

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Trust

SHAWN
LANE

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Trust

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Shawn Lane

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Prologue

“Hey, Brit, shouldn’t you be watching your boyfriend play?”

Justin Lowe didn’t glance up from the lined notebook he was writing furiously in. The sounds of the full-capacity crowd in the football stadium surrounded him.

“He’s in the red zone,” the man sitting next to him, Rick Driver, said.

It had taken Justin a few years after moving from England to California to get used to American football. It hadn’t made a bit of sense when he was thirteen but now as a freshman in college he actually liked it. Of course it was quite likely because his boyfriend of six months, Brad Callahan, was the quarterback on the team.

Justin closed his notebook and shoved it in his backpack. Sure enough, Brad’s team was close to making a touchdown.

Rick gave him a derisive look. “What are you writing in there, anyway?”

He was jotting down notes about the mystery novel he hoped to have published some day, but he was hardly going to tell that to Rick. He couldn’t stand Rick, but he was Brad’s oldest friend. They’d known each other since kindergarten. Rick went on and on about it every chance he got too. Justin was of the opinion the slim blond man hung around them so much because he was in love with Brad himself. But Rick claimed to be straight.

“Class notes,” he lied.

Rick snorted and mumbled something that might have been “dork” but Justin ignored him.

Brad threw a pass and the cheers in the crowd became deafening when the wide receiver caught it. He ran for the touchdown with only seconds left. Everyone stood, screaming. Justin found himself screaming as well.

* * * * *

He and Rick waited at one of the stadium exits for Brad to come. Earlier he'd been surrounded by jubilant teammates.

Justin always felt a jolt of anticipation at seeing Brad after a game. Brad was generally pumped up and as horny as hell.

Brad came around the corner, holding his helmet, his dark hair plastered to his head with sweat, a big happy grin lighting his face.

"All hail the conquering hero!" Rick yelled, and ran to him, embracing him. "Man, you were awesome."

"Thanks, buddy." Brad ruffled Rick's hair affectionately. He smiled at Justin. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself. You were awesome. Great game."

Brad nodded and pulled Justin to him in a brief hug. "I'm going to hit the showers. You guys wait for me in the parking lot out by the cars."

"Don't take too long. I'm starving," Rick announced.

"I saw you eating two hot dogs in the stand," Brad said. "Anyway, I won't be long."

"Sure, but I'm getting something to eat if you are."

"Okay, okay. See you in a bit." Brad headed down the path toward the lockers.

* * * * *

The game seemed to have ended long ago with the last-minute victory and Justin thought Brad would have should have come outside to the parking lot by now. Rick had left at least a half an hour ago, saying he was fed up waiting and was hungry. The lot was nearly empty save for a handful of cars.

Justin supposed with the victory some of the team might be having an extra celebration. This would put them in an excellent position to be in the playoffs.

He straightened from his position leaning on Brad's car and walked back to the locker room. The door handle turned easily.

"Brad, are you..."

By his locker, his jeans lowered down to his knees, stood Brad. Kneeling in front of his six-foot-three frame was one of the running backs, Justin forgot his name, working Brad's hard cock in and out of his mouth.

Brad glanced Justin's way at that moment.

"Holy fuck!"

Justin's stomach lurched and he stumbled, dropping down on one knee. His heart squeezed. Bile rose in his throat.

Somehow he was aware of the running back scrambling to his feet, throwing a worried look at Brad and then running out of the locker room. Puffing out heavy breaths, Brad quickly refastened his jeans.

"Justin... I... What are you doing here?" Brad's dark hair was tousled and his blue eyes were wide with shock and guilt.

"I came looking for you. To find out how much longer you were going to be." Justin shook his head and grabbed for the nearest locker to hoist himself up. "I can't do this."

"Wait," Brad said. He spoke quickly and his words were slightly slurred. Justin could smell the beer on his breath from where he stood. "That wasn't what you think you saw."

Justin couldn't look Brad in the face. Couldn't see the shame, the flushed cheeks. He turned away. "I have to get out of here."

"No." Brad grabbed his arm. "Justin, please I'm telling you that was nothing."

Justin shrugged Brad's hand off. "He had your cock in his mouth, Brad."

Brad made a little noise that was half whimper, half sigh. "I'm sorry. It just happened. We didn't even get that far."

If he'd kicked Justin in the stomach it wouldn't have hurt more. Justin clenched his fists and headed for the door that would allow him to escape the suffocating locker room. If only he could so easily escape the sight of Brad getting a blowjob from his teammate.

Brad chased him to the door and threw himself in front of Justin, blocking his exit. "Look, I know how this looks, but I'm telling you it was nothing. It meant nothing. I just had a little to drink. We were celebrating the win. Justin, you and I...we're together."

Justin swallowed heavily, shook his head. "Not anymore."

"You don't mean that," Brad said, his expression vaguely panicked.

"Get out of the way, Brad."

Brad searched his face, his blue eyes drifting over and over again, looking for something, Justin wasn't sure what.

"You-you weren't supposed to..."

"Weren't supposed to come in? Find out? Ever know? Which is it, Brad?"

"I don't know," he said, his voice cracking.

"You always do this, don't you?" Justin whispered, unable to stop the words from coming out.

"Do what?" Brad asked, his voice pained.

"I don't know what it is about you, Brad, but you have to sabotage everything good in your life. You've done that your whole life. You sabotaged that movie deal they wanted to give you because you were such a cute kid. Sabotaged art school. Your football scholarship to Stanford. Sabotaged friendships. Even relationships with your family. The only person who's been around for a long time is Rick and that's because he takes your shit."

"Justin..."

Tears stung Justin's eyes. "I shouldn't be surprised, really. But I guess I thought maybe I might be different. I thought you might care about me. But you found a way to sabotage us."

Brad shook his head. "No."

"Get out of my way." Though Brad was larger by quite a bit, Justin must have caught him unprepared, for when Justin shoved Brad, he moved out of the way from the door easily. Justin wrenched it open.

"What about second chances, Justin? Aren't you the one who told me you believe in second chances?" Brad's voice was low.

Blinking away tears, Justin nodded. "I thought I did. Goodbye, Brad."

Chapter One

Thirteen Years Later

Brad Callahan had just forked a bite of chili when the alarm sounded. He shoved the bite in his mouth and scrambled up from the dining table in the fire station. He followed the other men out to the trucks.

"Car accident," his captain announced. "Off the side of the freeway near the Balboa exit."

