**Rebel’s QAF Stories**

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**Drabble Series**

**Justin Saves a Kitten**

Post-513 story of a kitten named Rage

Brian frowned. “It’ll come down when it gets hungry.”

Justin glared down from the tree branch. “Or freeze. Or get snatched by… by…”

“An eagle?” Brian laughed.

“Or fall and break its leg.”

“Cats can fall without hurting themselves.”

Justin ignored him. “Here, kitty kitty…”

“Who’d have ever thought,” Brian said sadly. “Justin Taylor, begging for pussy.”

Justin didn’t even breathe as the kitten, trembling, let him scoop him into his arms. “Fuck you,” he said, beaming down at Brian with his happiest smile.

Brian hid his laughter, and held out his hand to help Justin jump to the ground.

**Justin Names His Kitten**

The kitten leapt from Justin’s arms to the kitchen counter. He purred while he ate the chicken Justin gave him, and rubbed softly against Justin’s hand when he was done.

Brian leaned against the refrigerator, drinking a beer. “Feed him and he’ll never leave.”

Justin picked the kitten up. “Maybe I don’t want him to.” He smiled down at the tiny cat. “What’s your name, little guy?”

“Christ.” Brian looked disgusted, slammed down the beer and stomped out.

The kitten reached up and swatted Justin’s hand. Justin looked down at the tiny animal, smiling. “I think I’ll call you… Rage.”

**Rage Sleeps**

Justin sat at the kitchen table with the kitten asleep on his lap, frowning. He didn’t want to disturb little Rage, but he needed to go buy cat litter and supplies.

He carefully got up, cradling Rage against his chest while he walked upstairs to the bedroom. Brian was sound asleep, his lips parted, a very quiet wheeze from his deviated septum the only sound in the room.

Brian didn’t move when Justin placed the sleeping kitten on his chest. After Justin had slipped out, he carefully opened one eye, smiled a very small smile, and went back to sleep.

**Eating Out**

Brian slid into the booth. He picked up the menu, and raised his eyebrow at Justin. “Why the fuck are you still wearing your coat?”

Justin shrugged. “I’m cold.”

“It’s not even cold enough for a down jacket outside.”

Just then Debbie came up. Justin ordered a cheeseburger. Brian ordered a salad.

Debbie came back a little later with two cheeseburgers. Justin was taking a bite of his burger when he realized Brian was staring at him. “What?”

“You didn’t…”

Justin looked down. Rage’s head was sticking out of the opening in his jacket.

Justin grinned. “Oh. Yeah. I did.”

**At the Fancy Restaurant (Alternate version to Eating Out)**

Brian and Justin walked into the first Zagat-listed restaurant in Pittsburgh.

Justin kept his down jacket on.

Brian frowned. “Why the fuck are you wearing your jacket?”

“I’m cold.”

“It’s not even that cold outside.”

Just then, a snooty waiter appeared. Justin ordered a cheeseburger, and Brian ordered Salad Nicoise with the dressing on the side.

A little later, the waiter returned with two cheeseburgers. Justin was taking a bite of his when he realized Brian was staring at him. “What?”

“You didn’t…”

Justin looked down. Rage’s head was poking out from his jacket.

Justin grinned. “Oh. Yeah. I did.”

**At the Movies**

“This is the scary part,” Brian whispered.

Justin nodded. “I know. We’ve seen it four times already.”

Brian sighed. “It’s a classic, Justin.”

“Shhhhhhh,” hissed someone from behind them.

Just then, blood, guts, and alien protoplasm exploded all over the screen. Justin’s fingers dug into Brian’s leg, and he buried his face in his shoulder. In the silence that filled the theater after the alien eruption, Rage’s tiny “meow” echoed loudly.

Brian looked at Justin. “You didn’t.”

Justin smiled at his kitten, who was poking his head out to see what all the noise had been about. “Yeah. I did.”

**The Word**

Brian and Justin settled into their seats in the studio audience of the Colbert Report. Brian pretended not to care and to only be there for Justin’s sake. Justin rolled his eyes because whenever he watched the show, Brian always “had to” do something on the computer in the media room.

Brian was very transparent.

“America,” said Colbert, “has always been obsessed with one thing above all else, and that thing is tonight’s word, and the word is…”

“Meow.” Rage poked his head out of Justin’s jacket.

Brian put his head in his hands. “You didn’t.”

Justin smiled. “I did.”

**What's Wrong with Justin?**

Brian came into the media room and sat at his computer. Justin barely glanced at him, his feet on the coffee table, his eyes on the television, his hand absently stroking Rage’s head.

Brian frowned. “Look… stop sulking. You should have known if you brought a cat…”

“Kitten,” Justin corrected him sharply.

“Kitten into the Comedy Central studio that they’d throw us out.”

Justin continued sulking and watching the show on Animal Planet.

Brian sighed and went back to his computer.

Rage nestled his head into Justin’s chest, and woke up just enough to wonder why his person was upset.

**What's Wrong with Justin, 1**

Justin had gone up to bed as soon as Animal Precinct was over. He refused to watch either the Daily Show or the Colbert Report, which were in reruns anyway due to the writers’ strike.

Brian had argued with him, pointing out that Stewart was paying the writers during the strike and Justin should watch the shows for political reasons if nothing else. Justin just snorted and gone upstairs.

Brian was at the computer when he heard a small sound and felt the brush of fur against his bare feet.

Rage leaped lightly onto his lap, and tipped his head.

**What's Wrong with Justin, 2**

Brian frowned at the kitten. “Why aren’t you glued to Justin as usual?”

Rage meowed sharply, jumped down, and looked at Brian over his shoulder before stalking off, tail in the air.

Brian laughed and followed him to the dark bedroom. He knelt next to Justin and kissed his shoulder. Rage purred on the pillow.

Justin groaned and buried his face in his arms. “You’re ganging up on me.”

“You’re pouting.” Brian kissed him again. Rage purred more loudly.

Justin rolled over and looked into Brian’s eyes. “It’s my favorite show.”

Brian nodded. “We’ll try again. I promise.”

Rage purred.

**Good Morning**

Brian had worked all night on the account the new (now fired) account exec had fucked up. There was coffee next to his hand, and Justin’s backside disappearing out the door of the media room.

“Hey!”

Justin turned. “I’m taking Rage to his vet appointment.”

Brian squinted. “Why the fuck are you wearing that thing? I didn’t even know you still had it.”

Justin grinned. “It’s the perfect shirt.”

As Brian regarded his partner over the edge of the coffee cup, Rage poked his little head out of the pocket of the hoody and gave Brian a revoltingly cheerful “Meow.”

**Not a Toy**

Justin was sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of the tree, untangling the mess of lights. Rage was sitting on the chair next to him, watching.

Justin lifted the lights and gave them a shake, hoping to dislodge the end of even one string. Rage’s paw shot out and hooked the light, pulling it in for closer examination.

Justin laughed and pulled the lights away. “That’s not a toy,” he said.

Rage gave him a skeptical look, jumped to the floor, and stalked off.

Brian looked up from the computer. “Apparently, he disagrees.”

Justin smiled after his kitten. “Apparently.”

**Rage Explores**

Rage crept down the stairs. He wasn’t sure why he was creeping, since Brian and Justin were sound asleep in the bed.

He went into the big room with the tree, and sat looking up at it. It stretched up high, high above him. Not as high as the tree he’d been in when he’d found Justin. But high.

The lights on the low branches smelled a little bit like Justin, so he sniffed them for a while. Then he tasted the water under the tree; it was nasty, so he spit it out. Then he went back to bed.

**Home Alone**

The next night, Brian and Justin went out. Rage didn’t like it when they went out and left him home, but Justin sadly said that they were going to something called Babylon, and that the noise might hurt Rage’s ears. Besides, it didn’t look like there was anywhere for the kitten to go in the clothes Justin was wearing.

As soon as they were gone, Rage stalked into the tree room. The lights were on, and he watched them sparkle for a while. Then he went back to the ones that smelled like Justin. Did they taste like him, too?

**Rage in Trouble**

Brian laughed and helped Justin get the key in the door. It was freezing cold outside, and they were both a little drunk. The car that dropped them off was pulling out of the driveway by the time Brian got the door open.

He walked into the media room, and stopped. Under the tree Justin had insisted on setting up in there was Rage, lying very, very still. Brian said Justin’s name in a strangled voice, and dropped to his knees beside the kitten.

“Brian? What is it?”

Brian looked at him, and Justin said, “No.”

Brian took a breath.

**Rage at the Vet**

They sat in the waiting room at the emergency vet. Justin thought about all the hours he’d spent watching things like this on Animal Planet. About how Daphne had told him to “kitten proof” the house. He thought about the day he’d found the little kitten sitting in the tree in their garden.

Brian’s arm was around him, and Justin hid his face against his shoulder. “Make him be okay.”

He felt Brian’s lips on his hair, and his arm pull him closer. “They’re taking care of him.”

Justin shook his head. “He has to be okay.”

Brian didn’t answer.

**What the Vet Said**

“Mr. Taylor?” Justin looked at the white-coated woman standing in front of him and stood up. Brian stood, too.

She gave them a tired half-smile. “Your kitten…” she glanced down at the chart in her hand. “Rage is breathing again, and his heart rhythm is better.”

Justin felt Brian’s hand firm against his back, and he shook his head to stop the buzzing sound in his ears. “I’m sorry… what did you say?”

“The next 12 hours or so will give us more idea of what’s next.”

“Can I see him?”

She nodded. “He’s unconscious, but you can see him.”

**Seeing Rage**

Brian stood behind Justin, watching him put one tentative finger on Rage’s little head.

The kitten lay on his side in the cage. There was a clean, soft folded towel under him, a heating pad under that, and he was hooked up to IVs and monitors.

Justin’s hand was resting on the edge of the cage, and even though the finger stroking Rage’s face was gentle, the knuckles on the other hand were white.

Brian bit both his lips, and had to look away for a minute. When he turned back, there was a streak of moisture on Justin’s cheek.

**Isn’t There Something We Can Do?**

Brian walked over to the vet. “Isn’t there something we can do? I don’t care how much it costs. Get a specialist, or something?”

“Mr…?”

“Kinney.”

“Mr. Kinney, I am a specialist in critical care. We have a cardiologist on staff, and Rage may need him tomorrow, but tonight, we just need to wait.”

Brian heard Justin sniffle behind him. “I’m not very good at waiting, doctor.”

Her eyes flicked to Justin, then back. “For tonight, there’s nothing else we can do. Not even with all the money in the world.”

Brian jerked his head, and went back to Justin.

**Waiting**

Justin stopped abruptly at the door of the media room; the tree was gone, replaced by a large wreath on the wall. “What…”

Brian threw his jacket on the sofa. “I had Emmett get it out of here. We have the one in the living room, and we can just keep that door closed when Rage gets home.”

Justin’s eyes filled with tears, and Brian pulled him close, kissed his hair and let him cry for a while. “Hey.”

Justin looked up.

Brian’s voice was firm. “He’ll be okay.”

“You don’t…”

“I do.” He kissed him again. “I really do.”

**What Rage Saw**

Rage tried to lift up his head, but it was too much effort. He opened his eyes, and even that made his heart pound.

He looked around the place he was in, then squeezed his eyes shut again. He didn’t know where he was, except this was the place with the bad smells and the sharp needles. He didn’t like it here.

And where was Justin?

Rage took a long, deep sniff, and thought he could smell just the littlest tiniest trace of Justin’s scent, and Brian’s. He buried his nose in the bad-smelling towel, and gave one quiet “mew.”

**What the Vet Tech Saw**

Nancy was scribbling something on the chart of a Persian cat in the cage next to the little kitten who has bitten the Christmas tree lights. She heard him make a very small sound. “Hey, little guy! I know two people who are going to be very, very happy to hear you’re awake!”

She reached in the cage and touched his head very softly, but she wasn’t Justin or even Brian, so Rage considered biting her.

But it was just too much effort, so instead, he just made sure his eyes were shut very tightly and pretended to be asleep.

**Coffee Thoughts**

Justin was still asleep when Brian slipped out of bed and padded downstairs. Usually when he made coffee, Rage would meow and give him instructions and generally supervise to make sure that it was done right. Because without that morning coffee, neither Justin nor Brian would be capable of preparing his breakfast or cleaning his litterbox.

Not that Brian did that. Not even that time Justin’s allergies acted up, before they got the dust-free litter. No, Brian had paid the housekeeper extra to do it.

The phone rang, and Brian grabbed it. The caller ID said Pittsburgh Animal Medical Center.

**Waking Up**

Justin was awake, but since being awake meant an aching hole in his chest, he tried to get back to sleep. He closed his eyes tightly, and tried to think about nothing. Especially not his kitten, in that lonely cage. What if he woke up and thought they’d abandoned him?

Justin sniffled, pressed his face harder into the pillow, and tried to make his mind blank.

He must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, Brian was shaking his shoulder. “Wake up!”

Justin sat up like a shot. “What?”

Brian grinned. “He’s awake and apparently asking for you.”

**Back at the Hospital**

Rage lifted his head. He smelled something good, something… JUSTIN.

“Mew.” He said it as piteously as he could, and was rewarded with the touch of the big, strong hand he loved best in the world stroking him.

He said “mew” again, but this time it was a greeting, not a cry. And as Justin’s hand petted firmly down from the top of his head to the base of his tail, Rage nuzzled into him and started to purr.

He heard Justin say his name, and he thought back at him as hard as he possibly could: Take. Me. Home.

**Not Yet**

Brian was talking with the veterinarian while Justin cradled Rage against his chest, careful not to dislodge the IV tubing and monitors. Rage was mewing and chatting to Justin, undoubtedly outlining all the many indignities he had been forced to suffer at the hands of the incompetent staff of the best – and most expensive – veterinary specialty practice in Pittsburgh.

Justin was agreeing with every word Rage uttered, and assuring him that he’d be going home soon.

But the vet shook her head. “We need to keep him one more night. His heart was stopped, Mr. Kinney. He needs careful monitoring.”

**Are You Sure?**

Justin didn’t say anything when he heard what the vet said, just closed his arms more tightly around the kitten.

Brian frowned. “But tomorrow, if he gets through the night okay?”

“Mew!” said Rage, very, very loudly.

Justin lifted his head. “He really wants to come home.”

The veterinarian had a look on her face Brian found hard to interpret, but if he had to guess, he’d think she was trying not to laugh. But in a good way.

Justin looked at her. “He won’t understand if I leave him alone here another night, why I’m not here with him.”

**I Wish I Could Forget**

The vet was explaining the reasons why Rage needed one more night of monitoring and fluids, but Brian wasn’t listening. He was thinking about Justin in the hospital all those years ago, not knowing where Brian was, and why he wasn’t there.

Justin was nodding at whatever the vet was saying, but Brian mumbled something about the rest room and went outside. He stood in front of the building, watching the snow falling all around, with the holiday lights reflecting on the windows and windshields of the cars in the parking lot, and thought about how much he hated hospitals.

**Come Inside**

“Brian?” It was Justin. “You’re freezing. Come back inside.”

Brian turned and wrapped his arms around Justin’s shoulders. “How late will they late you stay?”

“They said all night if we want, but if an emergency comes in, or they get really busy, we’ll have to leave.” Justin put his hand on the back of Brian’s neck. “What’s wrong, Brian?”

Brian touched his forehead to Justin’s. “I hate hospitals.” It was all he said.

Justin stared at him for a long time, then he went on his toes and kissed Brian softly. “Come inside,” he repeated. “You’re cold out here.”

**All Night Long**

Brian was in the lobby getting a cup of coffee from the stand near the waiting area. It was terrible, and the creamer substitute bore no resemblance to any kind of dairy product, but he loaded it with sugar and sucked it down for the medicinal effect. It was somehow easier, he thought, to stay up all night when you were dancing at an after-hours club in Manhattan, than with your butt on cold linoleum and your back against a row of cat cages while your partner slept with his head on your shoulders and his kitten in his arms.

