive blonde woman in her early forties, nervously pushed open the gallery door and she was greeted by a waiter, but she refused the drink on offer; needing to keep a clear head.

Brian recognized her straight away; the likeness was unmistakable. He glanced round; Justin was deep in conversation and hadn't seen her, but Brian approached her and held out his hand.

"Mrs. Taylor? I'm Brian Kinney ..." Jennifer Taylor hesitated and then shook his hand.

"So ..." said Jennifer, looking around. "All this is for Justin?" and Brian nodded.

"He's very talented ... as you can see ..." and he indicated the pieces of Justin's artwork adorning the walls.

Jennifer nodded and moving away from him walked up to one of the pieces; studied it and then moved on to the next. She looked around and that's when she saw her son.

Justin was talking and smiling as he turned around and suddenly found himself looking across the room at his Mother.

Jennifer smiled and took a small, tentative step forwards. Justin didn't need any encouragement and in a few strides had crossed the floor and for a moment they stood looking at each other before they moved together and hugged.

"Oh Justin ... I'm so sorry ..."

Justin pulled away. "It's my fault ... if I ..."

Jennifer shook her head and took her son's face in her hands. "None of what happened is your fault ... it's all your Father's. I'm only sorry I didn't stand up to him sooner".

"You're my son and I love you ... I should never have taken his side. I'm so proud of you

... can you ever forgive me?" But she needn't have asked and for long minutes, they hugged: totally ignoring everyone looking on.

Debbie sidled up to Brian. "And just how many Taylor's are there in the book?" she asked him. Brian briefly closed his eyes before speaking.

"Too many ... way too many," he answered her.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Justin falling into step with Brian's life felt the most natural thing in the world – to Justin. It was becoming all too obvious; the way things were progressively moving, but a panic attack would overtake Brian every now and again.

Now when he heard people speak, it was always 'Brian and Justin': both names spoken in the same breath; always as a couple and despite feelings that he was no longer able to hide; even to himself, to no longer be thought of as an individual but as one half of a whole, made Brian reassess how he felt and the responsibilities that went along with someone else starting to rely on you; to think that you'd always be there.

Even Jennifer Taylor, who at first struggled enormously with the thought of her little boy having sex with anyone; let alone with another man and a much older one at that, had come around once having been made aware of everything that Brian had done for Justin.

When Brian had called her, he'd initially introduced himself as 'just a friend', but it was soon plainly obvious that his and Justin's relationship was more than that and, at the gallery, she'd observed them when neither of them knew she was watching and the affection that passed between them was obvious: they had to be lovers.

With the art show a resounding success, Brian had backed off and suggested that Justin spend a little time with his Mom and had sent the two of them off to have dinner together to celebrate Justin's success; even though the younger man had looked on questioningly; he'd wanted to celebrate with Brian.

But at least he had his Mother back in his life and now contact had been established there was no way they were ever going to lose it again and regular phone calls and frequent visits commenced. Justin even looked forward to the times when he caught up with his kid sister, Molly, who'd missed her older brother, despite his constant teasing and the nickname Mollusk, which he had bestowed upon her from an early age.

It still hurt that his Father rejected him; but now Justin was beginning to believe both his Mother's and Brian's words; that it wasn't down to him; that he should be true to himself about who he was and what he wanted; if his Father couldn't accept it, that was his loss, not Justin's.

A routine seemed to be developing and as the weeks moved on, the loft began to fill with Justin's possessions; his artwork, school books, clothes, toiletries and CD's. It was like

living with a teenager and it got to the point where Brian found himself falling over things the moment he got inside the door and without warning, the loft was no longer his domain.

His orderly home was beginning to take on an unfamiliar, disorganized look and suddenly, Brian was unable to find things; Justin would move them; re-arrange and then finally, Brian blew his stack.

“For Chrissakes ... why can’t I find anything any more?” he’d yelled above the noise of the music being played loudly; Brian was trying to find the file he’d been working on the night before and that he needed to take into the office. Abruptly, he turned off the CD player and stood still; one hand on his hip, the other rubbing his forehead and he frowned.

“Sorry,” said Justin quietly. “I guess ... I guess I have sort of ... taken over ...” he acknowledged.

“It’s okay,” said Brian, turning round. “I’m just in a hurry, that’s all. I’ve my first meeting at 8:30 and I’m running late ...”

“Is this what you’re looking for?” asked Justin, moving his school bag off the table and revealing the file underneath and he picked it up and handed it to Brian. The man tried to take it off him, but Justin hung on to it; refusing to let it go and in the end Brian conceded; smiled and bent down to kiss him.

“I didn’t mean to yell ...” he said quietly, by way of apology. “Do you need a ride?” he asked him, but Justin shook his head.