Brad hurried to the paramedic truck and seated himself in the passenger side. His partner Jeff Reeves started the truck and pulled out of the station. The fire engine followed with the rest of the crew.

It had been an unexpectedly wet week with today being the fourth rainy day in a row. January and February were the rainy months in Southern California if there was any rain at all. And no one seemed to know quite how to drive in the rain. Brad had been out at accidents every day since the storms started.

Sirens blaring, Jeff drove onto the freeway and headed in the direction of the accident. Some cars got out of the way, others didn't really have any place to go. It was jammed.

"This is going to take forever," Jeff muttered.

This being January, it was dark at six thirty, and with the rain pouring down, it made it difficult for Brad to see far ahead. He estimated they were still about two miles from the accident.

"Goddamn Californians don't know how to drive," Jeff said.

Brad smiled a little. Jeff was originally from New York and still had his Bronx accent though he'd been in California for twenty of his thirty-five years. He was a big guy much like Brad himself. They'd both played football in high school and college. Jeff

was a little thicker around the middle, which he assured everyone was because of his Mexican wife's excellent cooking.

Jeff pressed the horn and another car moved, allowing the paramedic truck to just squeeze through. He drove up on the shoulder and managed to find a clear path to the overturned sedan.

Brad grabbed their equipment and headed for the car. He crouched next to the driver's side to see a young blond man of perhaps twenty-five wearing a seat belt. The airbag had deployed and there was a large gash across the man's forehead. Brad checked his vital signs.

The engine had pulled up behind their truck and the captain rushed over and bent down next to Brad. "How is he?"

"DOA." Brad shook his head and stood to go to the other side of the car where Jeff had gone.

"Passengers?" the captain called.

"Just one," Jeff said. "He's alive, Cap, but he's pretty jammed in. May need the jaws."

"Got it."

Brad crouched down next to him. The passenger had likewise been wearing his seat belt and the airbag had been deployed. A large bruise was already forming on his cheek and a cut above his eye was gushing blood. The man's sun-streaked light brown hair was matted with blood.

Brad's heart squeezed in his chest. It...it couldn't be, but it was. He nearly stopped breathing.

Jeff frowned. "Hey, Callahan, isn't that the mystery writer guy you read? He looks like the photo on the back covers."

Somehow Brad found his voice, though it came out weak. "Yeah, that's him. Justin Lowe."

* * * * *

Brad stared at the closed doors leading to the intensive care unit. He was shaking all over and couldn't seem to stop. Had been since seeing Justin lying in the wrecked car, pale and bleeding. Near death.

As soon as his shift ended, Brad changed into jeans and a blue polo shirt and came straight to the hospital where Justin had been taken.

He hadn't even known Justin was in California. Didn't his biography on both his books and website say something about upstate New York?

God, Justin.

"Brad, what are you doing here?"

Brad turned to face the pretty African-American nurse who called out to him. He knew many of the staff in the area hospitals. "Hi, Gretchen. I was just wondering how the accident victim we brought in is doing."

"Oh, the writer? He's critical. They're watching him closely for brain swelling."

No, please.

"The press has been calling ever since they learned of the accident," Gretchen said. She sighed, crossing her arms. "We've already had some trying to get in to take pictures."

Brad swallowed the bile rising to his throat. Paparazzi in Los Angeles were like piranhas.

"Listen, Gretchen, do you think I might be able to see him for a minute?"

"You? Why? Brad, you know only immediate family is permitted."

Brad nodded. "I know but...Justin has no family out here anymore."

"Do you know, Mr. Lowe?"

"Yeah, we...we were good friends once." Brad blanched. His heart threatened to leap into his throat.

Gretchen stared at him, her mouth twisting in consideration. "All right, but only for a few minutes. Come with me."

He followed her through the double doors and past several rooms, most of which were merely covered by curtains. He heard groans of pain coming from some of the rooms and low but poignant weeping from the room next to where Gretchen led Brad.

"Wait here," she told him. "I'm going to tell his nurse."

Brad stood outside the room covered with one of those ringed curtains. He felt sick and wasn't sure he should even be there.

Justin's nurse, an older woman with gray curls, piercing blue eyes and a name tag that said Betty, walked over to him. "Are you a family member?"

"No, ma'am. I-I used to know Justin. I don't know where his family is now. I'm one of the paramedics who were called to the accident."

Betty appeared unimpressed but she shrugged. "Two minutes. We're keeping him sedated so he won't even know you're here."

"Yes, ma'am."

She sniffed and drew the curtain aside to reveal Justin looking very small and ghostly white in the hospital bed. Tubes stuck out of him and a white bandage had been wrapped around his head.

"Two minutes," the nurse said again then sort of nudged him in the direction of Justin and pulled the curtain closed behind him.

Brad walked within touching distance of Justin. He was so pale Brad could see little blue veins beneath his skin. Justin's lips were almost as pale as his skin and there was a cut and a bruise next to his mouth.

He had an uncontrollable urge to touch his former lover's face. His hand shaking, Brad reached out and touched his index finger along Justin's cold cheek. Somehow it seemed a violation. He had no right to touch this man. He'd lost that right years ago.

His chest constricted and he dropped his hand away from Justin. His ex had always been smaller than him. Justin was five feet eight inches tops. But lying helpless in the hospital bed he appeared even smaller and frailer. Just as heartbreakingly beautiful, though.

Justin wouldn't want him there, of course. Brad was well aware Justin hated him. He'd screwed up bad in college, and even after Justin walked out of the locker room, Brad had tried to talk to him. Justin would have none of it and had even moved away to avoid Brad. He'd given up then, not wanting to be Justin's stalker.

Still, he followed Justin's very successful career as a mystery novelist. Brad always knew he would do well.

The curtain moved and Brad knew his time was up. Had been thirteen years ago, really. The foolish prick of tears stung his eyes. The heartache never went away.

"Time's up," Betty said unnecessarily. She stood with her hands on her hips, looking like a bird protecting her baby in the nest.

"How is he doing?" Brad asked.

The old nurse shrugged. "About as well as can be expected. Airbag saved his life but he hit his head pretty hard. Doctors are monitoring him and so far there's no swelling of the brain."

Brad nodded, aware one of the tears he'd tried to hold back fell hotly against his cheek.

Betty's face seemed to soften a bit. "Want to be sure there's no spinal damage too."

Oh God.