**The Next Day**

Every muscle in Brian’s back, legs, and ass screamed at him, but he eased Justin’s head off his shoulder and stood up.

The tech whispered, “They might be able to release him after rounds, if you want to go get some breakfast and come back in an hour or so.”

Brian glanced down at Justin, who looked at Rage.

“We’ll be right back,” Justin said. “And then we’ll take you home.”

Rage gave a terrible, loud “mew” in protest when Justin slid him back into the cage. Justin hesitated.

“We’ll be right back,” Brian repeated firmly. “We promise.”

Rage blinked.

**Paying the Bill**

The vet was going over Rage’s home care with Justin. They had brought Rage out in a carrier, but Justin had moved him immediately to inside his jacket, where the kitten was purring so loudly Brian could hear him from ten feet away.

The receptionist slid the final bill towards him, and Brian calmly handed her his credit card. Ted was going to have a heart attack when he saw more than four grand at the vet hospital. Then he groaned. Until now, he’d managed to avoid having Ted find out there was a kitten in his house at all.

**What Brian Heard**

Brian was almost asleep waiting for his receipt to be processed, when the fact that the lady standing next to him was sobbing penetrated his consciousness.

“Our grandson was here for Christmas and he left the door open,” she was saying through her tears. “We didn’t know he’d gotten out until it was too late.”

The receptionist gave Brian his receipt, and he nodded towards the couple. “What happened?”

She lowered her voice. “Their little dog got hit by a car, and it’s a three thousand dollar bill to save him. And they don’t have it.”

Brian bit his lip.

**What Justin Heard**

Even though Justin had Rage tucked warmly inside his jacket, Brian had left them there while he went to get the car.

Rage’s purrs were a comforting rumble against Justin’s chest.

The vet was whispering with the receptionist, and then walked up to the couple standing at the end of the counter. “It looks like we can do your dog’s surgery after all, Mrs. Richards.”

The woman shook her head. “We don’t have the money…”

“The bill’s been paid in advance.”

“What do you mean?”

The vet shrugged. “Another client heard what happened and he paid your bill for you.”

**In the Car**

Rage woke up when they got in the car, and panicked for a minute. But he realized he was still inside Justin’s jacket, and he closed his eyes and resumed purring. He knew they were going home, and away from that terrible loud place full of sharp things and strangers and dogs.

He felt Justin twist around, and he wriggled into a more comfortable spot. Justin was saying something to the other man, and he heard him make a short kissing noise. He was saying, “I love you.”

Rage purred more loudly. It was good to be where he belonged.

**At Home**

Brian got under the duvet, sliding his arm under Justin’s shoulder without disturbing the kitten. “I told you he’d be home before Christmas.”

Justin smiled. “And he’s okay.”

Brian nodded smugly. “I told you that, too.”

“Yes, you did,” Justin laughed.

Brian was almost asleep when Justin’s lips brushed his. “This is the best Christmas ever.”

Brian smiled without opening his eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

Rage opened one eye, then shut it again. He was still home, and they were still kissing. He wasn’t sure what Christmas was, but it seemed like a very good thing to him.

**Stalking the Wild Pizza**

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I.

Rage was curled in his basket, purring in his sleep. Justin smiled and brushed his hand over his kitten's body, but Rage kept his eyes tightly closed.

But after Justin was gone, the door slammed, the car started in the garage, Rage jumped up. He raced into the kitchen, nose twitching, tail in the air. He leapt onto the counter, and pounced on the pizza box.

The empty pizza box.

Rage sat there, confused. He knew Justin hadn't eaten it all, and he'd heard Brian say when the man brought the box, "You know I don't eat junk food anymore."

II

Rage stalked into the room, planning on venting his anger with his claws on the white leather sofa. But Brian was there, watching television. "Well," Rage thought, "maybe a nap…" and he jumped on his lap.

Brian pretended not to notice the little kitten, but Rage was used to that. He settled on his denim legs and started to groom one of his paws. In a minute, just like always, Brian's hand started stroking him, even though his eyes never left the television screen.

And then Rage froze, eyes narrowed, nose twitching. He smelled it: his pizza. On Brian's breath.

**What if… a 216 Kitten Drabble**

As he passed the alley, Brian couldn’t believe he’d almost bought those lesbian roses. Then he saw a kitten, her back arched, hissing at a big cat near a dumpster.

“Hey!” The cat bolted, but the kitten, who’d been hungry and cold ever since her mother died, simply curled up right where she was and prepared to be killed by the monster looming over her.

Brian picked her up and felt her trembling. He’d told Justin he couldn’t have a cat in the loft. Fuck knew what she’d do to his Italian leather sofa.

Brian kept walking towards the Jeep.

**Warm**

Brian drove home, one hand on the kitten to keep her from shaking. When he opened the door to the loft, he wondered what fucking influence the lesbians had on Justin that he was listening to classical music.

Justin stared, a strange expression on his face. Brian just stood there, the kitten against his chest, cradled in his hand.

Justin came over. “What….”

Brian shrugged. “It’s a kitten.”

Justin stroked her, and with his hand resting over her, and Brian’s beneath her, for the first time in a very, very long time, she felt warm. And safe.

So she purred.

**Welcome**

Justin sat on the sofa, the kitten asleep on his lap. Brian was at the computer, probably Googling “kittens.”

Daphne’s family had a cat, so he’d phoned her for advice. She’d made an emergency delivery of food, litter, and a decidedly non-designer litterbox. Brian regarded it with horror, but the kitten had used it with relief. And then ate the entire can of food.

Justin stroked her dirty fur, wondering what had made Brian bring her home.

After a while he fell asleep, his arms curled protectively around the kitten.

Brian put a blanket over him, and went to bed.

**Jingle Balls**

Justin was cross-legged on the floor, watching the kitten bat a jingling ball around. Daphne was next to him, a bag of cat toys in her lap.

“I can’t believe Brian got you a kitten.”

Justin shrugged. “He didn’t get her for me. You make her sound like… a dozen roses or a box of candy or something. He just saw her getting beaten up in an alley and he saved her.”

Daphne sighed. “I know. It’s so romantic.”

Justin snorted. “You wouldn’t say that if you’d heard him swearing when he found cat hair on his suit this morning.”

**Romance**

Exhausted by hours of play, the kitten was sleeping on the back of the sofa. Daphne and Justin were standing at the open refrigerator door, arguing over the relative merits of ordering a pizza or cooking something using only beer, Evian, and cold cereal.

“We had the best maple pancakes at this place in Vermont,” Daphne said, sighing.

“You and what’s his name?”

Daphne jabbed her elbow into his side. “Shut up. Just because you don’t like him. But it was very romantic. They had a fireplace and Jacuzzi in every room.”

Justin didn’t respond, just closed the refrigerator door and said, decisively, “Pizza.”

**Meow**

After the pizza came, Daphne went back to her recent trip. “You and Brian should go.”

Justin rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I can see him on a romantic weekend in the mountains.”

“You could ask him.”

Just then the kitten woke up, and looked around, worried to find herself alone. She gave a heartrending “meeeewwww.”

Justin ran over and picked her up, petting her. “Shhhh, it’s okay.”

The kitten blinked, and jumped down to use the litterbox.

Justin laughed. “Unless that place takes cats, I think it’ll be a while before I try to get Brian to take me there.”

**It’s Business**

Justin watched Brian pack. “Where are you going?”

Brian shrugged. “Business.”

“What business?”

Brian zipped his bag shut. “My business.”

Justin didn’t answer. He was tired of trying to figure Brian out, tired of one word answers and the loft door closing. He just went out to the living room.

The kitten jumped up on the back of the sofa, and crawled onto his shoulder. Justin jumped, and then laughed as he pulled her down into his lap.

Brian paused at the door, watching Justin smile at the kitten. He realized he hadn’t seen that smile in a long time.

**What’s Your Name?**

Brian walked over to the sofa. Justin looked up. “What?”

Brian folded his lips in, stuck his tongue in his cheek, and put one hand behind his back. “When I get back…”

Justin waited.

Brian tried again. “I’m going to Chicago to try to meet with Leo Brown from Brown Athletics.” He stopped.

Justin nodded. “Okay.”

“I’ll be back tonight.” Brian hesitated. “Maybe when I get back we can try to figure out some kind of name for her.”

Justin looked up at him, and Brian thought, not for the first time, that his smile really was just like sunshine.

**Dark Eyes**

Daphne and Justin were walking down the street. She had a class, and he had to stop and pick up some cat food on his way home.

They heard violin music at the same time. “I know that guy, he goes to my school. I heard him play once.”

Daphne listened for minute. “He’s good. Intense eyes.”

Justin looked at him. He thought about his birthday, and Brian, and how sometimes it felt like he lived in a mine field instead of a home. “Yeah, they are.”

Daphne went off to her class, and Justin stood, listening to the music.

**Garbage**

Justin smiled when the violinist… Ethan … remembered him. It felt good to just flirt and laugh with someone his own age, who apparently didn’t have a “special handling required” sticker placed on him at birth.

And when Ethan asked him to help him bring a sofa about to be tossed in a garbage truck up to his apartment, he was glad to help.

Even if the sofa was disgusting. “God, are you really going to sit on this thing?” Justin asked, laughing, when they set it down.

Ethan shrugged. “One man’s garbage is another man’s living room.”

**Wolfram**

Justin heard a cat meow, and went over to pet him. “I have a kitten.” He looked up at the dark-eyed man. “My boyfriend gave her to me. He found her in an alley and brought her home.”

Ethan nodded. “All my best stuff, I found in the street. Including Wolfram.”

Justin stood up. “Yeah. That’s where I found my boyfriend, actually.”

“Can I get you anything? A beer?”

Justin shook his head. “I have to go.”

Ethan looked at him. “Your boyfriend waiting?”

Justin laughed. “No. My kitten.”

He waved over his shoulder as he ran down the stairs.

**Purring**

When Justin got home, Brian was staring at his computer, the kitten sleeping on his shoulder.

“That doesn’t look very comfortable.”

Brian slid his eyes sideways. “She looks completely comfortable.”

Justin bent down and kissed him. “I meant for you.”

Brian stood carefully, sliding her down against his chest. She didn’t wake up.

“We have to name this cat, you know. We can’t keep calling her ‘the kitten.’”

“This morning you called her ‘the twat,’ is that what you had in mind?”

Brian frowned. “Justin, she was asleep in my new Prada shoe.”

Justin kissed him again. The kitten purred.

**Pain Management**

Justin was at the computer, reading about cats. When Brian walked in, he didn’t look up. “Did you know that it’s easy to cook for cats?”

Brian went into the bedroom. “That would be interesting if either of us ever cooked for ourselves.”

Justin went to the door and watched him change. “I like to cook. Sometimes.”

Brian snorted. “You like to make a mess in the kitchen and then order Thai food.”

“I can cook tonight.” Justin grinned. “For us, and the kitten.”

Brian walked over and kissed him, hard. Justin was startled, and let Brian pull him closer.

**Pain Management 2**

Brian pressed his forehead to Justin’s. “Not tonight, I have to get the fuck out of here.”

Justin bit his lip. “Can’t we just stay home tonight? Just the two of us?”

Brian smiled. “You mean the three of us?”

“Three of us.”

Brian just pulled on his sexiest black t-shirt, and didn’t answer. Justin sighed.

He was sitting on the sofa, the kitten in his lap, when Brian suddenly slid over the back and sat next to them. Justin let him pull him close, and kissed him back when Brian crushed his mouth against his.

The kitten watched, worried.

**Pain Management 3**

The kitten decided enough was enough. Sometimes her humans did these incomprehensible noisy things, but not tonight. Tonight she wanted her dinner, and a name, and someone to get that jingly ball out from behind the bookshelf.

“Meow!” She swatted Justin’s arm.

Nothing.

“Meeewwww!” She flicked her claw over Brian’s cheek.

“Hey! Watch the face!” Brian pulled away from Justin, who was trying not to laugh. “I’ve had a for shit day, cat. I don’t need more shit at home.”

“What happened?”

Brian shook his head, and didn’t answer.

Justin slid closer, and the kitten sat down on Brian’s leg.

**Hospital**

The kitten nudged Brian’s hand with her head. He started petting her without realizing it.

“Michael called….”

Justin kissed his jaw. “Yeah?”

“Ben’s in the hospital.”

Justin blinked. “Is he okay?”

Brian shrugged. “I think he will be.”

“What happened?”

“Bad reaction to his meds. It’s serious.” Brian was still petting the kitten, and Justin was still next to him. He felt her purring under his hand.

He felt Justin’s breath against his face.

Brian turned his head for a second. “I hate that hospital.”

Justin put his head on Brian’s shoulder, and they just sat there for a while.

**Bowling**

Justin watched as Ben bowled one and then two perfect strikes. Brian was acting like he didn’t care, but he was watching out of the edges of his eyes. Justin could always tell.

Brian let out a huff when one pin didn’t fall on Ben’s third try. Justin shook his head. “Fuck.”

Brian nodded. “Cops top queers. It’s a disgrace.”

Justin laughed. They all went to Woody’s afterward, and Justin stood next to Brian.

Brian was staring at Ben and then at Michael, his face blank, his eyes thoughtful. Ben looked good, not even tired, his arm over Michael’s shoulders.

**Three Cheers**

Brian tipped his beer bottle and took a long swallow, his eyes following a guy in black jeans as he crossed the bar. Justin glanced at him and laughed. Sort of.

Brian didn’t seem to notice, and he didn’t say anything.

Later that night, they went back to the loft. Justin checked the kitten’s water bowl. She was asleep on their bed.

He heard Brian cross to the refrigerator, but didn’t look at him. “Why didn’t you fuck that guy?”

Brian came over, and stood looking down at Justin. “What guy?”

Justin snorted. “The one you were cruising all night.”

“The long-suffering wife routine doesn’t suit you, you know.” Brian went into the bedroom.

Justin sighed. He hated it when he got like this. He didn’t care if Brian fucked every guy at Woody’s. What the fuck was wrong with him?

**Later**

Justin stood in the bedroom doorway. Either the kitten had woken up, moved to Brian’s chest, and fallen back asleep, or Brian had scooped her there without waking her.

Justin sighed and climbed into bed next to them. “We really need to give her a name.”

Brian nodded, then turned his head and kissed him. “Later.”

Justin kissed him back. “Later,” he agreed, laughing.

It was dark, and quiet, and later, when Justin felt Brian give a deep sigh.

“What?”

Brian didn’t answer for a while, and Justin thought maybe he’d fallen asleep.

“So, we really can’t call her ‘Twat’?”

**Words**

“We really can’t call her ‘Twat’. Mel and Lindz would kill us.”

“Hmmm. Although imagining Gus yelling ‘Twat, Twat,’ as he runs around the loft is sort of amusing.”

“To you,” Justin pointed out. “Why can’t we think of anything? I don’t usually have trouble with names.”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard.”

Justin was almost asleep when he heard Brian’s voice again. “Maybe it doesn’t matter what we call her. It’s just a word.”

Justin opened his eyes. The kitten was curled on the pillow near Brian’s head. He nodded and put his head on Brian’s chest. “Maybe it doesn’t.”

**The Morning**

The kitten woke up. Her people were asleep, legs tangled, crusted drool on the corners of their mouths. She cleaned herself carefully, then jumped up to use her litterbox. She tried to get her jingly ball out from behind the bookshelf, but it wouldn’t budge. She flounced to the bedroom, and stood glaring at Brian and Justin.

The power of her rage didn’t wake them, so she used a technique that had proven effective in the past: Jumping on Justin’s face.

He woke up, arms flailing. “What the fuck…. You TWAT!”

Brian laughed, and pulled the pillow over his head.

The end...

**Season Five AU Drabble Series**

**Brian Says No to Justin**

Brian watched Justin sketching angrily. Maybe, he thought, he was just channeling Rage.

But more likely Justin was seriously pissed off. At him.

He took a swallow of his beer. “Do you have any idea how much ItalianModa furniture costs? And what a puppy would do to it?”

Justin slashed a line across the paper, and didn’t answer.