“No ... I’m not going into the agency today ... I have to go into school”.

“That’s okay,” said Brian, “I can take you there,” and with a little more silence than usual, Brian delivered Justin to class.

Over the next few days, Brian suddenly realized that not quite as many of Justin’s possessions were left lying around the loft any more. Justin would come back when Brian wasn’t around and gather up a few things and start to take them back to Debbie’s.

Maybe he was moving a little too fast; after all, Brian hadn’t exactly ever mentioned that he wanted them to live together permanently and then Justin had actually said that he wasn’t going to be spending the night at the loft; that he had too much school work to catch up on as well as a shift at the diner.

That was the night Brian went back home and realized he hated how quiet it was. No loud music; no mess and no Justin. Christ: he wished he knew what he really did want.

“So how come so much of your stuff has found its way back at my place?” asked Debbie; now at her wits end. What the hell was Brian playing at? This young man was probably

the best thing that ever happened to him and he was still threatening to fuck things up.

Justin placed the coffee pot back on the hot plate and shrugged his shoulders. "It's probably me Debs ... I guess I'm trying to push things a little too fast ... I just need to back off a little, that's all".

"And here's me thinking I was going to have to look for someone else to rent your room ..."

Justin shot a look at her. "Brian never asked me to move in ..." he confessed. "I think I just sort of started to take things for granted ..."

"Look," said Debbie, quietly. "I know it's none of my business ... but has he said anything?" she asked. "Has he actually told you how he feels?" Brian's lack of communication was legendary: as if you were supposed to know what he was thinking and Justin shook his head.

"No ... but I guess he doesn't really have to ... I mean ... look at everything he's done for me ... that should tell me all I need to know".

"Sure," thought Debbie. "Mr. Practicality – why say I love you, when all you need to do is buy the kid a computer, set up an internship or call his Mother".

They say actions speak louder than words, but Debbie could see by the expression on Justin's face that despite all that Brian had done, hearing Brian say how he really felt out loud would mean so much to the young man.

Since moving most of his stuff back to Debbie's, Brian and Justin's relationship had seemed to cool a little. They still went out dancing and the sex was still hot, but Justin didn't spend quite as much time at the loft as he had done and they didn't seem to talk as much as they had. But as Justin had said to Debbie, he was scared he was pushing Brian just a little too fast too soon.

For Brian, it was echoes of Mark, who had wanted him to go to this function or that dinner and memories of how that relationship turned out just wouldn't go away.

But when he found Justin's keys on the counter after the young man had already left one morning and the invitation to the fundraising event at the GLC arrived addressed to Brian Kinney and Justin Taylor: not Brian Kinney or even Brian Kinney and guest, he stared down at the envelope, realizing just how good that looked.

"Asshole ..." he muttered under his breath and he put the keys and the invitation into his attaché case.

It was another school day for Justin and Brian didn't like to disturb him by ringing his cell; that and he wasn't sure what to say to him. Had he left his keys at the loft deliberately or unintentionally? Was he trying to say he was backing out of their

relationship?

Brian sighed. Why couldn't he let Justin know his feelings or do romantic gestures; like candle-lit dinners for two instead of dining at a restaurant or bringing Justin flowers or a gift that wasn't in the least bit practical?

Why was it so hard to say the words he felt in his heart: as if saying them out loud would make them disappear into thin air or to see if Justin would return them? But Justin was always telling him how much he cared; he gave his heart, his mind and his body. How much more confirmation did Brian want?

He knew his doubts were unfounded; from the first time in the loft that Justin had said he loved Brian; deep down Brian knew those words to be true and yet he still couldn't respond, even though it was obvious that Justin longed to hear them so much. Was he going to risk losing him for the sake of three little words? Was he really that much of a fool?

Brian caught up with Justin later that day at the diner, where he pulled out the invitation to the GLC fundraiser. "Are we going to this?" Brian asked as he handed it to Justin and the younger man glanced at the envelope. There'd been no comment from Brian as to how the invitation had been addressed; was he starting to feel more comfortable about their relationship after all? Justin wished he knew for sure.

"It's for a good cause ..." commented Justin; deciding to ignore it himself and Brian had nodded in agreement and nothing more was said.

Waiting for Justin to finish his shift, Brian ordered a coffee and moved into a booth and Debbie slid in beside him.

"What have I done this time?" asked Brian, studying Debbie's expression and wondering if he was ever going to get too old for one of her lectures.

"I was just wondering whether I'm going to be able to rent out Justin's room," said Debbie: repeating her words of earlier and low enough so that Justin couldn't hear.

"That's none of your business," snapped Brian.

"Maybe not," answered Debbie. "But it's sure as hell's Justin's" and able to say things to Brian that he would never tolerate from anyone else, she continued.