Brad stepped away from the bed and Betty closed it off again. He felt a little lightheaded.

"You can come back tomorrow if you want," Betty said with a sniff. "In the morning."

Brad found he couldn't speak so he mouthed the words *thank you* and walked back through the double doors and out into the regular wing of the hospital.

* * * * *

Brad pulled the orange juice carton out of his apartment refrigerator and drank directly from it. He lived alone so there was no one to scold him.

He'd showered but hadn't bothered to shave. He ran his hand over his five o'clock shadow to wipe off the juice that had dribbled there. The toaster flipped up and he scooped up his waffles and set them on a paper towel. Maybe not the best breakfast but it was something.

The phone on the kitchen bar rang. "Hello."

"Hi, honey."

"Mom, what's up?"

"Nothing, just checking on my baby."

Brad rolled his eyes. "I'm a little old to be your baby."

"Says who? Anyway, I wanted to know if you wanted to come by for dinner tonight."

He took a bite of waffle. "Can't. I have to work."

"Work? Didn't you just finish your shift yesterday?"

"Uh-huh. I volunteered to cover someone else's." Brad returned the carton of juice to the fridge.

"Brad."

"Mom."

She sighed heavily. "You work too much. I'm worried about you. You don't get enough rest."

"I'm thirty-two years old. I can take care of myself." Brad walked into the living room to search for his keys.

"But you aren't taking care of yourself. Do you ever go on any dates, Brad?"

He pulled the phone away from his ear and glared at it. "No. Look, I have to go."

"I don't want you to spend the rest of your life alone."

"Maybe that's what I want, okay, Mom?"

"People make mistakes, Brad. How long are you going to let this penance of yours go on?" If there was one thing he hated it was being analyzed by his mother. Okay, so she did that for a living but he wasn't a patient.

He gritted his teeth. "Mom, I really have to go. I'll call you later. I can come over for dinner next week. Bye."

Brad tossed the phone on the nearby couch, shoved the last bite of waffle into his mouth and left the apartment. He had just enough time to check on Justin before he had to get to the station.

* * * * *

Brad entered the small private room Justin had been moved to that morning according to his new nurse Louise. The doctors felt he'd improved tremendously and would wake any time.

Justin still looked pale and small in the bed. Brad was happy to hear they no longer feared any brain swelling or spinal damage.

Louise told Brad they hadn't located any family for Justin and wondered what he knew. He knew that both of Justin's parents had passed away and his brother lived somewhere in Europe. He didn't confess he only knew that from reading Justin's website.

Brad pulled up a chair next to the hospital bed.

"Hey, you. They say sometimes those who are unconscious can still hear the people around them, so I brought a book to read to you." He waved the paperback of Justin's latest novel. "It's probably a bit familiar to you."

And so he read a few passages of the first chapter to Justin. He couldn't stay long, of course. He was expected at the station in less than an hour. But if Justin was going to wake soon his time was limited.

Brad wanted Justin to wake. Prayed for it even. It meant, though, that his visits with his former lover were nearly through. Once Justin woke, he would throw Brad out.

Brad learned thirteen years ago if you pissed off Justin he stayed that way. The day Brad finally gave up was the day about two months after the locker room incident when he'd called and left a message for Justin to meet him at a local park just to talk. Brad sat on the park bench for hours past the time he'd asked Justin to meet him. It grew dark before Brad got up and left. He learned only a few days later through a mutual acquaintance Justin was moving out of state.

He closed the book. "Genius, wouldn't you say?"

Brad got no response from the unconscious man.

Standing and stretching, Brad knew it was time to leave. He took a few steps to gaze down at Justin's face. Almost of its own accord, his hand reached out again to touch Justin. He stopped himself in time.

"You know you never let me tell you all those years ago, but I guess there isn't anything stopping me now. I'm sorry I screwed us up. More sorry than you can imagine."

Justin's eyes fluttered.

Brad held his breath.

The light brown lashes lifted, lowered then lifted again. Though Justin's olive green eyes were unfocused, he was looking at Brad.

Brad swallowed the emotion clogging his throat. He should get the nurse to tell her Justin was awake.

"Brad," Justin said in the barest whisper.

"Yes."

The lashes lowered again, in a painful slow-motion kind of way. "Road."

"What? Justin, what?"

Justin's eyes opened. "Off the road."

Brad nodded. "Yes, you went off the road."

Justin made a little noise somewhere between a sigh and a whimper.

"Shh, it's all right. I'm getting the nurse." Brad pressed the call button for the nurse.

The door of the room opened a few seconds later. Louise, a middle-aged woman, stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips.

"He's awake," Brad told her.

She bustled in. "Wonderful. Hello, Mr. Lowe, my name is Louise. I'm going to get the doctor to check you out in a moment. But first I'm going to check your vitals. Can you tell me how you feel?"

Justin shook his head a little, his gaze staying on Brad. "Brad..."

Louise glanced at Brad too. "I'm afraid you'll have to go for now, Mr. Callahan."

Brad went to move, but Justin reached out and grabbed his wrist in a surprisingly strong grip. Brad frowned.

"Forced off the road," Justin said.

Brad's stomach dropped. "What?"

"Mr. Callahan, please," Louise admonished. "You need to leave. You can come back later to see Mr. Lowe." The nurse removed Justin's cold hand from Brad's wrist. "Be still, Mr. Lowe. You can visit with your friend later. Do you know where you are?"

Brad bit his lip and stepped away from the bed. Justin must be suffering from the accident or something. He couldn't mean they were actually forced off the road, could he? He glanced at his watch. Damn, he really did need to go.

"I'll be back, Justin," Brad called from the door. He only hoped Justin would want him to come back.

Chapter Two

They hadn't had a normal first date. There hadn't been a time when Brad asked Justin out or he'd asked out Brad. In fact, when Justin first noticed Brad in a freshman literature class, he hadn't even guessed Brad was gay. Justin spent the first two weeks of that class staring at the good-looking, athletic, dark-haired man and daydreamed him into every fantasy.

Then one rainy night when he found himself leaving campus a little later than usual, he noticed Brad's car pulled over to the side of the road, broken down. Brad was bent over, looking under the hood. Justin didn't know a thing about cars, but he drove over and parked next to Brad anyway.

"Hi, need any help?" Justin had asked as he got out and approached Brad. "I'm Justin Lowe. We have lit class together."

Brad smiled and grasped his hand. "I know who you are. Brad Callahan."