“Not to mention peeing on the hardwood floors. Shedding hair on our clothes.”

Justin looked up. “Long walks in the park. Seeing a living being grow up. Playing ball with Gus.”

Brian put down his beer and went into the other room.

**The Moment Before**

Justin stood in the shower, washing away the smell of sex, booze, smoke, and men. Brian had gotten out a minute before, and was toweling his hair roughly.

Justin turned off the water, got out, and took the towel Brian handed him. “So, Babylon is a huge success, just like I said it would be.”

Brian took the towel and started drying Justin’s hair. “How did you like the VIP room?”

Justin grinned. “It was… fun.”

Brian smiled, kissed Justin’s still-damp hair, and tossed the towel on the counter. “Let’s go to bed.”

Justin bit his lip, and followed him.

**The Moment**

Brian was sprawled across Justin, almost asleep, when Justin sighed.

Brian contemplated ignoring it, but sometimes it was easier to talk to a freshly-fucked, half-asleep Justin than a wide-awake, fully-clothed Justin.

He lifted his head and an eyebrow.

“I was thinking about that puppy…”

Brian put his head back down. “We’ve had this discussion.”

Which was clearly the wrong thing to say, because Justin pushed him off and got out of bed.

Brian sat up. “Where are you storming off to? You live here.”

Justin yanked his sweater over his head. “I know.” And he walked out of the bedroom.

**The Moment After**

Brian didn’t follow him. Justin didn’t expect him to.

Justin sat on the front stairs. Only a few cars drove down the dark street. He didn’t think about anything, really. He just sat there.

Brian was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, wishing he wasn’t thinking at all, instead of thinking too much. Thinking how every time Justin said anything, it was about more than the words themselves. It was about all the things Justin wanted, or might want, or wanted to see if he wanted.

Marriage, Brian thought. And families. Violins, and roses, and picnics.

Picket fences.

Puppies.

**Sleeping On It**

Brian had gone to Babylon, but the DJ that night sucked. The music was too loud, the lights not in sync with the sound. He'd told his manager to get his fucking act together if he wanted to keep his job, and gone to the baths, where apparently it was Troll Night.

So he went home. It was five minutes to 3, and Justin was asleep on the sofa.

Brian didn't bother looking for the puppy. He knew where he was. He was under the blanket, curled against Justin.

He knew Justin wasn't asleep, even though his eyes were closed.

**Thinking On It**

Justin opened his eyes when he heard Brian go up the bedroom stairs. He lay there staring at the ceiling, listening to the shower.

The puppy snuffled into his armpit, and Justin smiled. "Do you need to go out?" The puppy just burrowed a little deeper into his side.

Justin pretended for a minute that he was keeping him. He thought about what he'd name him, about drawing him, about how Gus would like him. He imagined walking him with Daphne, and wondered what Debbie would say, or his mom.

He heard the shower turn off in the other room.

**Waking Up On It**

Justin didn't remember falling asleep, but he must have because the puppy woke him up. He was wriggling in Justin's arms, nipping his chin and whining.

Justin's normal morning irritation disappeared when the puppy licked his face. He laughed and pushed the blanket down around his feet. He thought longingly of coffee, and then thought about Brian's reaction if the puppy peed on his floors.

He shifted the puppy from one arm to the other while he struggled into his jacket, and then held him against his side while he got the loft door open as quietly as he could.

**Peeing On It**

Justin half-jogged down the block to a vacant lot behind an empty store, and set the puppy down in the grass. He sniffed around, his black tail pointing straight up and wagging rapidly back and forth.

After a few minutes, Justin realized three things. One, he was freezing. Two, he needed coffee. Three, he needed to pee. "Hurry up," he said coaxingly.

The puppy was very busy smelling a small brown patch of dirt and ignored him. He finally decided that the spot was the right one, and, with a look of intense concentration on his face, peed on it.

**Waiting On It**

Brian hadn't slept much. Funny how fast he'd gotten used to Justin sleeping next to him, after all that time in LA.

He almost laughed. Yet another reason not to have a dog; Justin wasn't what you'd call a morning person, and it's not like the loft had a backyard.

Brian started the coffee, and waited for the two of them to come back from their little outing. He waited a lot longer than he'd have expected, considering it wasn't really even light out yet.

He was putting sugar in his second cup before he heard the loft door opening.

**Taking a Chance On It**

Justin saw Brian in the kitchen, coffee cup in hand, but didn't say anything. He just put the puppy down.

The puppy's nails clicked on the hardwood floors while he raced over to Brian's bare feet. Brian stood looking down at him with a certain amount of confusion. The puppy's little nose was pushing in between Brian's toes, and he was making little snuffling noises.

He glared at Justin. "What the fuck is he doing?"

Justin took a cup off the shelf, and poured coffee into it. "He's worshipping at your feet."

Brian regarded the puppy with a new interest.

**Once Bitten**

Brian took his coffee over to the sofa. The puppy hurried after him, eyes locked on his bare feet. When Brian sat down, he pounced.

"Hey!" Brian poked at the puppy with one long toe. "That hurts."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Brian. He barely even has any teeth."

Brian glared at him over the rim of the coffee cup. "He has teeth. Believe me."

Justin sat down next to him and scooped the little dog into his lap. Brian watched Justin's strong hand tickle and tumble the puppy all over his legs, and down into the space between them.

**Twice Shy**

Justin didn't look at Brian. Brian knew that was a bad sign.

Justin didn't say anything. Brian knew that was a very, very bad sign.

Brian rubbed between his eyes and wondered if he was allergic to dogs, but decided it was a reaction to the wall of unspoken words that wasn't coming from Justin.

Brian put his hand on the puppy's head. "Justin…"

He cut him off. "I know. We can't have a dog."

Brian sighed. "It wouldn't be fair to him, even if we wanted to." It was uncharacteristically conciliatory, but he hated it when Justin seemed resigned.

**A Hair of the Dog**

Justin got up, and the puppy sat on the sofa next to Brian, head tipped to one side. He looked at the floor, very far below, and Justin, very far away. He made up his mind, and half-jumped, half-slid off the sofa.

"Hey!" Brian grabbed at the little black dog, and kept him from wiping out on the hardwood below. Justin was standing by the kitchen counter, a half-smile fighting with the frown on his lips. When the puppy got over to him and started scrabbling imploringly at his legs, the smile won. He leaned over and picked him up.

**That Bit Me**

Brian looked at Justin, puppy in his arms.

Justin shifted from foot to foot. "I guess I'll take him to the shelter. They said I could come anytime after 10."

Brian glanced at the clock. "It's not even 8."

Justin nodded. "I thought I'd take him to Mel and Lindz's first. Maybe they'd like a puppy for Gus."

Brian looked at Justin for a long time, then shrugged. "I'd offer you a ride, but I don't want dog hair all over the car."

Justin gave a short laugh. "Don't worry Brian. It would never have crossed my mind to ask."

**Snakes and Snails**

After Justin left, Brian cleaned up the kitchen, got dressed, and went to the gym to meet his new trainer. Time may be marching on, he thought, but fuck if it was going to march over Brian Kinney's body any harder than it had to.

The trainer was good, so Brian had a really great workout. The trainer was also hot, so Brian had him, too.

He looked around the locker room. It was full of the same guys in the same stages of undress, talking about the same things they always did.

Brian decided to shower at the loft.

**And Puppy Dog Tails**

Brian was toweling his hair when he heard the loft door open. Justin didn't come in. He figured he'd give the guy a few minutes to mourn the loss of the hairball.

He was pulling on a pair of jeans when he heard Justin talking in a very specific tone of voice Brian immediately knew meant plans had changed. It was Justin's puppy voice.

Brian walked to the top of the stairs. Justin was on the floor, the puppy inside the circle of his crossed legs.

"Justin…"

He didn't look up or answer. He just kept playing with the puppy.

**The Moment**

Brian walked over to where Justin was playing with the puppy. He wasn't sure what was going on, but he had a bad feeling. "I thought you were taking him to the shelter."

The little black dog wriggled and got away from Justin, and tried to climb up Brian's leg. Justin scooped him back into the circle of his legs. "I was. But I decided not to." He glanced up at Brian. "I'm keeping him."

Brian just stared, and when he finally spoke, it was slowly. "Not here, you're not."

Justin looked up at him coolly. "That's entirely your call."

**Later**

Brian sat on the sofa, drinking the latest in a long, long line of beers. The bottles were lined up on the coffee table in front of him.

Justin had gone to meet Michael. He'd put the puppy in his crate, and stood at the door before he left. "I'll be back in around three hours. And this will be the last time you have to worry about the dog." And then he left.

Brian wasn't worried about the dog. That would have required that Brian think, and Brian was very studiously working on not doing that at the moment.

**Even Later**

Brian gazed at his face in the mirror. "You're drunk," he said.

"Yes, you are," he agreed.

He left the bathroom and ignored the whimpery noises coming from the crate in the bedroom. But for some perverse, drunken reason, he instead stooped down and let the puppy out. "Go ahead, little dog," he said. "Go piss on Justin's shoes."

The puppy just sat at Brian's feet, looking up at him adoringly. "Don't bother," Brian said. "You can ask Michael. It won't work."

He got another beer, and when he got to the sofa, the puppy was sitting there, tail thumping.

**Later Still**

Brian sighed. It was the booze, he figured, making him weak. He set the puppy on his lap. "Don't think this changes anything," he said. "This loft is too small for the two of us."

Brian tipped some more beer into his mouth, and then corrected himself. "The three of us."

The puppy put his paws on Brian's chest, and licked his face. Brian looked into his eyes. The little dog's tail flew back and forth.

"Why did you have to fuck everything up?" Brian gazed at the dog for a long time, but the puppy didn't say a word.

**Another Moment**

The puppy wasn't sure why the man didn't take him outside. He did have to pee, and the man was sounding like maybe he'd fall asleep soon. He tentatively licked at his face, and the man opened his eyes.

The puppy licked him again. Then he whimpered, very loudly.

Brian sighed, and figured it wouldn't be the end of the world to find the leash and collar Justin had bought, and take the puppy out to pee. It was that or get his floors refinished, he thought. Two minutes to the corner and back was certainly less hassle than that.

**Pissing and Moaning**

Brian stood shivering in the lot halfway down the block while the puppy sniffed every blade of grass. He pulled on the leash, dragging Brian from one end of the grassy area to another. Finally, the little black dog let loose a long stream of steaming piss, a look of ecstasy on his face.

"You're a freak," Brian informed the dog. "Hurry up."

The puppy gave a little jump when he was done, and started heading home, Brian trailing behind.

When they got back to the loft, the door was open, and Justin was inside, cell phone in his hand.

**Queening Out**

Justin snapped the phone shut. "Jesus, Brian…"

Brian sneered. "What, you thought I'd take your precious little puppy out to play in traffic?" He shut the door and unsnapped the puppy's collar.

He raced over to Justin, who knelt down and petted his head. "I think I'll take him now," he said. "You're being a complete asshole."

"You're leaving me for a dog, and I'm being an asshole?"

Justin picked the puppy up. "I'm not leaving you. I'm moving out. And I'm not doing it for the dog." He picked up the leash and collar. "I'm doing it for myself."

**Puppy Perspective 1**

I tried to go down the stairs, but they were very long and I had just come all the way up them with the other man. So I sat on the landing and looked at Justin, very sadly.

He sat next to me, and pulled me into his lap. I squirmed around until I got my feet back under me, and then I snuffled at his face.

Something tasted like water but it was very salty. I licked at it, but more kept coming. Finally he made a sniffing noise, and we went down the stairs and out the door.

**Puppy Perspective 2**

We walked very fast for a while. I was tired, but eventually we came to a house. I liked the way it smelled.

A lady opened the door. "Sunshine!" Then she looked at me. I was sitting very, very nicely, and when she smiled, I thumped my tail. "And who's this adorable little puppy?"

She leaned, and I jumped up and kissed her. Her face tasted very different from Justin's face, and also from the other man's.

"Deb, would it be okay if we stayed here tonight?"

She looked surprised. "Fight with Brian?"

Justin shook his head. "I moved out."

**Puppy Perspective 3**

The lady was very nice and gave me something she called "cannelloni." I liked it much more than dog food.

"He'll get diarrhea," Justin said. I didn't know what that was; it sounded bad.

"He's been eating out of dumpsters, and you think my cannelloni is going to fuck up his intestines?"

The long walk and the stairs and now this food made me very tired. I went over to where Justin was and lay right on his feet, so I would know if he went anywhere, because I didn't want to be left behind. Then I went to sleep.

**Plans**

The puppy was asleep on my feet, so I stayed at the table even after I finished the cannelloni.

Debbie sat down across from me. "So, what's going on, Justin? I thought you and Brian had worked things out."

I shrugged. "It’s not turning out how I thought it would."

"Yeah, well, most things don't." She nodded at the puppy. "And how does he fit in? I can't see Brian Kinney sharing his designer loft with a dog."

I snorted. "Neither could he."

Debbie reached across the table, and put her hand on mine. "What are you going to do?"

**Time**

I took a breath. "Get my own place. It's time I did that. And if Brian and I can work things out, great. If not, then I guess it's time I found that out, too."

Debbie stood up and carried our plates to the sink. "Well, you can stay here until then." She smiled down at the puppy. "And so can he, as long as you feed and walk him more reliably than Michael did when he was eight and we got a puppy."

I laughed. "I'm not eight."

She looked at me a little sadly. "No, Sunshine, you're not."

**Homing Instinct**

It took me weeks to find a place, even with my mom's help. Finding somewhere that allowed dogs at all was tough. Forget something with a yard and enough light and space that I could use it as a studio.

I found a loft on my own, in a neighborhood that would have given my mother a heart attack, but they said no pets and the stairs would have been hard on the puppy, anyway. So we kept looking.

I was trying one day, for the millionth time, to think of a name for my puppy, when my phone rang.

**Unspoken**

"Hey." It was Brian, his voice silky as ever.

We'd kept seeing each other, sort of – at the diner, at Debbie's, at the comic book store. I was at Michael's one night, letting the puppy play in his yard with a neighbor's dog, when Brian stopped by.

I'd gone home with him that night, but it was hard to be at the loft with him. I don't know why; he was gentle and tender in a way he hadn't been for a long time before I moved out.

He even petted the dog, and acted like he'd missed us both.

**The Morning After**

He asked me to come over, and I did. It was like it always was: a little comforting, a little painful. In the morning, the puppy was curled up on my jeans, next to the bed. I gave his head a scratch, then turned over.

Brian looked at me. "You still haven't named him?"

I shook my head. "I can't think of the right name."

He lit a cigarette, and blew out a thin stream of smoke. "You used to be pretty good at names."

"Everything seems so banal, or just not him."

Brian laughed. "I know what you mean."

**Thinking**

I left when I took the puppy for a walk. Brian seemed surprised, or maybe not; he always hid his feelings pretty well. It was a long walk from the loft to Debbie's; I stopped and got a coffee to-go when we were around halfway there, and sat on a bench in the park, watching him play with two other dogs. I couldn't decide if I felt contented, or lonely.

My mom had called twice the night before, so I called her back.

"I have a place for you to look at," she said, sounding happy. "I'll pick you up."

**The Place**

It wasn't really a house, but almost. If it had been cuter, you might have called it a cottage or a bungalow, but it was more like a glorified shed. There was an old brick patio, uneven and broken from too many freezes and thaws. There was a fence around a small back yard, mostly mud and weeds, and a few unhappy shrubs.

The leafless trees in the yard let in more than enough light. It was just one room, not even that big, but it had a lock on the door, a place to cook, and room to paint.

**Decision**

I'd left the puppy at Debbie's, but I stood in the yard and imagined him there. I smiled.

"I thought you'd like it." My mom looked pretty happy herself; it wasn't a bad neighborhood, just a few blocks from PIFA, in fact. It was cheap and clean and I decided it was going to be mine.

"The landlord's okay with the dog?"

She nodded. "He has dogs himself, and his previous tenant here had a dog. That's who built the fence."