"But why doesn't it surprise me one bit that that kid doesn't really know where he stands with you? One minute most of his stuff is over at your place and then it's back at mine. What the hell are you playing at Brian? It's as plain as day how much Justin loves you ... you only have to look at him to see that ... and come to that ... anyone only has to look at you to see how much you care for him ... but no ... the old Brian Kinney's back ... scared shit of anyone getting too close".

“I thought at least you’d got over that when Mark came along ... didn’t his death teach you anything?”

“What the hell does that mean?” asked Brian: his annoyance at Debbie’s directness and her reference to Mark difficult to hide.

Taking a deep breath, Debbie started up again. “Well I would have hoped that if nothing else it would have taught you how little time we have ... that none of us know how long we’ve actually got ... that an accident ... or ... or getting sick can happen to anyone at any time.”

“Just think ... if anything happened to you, Justin might never hear you say how much you love him ... are you willing to take that risk?”

Unable to answer her, Brian looked away and then searched out Justin. He watched as the young man delivered the ordered meals: smiling widely at a shared joke with the customer.

Justin had once spoken of taking a risk and so now had Debbie. And she was right; fate can play cruel tricks. A truck out of control; an act of hatred or terrorism; a fatal illness or an isolated patch of ice: Here today: gone tomorrow.

Maybe now was the time to take that risk.

“James just called,” said Justin, the following morning, as Brian stepped out of the shower.

“Everything’s set for tomorrow, so I guess I’ll be leaving this afternoon ... I just have to go back to Debbie’s and pack some clean clothes ...”

Brian nodded as he began to dress. “I’ll drop you over there ...”

“No, it’s okay,” insisted Justin. “I’ll get a taxi”.

“Well ... then can I take you to the airport?” asked Brian, but Justin again refused.

“No it’s okay ... I know how busy you are ...”

True: since becoming partner, every damn thing that had gone wrong seemed to end up at Brian’s door in order to get fixed.

“Besides ... I’ll only be away for a few days ... you won’t even know I’m gone ...” continued Justin.

“That’s okay,” said Brian, looking at him and smiling. “Take as much time as you need” and he carried on dressing.

Silently, Justin turned around; collected his coat and left; “Take as much time as you need?” Brian sounded like a boss giving Justin time off; not a lover saying how much he was going to miss him for the few days he’d be away.

The arrangements for the show in New York had been in place a few weeks now. The gallery were paying for his airfare and he was due to fly out to help James, who was already there, and overseeing the hanging of Justin’s work.

Brian watched Justin leave and regretted that they hadn’t even kissed goodbye and realized that very soon, he would have to at least give the young man an indication of how much he felt, before Justin was walking out of the loft for good.

The flight to New York was uneventful and as soon as he stepped off the plane there was a message from James to go straight to the gallery before booking into his hotel; there was something he wanted Justin’s opinion on.

It was getting late and with everything now in order, Justin was at last able to head for his hotel; James staying behind saying there was some paperwork he still had to catch up with.

The address James had given him was on Fifth Avenue and Justin thought it must surely be a mistake; the gallery couldn’t run to this sort of accommodation. But when he checked in, there was his reservation and a porter who looked distinctly aggrieved when Justin said he didn’t need anyone to carry his hold all; the man’s look of disappointment changing Justin’s mind and they both headed up to the designated floor in the elevator.

The porter opened the door to Justin’s suite and then moved to the bedroom where he placed the hold all on the floor. “This has to be a mistake ...” but the porter had left: ignoring Justin’s protestations.

The lights were on low and the table was laid for dinner for two with a big display of red roses as a centerpiece. Justin frowned and scratched his head and wondering what the hell was going on when there was a knock.

“Room Service” announced the voice from out in the corridor and Justin opened the door.

“I haven’t ordered ...” and the look of shock on his face brought the hugest of grins from the man holding two glasses and the ice bucket containing a bottle of Champagne.

“BRIAN!”

Brian stepped aside to allow the waiter to wheel in the cart carrying their dinner.

“I hope you don’t mind ... I ordered for you ...” and the cart was left beside the table; laden with smoked salmon, caviar and strawberries and as the waiter left, Brian put the Champagne and glasses down; intent on opening the bottle.

“What are doing here?” asked Justin, still shocked at Brian’s presence.

“An art show in New York is a big deal ... I thought you might like some company,” came the reply and then suddenly, Brian stopped what he was doing and wondered if he’d made a huge mistake. Maybe Justin didn’t want him there to share this; that maybe Justin would have preferred it if he’d stayed back in Pittsburgh so that he could experience the show on his own.

Seeing the hesitation and sensing the sudden doubt that had entered Brian’s head, Justin moved forward and took the bottle of Champagne from his hands before Brian had a chance to open it. Reaching up to kiss him, Justin completely chased away all Brian’s doubts.