"I know who you are too. Everyone knows. You're on the football team."

Brad brushed a wet lock of brown hair off his forehead. "Know anything about engines?"

"No, sorry. Can I call someone for you or give you a ride? I don't live too far. We can call someone for you from there. And you can get dry."

"Yeah, that would be cool. I can call my dad."

Even then, as Justin drove Brad to his tiny studio apartment, he didn't think Brad shared his sexual orientation. And even if he had thought about it he would not have thought Brad would be attracted to him.

"Damn, my dad's not home." Brad frowned at the phone. "Can I leave him your number?"

Justin gave Brad his number and Brad left a message. Justin offered to make coffee and then dinner as neither of them had eaten yet.

He didn't know how he had the nerve to ask, but Justin blurted out during dinner, "So do you have a girlfriend?"

Brad smiled. "No. Actually, Justin, I'm gay. What about you? Have you got a special girl?"

Justin had stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Justin? Are you freaked out because I'm gay?"

"No, I...no. I'm gay too. I just didn't think, you know, a jock—"

Brad smiled. "I know, I know, I get that a lot. It's okay." He stood. "Let me help you clear the table."

Justin stood too. "I can get this. Why don't you try your dad again?"

Brad walked to the phone and tried his call. Justin threw the dirty dishes in the sink, figuring he'd just take care of them when Brad left.

"Still no answer. I guess maybe I should call a tow truck." But Brad didn't pick up the phone again. He stared at Justin. Silence stretched between them.

Justin took a step toward Brad, his gaze searching Brad's.

"Justin," Brad whispered. He crossed the distance between them. His hand reached up to cup Justin's jaw, his thumb brushed Justin's bottom lip.

Justin shook and closed his eyes just before Brad's mouth lowered to his. The press of Brad's warm mouth sent jolts of lust through Justin. Brad's tongue prodded his lips open and it slipped in.

He moaned low and pushed Brad against the wall, his hands inching across Brad's abdomen, shoving up the hem of Brad's T-shirt.

Brad helped him, reaching down to yank the shirt up and over his head. "Condom and lube?"

Justin nodded. "In the bathroom. I'll be right back." He'd hoped he wasn't dreaming. Hoped Brad wouldn't be gone when he returned with a condom and lube. Justin had pulled off his own shirt and tossed it in the wicker basket he used as a hamper. He kicked off his shoes too. Reaching under the sink, he'd grabbed a foil packet and the tube of lube and walked back into the main room of his studio.

He was delighted to find Brad had not only not left or disappeared, but he'd lowered Justin's Murphy bed and pulled back the blankets. He'd also already unzipped his jeans.

Justin's mouth watered, taking in Brad's broad, athletic back as he bent to fluff the pillows. He found the action surprisingly touching.

Brad turned. "Ah great." He reached his hand out with a very sure smile.

Brilliant! He wouldn't have to ask the awkward question of who would be fucking whom. For the most part, Justin liked to bottom.

Justin walked to the bed and handed the condom and lube to Brad.

Brad pulled him against him, kissing Justin hard and deep. Justin whimpered and pushed Brad onto the bed. He pulled on Brad's jeans, tearing them from his legs and discarding them in a pile at the foot of the bed.

Brad leaned up on his elbows, wearing only his briefs. "Now you."

Justin swallowed and complied, removing his khaki slacks and briefs together. His erection bobbed free, straining up toward Brad.

His lover lifted his hips and shed his own briefs. His cock already leaked pre-cum. "Come here, Justin."

Justin crawled onto the bed, snatched up the foil packet and tore it open with his teeth. He set the condom on the bed next to them. His hands were shaking and his balls had already tightening close to his body. He was incredibly turned-on. He had never been with anyone as hot as Brad.

Brad pushed Justin onto his back and linked their hands as he crushed Justin under him. Their mouths fused together, their tongues dueling, fighting for dominance.

Justin gasped for air and reached for Brad's cock. His hand closed over the length, sliding up and down. "Oh God," he moaned. He grabbed the condom and rolled it on Brad's cock.

Brad flipped them so he lay on his back again and Justin loomed above him. Brad had the tube of lube in his hands and he squirted out a generous amount over his fingers. "Straddle me."

Justin placed his legs on either side of Brad and spread his ass cheeks. He gritted his teeth, waiting for the cold, slick liquid to be inserted in his opening. Brad pushed two lubed fingers inside.

"Yes, Brad, please."

Brad worked his fingers in past the tight ring of muscle, spreading him, preparing him. He slipped them in and out, over and over, loosening Justin.

"Now, Brad, now," Justin groaned.

Brad bit his lip. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Uh-huh, please."

Brad laughed, low, sexy. He grasped Justin's hips and slowly lowered him onto his cock. He paused at the ring of muscle for just a brief second and then breached past all the way to the hilt.

Justin closed his eyes, exhaling deeply. He let the feel of the other man fully inside him flow through him, tingle up his spine.

Brad pumped into him, faster, deeper, lifting him and lowering him, hitting the sweet spot that nearly drove him mad.

He dug his fingers into the sheet, fucking himself on Brad's cock, unable to keep cries of pleasure from spilling from his lips.

The orgasm didn't just tingle on the edge, didn't just prickle up his spine, it slammed through him, hard and potent and excruciating in its power. Cum shot all over Brad's stomach. Brad tensed under him, gasping out his own release, shuddering and shaking underneath him.

Justin collapsed on Brad, resting his head on the other man's chest, trying to catch his breath. It had been amazing. More than he could have dreamed. Brad's arms closed around him.

"Wow, thanks for picking me up tonight."

Justin chuckled. "No, thank you. Pleasure was mine."

The phone rang.

"Damn," Brad said, "that's probably my dad."

The phone kept ringing startling Justin out of his memory.

He reached for the phone by the hospital bed. "Brad?"

"Is this room 223?" a woman asked.

Justin fought to keep down his disappointment. "No, I'm sorry. You have the wrong room."

Brad, where are you?

Justin was beginning to think he'd dreamed up Brad because he wanted him to be there. Louise assured him the big, tall, dark-haired man who'd been visiting him up until three days ago was very real. And she had called him Mr. Callahan.

So where was he?

It was stupid to want to see Brad. It had taken him forever to get over him. If he really had. But when he knew he was coming to California, some part of him thought about seeing Brad. No wonder when he woke up to Brad in his hospital room, he thought maybe he'd hit his head too hard.