"Let's do it, then." We walked back to the car and went to the office to sign the lease.

**Trouble**

I'd given a pretty big piece of my Rage savings to the rental agency, so my mom bought me lunch. After she dropped me at Debbie's, I ran inside to get my puppy, thinking yet again that I really had to come up with some kind of name for him. But his crate door was open, and he wasn't inside.

I checked the yard, but he wasn't there. I noticed his leash and collar were gone, too, so I figured Debbie had taken him for a walk.

But she hadn't. She'd gone out looking for him, because he was gone.

**Missing**

"What do you mean, he got out?" I was staring at Debbie, who was holding his leash and collar in her right hand.

"He was whining, so I let him into the yard while I did the dishes. When I went out to get him, he'd dug out under the fence." She pointed to a little gap between the grass and the fence. Just big enough for a puppy to fit through.

I sat down, hard, on the kitchen chair. "Where would he go?"

"Looking for you, I guess." She sat down. "Michael and Ben are coming to help look."

**The Search**

Michael, Ben, Debbie, and I all took a different direction. I walked up and down the streets near the house, calling him… but I couldn't call his name. I'd never given him one. I just called him "Puppy."

I stopped at Debbie's to see if he'd come home. She'd called Carl, who said he was a homicide investigator and not a dog catcher, but who sent over two cops and an animal control officer anyway. I filled out a form and gave them a photo I'd taken of him at Brian's.

Then they left, and I went back out searching.

**The Smell**

I smelled Justin then I didn't smell him, so I went back to the smell. Then a car tried to kill me, but I remembered cars and so I ran away. But then I couldn't find the Justin smell again, and I wasn't sure where I was.

Then I worried, because if I didn't know where I was, how would Justin find me? So I started looking for his smell again, up and down the streets and the alleys, just like when I was a homeless puppy looking for some food.

I remembered to be careful about the cars, though.

**The Night**

My mom had come over as soon as she heard, and gone out with Debbie one last time to look. I went back to the fence where he'd dug out, walking around. Somehow I couldn’t imagine he'd gone far. Most of the neighbors were home by then, but no one had seen him.

I even went to the alley where I first found him, but he wasn't there. I don't know why I thought he would be.

I stood under a streetlight for a minute, and looked up at the sky. There were no clouds, and it was getting colder.

**The Cold**

I'd forgotten. How cold it could be, I mean. The first time Justin picked me up, I was very very cold, but since then, I'd forgotten.

I dug and dug in the newspapers, and made myself into the smallest size I could, and tried to feel warm. But it was very hard. The wind kept blowing and the ground was wet, and it felt like the wet was coming up through the newspaper.

And my stomach was empty and making sounds. I'd forgotten that, too.

Suddenly it seemed that going out looking for Justin had been a very bad idea.

**The Morning**

That night, while everyone slept, I made a poster on my laptop. I mailed the file to Kinko's, then walked over there to pick them up as soon as it got light.

I put them up around the neighborhood, and then I went to put one on the bulletin board at the diner. When I walked in, I saw Brian sitting at the counter, drinking coffee and reading the paper.

"Hey."

He looked at me in surprise. "Hey." Then he gave me another look. "Someone's on his way home after a long night."

I nodded, and handed him a flyer.

**Still Cold**

It got light, but it was still cold. I hadn't slept much, because I kept shivering, and my stomach was empty. I tried to smell again, looking for food and for Justin. I got up and went to the end of the alley, then out to the street, smelling and smelling.

There was a food smell, and I followed it to a paper pushed up against a wall. I ate the food, but it was stuck to the paper so I ate that, too. I wished I had some water.

I went down the street, smelling very hard for Justin.

**Comfort**

I admit it; Brian wasn't a shit about the puppy. He might have even looked worried, although whether it was about my dog or me, I wasn't sure.

"I can drive you around to look, if you want," he said.

I shook my head. "I need to walk."

He nodded. "Let me know when you find him." Then he added, carelessly, "And if you need anything."

I couldn't think of anything. "I'm going out to put up my flyers, then to the shelter when they open at 9."

He looked at me for a minute, then signaled for his check.

**On the Track**

I smelled him. Maybe. It was a very familiar smell, and yes, I thought; it was Justin.

Maybe.

I sniffed again, then sneezed very hard, then sniffed one more time. And then I realized it was not the Justin smell. It was something else that I remembered. So I followed it.

I went down many streets, and the smell was always there. I was very careful when I had to go in the part of the street that had cars. I didn't like cars. One hit my mother one day and she never moved anymore. I hated them very much.

**No Luck**

He wasn't at the shelter. They had my report, and let me put the flyer up on their bulletin board. The woman who showed me the stray kennels told me to come every day, twice if I could, to look for him; they always had lots of black dogs, she said, and they were usually too busy to check the reports and call people. She gave me a brochure on how to find a lost pet, and then I went back out on the street.

I don't know how long I walked, and looked. I just kept walking.

And looking.

**I Remember This**

I kept smelling, and it was still familiar but I didn't know what it was. Grass and dirt was there, and some broken glass I walked around carefully.

I remembered broken glass. It went with cold and hungry and sleeping on the wet, hard ground.

I remembered Justin, too, and thought I should have found him by now. Why was I smelling this other thing?

But it was all I could smell, so I kept going.

Then I stopped, and sat. I sniffed the air, and tipped my head to one side, and felt my tail thumping on the sidewalk.

**What Now?**

After a couple of hours, I realized I was going to fall asleep on my feet. So I went back to Debbie's and lay down on the sofa. I didn't even take off my shoes, which she'd have been pretty pissed about if she'd been there.

I woke up and it was quiet and dark. I grabbed my cell phone and looked at the time; five-thirty. The shelter closed at six.

I grabbed my jacket and thought about calling Brian or my mom for a ride, but there wasn't time. I walked to Liberty Ave. and looked for a cab.

**This Place**

I hesitated. It wasn't a bad place to rest, but not the best place. I thought people might see me. And I smelled as hard as I could but there was no food. So I went across the street and looked for a food smell. I found something and ate it, and it made me not as hungry, but I thought it would be very good to have some water. Maybe it would rain, although then I would be wet.

But I was thirsty, so I curled on the hard spot I found, and hoped that it would rain soon.

**Despair**

He wasn't in the shelter. I looked all over, again, for hours, and I never saw him.

I wished I'd given him a name.

I found myself back in the alley again, but he still wasn't there. I started at the spot where I'd found him, cold and wet and curled up on some newspaper. I went back to the street, and kept walking. I didn't know where I was going at first, but after a while, I realized I was heading for the loft.

I checked the time; he might be there. But either way, I had a key.

**Two Shoes**

I was asleep. The wind had gone away and I was against a wall that was not as cold as the night before, so I slept very hard. Too hard, because I was awake and there were two shoes. I jumped up, ready to run.

But then I smelled, and though it was not Justin, I knew who it was. It was that man who had the very big, warm bed.

He squatted down and lifted me up, very carefully. He said something, but I didn't know what he meant, except he said one word I knew.

He said, Justin.

**There You Are**

Brian was in front of his building, unlocking the door. I started to call his name, then stopped.

He turned and saw me, and his face broke into a big smile.

I took two steps, then one, then I started to run. He put the puppy down and he raced to me, barking and wagging and then I knelt down and grabbed him. He was licking my face and taking little nips at my mouth and ears and hair.

"What… where did you…" I couldn't get anymore out; every time I said something, my mouth was full of puppy tongue.

**Justin**

I had followed the other man's smell and that is how I had found Justin. He was there, warm like I remembered, and he smelled and tasted very very good. I told him I was thirsty and still hungry, and thought we should go in the house with the warm bed.

So he took me in, with the other man, who had his arm over Justin's shoulder and was petting my head with his hand, which felt very nice. Then he did it to Justin, who made a laughing sound that I liked very much.

And then we went inside.

**Puppy**

We gave him food and water, and he ate and drank it all. Then I picked him up again, and sat with him on the sofa. "He was just there when you got home?"

Brian nodded, and carried two cups of hot coffee over to the sofa. I took one, and let the hot liquid warm me up.

Brian sat next to me, and petted the puppy's head. "There he was. I was going to bring him in and call you, but then… there you were."

I couldn't stop smiling. "He found his way back here. It's unbelievable."

Brian nodded.

**Warm and Safe**

I was on Justin, right on him. He was very warm and I felt very sleepy. I was full and not thirsty, and everything felt exactly right.

The man was petting me, and so was Justin, and I felt them start to kiss behind me. I knew this was just something they did; I hoped if they had to go to the bed they would take me, because even though the sofa was warm, I would rather be in the bed. But then I was so tired, I just fell asleep. I knew Justin would make sure I was okay.

**And Then…**

The puppy was asleep on my lap, and I was falling asleep on Brian's shoulder. His arm was around me, his other hand was stroking the puppy, and I felt warm and drowsy and safe.

I made myself open my eyes. "We should really go to bed."

He didn't move, just let his fingers play with my hair.

"Brian?"

"You realize, Justin, that your puppy wants to live here."

I laughed a little. "Apparently. But we'll have a place of our own soon, and he'll like that, too." I let my hand rest next to Brian's on the puppy's back.

**The Bed**

I felt them moving around, and almost woke up.

Almost.

I was bumped and carried, and then… yes!... I was put on the bed. I could smell Justin and the man and other good smells, so I just made a little grumbly sound and went back to sleep.

After a while they were making noise and I woke up, but then I recognized it was the good noise they sometimes made, and this time when I fell asleep, I didn't wake up for a very very long time.

When I did, Justin was sleeping with his head on the man.

**Good Morning**

I woke up between Brian and the puppy. I thought it was entirely possible I'd never been so happy.

When I opened my eyes, Brian was staring at me. "I was thinking…"

"Always a dangerous sign," I said.

"Your puppy needs a name."

I nodded, and yawned. "I was thinking… Hero. Because he was so brave."

Brian laughed. "Like Rage?"

I smacked him with my hand. "Well, like Rage but without the angst."

Brian kissed me. "This is no place for a dog…"

I kissed him back. "How about we try something different this time?"

And then Hero woke up.

**A Puppy's Epilogue**

And that was my story. Justin took me to a new house, and I lived there with him and our yard. The man came all the time, and sometimes we would go to the house where he lived, almost every night one thing or the other would happen.

Sometime we visited the lady at the other house, and she would always tell me not to run away and then she would laugh. Also, she called Justin by his wrong name all the time. But she was very nice and gave me good things to eat, so I loved her too.

The End

**Rimshot**

A story about basketball with no pets in it

1.

Justin threw the ball, and one more time it ricocheted off the rim.

Michael sighed. Brian laughed. Ben picked up the ball and patted Justin's shoulder. "That was a lot better."

Justin shoved a hand through his hair. "I'm never going to be good enough in time for the game." He looked at Ben with troubled eyes. "And the hospice really needs the money we'll raise if we win."

"Look at it this way," Brian said from the sidelines. "At least you're better than Mikey."

"Hey!" Ben and Michael said in unison.

"At least I'm playing," Michael added. "Unlike you."

2.

Brian finished checking email on his Blackberry, ignoring the encouraging sounds Ben made whenever Michael or Justin got the ball anywhere near the basket or it rolled around the rim for any length of time before falling to the ground.

Michael threw himself onto the bench next to Brian while Ben showed Justin the proper stance for a free-throw. "You could be a little more supportive, you know."

Brian shrugged. "I taught Justin everything he needs to know about rimming back when he was in high school."

Michael laughed. "Good thing Ben's here to teach him the parts you missed."

3.

Brian checked the time, and frowned. Justin had said he'd be back "soon, I just want to try a few more throws." That was two hours ago; now, it was almost dark.

Half an hour later, Brian slammed his laptop shut and ran down the stairs to the street. Half a block away, in the half-twilight, Justin was standing on the free throw line, staring at the basket, ball held lightly in his hands.

Brian watched from across the street as the ball flew through the air and rolled twice around the rim and then dropped quietly through the net.

4.

Justin was picking up the ball when he felt someone standing behind him. He felt a moment's alarm, then laughed as Brian's arms wrapped around him.

Brian laughed against his ear. "Now you know what rimming is."

Justin turned to face him. "Did you see?"

"I saw. Nice shot."

Justin grinned. "Michael says you're almost as good as Ben."

Brian pulled back, a look of horror on his face. "Almost as good? Love really is blind."

"Well," Justin said, slipping his arm around Brian's waist as Brian looped his over Justin's shoulders, "if you played, you'd show them, wouldn't you?"

5.

Justin came out of the bathroom, toweling his hair.

Brian woke up with a grunt when Justin's cold feet and wet hair joined him under the duvet. "This is why you shouldn't turn into a jock."

Justin snuggled deeper into the warmth under the cover, laughing. "Don't worry; it's just temporary. And it's for a good cause."

Brian made a face as Justin's wet hair brushed against his bare skin. "So you, and everyone, keep saying. But I told you: the only kind of rimming I'm into involves my tongue and your ass, not throwing a ball through a net."

6.

Brian was almost asleep. Justin wasn't. "Seriously, Brian; why won't you play? It's for the hospice."

Brian heaved a martyred sigh. "If I want to give money to the hospice, I'll write them a check. Why should I humiliate you all with my superior athletic prowess so Vic Grassi House can fulfill its mission of care and compassion?"

Justin laughed, and petted Brian's hair. "That was extraordinarily eloquent and a complete load of shit. What is it? Do your rim shots bounce out? Your free throws fall short?"

Brian snorted. "Ben's been teaching you the talk along with the walk?"

7.

Justin stuck his tongue out, and Brian grabbed it. "I can suggest a better use for that, since we're on the subject of rimming."

Justin swatted his hand away. "Forget it. I'm going to sleep. I have practice in the morning."

Brian rolled his eyes. "You're like a fucking dog with a bone when you have some new cause."

"The hospice isn't a new cause, Brian." Justin sounded offended.

Brian glanced at him, and he touched his face. "Sorry. I know."

Justin put his head on his pillow. A minute later, Brian rolled over and tugged him into his arms.

8.

Brian noticed Justin walking towards the door. "You know, you could just stay here and work on your rimming the old-fashioned way."

Justin glanced over his shoulder as he opened the door. "You should come. You can just watch."

Brian didn't look up from his laptop. "I don't watch. I'm the one every else watches."

Justin laughed. "All the better."

Brian ignored him, and Justin went out the door, still laughing.

Fifteen minutes later, Brian decided to go to the gym. He'd been feeling a little slack lately. He got into his sweats, grabbed his gym bag, and headed out.

9.

It was a nice day, so Brian decided to walk. As he passed the park, he saw Justin leaning against the fence, next to Emmett. He glanced at the basketball court, and then stopped.

Drew Boyd, shirt tucked into the waistband of his sweatpants, was dribbling the ball, while Ben tried to get it away from him – something at which he was both very good and very successful.

Ben made a flying leap to the side of the basket. The ball landed right on the rim, where it spun once, twice, and then dropped with a swoosh through the net.

10.

Brian frowned when Justin spotted him, but walked over to where he stood with Emmett. "So, what blackmail did you use on your boyfriend to get him to take one for the team?"

Emmett looked at him with what might have been either pity or affection. "I told him it was to help the hospice."

Brian glanced at Justin, who smiled innocently. Brian's contemplation of the incongruity of that particular expression was interrupted by whoops from the court, where Drew had managed to get the ball to bounce off the rim of the basket before it fell to the ground.

11.

Drew got the ball first, and threw it, but it spun around the edge three times before falling to the ground.

Ben clapped Drew's shoulder. "Not bad for a football player."

Drew grinned. "And you're not bad for a college professor."

Brian had enough. He dropped his gym bag, stripped off his sweatshirt, and strode onto the court.

"If you boys can spare me a ball?"

Ben threw it to him, and without moving an inch closer to the basket, Brian coolly launched it down court.

The ball dropped cleanly through the net, not so much as brushing the rim.

12.

Michael, Emmett, and Justin watched Ben pull off his sweatshirt and toss it on the ground. He called encouragement to Drew and Brian, then walked on the court and snagged the ball.