He knew what this gesture was really costing the older man; opening himself up like this. Brian was allowing Justin to see that he was willing to do something so ridiculously romantic as follow him to New York, book them into one of the most expensive hotel suites in that city and share the show with him.

He wasn’t about to turn the man down.

Very little food was consumed that evening. However the Champagne and strawberries were devoured in the bedroom; the hunger for these two food items matching their hunger for each other.

As in Pittsburgh, the New York show was a huge success; Justin had made his mark and the fact that he had still to graduate, underlying what a huge achievement it actually was.

To have Brian there and share it with him made it an even more wonderful experience.

They arrived back at the loft late: extremely happy and still too high on the events of the previous few days to even think about sleep.

From the two shows, Justin had undoubtedly sold all his work and had been offered commissions for others. He would certainly have enough funds to finish PIFA, but if not, Brian was determined to make up any shortfall.

The strides Justin had made since the bashing was unbelievable; he was hardly recognizable as the young man who’d been drifting through life with no drive or ambition not so many months ago.

But Justin wasn’t the only one unrecognizable.

“Here,” said Brian, tossing Justin the keys. “You must have forgotten these ...”

Slightly surprised, Justin caught the keys to the loft and put them in his pocket.

“Thanks” he replied and, for a moment, unsure of how he was supposed to react.

He’d noticed that Brian had been a little quiet on the way back from the airport, but had decided the older man, after all, was probably just a little tired; now he wasn’t so sure. Maybe he’d been deliberating over something and so Justin decided to wait for Brian to come to him and to play things cool.

“I’m famished,” exclaimed the blond and he started to search in the refrigerator, but found nothing that didn’t look like it shouldn’t be thrown in the trash.

“We can order something,” replied Brian. “ ... or if you can hold out ... we can go out for breakfast in the morning ... before we go over to Deb’s to pick up your stuff ...”

Justin turned around to face him, but Brian was now walking away and heading for the side-table, where he picked up the bottle of beer. He didn’t really need a drink, but somehow he didn’t want to be looking at Justin when the younger man realized what he was saying.

“Are you asking me to move in?” asked Justin quietly: his heartbeat quickening as he waited for Brian’s reply.

Brian briefly closed his eyes and drew on every ounce of courage he possessed. It had to be now or never if he was ever going to tell Justin how he felt and he poured out his drink and picked up the glass and, slowly, he turned to face him.

“Well, I kind of like having you around ... so ... yes ... I guess I am ... asking you to move in ... I mean”.

The look in Brian’s eyes as he waited for Justin’s response, melted the young man’s heart. Just looking at the body language told Justin that Brian wasn’t the confident and together person he liked to portray on the surface. That underneath he was scared that even now, Justin would turn him down: throw his feelings back in his face and break his heart.

But there was no way Justin could walk out on him: this at least was part of what he was hoping from Brian; maybe the rest wouldn’t be too long to wait for after all.

Without a word, the young man crossed the floor and took the untouched drink from Brian’s hand and placed it back on the table.

Brian was now looking at the floor; until that is that Justin reached up and put his arms around Brian’s neck; drawing the man down so that their faces were only inches apart.

“Of course I’ll move in,” answered the younger man and with obvious relief, Brian drew him even closer and they kissed and then Justin pulled away and looked into Brian’s eyes; seeking the words he so desperately wanted to hear.

The older man swallowed: seeing the love for him shining from Justin's beautiful blue eyes. The love he could now feel totally secure in; the love that would never let him down; that would never lie to him or deceive him.

The love that at last gave him the courage he needed.

"I love you," whispered Brian; giving Justin the confirmation that he'd been yearning for; the confirmation that made those blue eyes glisten with tears that threatened to spill over.

Was it fate or co-incidence?

Good fortune or destiny; that had brought Brian and Justin together?

They had both been involved with the same man; a man they thought they were both in love with and who loved them, but who had let them both down dreadfully. But without Mark, they might never have met.

"I wish we could stay like this forever ..." whispered Justin, as he lay in Brian's arms and Brian lent down and kissed him.

This was one partnership that Brian didn't have to celebrate on his own and they'd consummated their union over and over again, until both their bodies ached and glistened with the exhilaration.

Justin was everything Brian could have wanted and needed. He wasn't just a lover; he was his partner; his soul mate, with more love to give than Brian could ever have imagined. The only thing Brian wished now was that he'd recognized this earlier. He had a lot of time to make up for.

For the first time since the start of their relationship, Justin knew that Brian was opening up to him and that process would continue slowly and surely until he could give of himself completely; without question and with a love that consumed him totally.

Now together as one: theirs was a love that would last forever.