Justin sat up in bed, flipping the channels on the room television. It was the middle of the day and all he could find were soap operas and judge shows. But it kept his mind on something other than the car he had been riding in being forced off the freeway and Brad.

Louise told him the young man who'd been driving, Mike, had been killed in the accident. Mike had been a driver hired by the car service who'd picked him up from the airport. Justin didn't know much about him other than the small talk they'd exchanged while he drove. He felt terrible though. He wanted to say something to Mike's family but he wasn't sure what comfort he could provide.

Justin glanced at the wall clock. It was almost one o'clock so he figured his lunch would arrive at any time. He'd forgotten which selections he checked off on the menu but they all pretty much tasted the same, anyway. Later that afternoon the doctor was supposed to come by and let him know when he could be discharged. Justin counted the minutes.

The door of his private room had been left open so he could hear the hospital attendants going up and down the hallway with the lunch tray carts. A cart stopped just outside his door. He heard a low, deep murmur and then the answering softer tones of a woman.

He watched the doorway until it was filled with a dark-haired, six-foot-three god holding his tray of terrible food.

"Brad!" That sounded too eager, Justin was sure.

Brad smiled a little and came into the room with the tray. He set it on the small rectangular table lying across Justin's bed. He removed the plastic dome.

"What have we here? Um...baked chicken, green beans and red gelatin. Wow, looks great." Brad laughed.

"Yeah, funny," Justin said, unable to help smiling himself. "It's a good thing I'm almost out of here or I'd starve to death."

Brad's blue eyes bore into him for a moment then he pulled up a chair. "That's great news, Justin. When do you get discharged?"

"I'm waiting for the doctor to come by some time today." Justin realized he didn't even have a hotel room as he'd never made it to his reserved hotel on the day of the accident. He guessed he'd better figure something out.

"I'm glad. Sorry I couldn't come by earlier. I've been working."

Justin nodded and tried not to stare too intently at Brad. But damn it was bloody difficult. If anything, Brad looked better than he had thirteen years ago. More muscular, more devastating. He had the barest hint of a five o'clock shadow and it was sinfully sexy. Tiny lines by his Caribbean blue eyes made him sexier if possible. Really though, the thing Justin noticed most, that tore at his heart, was an overwhelming aura of vulnerability coming off Brad.

Truthfully, Justin was damn glad the table with his nasty food covered his lap from Brad's gaze because he wouldn't be able to mistake the bulge under sheets for anything other than Justin's hard cock. He'd always wanted Brad more than any other man.

"Louise said you're a paramedic."

"Right. We responded to your accident."

Justin wondered if there really were no such things as coincidences.

"I'm sorry about your friend. He was already dead when we got to the car."

"I'm sorry about him too. He was actually a hired driver. My publisher arranged for him to pick me up from the airport."

"You here for a book tour or something?"

Justin nodded. "In part, yes. But I'm also on an extended sabbatical. Or that's my intention anyway. Brad, you don't have to tell me anything but I wondered... Well, I was sure you'd have a football or some sports-related career."

Brad shifted in the chair. "That didn't work out."

"What happened?"

Brad glanced away toward the door, and Justin had a panicked moment thinking Brad would bolt. He didn't want that.

"You-you don't have to tell me, forget it. How are you otherwise?"

"It's okay, Justin. I'm not bothered by it. I quit football after... Well, a long time ago. Now I'm just an armchair quarterback." Brad grinned fleetingly. "I lost enthusiasm for it. I decided college wasn't really for me either. I entered the firefighters' academy. After a few years as a firefighter I decided to become a paramedic."

Somehow, even though he'd been a bit surprised at first, Justin didn't think it all that surprising Brad decided to devote his life to helping others. He'd always had that quality. A number of less admirable qualities too, of course. Didn't everyone?

"You don't have to tell me how you're doing," Brad said. "I've been following your career."

His heart twisted a bit. "You have?"

"Sure. I buy your books in hardback and then paperback when those come out. So you get double the money from me."

It was Justin's turn to look away. He was choked with too many emotions to meet Brad's gaze. Thirteen years was a long time to still be in love. Honestly he hoped he wasn't anymore, but one look at Brad and he knew. Who was he kidding? Every male protagonist he wrote about had a little bit of Brad in them. He still had a picture of his ex sitting next to his computer at home. Even before seeing Brad in the flesh again, Justin knew.

"Thanks," Justin managed to say when he could speak without his voice cracking. "Thanks for the rescue too."

Brad shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "I'm glad you're doing better. The bruises don't look so bad. They're fading."

Justin touched the bruise on his chin. "I'm not as sore anymore either."

"Good. Excellent. I should probably go so you can eat your lunch." Brad stood.

The panic filling Justin made him lightheaded. "No," he begged.

The startled look on Brad's face almost made him regret the outburst. But not quite.

"Please. I want to talk to you." Justin ran his hand through his too-dirty hair. They'd let him shower the afternoon before but hospital shampoo left a lot to be desired. "I've been waiting for you to come by for three days. Don't leave yet."

Brad sat immediately. He smiled. "Okay. I wasn't really sure you'd want to see me."

Justin licked his dry lips. "I want to."

They held each other's gaze for a moment. Brad looked away first. He picked up the wrapped plastic knife and fork, handing it to Justin. "Go ahead and eat at least."

Justin grimaced. "You couldn't smuggle me in a hamburger?"

He opened the plastic bag and removed the fork. Actually it appeared to be a spoon and fork combination. Spork they called them. He reached for the red gelatin.

"Justin, when I was here before, you said something when you woke up I've been wondering about."

Justin froze, the spork partially sticking out of the red substance. He set the container down. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure the car I was riding in was forced off the road."

Brad frowned. "But why? You mean by a drunk or something? Someone just came over into your lane?"

Justin wished it was a simple explanation of someone losing control on the oil-slicked freeway. Maybe it was and the accident didn't have anything to do with the other stuff. He just didn't believe it.

"You'll think I'm crazy or not remembering it right after the accident, probably, but, Brad, I saw the other driver. I looked straight at him. Our eyes met. He wasn't on anything and it wasn't someone missing a lane change. He knew exactly what he was doing and he deliberately crowded us off the freeway."

Brad seemed to consider that. "Maybe a road-rage incident? Your driver cut him off or maybe he thought the driver was cutting him off?"

Justin sighed and pushed his lunch away. He didn't have the appetite for it anyway. "I guess that could be the explanation."

"You don't think so, though. Why?"