Justin smiled. "I really admire how Ben makes everyone feel appreciated even while whipping their asses."

Michael sighed. "That's my guy."

"You know what I admire, boys?" It was Emmett. "The way these three guys look with their shirts off."

Michael and Justin looked as Drew hurtled the ball uselessly at the rim of the basket, and Brian leaped up and slammed it through.

Justin nodded. "Good point."

13.

A few minutes later, Ben feinted around Brian, snagging the ball away as they both ran. He threw it to Drew, who took his shot.

The ball spun around once, twice, three times as Brian and Ben ran to the basket. Ben took a leap, trying to push the ball in. Brian flew up after him, aiming to knock his arm away from the ball. Drew got in between them, trying to throw Brian's aim off.

The ball dropped off the edge of the basket and bounced towards the benches. But Emmett, Justin, and Michael didn't chase after it, or even notice when it bounced past their feet.

They were watching the three shirtless, sweaty guys who had fallen in a writhing pile underneath the basket.

14.

"You know," said Emmett. "I used to like football best. Those tight pants, and my sweetie being the star and all."

"Yeah," said Michael. "Something about basketball really appeals to me." He nodded as Ben managed to get free of Drew and Brian's legs and stand up. "I mean, the way that ball just spins around and around on the rim of the basket. It's kind of… mesmerizing, really. Don't you think?"

Ben held out a hand that Brian ignored. He stood up on his own, sweaty chest and arms catching the sunlight that peeked out from behind a cloud.

15.

"You know," Justin added, "I can't say I have any good feelings about football or baseball, for personal reasons. But I'm gaining a deep and abiding appreciation for basketball."

"Hey, guys," Ben called out pointedly "Think one of you could get the ball?"

Justin laughed and retrieved it, then tossed it not at Ben, but at the basket. It hit the rim and almost, but not quite, went in.

"I told you that you needed to practice your rimming," Brian said as it bounced into his hands.

Whatever Justin said was drowned out by thunder, then lightning and then rain.

15.

The rain came down in a sheet. It poured over Brian's head, separating into rivulets that ran down his shoulders, arms, and chest.

Justin contemplated how much he liked rain, and then noticed Brian had dropped the ball and joined Drew and Ben in running for their gym bags and discarded shirts near the benches. He shook his wet hair out of his eyes, grabbed the ball, and took it to the free-throw line.

The ball cut a clean swath through the falling water, skidded on the wet rim of the basket, and dropped with a splash through the net.

16.

A very wet Brian, his equally wet sweatshirt clinging to his muscles, grinned at him from the gate. He was holding Justin's gym bag, and he handed it to him before looping his arm over his shoulders.

As they walked back to the loft, he dropped a kiss on Justin's wet hair. "You know what we need now? A really hot shower." He smiled. "And then we'll practice your rimming."

Justin jabbed him with his elbow. "MY rimming? I'm not the one who landed on my ass out there."

Brian snorted. "Fine. You win. We'll practice my rimming."

Justin smiled.

17.

That night, Justin looked at Brian from across the room. "So, you're going to play?"

Brian didn't turn his eyes away from the television, just grunted something vaguely affirmative and took another bite of Thai takeout.

Justin's face lit up, although Brian didn't see it. He walked over to the sofa, and slid down next to him, wrapping his arm around his shoulders. "I'm glad you're going to be able to put all that rimming experience you have towards a good cause."

Brian chewed on his lip to keep from smiling, and put another bite of food in his mouth.

18.

After a week of practice, they were ready. Ben, Brian, Drew, the bouncer from Babylon, and a former trick of Brian's who shyly admitted to having played "a little college ball" were the starting lineup for the hospice. Michael, Justin, Emmett, Ted, and Blake were on the bench.

Debbie, pom poms clutched firmly in each hand, leaned over to Brian. "Nice sign behind the stage."

Brian ignored her.

"I wonder who got Remson to sponsor this thing?"

Brian smiled. "Time to warm up."

His first shot missed, but the second spun twice around the rim before dropping through the net.

19.

Angels Over Pittsburgh's team was comprised of a chef who'd played for the Panthers, 6'8" twin brothers, a lesbian couple who had come out while playing for the WNBA, and five of their closest personal friends on the bench.

Daphne looked at Justin. "Why aren't there any women on your team?"

"Because we suck."

"You do." She patted his hand. "But I still hope you win."

Ben smiled. "Everyone wins today; both teams get $5000 just for playing, thanks to…" he glanced at the court, where Brian was once again teasing the edge of the basket with his ball… "Remson."

20.

Suddenly, Tannis' voice rang out from the stage: "We want to welcome everyone here today to the First Annual GLC Basketball Game for Charity! Thanks to our sponsor, Remson Pharmaceuticals and … an anonymous contributor from our community…"

Justin smiled, Brian glared at the stage, and Debbie snorted.

"Each charity will receive $5000 just for playing, and the winning team will be awarded TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS!"

Applause rang out, and just then, one of the women from Angels over Pittsburgh sent a ball through the hoop so cleanly not only did it not touch the rim, the net barely moved.

21.

"Oh, that's just beautiful," Brian said disgustedly.

"It really was," Ben said, the slightest hint of disapproval in his voice.

Brian snorted. "Lesbians rimming. What is this queer world coming to?"

The referee blew her whistle as Babylon's bouncer glanced the ball off the basket's rim.

"You know," Drew said from behind Brian, "there's only one important thing to remember here today."

Ben nodded. "To play a good, clean game, and know it's for a good cause."

Brian gave Ben a disbelieving look, and Drew shook his head. "To completely crush those losers."

"Thank god," said Brian. "Let's play ball."

22.

Justin paced up and down in front of the bench, chewing on his thumbnail.

They'd been up by 22, down by 4, back, up by 8, and down by 1 after the bouncer fouled one of the lesbians, back up by 5 after the lesbians took their revenge, and now the score was tied. Every time a hospice player scored, someone from Angels scored, too.

The crowd was screaming, some of them rooting happily for both teams.

Gus was bouncing excitedly in Lindsay's lap, screaming "Daddy! Daddy!" every time Brian's ball so much as brushed the rim of the basket.

23.

Ben called a timeout with two minutes remaining in the fourth quarter. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and Michael ran to him with a bottle of water and a towel.

"That last shot was beautiful, big guy," he said, wiping Ben's face tenderly. "Nothing but net."

Ben finished swallowing the water, and shook his head. "Michael, it was a textbook example of rimming the basket. I think it went around six times before it went in."

Michael grinned. "In my world, rimming is the gold standard."

Ben laughed, kissed him, and turned to his team. "OK, here's the plan…"

24.

Ben's shot hit the rim and bounced to the court.

"FOUL!" shouted the ref.

"FUCK" shouted Ben.

Michael ran out and helped him to the bench. "What happened?"

"That fucking bitch kicked me in the knee…" he winced as he sat down.

Brian stood there, frowning. "Fuck."

Ben glanced at his bench. He looked at Ted, who shrank back against the fence. He looked at Blake, who was examining the sky. He looked at Michael, who started to shake his head, at Emmett, whose eyes got huge, and then at Justin, whose cheeks were flushed, lip caught in his teeth.

25.

Ben glanced at Brian. "What do you think?"

Brian nodded. "Let's see what the lad can do."

"Substitution," he called to the scorer, who nodded and noted the change.

There were 48 seconds left on the clock. The score was 75-75. Brian got the ball and went to the free throw line. He shot, and the ball spun around the rim once, and fell to the court floor. He shot again, and this time it dropped in cleanly.

Eighteen seconds later, the player who kneecapped Ben scored a perfect bank shot.

Justin, coming in low, got the ball.

26.

Justin was about to throw it to Brian when he got slammed from behind. The whistle shrilled, and the ref again called, "FOUL!"

Justin hesitated and Brian hissed, "Take the fucking ball."

Justin gave his head a shake, took the ball from the ref, and walked to the free throw line.

Brian stood there, both lips folded tightly in. He heard Gus shriek, "JUSTIN!" from the stands.

Justin stood there, the ball held lightly, effortlessly, in his hands.

Brian held his breath as the shot flew towards the basket, touched the rim, rolled around it, slowly… and dropped through.

77-77.

27.

Justin took the ball for his second throw.

Debbie squeezed Michael's hand painfully. Michael hid his face in Ben's shoulder. Ben murmured, "Come on, Justin. You can do it."

Brian caught Justin's eye, smiling his sweetest, proudest smile. Justin grinned back. And then he looked at the basket, took a deep breath, and threw.

Unbelievably, just like the time before, it hit the rim and started its crazy orbit. It went around once, twice, three times. A fourth.

Brian watched it, using all his powers of mind control to nudge its center of gravity inward. "Come on, motherfucker," he thought.

28.

And it did.

The ball fell into the net, the clock started up again, and the Angels went crazy trying to get the ball. Brian fucked that plan up, throwing the ball to Drew, who shot it to Brian's former trick, who sent it flying towards the basket just after the final buzzer rang.

78-77, and the Vic Grassi House won.

Brian got to him first, grabbing him close and saying roughly in his ear, "Now you really know what rimming is" before Debbie, sobbing "Sunshine!" at the top of her lungs, got him into her arms for a hug.

29.

That night, Justin was standing in the shower, face still aching from smiling so much. Brian was washing his hair, the shampoo running down his shoulders as the hot water rinsed it away.

Justin leaned back, and sighed happily. "We won."

Brian kissed his head. "We did." He looked down at Justin. "You were great."

Justin turned around, and grinned up at him. "I was, wasn't I?"

Brian laughed. "You learned from the master, after all."

Justin wrinkled his nose. "Ben taught me to play basketball."

Brian nodded, and turned off the water. "But I taught you what rimming is."

END

**Moving Day**

A not-very-serious drabble series

**While Lindsay and Melanie Moved Back**

While Lindsay and Melanie were moving back to Pittsburgh with the kids and their dog, Fluffy, Ben and Michael watched JR, but Justin said, “We’ll watch Gus and Fluffy!” Brian frowned but couldn’t say no to Justin.

The Corvette was too small so they took the bus. Brian and Justin started making out and got all turned on and decided to go to the baths.

They were fucking when Justin gasped. “OMG Bri!” said Jus. “We left Gus on the bus!” He frowned. “And Fluffy! We have to find them!”

Brian paused. “Okay,” he said. “But shouldn’t we finish first?”

**Meanwhile At Mel and Lindz’s House**

Mel’s cell phone rang so she answered. It was a call from Pittsburgh, which was weird since this was her Toronto number.

“Hello?” (That’s how she answers her phone.)

A minute later she started swearing, and Lindsay looked up. Melanie was simultaneously thanking the person on the phone, condemning Brian to the fires of hell for all eternity – a hell which, as a Jew, she did not believe in – and asking about Gus. Gus?

“We’ll be right there,” Melanie said in her most bitch-lawyer voice, and flipped the phone shut.

Whatever, Lindsay thought to herself in perplexity, was going on?

**At the Bus Depot**

“You asshole!” Melanie screamed. “If Fluffy hadn’t had his tags on they wouldn’t have known who to call! How could you fucking leave them on the bus?”

Lindsay was hugging Gus. Fluffy was wagging his tail and explaining to them how he had protected Gus until the proper authorities could be called. Unfortunately no one but Gus knew what he was saying, and Gus never did say much.

Brian looked guilty and defiant at the same time. “Lindz…”

Lindsay whipped around. “Shut up, Brian. This time you’ve really gone too far.”

Gus reached out and patted Fluffy on the head.

**Back at the Loft**

Justin held Brian tenderly in his arms and made soothing noises. “It’s so unfair they won’t let you see your own son anymore just because you left Fluffy and Gus on the bus.”

Brian frowned. “You left them, too.”

Justin wrinkled his brow. “I know. Why weren’t Mel and Lindz mad at me, too? They hugged me.”

“They think I take care of you as badly as I did Fluffy and Gus.”

Justin patted Brian’s arm. “You take care of me just fine.”

Brian and Justin kissed for an hour and then they had sex and lived happily ever after.

The end.

**Full Length Stories**

**Dogwalker!Justin**

An AU in which Brian and Justin meet a different way

The elevator stopped at the floor below Brian's, and one of his neighbors got on with her dog. He smiled and nodded at her in that distant, almost-not-really-a-smile-and-nod way that he used when he saw guys he'd had sex with. She smiled back, but all she said was "Hi."

Her dog completely ignored Brian, and he thought as they rode down that it was insane to have a dog with long hair that was both black and white, guaranteeing that you'd always have visible dog hair on you no matter what you wore.

Unless you wore a lot of tweed.

Brian shuddered at the thought of wearing tweed.

They got to the ground floor, and Brian gestured politely for the lady and her sleek dog to exit first. He surreptitiously brushed at his suit to make sure there was no dog hair on it before he left the building.

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Brian saw his neighbor and her dog a few times after that, and once or twice he saw her husband with the dog. One day he was standing in the lobby when a blond high school kid came in with the dog on a short leash.

Brian glanced at him, then glanced again. Nephew? Godson? Dogwalker? He decided it was the last, due to the fanny pack. Dogwalkers always had fanny packs. He'd seen them on the streets and in the parks ever since he'd moved to New York from the Pitts, usually with multiple dogs, and always with fanny packs.

Brian stood where he always did, as far as possible from the dog, who ignored him the way she always did. Since the kid wasn't his neighbor he didn't bother with even the hint of a smile or nod.

Until the kid flashed him a smile that probably could have earned him a five figure income as a model in a toothpaste ad. Brian immediately upped the estimate of his age to college rather than high school, but didn't say anything.

The guy and the dog got off on the floor below Brian's. Brian was watching what was possibly the nicest ass he'd ever seen disappear down the hall when the kid turned around, caught him looking, and grinned at him over his shoulder.

After the elevator door closed, Brian let himself smile.

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The next time Brian saw his neighbor, he was coming home from an after-hours club at around 4 AM. She was waiting for the elevator, pajama bottoms showing under her fashionable coat and above her rain boots. She had the dog on a leash, and looked tired.

Brian was a little drunk, but even so, he was surprised to hear himself asking her if everything was okay.

She looked surprised. "Yes… no. I'm not sure." She started to cry, and bit her lip and turned her head to the side, embarrassed. "Sorry."

Brian frowned, but respected her attempt to get control of herself.

When they got on the elevator, she took in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I just… had a miscarriage. And Melody…" she nodded at the dog "has been having some health problems." She sort of half-laughed and half-cried, "I guess she's feeling the stress, too."

That must be the reason for the dogwalker, Brian thought. He made sure his voice sounded warm, slightly impersonal, and hopefully not drunk. "I'm sorry."

She just nodded, kept her eyes averted from his, and got off at her floor.

After three hours of sleep, Brian showered, put on one of his endless supply of perfect suits, and got in the elevator to start another day of convincing the gullible American consumer that he or she couldn't exist for one more moment without any of the crap his clients wanted to sell them. He felt so good that he forgot to frown and worry about dog hair getting on his suit when the elevator stopped one floor down and the blond dogwalker got on with the dog… Melody.

Brian decided a little early morning head-fucking would be a nice way to start the day. "Is she feeling better?"

The blue eyes swiveled towards him, but Brian had to admit the kid hid his surprise almost instantly. "Yes, but I came early, just in case." Then he smiled.

Melody looked at Brian when he spoke, but apparently he wasn't interesting enough to her to earn more than a glance. He almost laughed at the boredom in her eyes, and wondered briefly how many guys had seen it in his.

Then the dogwalker reached down and rested his hand on Melody's head, and she looked up at him, her white plumed tail moving gracefully back and forth. Her eyes softened and filled with something Brian had seen a few times in Lindsay's eyes when she was looking at Gus. For a second he missed Gus, missed Lindsay and Debbie and Michael… he slammed the door shut on his thoughts, and looked disinterestedly away from them both.

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The days went by, and Brian didn't see his neighbor, the dogwalker, or the dog. He was working late hours, and staying late at the clubs, trying to get relaxed enough to get some sleep. Every morning he searched his face for signs of stress and fatigue. Of age. Every morning he put on his SPF 4000 moisturizer and his costly French anti-aging cream, satisfied he'd held off the ravages of time for one more day.