"The letters."

* * * * *

Justin hadn't had a chance to explain to Brad about the threatening letters he'd been receiving as the doctor had come to check him out and release him. He was very glad he would be leaving but that begged the question where he would stay.

Brad waited for him in the hall outside the hospital room while he changed into his clothes. The clothes he'd been wearing had been too ruined to wear so Brad had volunteered to dash out to get him something. He'd returned a few moments ago with silk boxers, jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt all in Justin's size.

Brad peered in. "Ready?"

Justin slipped his feet into his brown loafers. At least they were intact.

"More than, actually."

"Good. I want to ask you about the letters you mentioned."

He nodded. "I want to talk about them too, but not here."

"Where are you staying?" Brad asked.

"Well, nowhere actually," Justin admitted. "I never made it to the hotel I had a reservation with. I don't even know what's happened to my baggage."

"I'm sure I can find out about it. It's probably in the trunk of the car in the impound lot. You want me to take you over to the hotel you had reservations at?"

"Unless... No never mind."

Brad raised an eyebrow. "What?"

Justin's face heated. Lord, now he felt stupid. "I just thought perhaps I might stay with you for a couple of days."

Damn, he sounded foolish. But honestly, he didn't know that he wanted to be alone, considering what just happened.

Brad squirmed. There was no other word for the awkward little movement he made and Justin felt even more foolish.

"I'm not sure that's such a great idea, Justin."

Of course, Brad probably had a boyfriend or something. Why hadn't he thought of that? Maybe because he hated thinking of Brad with someone else even now. Life sucked sometimes.

"Sure, yeah, you're right. Forget it," Justin said. He turned away to cover his embarrassment and picked up the plastic bag the hospital had put his ruined clothes in.

"Justin."

"Forget it, Brad. Don't make a big deal out of it." He brushed past Brad standing in the doorway and went out into the hallway. Lord, he should have known better. He kept walking, anxious to get to the exit and get out of the antiseptic-smelling hospital. Except he didn't know where he was going. Damn, which way was the lift? He'd seen it on the walks the nurses made him do.

"Justin, wait, please." Brad caught up with him and touched his arm.

Justin swallowed his pride and plastered a smile on his face and faced Brad. "I forget which way to go."

"It's to the left," Brad said. He wasn't smiling but rather looked concerned. "I want you to stay with me."

Justin shook his head. "Forget it. Like you said bad idea."

"I know what I said. I've changed my mind. I have plenty of room. It's a two-bedroom apartment and I live alone."

Okay, he liked the sound of that, but it didn't mean Brad didn't have someone. Not that he should care. Hell, he didn't want to start something with Brad, did he? Did he?

"Well, won't your boyfriend mind?" Shameless question, Justin knew.

Brad did smile just a little then. Just a ghost of the killer smile he was capable of and Justin used to crave. "I don't have a boyfriend, Justin. There's no one to mind."

He shouldn't be so happy about that. Really. It was none of his business and anyway he didn't want to start something with Brad. Didn't want his heart shredded into ribbons again.

"What about your significant other? Is there someone we should call?" Brad asked, his blue eyes darkening.

"No significant other at the moment," Justin admitted. He'd had a few relationships since Brad. None of those men mattered the way Brad had. The way he still mattered, damn it.

Brad exhaled. "All right. Settled then. But we should stop at the grocery store because I don't have much food. Then you can tell me about the letters you've been receiving. I assume you contacted the police."

"Yes, and they are completely useless. But I'll tell you everything."

* * * * *

Brad stared at the boxes of condoms and the nearby bottles of lubricant. He kept glancing around to make sure Justin didn't come down the aisle. He'd left Justin in the cereal aisle choosing between a healthy cereal and a sugared one.

What was he doing? It wasn't as though he were going to get to fuck Justin or anything. He was staying at his apartment for a few days, likely in the other bedroom. It didn't make one bit of difference he had been thinking of sex ever since walking into the hospital room that afternoon and seeing Justin looking so well. So damn hot.

Justin had always been a pretty boy. Small but well-built with nicely defined biceps and pecs. His light brown hair had streaks of gold. It had always reminded Brad of that

song from the seventies about angels sprinkling gold dust in someone's hair. He'd always been partial to Justin's olive green eyes too. They were different from everyone else's brown or blue eyes. He'd always been much more classically handsome than Brad. Softer, prettier.

Yeah, Brad wanted him. But being the dumb ass he was he'd screwed that up. Still, he had no condoms and lube at home. Wouldn't hurt to be prepared for the future.

He grabbed a box and a bottle and looked down the aisle in both directions. No sign yet of Justin. How the hell was he supposed to buy them in front of Justin? He couldn't. No way.

Grimacing, Brad was about to return them to their respective shelves when he remembered this store had a pharmacy department for small purchases.

A few minutes later, pharmacy bag in hand, he found Justin just coming out of the cereal aisle.

"It took you that long to pick something?" Brad asked.

Justin shrugged, allowing Brad to appreciate the way the shirt he'd purchased for Justin stretched across his skin. "Actually I couldn't decide so I thought I'd get both."

"A wise decision."

Justin glanced at the bag Brad held. "You already bought something?"

"Um yeah, just had to pick up a prescription."

"Okay, let's hurry with the rest of it. I'm starving."

"Just have to hit the meat department."

Justin nodded and turned the cart in that direction. "Think they'll have bangers?"

Brad shuddered. "I sincerely hope not."

Chapter Three

Justin was starting to wonder whether wanting to stay with Brad really was a mistake. His ex was more gorgeous than he had been thirteen years ago. If that was possible. Justin found himself seriously thinking of hot sex and he hated himself for it. How could he think of going down the Brad road again?

His gaze betrayed him and stayed glued to Brad's ass as he bent to put groceries in the vegetable drawer of his refrigerator. The jeans Brad wore could have been painted on. Good Lord, he was salivating.

Justin pulled at the collar of the t-shirt he wore. His flesh was heated with lust, his pants tightening in the crotch. He had to get a hold of himself.

"Have any bottled ice water?" he choked out.

Brad crouched down in front of the fridge. The polo shirt he wore stretched across his broad back. He pulled out a water and held it up for Justin without turning around.

Justin placed the cold water against his heated face and neck. "So you aren't playing football at all? Not even for recreation?"

"I don't really have time for recreation." Brad stood and reached for the last plastic bag of groceries.