In fact, that morning he felt pretty good about his skin in general – until the blond dogwalker joined him for the downward elevator ride, his skin glowing with the cold morning air. Brian adjusted his age downward again, maybe to junior high. He glared at the boy's full lips and smooth skin and perfect fucking hair. I bet he doesn't have bed head in the morning, he thought, getting more irritated by the minute.

"I'm Justin."

Brian looked at him in surprise. His voice had sounded confident, strong, not at all like a kid in the ninth grade. Brian frowned, then said, "Brian."

"This is Melody." Justin gestured at the dog.

Brian nodded. "I know. We've met."

Justin looked surprised. "She doesn't act like you've met. She's usually very friendly with people she knows."

He snorted. "Apparently she doesn't like me."

"She probably thinks you don't like her."

Brian laughed. "It's not her. It's the hair. We can't all go to work covered in dog hair."

Justin smiled. "It brushes right off denim."

They got off the elevator, and went out onto the sidewalk. "My clients might object to me showing up at the office in jeans."

Now Justin laughed. "I can't imagine you caring what your clients think. Do you?"

Brian shrugged. "Not really, but sometimes I play the game."

Justin looked at him for a minute before he nodded. "Well, we'd better get to the park. See you around."

Brian watched the kid… Justin… and his world class rear end as he crossed the street, Melody on a leash at his side.

Brian went out after work, and didn't come home until the next morning at 6, leaving himself with not much more than the time he needed to shower, change, drink six or seven pots of coffee, and get to work. He'd woken up at some guy's place, something he didn't usually do. But he hadn't been getting much sleep lately, and he'd been wasted. At least he'd gotten out while the guy was still sleeping, the next best thing to leaving before he fell asleep in the first place.

He was waiting for the elevator when Justin came in the door. He raised an eyebrow at the early hour; it was still dark outside.

"Hey." Justin smiled at him, pulling off his gloves and shoving them in the pocket of his jacket. "You look like hell."

Brian wasn't sure whether to laugh or call him an asshole, so he settled for ignoring the comment. "You're here early."

He nodded. "I have a class at 8 on Thursdays."

Brian felt surprised, but didn't show it. "You're in school?"

"Art student. I'm in my sophomore year at Cooper Union."

Brian's surprise bordered on shock. "You're at Cooper Union? What's with the dog walking?"

Justin shrugged. "The tuition's free, but I still have to eat and pay rent." He frowned a little. "How do you know about Cooper Union?"

"I'm in advertising." Brian looked at Justin more closely. "That's quite an accomplishment, getting into the Harvard of art schools."

Justin grinned at him as the elevator door opened and they both got on. "I'm very accomplished."

Brian laughed. "And modest."

"Not really. What does that get you?"

Since that was more or less Brian's motto, he didn't argue with him. He must have still been drunk from the night before, because he heard himself asking if Justin wanted to get coffee after he walked Melody.

Justin looked surprised, but just for a second. "I have some other clients. Melody doesn't get along with other dogs very well, so I have to take her by herself. Then I take five other dogs to the park at the same time." He looked at Brian, and Brian noticed for the first time how blue Justin's eyes were. "How about tomorrow? The Starbuck's on the corner, at 8?"

Brian didn't say anything at first. It wasn't just Justin's eyes, it was the whole idea of making a date to meet for coffee with an artistic genius – because Cooper Union didn't admit any other kind of student – who was probably not out of his teens yet, when he hadn't had any kind of a date since he was in college himself.

A kid who walked dogs to pay his rent. He almost shook his head. But he didn't. He just said, "Okay."

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The next morning, if Brian'd had Justin's phone number, he'd have called and cancelled. As it was, he contented himself with cursing all the way to the corner. Justin came in a minute or two after Brian sat down with his triple shot latte, got himself a cup of coffee, and smiled as he sat down. "Hey."

Brian sipped his coffee. "How was Melody?"

Justin sipped his. "She's fine. Erica said she's been sleeping through the night again, so hopefully she's okay now."

"Erica?"

Justin frowned. "Her owner. I thought you must know her, if you know Melody."

Brian shrugged. "We chatted in the elevator one night for about two seconds. She told me about her miscarriage and that Melody had been sick." He drank some more coffee, then noticed Justin looked shocked. "What?"

"I didn't know she'd lost the baby. She didn't tell me." He really seemed upset.

Strange, thought Brian. She tells a stranger in the elevator. Or maybe not strange. Who the fuck knows.

Justin stared into his coffee. "Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever have kids. I always used to assume I would, then when I realized I was gay, I figured I wouldn't. But the world's changing so fast, it seems like anything can happen now." He laughed. "Although I guess if you have kids, dogwalking and art aren't exactly the best way to support them. So maybe it's a good thing if I want them, I'd really have to work at it." He grinned at Brian.

Brian thought suddenly about Gus. He hadn't seen him in… a year? Two years? He pushed the thought out of his mind, and drained his cup. "Where are you from?" That was sufficiently banal to divert them from the topic of offspring.

"Pittsburgh."

Brian choked on the last bit of foam in his cup. "Jesus."

"You, too?"

"Born, raised, and couldn't get out of there fast enough."

Justin nodded. "I miss it sometimes, not so much the city as the people." He made a gesture with his hand that Brian couldn't quite interpret. It was almost dismissive. "But I like it here, now. And in the art world, there's nowhere else to be."

"Or advertising." Brian pushed back his chair. "Speaking of which…"

Justin just looked at him, and gave a slow blink. Brian stared across the table at Justin's eyes. And mouth. He almost cleared his throat, but caught himself in time. "When do you have to be in class?"

Justin smiled, but not the grin he'd given Brian before. "Not until noon. Don't you have to go to work?"

Brian kept looking at him. "I can be late."

They went back to Brian's loft, and two hours later, Brian was leaning against the tile in his shower, Justin resting his forehead on his chest while Brian ran the soap idly across his shoulders and tried to think when the last time he'd fucked a guy he actually knew had been. Justin shook the water out of his eyes, and smiled up at him through the steam.

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It should have gotten weird. But maybe since it started out weird, it just got kind of normal instead. Brian kept running into Justin and Melody in the elevator. He and Justin kept going for coffee. Justin kept coming back to Brian's loft when they had time. And Brian kept wondering what was going on, and trying not to think about it.

One November evening he found himself walking with Justin and the dog across the street to the park. It had rained all day, and he tried not to think about what the wet grass was doing to his Prada shoes. He snuck a glance at Justin's mud-stained sneakers and felt a moment's horror.

They went inside a fenced dog field, and Justin let Melody off the leash.

"I thought you said she didn't like other dogs?"

Justin draped the leash around his neck. "She's okay as long as she's off the leash."

They sat on a bench and watched the dogs running and playing. Melody ran faster than the other dogs, lapping the field over and over again, a little train of slower dogs trying to keep up and dropping away one by one.

"There's a greyhound who's here sometimes. He's the only one who can keep up with her."

"What kind of dog is she, exactly?"

"She's a Borzoi. A Russian Wolfhound."

"Ah. I should know that."

Justin nodded. "Right. They're used in advertising a lot. Mostly fashion."

Brian watched her fly around the perimeter of the field. "She's beautiful."

Justin looked pleased, almost like Brian had complimented him instead of the dog. "I know. She is. Erica really loves her. It's hard to have a dog like this in the city."

Melody veered off course and ran over to them. Justin laughed and rubbed her ears, and fed her little bits of something from his fanny pack. She nibbled the treats from his fingers, then turned her dark eyes on Brian. He put his hand out and touched her nose with one finger. He could have sworn Melody was laughing at him. "I've never had a dog."

Justin rested his hand on Melody's neck. "Neither have I. Not a dog of my own. I'd like to have one someday, but I have four roommates and no time."

Brian didn't have any roommates, but he definitely had no time. He didn't say anything.

They walked back to the building. Erica and her husband weren't going to be home until late, so they took Melody back to the loft for a while. Brian refused to think about dog hair on his furniture. It was leather. It would brush off.

They had food delivered, and Justin let Brian feed a little bit of Chinese beef to Melody. The dog was definitely warming up to him, he thought as he felt her lips delicately take a little piece of meat from his fingers.

After Justin put Melody in her apartment, he came back up to Brian's loft. They were lying in bed afterward, Brian playing with Justin's hair, when Justin said something about his mom.

"What?" Brian had been half asleep.

"My mom is going to come here to spend Christmas." Justin's voice sounded sleepy. He liked to chatter after sex, and Brian didn't always listen that closely. He didn't say anything now.

Justin kissed Brian's chest and gave a little sigh. Brian tried to decide if it was a contented sigh, or if something was wrong. He fell asleep before he came to a conclusion.

He woke up in the middle of the night, and Justin was sitting at the foot of the bed tying his sneakers. Brian poked at him with his foot. "Don't go. It's only 3."

Justin looked back at him. "I couldn't sleep."

Brian poked at him again, and grinned. "Then don't sleep."

Justin smiled, and toed out of his shoes.

Brian laughed as Justin crawled up the bed, shedding his jeans on the way. "You're easy."

This time Brian kissed him and held him after they fucked, and when Justin sighed, he was positive it wasn't contentment. The words "What's wrong?" had never in his life passed his lips, and they weren't going to now. He just listened carefully to what Justin was saying. Something about his sister visiting his dad while his mom came to New York next month.

"Your parents are divorced?" Considering half of all marriages ended that way, he had a 50/50 chance of being right.

Justin nodded. Brian just stroked his hair.

"My dad wasn't too happy to have a gay son. He still isn't."

Brian's hand stilled for a minute. He thought about his own fucked up family, and his sister's fucked up kids. He thought about drunken phone calls asking for money, and his mother's eyes narrowing as she told him he was going to burn in hell. "Yeah, well, maybe you're not too happy to have an asshole for a father."

For a minute Brian thought he'd made a mistake, but Justin finally laughed. "Don't hold back or anything, Brian."

Brian smiled, and kissed his hair. "I never do."

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The next night when Brian got home from work, he started to change to go out, and hesitated. He picked up his phone instead. "Lindz?"

He heard her startled voice on the other end of the line. "Well, hi there, stranger."

Brian frowned. "How's Gus?"

Her voice got a little softer. "He's fine. Great. Did you want to talk to him?"

He can talk? Brian wondered, but didn't ask. "Sure."

He heard whispering in the background, and then a child's voice. "Hi."

His throat suddenly got tight. "Hey, sonny boy."

Gus didn't answer, and a minute later Lindsay came back on the line. "He's at that age where they don't know what to make of the phone." She paused, then went on. "You should come visit him. We tell him about you, but…"

He closed his eyes. He remembered a time when he'd made a lot of promises, none of which he'd kept unless they involved checks and expensive presents. "Yeah. Maybe I will."

Lindsay sounded sad, but just said, "Good. We'd like that."

He sat there staring at the phone after they hung up, then got dressed and went out.

Brian had been sure he needed to drink and dance and fuck a stranger or two, but when he got to the club, he felt irritated at everyone and everything. He didn't like the music or the men, and they had the heat up too high or something.

He was pushing towards the coat room to reclaim his leather jacket and get out of there when he saw a flash of blond nearby. He stopped and watched Justin dancing with a group of friends his age, two guys and a girl. After a minute, Justin turned his head towards Brian, saw him, and smiled.

It was that same high-wattage smile Brian had seen the first time Justin had looked right at him. Brian felt stupid at how glad he was that he could make Justin's face do that. Justin said something to his friends, and walked right into Brian's arms, and pulled him onto the floor.

Dancing and drinking and getting laid were exactly what he'd needed after all.

They ended up outside the club, arms around each other as the cold air dried the sweat on their skin, kissing and laughing and trying to get a cab. Brian slid his arm around Justin's waist, and then worked it under his t-shirt. "I'm going to Pittsburgh weekend after next. Do you want to come with me?"

Justin looked at him in surprise. "What are you going to the Pitts for?"

Brian cleared his throat. "To visit my son."

Justin stared. "You have a SON?"

He nodded. "He lives with his mothers. I'm really just the sperm donor, but…"

Justin pressed his lips together for a second. "I don't think that's true."

Brian shrugged, and didn't look him in the eye. "If you don't want to come…"

Justin went up on his toes, and kissed him. "I didn't say that. I'd love to."

Brian looked down at him, and felt a strange sensation, something not all that different from what he'd felt the night Lindsay had put Gus into his arms for the first time. He didn't let himself remember that night too often. He didn't let himself think about it now.

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He wasn't sure which surprised Lindsay the most: That he'd shown up at all, that he'd brought someone with him, or that the someone he'd brought with him was Justin.

They sat in the living room talking, and Melanie and Lindsay kept staring in perplexity at Justin, realizing they were being rude, and then smiling warmly at him and offering him cookies or coffee or cocoa. Fortunately, the whole thing seemed to amuse the hell out of him, so Brian just sat back and enjoyed the show.

Gus had been napping when he got there, but after around an hour, he came down the stairs. He stood on the bottom step, staring at Brian, his lip caught in his teeth.

Brian stood up, feeling a pang in his heart. He took one step closer, and it hit him that the last time he'd seen that face was in a photo album, looking at pictures of himself as a kid.

Justin was staring at Gus, thinking pretty much the same thing, when a streak of red and brown flew down the stairs, past the little boy, and into the living room. Without so much as a pause, a medium sized, short-haired dog hurtled himself at Justin, tail frantically wagging while he tried desperately to get up to his face.

Lindsay and Melanie jumped up, mortified, yelling, "Rusty! Off! Get down!"

Justin had fallen back under the onslaught, laughing. "Don't worry," he said, grabbing the dog's paws and setting them on the floor. "I love dogs."

"It's true," Brian offered helpfully. "He does."

Justin's hand went to his absent fanny pack, and he smiled and took a cookie off the table. He broke off just a crumb, smiled at the dog, and in a firm, happy voice, said, "Rusty, sit."

The dog stared at Justin uncomprehendingly, but he held the tiny piece of cookie up over his head, moving it slowly backwards. The dog followed the treat with his eyes, tipping his head back while his hindquarters gradually sank lower and lower, until he was sitting.

And Justin popped the cookie into his mouth and said, "Good boy!"

Mel and Lindz were staring at him. "How the fuck did you do that?" Mel asked.

Justin shrugged, and smiled at Gus as the little boy walked closer. "Do you want to try?" He held out a cookie bit to him.

Gus nodded, and took the piece of cookie. Rusty stood up and wagged his tail expectantly. "Just tell him ‘Rusty, sit,' then hold it over his head…… but move it backwards so he doesn't just jump up and grab it…" Justin guided Gus' hand. Rusty sat more quickly this time, and Justin made sure the cookie got into the dog's mouth quickly, too.

Gus laughed, and leaned on Justin's leg. "Do it again!"

Justin showed Gus three more times, then stopped. "That's enough. Dogs get bored if you do tricks too often. Just practice three or four times every day, and soon he'll sit whenever you tell him to."

Justin didn't seem to be paying any attention to anyone but Gus, but Brian let his arm slip down off the back of the sofa and brush the hair on the back of Justin's neck, just for a second. He smiled at Gus, who had glanced his way. "Hey, sonny boy."

Gus contemplated him for a minute, then smiled shyly back. Brian wanted to give him a hug, but it struck him that Gus really didn't know him. Instead, he swiped his hand over Rusty's head.

The dog put his front paws on the sofa between Brian and Justin, with Gus standing behind him. All three of them were petting him, and his tail thumped hard as he butted his head first into Brian's hand, then Justin's. Gus finally gave Brian a more open smile. "He likes you."

Brian grinned at his son. "I like him, too."

Justin watched the two faces, so alike, and then looked at the dog. "Good boy."

Melanie and Lindsay didn't have a guest room, so they stayed at a hotel downtown. That night, when Brian came out of the bathroom, he saw Justin standing at the window, staring out at the lights and the river. Brian walked up behind him, wrapped his arms around him, and kissed his neck.