"Well, then how do you maintain that hot physique?" Fuck, he just blurted that out, didn't he? Now his face was red from more than just heated lust. Damn, he wished he could take back the words.

Brad cleared his throat but didn't turn around. Justin was grateful for that. He was embarrassed enough.

"There's a treadmill down at the fire station," Brad explained, taking out bananas and setting them on the counter. "And a weight room too. I use those."

"That explains it, then," Justin said too brightly. *Fucking idiot*. He'd always been a bumbling, babbling fool around Brad. Some things never changed.

Brad turned around and folded his arms across his broad, muscular chest. Justin stared at his biceps for a moment then dropped his gaze to the flat washboard stomach. Forcing himself to look up and into Brad's face was almost as big a mistake for he couldn't miss the quizzical, slightly amused look in those blue eyes.

"Are you hungry? What would you like to eat?" Brad asked.

You.

"How about that frozen pizza we bought?"

Brad nodded and turned on the oven to preheat.

Trying desperately to distract himself, Justin said, "Hey, can I use your telephone? Somewhere between the car accident and the hospital my cellular has gone missing. I should probably ring some people and let them know what's happened and my whereabouts."

Brad smiled and pointed to his cordless phone. "Sure, it's there on the bar counter."

* * * * *

Brad flipped his cell phone closed after asking his superior for a few days off. To his relief he'd been able to have another paramedic fill in for him no problem. He supposed it would be difficult to say no to someone who often covered other shifts.

He remained sitting on the edge of his bed for a moment, listening to the low rumble of Justin's cultured British accent coming from the living room. Though Justin had moved to the States in his teenage years, he'd never quite lost his accent. Brad had always found it quite sexy.

Brad wanted to give his cock a chance to deflate back to normal. The sensual, heated looks Justin had been giving him in the kitchen a few moments before had been almost impossible to resist. Almost.

Just below the surface of those *let's have hot sex* looks Justin gave him were vulnerability and distrust. Still. Brad saw it in Justin's olive green eyes every time he looked there. Justin didn't trust Brad. It was pretty clear.

Brad understood. Naturally. But it hurt anyway. So much for the lube and condoms. He was *not* going there.

Under control again, both mentally and physically, Brad rose from the bed and went back to the living room. He could smell the pizza so he went to check on it when he realized Justin was still on the phone. Sounded like to his agent.

Not quite ready. He closed the oven and turned, smacking right into Justin's chest. Brad's lungs seized. Though they were separated by both of their shirts, he could feel the heat coming from the other man's skin. Could feel the ripples of Justin's muscles.

When the hell had Justin come into the kitchen, and why was he standing so damn close? He pushed him. He actually reached out and pushed space between himself and Justin. Not a hard shove but an effective one. Hurt glinted briefly in Justin's gaze but Brad decided to ignore it. It was way better this way.

"Done with your calls?" Brad asked, forcing casualness into his tone. "The pizza still needs a few minutes. Why don't I show you the spare bedroom? Later, we can check on your suitcases."

"Yeah, all done. I'm getting kind of tired," Justin said, his voice whisper-soft. "Do you think I can eat the pizza later?"

"Oh sure, yeah. It can be reheated. Everything okay?"

Justin nodded.

Brad wished he could stop feeling like the biggest jerk around Justin. The hurt he'd seen in his green eyes when Brad shoved him had returned, looking sharper and more poignant. He didn't want to hurt Justin. He never did.

"Come on, I'll show you the room and you can take a nap. Then when you wake you can have the pizza. I can make you some tea too and you can tell me about the letters. All right?"

"Yes, that will be fine." Justin walked out of the kitchen. Brad's heart twisted. The distance was back between them.

* * * * *

"Hi, Mom."

"Are you at work, Brad?"

Brad closed his eyes and leaned back in the beige leather easy chair he'd been sitting in for the last hour. His favorite place in his apartment. When life ceased to make sense for whatever reason, he crawled into the chair. It had been his father's before his.

"No, I'm taking a few days off."

"A vacation? Brad, that's wonderful. I want you to come for dinner."

"Not really a vacation exactly. Just a few days off."

"How many?"

"I'm not really sure. The thing is, Justin, Justin Lowe is here."

A slight pause before his mother said, "Here in California."

Brad winced. "Um yeah. Actually, here. In my apartment."

"Brad." Her tone all censure.

"I know. There was this accident. It was pretty bad. Justin said something about being forced off the road and some letters he's been receiving."

"How does that get to him in your apartment?"

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "He needed a place to stay, Mom. I don't know the whole story yet. He's taking a nap."

"Brad, do you think this is a smart thing to do?"

"No. But it's not like we're sleeping together or anything. He's staying in the second bedroom."

"For how long?"

"I don't know." He was so weary he wished he could just go to sleep, wake up and find out it was all a dream. Justin could be safely back in New York, just a mystery writer Brad once knew.

"Do you want it to be something more?" His mother's voice had gentled.

"No. Yes. I don't know. It doesn't matter. Justin doesn't want that. Doesn't want me. Okay? We both know I fucked that up long ago. He's not...he's never going to forgive me."

"And you haven't forgiven yourself either."

"Don't get all psycho babble on me, Mom. I deserved what I got."

"Bring him to dinner."

"I don't think that's a good idea. I'm not even sure how long he's going to be here." He clenched his eyes tight. "Things aren't going well."

His mother sighed. "You two were never compatible, Brad. Too many differences. You need to move on and think about a real relationship. It's long past time. I think you should get some counseling."

"Mom."

"Not with me. You need an unbiased professional. I can recommend several."

"Sometimes I really hate having a psychiatrist for a mother."

"I'm serious, Brad. I've allowed this to go on for far too long."

"You've allowed...Mom." Brad opened his eyes and straightened in the chair, fully prepared to tell his mom to mind her own business when his gaze stopped on Justin standing in the doorway of the living room. His light brown hair was wet from the shower he'd obviously just taken. *Shit.* "Uh, Mom, I have to go."

"Think about what I said. And think about dinner."

"Yeah, yeah. Goodbye." He closed his flip phone, his cheeks hot with embarrassment. He stood up. "S-sorry. That was my mom."

Justin's expression was unreadable but he nodded. "Yes, I heard."

Brad looked away, unable or unwilling to meet Justin's gaze. "The pizza. I'll reheat it for you. And tea. I already have the teabag waiting."

He moved toward the kitchen but Justin had already moved away from the doorway and stood in his way. Justin's fingers curled around the bare skin on his forearm, sending a powerful jolt straight to his cock.