Justin laid his hands over Brian's forearms, and tipped his head back. They kissed for a long time, and finally Justin turned around. Brian just held him.

"Gus is great."

Brian nodded. His throat was doing that tightening thing again.

Justin laughed. "And so is Rusty, although they need to train that dog."

"I think you may have inspired them in that direction."

Justin looked at Brian, went up on his toes, and kissed him. "I'm definitely a good influence."

Brian kissed him some more, then whispered in his ear, "You really are."

END

**Second Chance -- Post-513**

Brian was sitting at his computer when Justin stuck his head in the door of the media room, mumbled something, and left.

Brian pretended nothing had happened. He pretended for one minute, then two minutes, and then three minutes. And then he got up and followed Justin to his studio.

Justin was painting and pretended not to see Brian come in.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

Justin didn't even glance at him. "I. Have. An. Exhibit. Tonight. I'd. Like. You. To. Come."

Brian contemplated this information for a moment. "What exhibit?"

Justin looked at him then, and flashed a big smile. "You'll see."

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"Turn in here." Justin hadn't really told Brian where they were going, just given him directions.

"The POUND?" Brian stared at Justin like he'd lost his mind. "There's an art exhibit at the pound?"

"It's an animal shelter. Daphne volunteers here. And she asked me and Michael if we'd do something for their campaign against animal cruelty, which launches tonight."

Brian tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, and then, as if there had actually been any question, turned into the parking lot. "You tricked me."

Justin patted his knee. "Yes. Yes, I did."

Brian glowered and glared at everyone, particularly Daphne and that traitor, Michael, but everyone cheerfully ignored him. After some truly ghastly vegetarian appetizers and bad wine, the head of the animal shelter got up on the stage and blah-blah-blahed for a while about giving abandoned dogs and cats a second chance, and something she called, tearily, the "human-animal bond."

Brian let his eyes wander the room, and was trying to decide if it was bad enough to fake having a heart attack so he could leave when he felt Justin's elbow drive into his ribs. Everyone was applauding, so Brian politely clapped.

Once.

They all trooped into the next room to see the artwork, and then Brian thought he might actually have that heart attack after all.

"What the fuck," he began, eloquently. "What the fuck, Justin?"

There on the wall was a much-more-than-life-sized drawing of Rage, flying away from a city street, a wriggling yellow puppy in his arms. Two teenaged boys were being led away in handcuffs by the police, a container of gasoline and a box of matches on the sidewalk at their feet.

Justin smiled. "Cool, huh?"

Brian stalked over and looked at the painting. "Rage saved a puppy? A puppy?"

Justin frowned. "What, Rage is too good to save an animal? Virtually all serial killers started out abusing animals, Brian. I'm sure Rage knows that and is trying to prevent violence against people, too." Then he glanced up at Brian. "Although I think Rage would have saved the puppy no matter what. He just wouldn't want anyone to know."

Brian snorted, but didn't say anything.

Justin's face brightened. "Hey! There's one of my models. Want to meet him?"

Brian looked at the cops and thugs in the painting, and shook his head. "I don’t think…"

"He's blond," Justin interrupted. "And really cute."

Brian sighed and followed after him, mumbling, "You really, really owe me," under his breath.

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Justin was lying in bed with his head on Brian's chest. Brian was almost asleep.

Justin sighed. "I'm so glad we brought him home with us."

Brian stroked Justin's hair but didn't say anything.

"I knew you'd like him." Justin snuggled in closer.

Brian wondered if Justin would shut up if he started snoring.

"I mean, have you ever seen…"

Brian peeled open one eye, and looked at their guest. Then he glanced back at Justin. "He's eating your sneaker."

Justin stopped rhapsodizing and sat up. "He's what?"

Brian lay back against the pillows and pulled the duvet over his head. Justin climbed out of bed. Brian heard him gently scolding the little yellow dog, and then putting him in his crate. "Here, puppy… have a nice chew toy and leave my shoes alone."

Brian looked out through his eyelashes to make sure the "chew toy" wasn't one of his Prada loafers, then snapped his lids shut before Justin got back in bed. Justin tangled his legs up with Brian's, snuggled into his side, and then planted his cold, bare feet against Brian's calves.

When Brian finally relented and moved his arm around him, Justin pressed a kiss onto Brian's shoulder before lying down with a contented sigh.

In his crate, Brian and Justin's new dog put his chin on his paws, and gave a happy sigh of his own.

END

**Justin and the First Puppy**

An Inauguration Day story

The puppy tucked his chin over the edge of the box. The little girl was crouched next to it, her eyes large and dark. He felt his paws scrabbling at the box's edge while he tried and tried to climb over and get to her.

She put out one finger, and he frantically licked it. She tasted like… he didn't know. He smelled very very hard and was sure he had never smelled her before, but it was the best smell he had ever known except his mama.

She giggled, and strong hands picked him up out of the box. "Did you want to hold him?"

He kicked and squirmed in mid-air as he sailed towards the little girl. When she had him safely in her arms, he turned around, planted his rear paws on her tummy and his front ones on her neck, and proceeded to snuffle and lick her until she fell backwards, laughing.

The lady with the strong hands smiled. "It looks like this is the one Jessica likes."

Jessica, the puppy thought. She's the one I like.

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Justin turned the page in his sketchbook, and started again. Brian was on the phone and the computer at the same time, arguing with Ted.

First he tried to draw Daphne from memory. He did that more often these days, since she'd moved away. He didn't want to forget how her chin looked when she was pissed off, or the way her hair would almost vibrate when she had something to tell him.

He finally put the sketchbook down, feeling his hand start to get a little numb. It always did that before it cramped; he'd gotten good at knowing the warning signs.

"Theodore, you're worrying about nothing. The last thing Remson will want to do in this economy is…"

Justin stretched, feeling the muscles in his neck and shoulder let go of the hunched-over position they'd been in for the last hour. He got up and went into the kitchen, thinking it was time for dinner. He caught Brian's eye from over near the refrigerator, and held up a beer.

Brian shook his head and pointed to the Thai takeout menu by the phone. Justin was flipping through it, trying to find something he hadn't had six times that week already, when he heard Brian tell Ted he had to go.

Justin let the menu fall to the floor when Brian wrapped his arms around him. His hands started massaging Justin's shoulders, and then slid down his arms. He let Brian work the stiffness out of his hand, his eyes closed, forehead resting against his chest. "Mmmmm."

Brian gave his fingers one last squeeze. "Justin… "

He pulled his hand away. "Don't start."

"Christ. First Theodore, now you." He went and got the beer he'd rejected a minute before from the refrigerator. "We have to decide."

Justin didn't look at him. "I know." He took a deep breath. "But I can't."

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His name, they said, was Orion's Promise Kept, but Jessica called him Kep and so that was his true name.

If Amelia called him Kepper, he would answer, because her smell was like Jessica's smell and so he liked her very much. But sometimes the man called him "the dog," and the new lady called him "Jessica's puppy," and mostly he ignored them.

"Jessica, you have to learn to put your shoes where he can't get them."

Kep opened one eye. The lady was telling something to his girl, so he tried to listen.

"I know, Mom. I forgot." She sounded a little upset, but he decided she didn't truly mean it, so he closed his eye again. But the lady came over and opened the door to his little house, and she had his leash in her hand.

He felt his tail start thumping hard against the side of the crate, and he plunged through the door, trying to put his neck as close as possible to the leash. "Walk! Walk!" he thought to himself.

It wasn't a very fun walk at first, though. He sniffed all the bushes and trees, and he put his smell in a few important places in the garden. He planted his front paws on the ground, and crouched his shoulders very very low and put his bottom up very very high, and barked.

Jessica laughed. "He wants to run, Mom."

The lady nodded and unhooked his leash. Delighted, Kep raced madly around in circles, then threw himself on his back in a pile of muddy snow, and wriggled in ecstasy. He jumped up and ran back to Jessica, scrabbling up her coat, trying to get her to run with him.

"Jessica! He's covered in mud!" The lady sounded upset, but Jessica was giggling and running with him, her bright mittened hand flying in front of his face.

Suddenly it was a very good walk.

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Brian watched Justin as he sat on the sofa and picked up a magazine. He watched him flip through it without looking at the pages. He watched him toss the magazine down, cross his arms, and stare straight ahead.

He walked over and sat next to him. "Justin."

Justin jerked his chin, but didn't say anything.

"Look, I tried, but this economy…"

Justin turned towards him, concern all over his face. "Brian, I know. It's not you. Christ. I didn't mean…"

Brian shook his head. "Then what?"

Justin moved closer to him. "It just seemed like everything was going so well, just… everything. We were good, you were finally in New York most of the time, my art was good… and then everything crashed and burned overnight."

"Not everything." Brian's voice was gentle.

Justin wound his arms around Brian's neck. "I'm saying everything wrong tonight. I don't blame you, this isn't your fault." He laughed. "Not even Brian Kinney can destroy the entire world economy in a few months. For that, we needed George Bush."

Brian grinned. "That's one thing I'm willing to admit I have no responsibility for whatsoever."

Justin laughed a little, but then his smile faded. "It's just… there's no good choice. If I stay in New York, it'll be like the first two years, with us hardly seeing each other. If I stay here, I lose New York. And even doing that, we might have to sell the house...."

Brian shook his head. "You can't leave New York…"

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do." Justin's voice was flat.

Brian's lip folded in. "Sorry."

Justin got up and walked to the kitchen counter. He leaned on it, facing Brian. "I want it all."

"You always have."

Justin laughed. "I sound like a spoiled brat, don't I?"

Brian followed him into the kitchen. "No."

"Liar." But he kissed him.

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"Jessica, we told you when we moved to the White House, some things would be hard."

Kep had his face in Jessica's lap, and her hand was stroking his head very very hard. He wriggled just a little closer; she was upset. He didn't know why.

The lady kept talking. "He's not getting enough exercise. That's why he's, well… being a little destructive."

He wasn't sure what "destructive" was, but he did like exercise.

"He didn't mean to break the vase…" Jessica sounded even more upset.

"Of course he didn't. He's just a puppy."

Kep's tail thumped. He was a big dog now, he thought to himself. Almost grown up. Just the other day the man said his paws were so big, he'd probably be the size of a horse. He'd seen the horses riding around outside the White House fences one day, with police on them. He thought it would be very fine to be the size of one, but he didn't think he'd want to be ridden on.

"He'll still sleep with you at night." Her voice sounded very sad. "And you can go with John to walk him on the weekends."

Jessica didn't lift her head, just mumbled, "Okay." But when the lady was gone, she buried her face in his soft fur and cried.

Kep couldn't stand it when Jessica cried. He licked her face and nuzzled her neck and put his paws on her shoulders and did everything he could think of to make it stop. Finally she giggled, even if it was kind of watery. "It's okay, Kep. You'll like going running with John. And I'm at school most of the day anyway, you'll like being with him." She wiped her nose with her sleeve, then threw her arms around him and held him tight. "I'm just gonna miss you."

She didn’t put him in his little house that night, but kept him on the bed with her. Kep worried about being missed, because he didn't know where he was going. So when she finally went to sleep, he crawled very quietly off the bed and ate her slippers.

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Brian remembered that Justin always needed time to decide what he was going to do when things went wrong, so he stopped asking him about it. Shutting down the office in New York was bad enough; trying to do it while losing the minimum amount of prestige and the fewest clients was all he had the mental energy for.

But finally, things got to the point where he needed to know whether he was also putting their place in New York on the market.

"When I'm in New York this week…" Brian stopped.

Justin didn't look up from his sketchbook. "Don't."

"It's too late for that."

Justin shook his head. "I just… not yet."

Brian clamped down on his lips, and tried to think what to say. "It's time, Justin."

Justin shoved his hand through his hair. "I know." He took a deep breath. "Sell it. Even if I go back, we can't afford it if it's just me."

Brian looked at him. "If we sell the house…"

Justin smiled. "I know. But we might have to sell the house anyway. Sell the apartment. We'll figure out the rest later."

Brian nodded. He held Justin close that night, touching his hair even after he'd fallen asleep. He thought about all the things he'd spent money on in the last four years. Remembered looking for a place in New York with Justin, opening the office there, looking at Justin's paintings hanging on a gallery wall.

Remembered thinking, now we both have everything – New York, and Pittsburgh, and his art and my career. We have it all.

Happiness goes before a fall, he thought to himself. He couldn't believe he'd forgotten that.

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At first Kep was very happy when the lady came with the leash and took him out. He was even happier when a new man took him out the big tall gates and started running along the street with him. But when they came back from running, and he was very tired and hungry and thirsty and thought it would be very nice to go to his house and have a drink and some food and then take a nap in his room, the man took him to a place he'd never been.

It was a room and it had a little house like his, but not the same. He gave him some food and water, but it was the wrong bowls. He put him in the crate but it was not the right smell. And he gave him a chew toy, but it was not his.

Kep drank a little water and ate two bites of food, and fell asleep after a long time worrying with his chin on his toy.

They went out two more times to have a walk. Once they went outside the fences again, and ran and ran. It was very tiring, thought Kep. And finally, finally the man took him up the path through the garden, and gave his leash to another man, who took him to his real room.

"Kep!" Jessica jumped up from the bed and they raced to each other. He was telling her about his strange day, and she was telling him she missed him.

The lady came in. "John said he tired him out, but you need to let him sleep in his crate, Jessica. He's not housebroken yet, and he keeps eating your…"

She nodded. "Shoes. I know. I will."

Kep was very tired, so he curled up in his little house and slept while Jessica did her homework. It was his very favorite time of day, he thought. Everything smelled just right.

After a while, he got used to his new routine. He always came back to Jessica at the end of the day, and the new man stopped being new and then he was just John. That's what Jessica said he was called, when she talked to him at night. John.

On the weekend when Jessica had no school, mostly he stayed with her. One day they went outside to a place he hadn't been yet, and someone pointed a box at them and made a light flash. He barked at it, and everyone laughed. Jessica knelt down and hugged him, and the light flashed again.

When they left, he watched the person with the exploding box very suspiciously, but nothing happened.

A few days later Kep was running down the street with John. He wanted to stop and smell, but this was a running walk; he had a smelling walk later. It was the new routine. He went along and they passed the green place and then the place where the street was under the other street, and then they turned at the circle that meant they were going back.

And then a car came up very fast, and two men came out of it. And John tried to go around them, but one of them grabbed Kep's leash.

John was angry and Kep thought, this is wrong. The smells were all very wrong. And John yelled, but then one of the new men hit him on the head with a dark thing, and John fell down.

And the bad man picked up Kep and ran to the car.

Kep tried very very hard to make himself bite the man. But his mama always said, never bite people. They don't have fur and it hurts them. The lady said it too, when he was little and would try to tell her hand to stop moving his foot. So now when he was very sure he should bite this human, he found he couldn't do it.

So he was in the car and the bad man was holding his mouth shut, and they were driving very fast.

Kep crouched very very low and worried all the way to wherever they were going.

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Justin watched out the plane window as it touched down at JFK. He felt the slight bump when the wheels made contact, and then heard the engines roar as the plane slowed.

He let his forehead rest against the glass.

Brian watched him, and gnawed at his lip. He put his hand on Justin's thigh, and Justin put his on top of it without turning his face away from the window.

But he seemed fine when they left the terminal and got into a cab. He was fine when they got to the apartment, laughing and talking about where they should eat that night. He was fine when they went out dancing, and even more fine after he'd had three shots of Chivas.

Brian decided he was fine, too, after a few of those.

They slept late the next day, but they were up and dressed when Karen got to the apartment. She had the papers ready for them to sign.

Brian put down the pen. "Seeing this a lot lately?"

She gave him a combination of a smile and a frown. "Sure am." Then she shrugged. "Including me."

Brian glanced at Justin. "I'm sorry to hear that."

She smiled. "Hopefully things will turn around, now that we've gotten rid of that asshole in the White House."

Justin laughed. "Are you sure you don't know Debbie?"

She shook her head. "Debbie who?"

Brian raised an eyebrow. "Believe me, explaining that would take most of the day. Let's just say it's a compliment and leave it there."

Brian walked her to the door, and when he came back, Justin wasn't in the living room. He went into the bedroom, and he was sitting on the end of the bed, remote control in hand, watching the television. "Hey."

"Hey." Brian sat next to him. "Well, we did it."

Justin nodded. "It was the right thing. I'm really okay." He lay back. "I'm going down to my workspace. The movers are coming on Friday, and I need to have everything ready."

"Want me to go with you?"

He shook his head. "No. I'd like to go alone."

Brian looked at him. "Sure." He was leaning over to kiss him when Justin suddenly sat up, almost hitting Brian in the chin with his head. "Justin, what the…"

"Did you hear that?" Justin had grabbed the remote control from where it had fallen on the bed, and was turning up the volume.

"The presidential family's puppy was snatched off the street while being exercised by his handler, retired military canine office John O'Connor, who was critically injured when struck in the head during the theft."

Brian stared. "Fuck."

They watched the whole report, and Justin shook his head. "That poor puppy, and those little girls…"

He seemed really upset. Brian reached over and pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I guess it makes some of the crap we're going through seem not so bad."

"Yeah." Justin smiled and looked right into Brian's eyes. "It kind of does."

Brian smiled back. "Yeah."

Justin was a little late getting to his workspace.

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Kep was in a room and he didn't like it. There was not even one smell he knew, and he was all alone. He tried to bark and bark, but no one came. He had to pee, and he remembered one time when he'd had a stomach ache and couldn't hold it, and he'd pottied right by the door, the lady had said, "Oh, look, he knew he should go outside and he did it as close to the door as he could! What a good puppy!"

So when he had to go, he did it by the door. But the bad men stepped in it and yelled at him, so he didn't do that again.

The food was very bad, and the water kept getting dirty and no one would clean it. He had no toys, and no shoes. No Jessica. No Amelia. No John. The man and the lady weren't there. No one at all.

He barked some more, and drank some of the dirty, scummy water, and then lay down on the floor.

Why did these men take him from Jessica? He hoped she wasn't crying. But he thought she probably was.

He didn't know how long he'd been there. Maybe it was days and days, he thought. He'd tried several times to paw through the walls or the door, but it was no use.

The door opened. There wasn't anywhere to hide, but he went as far to the corner as he could. But one of the men came and grabbed him by his collar, and stuck a newspaper in front of his chest. The other man was holding a box, and Kep started barking because he knew it would explode soon. And it did, three times.

Then they left, and he curled up in the corner and tried to sleep.

When he woke up it was very dark, but there was a tiny slice of light he'd never seen before. He crept over to it, and sniffed.

Nothing.

He sniffed harder. Still nothing.

He pushed his nose at the light, and it was the edge of the door, and still… nothing.

He opened the door with his nose, and walked out. He didn't see anyone. Or anything. Just walls and floor. He didn't want the men, so he went the way their smell was the weakest, and soon came to a dark place that seemed wet.

Kep hesitated, then trotted across the damp floor. He smelled… air. Outside air. Cold air.

He followed it until he came to a small, broken window halfway up the wall. He stood up on his back legs and tried to get to it with his paws, but it was too high. He looked around, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, and saw a sort of table that was coming out of the wall. It was very odd and had no legs.

He sat on the wet floor and looked at it, then decided. He went to the other side of the room and ran very very fast, then at the last second he leaped, just like jumping onto Jessica's bed.

And he made it, but he also made a lot of noise. He worried in case the men heard him, so he went as fast as he could from the table to the window hole. The broken glass hurt him even through his fur, but he wriggled and pushed with his back feet and pulled with his front feet, and then he fell down a very little way into the snow.

He didn't wait, just raced towards some more light, and then ran far away from the smell of the men and the place.

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It was done. Justin looked around his space one last time, locked the door, and put the key in the manager's slot.

The movers had left half an hour ago, and Justin had sat cross-legged on the floor, thinking.

He'd rented the space back when he'd first come to New York, determined to suck everything out of the city that he could. He wasn't going to hold anything back. It had been hard at first – waiting tables, painting whenever he could, sharing apartments first with Daphne's friend and then with some artists he'd met at the workspace.

He'd gone home to Pittsburgh a lot – too much, Brian said, and he started coming to New York more often. And he loved it there, maybe even more than Justin did, because Brian loved everything about New York. He loved the clubs and the bars, the stores and the crowded streets, the restaurants and the galleries. Justin sometimes felt overwhelmed by all the people, irritated at the pretentious crap the artsy crowd spewed, and he'd never been much for recreational shopping.

But New York was good for him, and good to him. He'd shown a little here and there, caught the interest of a couple of gallery owners in Brooklyn, participated in two small group shows. Then Brian had told him it was time: Kinnetik New York. Their own place in Manhattan. It was like a fucking fairy tale.

And then the bottom fell out. The art world, the advertising world, the real estate market. It all went to fucking hell, almost overnight.

But Justin finally just laughed. He and Brian were still together, they might have lost the new place, and they might end up losing their house – where they'd never even lived, but had always sort of meant to – but they had the loft, free and clear, and they'd be okay. There was a new President, and he swore he was going to turn things around in time, and Justin believed him. Sometimes you just had to have hope.

He stood outside the workspace and looked at it one last time, then went down the alley to throw a box of trash he hadn't wanted to move to Pittsburgh into the dumpster.

The lid made a loud noise as he let it drop, and a small, brown furry shape darted out from under the metal bin. He was telling himself it was too big to be a rat at the same time he was pulling his feet back.

He looked down towards the end of the alley, and saw a small dog cowering against the wall. He wasn't really brown – more like tan and dirty – and it looked like he had blood on his side.

Justin walked to the end of the alley and crouched about five feet from the frightened dog. Puppy, he thought. He held out his fingers. "Hey, little guy. Are you lost?"

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Kep was frozen against the bricks. The man was talking to him in the way he remembered, but he didn't smell familiar. He was holding out his fingers in the way Kep trusted, but he had never smelled those fingers before.

But he was cold and hungry and thirsty and his side hurt, and he finally crept forward a few inches.

"Good puppy…" The man's voice was very soft, very nice. It had been a long time since Kep had heard a nice voice.

"Are you hungry, puppy? I can get you something to eat."

Kep slid closer.

"And maybe take you to the vet… it looks like you cut your side."

Kep hesitated. He remembered the vet. She was nice and gentle like this man, then she jabbed him with something sharp. But she also gave him a cookie. And he was very hungry. So in the end, he decided to go to this new man.

His collar had come off when he got out of the window, but the man just picked him up. Kep felt very tired, and let himself fall asleep as the man carried him down the street.

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Brian's Blackberry rang; it was Justin. "Hey."

"Hey. I just found a stray dog in the alley by my studio – I think he needs a vet. Can you look one up and give me an address so I can get a cab or something? He's heavy."

Brian didn't answer right away.

"Brian?"

"Yeah. Hang on." Jesus. Now he was saving strays off the street; what next, starting a soup kitchen? Brian shoved his hand through his hair while he booted up his laptop to find a vet near Justin's studio.

He gave him the address. "I'll call them and tell them we're coming," he added.

A moment's silence, then, "We?"

"See you there." And Brian hung up.

When he got there, Justin was sitting in the waiting area, a filthy tan dog lying across his lap. "This the mutt?"

Justin's voice was mildly reproachful. "He's just a puppy."

He was about to make some comment about fleas when the receptionist said, "The doctor can see you now, Mr. Taylor."

They went into a small exam room, and waited a few more minutes. A young guy in surgical scrubs came in and took the puppy's temperature; he yelped when the thermometer went in. Brian started to say something, but stopped when Justin glared at him over the puppy's head.

Finally the vet came in. "So you found this little guy under a dumpster?"

Justin nodded. "It looks like he cut his side…"

She examined him top to bottom, listened to his heart, carefully looked at his injury, and felt his ribs. "He's basically healthy, a little dehydrated, a little thin. His paws are pretty torn up, and he needs stitches in that wound on his side, but overall, he's in good shape."

"Do whatever you need to do," Brian said. "We'll pay for it until we can find his owners."

She nodded and picked up some kind of equipment from the counter. "Let me just scan him for a microchip." She ran it up over his shoulders, and smiled. "Bingo!"

"What does it say?" Justin sounded happy at the thought of reuniting the puppy with his people.

She shook her head. "It's just a code. I'll have my receptionist contact the registry while we get started on cleaning him up." She smiled at Brian. "Maybe by the time you need to pay his bill, his real owners can do it instead."

They took him away, and Brian and Justin went back out to the waiting area. Half an hour went by, then forty-five minutes. Finally the tech opened the door to the back, and told them they should follow her.

The vet was in the exam room, and the puppy was standing on the table, his tail wagging. "He's had some water, and eaten, and we pottied him outside. I didn't have to stitch this after all; we just shaved it and cleaned it up. I don't think my receptionist has heard from the microchip registry yet; they took the info and said they'd call us back."

Brian said, "I"ll pay the bill…" at the same time Justin said, "We can keep him at our place until you…" and she laughed.

"I wish every stray dog in New York City was this lucky," she said. "To get found by people like you."

Brian thought she probably meant "suckers like you" when they got back to the apartment. First, the puppy was still incredibly filthy, and he left mud on the floor, on the carpets, and on the white sofa.

As well as all over Justin's winter jacket, but that, Brian thought, was a small loss.

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Kep decided he'd made a very good decision to trust that man with the nice voice. His name was Justin, which seemed like a very nice name. It started out very much like "Jessica." Although he still loved Jessica best.

They put water in a bowl for him, and Justin took him out on a big terrace so he could potty. He peed on a tall bush in a pot, and then went behind the pot to do the other thing. Justin said he was a good boy, so he was very happy.

Dinner was very delicious, just like the things Jessica snuck to him when the lady wasn't looking.

But even though the new man was very nice, and he was warm and not hungry anymore, he thought he should really go back to Jessica soon. He tried telling Justin, but he just said, "Shhh, puppy. Don't bark or they won't let you stay here."

"I'm Kep," the puppy said, but Justin just said, "Shhhh," again, so he stopped trying.

He'd fallen asleep with his head on Justin's lap while everyone watched TV. Suddenly he heard a ringing sound, and then a buzzing, and a knock on the door, all at once. He started to bark, and followed the other man, not Justin, to the door. Justin was right behind them.

Justin's hand was in the new collar they'd bought from the veterinarian, and he tried to get Kep to stop barking, but Kep knew something terrible was going to happen. He could smell it: fear, and anger, and something else bad. He barked and barked, and the door opened, and men in dark clothes with those things they'd used to hit John came in, and swarmed around, and pulled Justin and the other man away and tried to steal him.

And this time Kep gave a loud last bark, and bit the man as hard as he could.

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Justin walked in the door to the apartment and dropped onto the sofa. Brian locked the door and came in, but he headed straight for the bar. He carried a bottle of scotch over to where Justin was sitting, took a swig, and handed it to him.

He took a long swallow and gave it back to Brian. "Fuck."

Brian sat next to him. "Yeah."

Justin put his face in his hands. "Who could ever fucking imagine…"

"You'd walk out of your studio and stumble across the president's stolen dog?" Brian finished.

Justin leaned back against the sofa. "I thought they were going to arrest us."

"Well, remember that the next time you feel a charitable impulse; no good deed goes unpunished."

Justin laughed. "But those little girls are going to get their puppy back. So it was worth it."

"Worth having guns pointed at us, led away in handcuffs by Secret Service agents who are, I'm sorry to say, not at all as hot as they are in the movies, and interrogated for hours?"

Justin thought for a second. "They really love that dog. Didn't you see them crying on the news?"

Brian snorted. "Justin, I was close to crying myself back there."

Justin grinned and patted his leg. "Poor baby."

"Fuck you." But he was laughing.

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Kep didn't get in trouble for biting the agent. He rode in a car for a long time, and when he got out at the end, Jessica was there, crying and jumping. The agent put him right into her arms, but she couldn't hold him; he was too heavy. So she sat on the ground, in the snow, and cried and held him and cried some more.

He licked her face and pushed into her armpit and smelled her and smelled her, and told her over and over that he was never, ever leaving her again, and about the bad men and the veterinarian and the nice man with the soft voice, and the whole time she was telling him how scared she'd been and how much she loved him.

And then the lady and the man were kneeling next to him, and Amelia was petting him and crying. And he licked her face, and then had to lick the lady's and the man's faces, because they were crying, too.

There was another exploding box, and then more and more, but he didn't care. They could explode boxes all day, he thought, if they just let him stay right where he was forever.

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Brian glanced around the apartment. It had been a dream he'd had all his life, to live in New York. He'd done it once; he'd do it again. If the amount of armed force he'd mustered to reclaim a stolen puppy was any sign, this new guy wasn't going to hold back on doing what he needed to do to fix the mess the last guy had made.

He still wasn't sure he was going to believe in actual happiness again, but maybe everyone was right, and hope wasn't total bullshit.

Justin came out of the bathroom, his black duffle bag slung over his shoulder. "Ready?"

Brian nodded and picked up his leather bag. "If you are."

Justin smiled. "Yeah. I really am." He kissed him.

And the doorbell rang. "It must be the car service," Brian said. "They're early."

Justin followed him to the door, and Brian opened it – and dropped his bag.

It was the Secret Service agents again. "We told you…"

The agent shook his head. "It's not that, sir. May we come in?"

Brian stepped back, and the agents started swarming all over the apartment. Justin was standing next to Brian, staring. "What's… "

The agent nodded and said something into his headset. "One moment."

Everyone just stood there, and then a familiar face appeared in the door: the puppy.

He ran up to Justin and jumped on him, barking happily. Justin knelt down and hugged him, and then looked over his head. "Oh," he said.

Jessica threw her arms around him and the puppy at the same time. "Thank you for saving Kep," she said. "Thank you very much."

Brian rolled his eyes when Justin started to get that weepy look, but then he was sorry he did, because his were a little wet, too. He must have gotten something in them. Must be that dog, he thought. Maybe he was allergic.

"We just wanted to thank you in person…" It was the First Lady, even taller and more graceful than she seemed on television. "The girls were heartbroken. And Dr. Jensen said you were willing to pay all his bills and keep him until they found us, and you didn't even know he was our dog."

Justin cleared his throat. "It was nothing. I just…" He cleared it again. "You're welcome."

He stood up, and smiled down at Jessica. "You're a lucky girl. He's a great dog."

She beamed up at him, her smile lighting up her whole face. "He's the best dog in the world."

Her mother put her hand on her head. "That's right," she said.

She looked at Brian and then back at Justin. "Thank you again. Both of you. My husband and I are so grateful."

She shook their hands, and then she was gone in a sea of Secret Service agents. Kep looked at Justin over his shoulder, and gave one last bark of farewell before dashing off at Jessica's side.

Justin sat down on the floor. "Did that just happen?"

Brian plunked down next to him. "I'm not sure. It might have."

"I'm starting to think," Justin said slowly, "that anything can happen. When you least expect it."

Brian nodded. "I'm thinking you're right."

Justin gave him a smile even bigger than Jessica's. "I've made up my mind."

Brian looked at him. "You did? What did you decide?"

"I'm going to get a studio here where I can work and live when I need to, and rent some workspace in Pittsburgh for when I'm there." Then his voice got fierce. "We did it before; we can do it again. All of it."

Brian stared. "And if we lose everything? The house? Kinnetik?"

Justin shook his head. "Please. Do you think Jessica's daddy's going to let that happen?"

Brian shook his head. "I'm serious, Justin."

"We did that before, too." His voice was soft now.

Brian let his head rest against the wall behind him. "You're doing that hope thing." He glared at him. "I hate it when you do that."

Justin patted his arm. "I know. It sucks, doesn't it?"

Brian stood up, held out his hand, and heaved Justin to his feet. "I'm used to it. But yes; fine. We did it once, we can do it again." He pulled him close and kissed him, then said firmly, "All of it."

And then he kissed him again.