"Brad, don't."

His heart leapt into his throat, then plummeted. This was the part where Justin told him he was calling a cab and getting the hell out of Brad's apartment. Misery choked him but he wouldn't back away from it like a coward.

"How much did you hear?" he managed to ask.

"All of it, I think."

Brad nodded. "Just my mother being bossy. It was nothing."

Olive green eyes met his. "You're wrong, Brad."

"Wrong?"

Justin stepped very close to Brad, so close he felt the bulge in Justin's jeans. So close he felt Justin's breath on his neck.

"I want you," Justin said. "I want you so bad it's tearing me up."

He pulled Brad's head down and pressed his lips to Brad's mouth in a deep, soul-searing kiss.

The last thing he ought to be doing was making out with Justin. Brad knew when it was over Justin would regret it. And so, therefore, would Brad. But it had been so long since he'd had such human contact. Brad leaned into the kiss, allowing the sensation of having Justin's lips on his to overtake him. Wasn't this what he wanted? What he'd wanted ever since Justin left him?

Justin tore his lips from Brad and searched his gaze. There was unmistakable need in his green eyes but also an aching vulnerability that made Brad want to weep.

"Justin, we shouldn't go there," Brad said, making his voice as firm as he could manage. His gut twisted but he didn't want to cause Justin any more pain.

"Why not?"

"You know why not. Let's... Why don't we talk about the letters you mentioned? If there's a threat to your life, I want to help."

"No," Justin whispered. His long fingers went to the snaps on Brad's jeans. "Don't. I don't think I can stand any more rejection from you, Brad."

What?

"Justin, I haven't—"

Justin shook his head and dropped to his knees in front of Brad. He inched the jeans down Brad's hips. He palmed Brad's erection through his briefs.

Brad inhaled sharply. His damn legs wobbled.

Justin raised his gaze for one moment to Brad's face but then lowered his lashes, shutting away whatever he was thinking from Brad. Justin pushed Brad's briefs together with the jeans down to his knees. Brad's hard cock was now mere inches from Justin's mouth.

Oh God.

Brad closed his eyes, willing himself not to get too excited. Hell, considering the way they'd parted this might be Justin's way of getting revenge and then he'd laugh and tell Brad he'd suck him off in his dreams. Brad didn't think Justin would do that, but really if he did, Brad would surely deserve it.

He thanked God when Justin's lips wrapped around the tip of his penis.

Justin slowly drew Brad in past the head until his shaft was halfway down Justin's throat. Brad's balls drew tight. He wouldn't be able to hold back for long. Too many years without.

That this of all things, Justin giving him a blowjob, would be possible in anything other than his dreams. It never would have crossed Brad's mind. Seeing Justin again, having him so near had been a miracle. But this, he couldn't even fathom.

Justin's long, thin fingers cupped his sac while he sucked. Brad tentatively placed his hands on Justin's shoulders, wanting the feel of him, even if it was through the fabric of his shirt. He could hear faint groans and realized they came from his own lips.

Brad opened his eyes when it occurred to him he was missing the sight of his cock sliding in and out of Justin's gorgeous mouth. And what a sight it was. Justin's fair, pink cheeks hollowed while he sucked, his lips wet with saliva and pre-cum. The orgasm tingling up his spine would be powerful.

"Oh God," he breathed. He hadn't thought it possible but his balls tightened more and jolts of agonizing pleasure shot through his aching shaft. If he hadn't been leaning against the counter, Brad would have fallen to his knees. "Justin, I'm going to come."

Justin nodded slightly but didn't pull Brad's cock out of his mouth. In the past, their past, Justin never took Brad's cream, he'd always released Brad's cock before he ejaculated. Brad knew Justin's preference and had always warned him beforehand.

"Justin—"

Justin's fingers tightened on Brad's ass and he sucked harder and faster on Brad's cock. Brad tried to push on Justin's shoulders, but the other man wouldn't budge. It was getting to the point where if he didn't pull out soon, Justin was going to get a mouth full of cum.

"Fuck, Justin, please, I..."

Justin's teeth grazed the tip of his cock and that was it. He couldn't hold back. The orgasm staggered him, electrifying every nerve in his cock, in his body. His grabbed Justin's head, threading his fingers in his hair. He tensed, pulsing and shooting, filling his lover's mouth.

Still Justin held on to him, continuing to suck and lick Brad for several moments. Finally he let Brad slip out. Justin stood and planted his lips on Brad's, slipping his

tongue between his parted lips. Brad tasted his own cum. Justin pressed closer and wrapped his arms around Brad's waist. His cock began to perk up again. It had been too long.

"Brad," Justin murmured. "Take me to bed."

* * * * *

Justin felt as nervous and excited as he had the first time he'd had sex with Brad. He didn't know why but he was on edge. Even after making Brad come.

Brad had disappeared into the bathroom off his bedroom, presumably to clean up a bit. He pulled off his shirt and then his slacks.

Brad had a king-size bed covered with a large forest green comforter. Justin pulled back the comforter and pristine white sheets. He hoped he knew what he was doing. He wanted Brad. Always had. But he didn't think he could be involved with Brad again. Not like before. He'd been thinking about it ever since he woke up to Brad in the hospital room. Yet he couldn't stop thinking of sex with Brad. Touching him.

And the taste of Brad. Amazing. Something he definitely should have done all those years ago. Back then he hadn't thought the taste of cum would appeal to him at all. He'd tried tasting other men since and, the truth was, it still wasn't his preference. He could learn to really like it with Brad, though.

Justin removed his briefs and sat on the mattress. He folded them neatly and set them on a nightstand nearby. Now he was naked and felt completely vulnerable. Damn, he hated that feeling. But with Brad, he usually felt that way.

Brad had always been better-looking, more charming, more popular. Everything he wanted to do well, he did.

Justin had struggled early in life. He was successful now. His writing career had exploded and his mysteries made the best-seller lists. Probably made way more money than Brad, but yet Brad was a paramedic, a hero nearly every day.

Still Justin didn't think he could get past what had happened in college. Sure, Brad had been drinking that day. But Justin didn't think alcohol excused bad behavior.

Funny, before he caught Brad cheating, Justin believed such a thing could be, if not overlooked, forgiven. His dad had cheated on his mom, and though he'd known it was devastating to her, he'd been miserable when she'd refused to forgive his dad. Their marriage had ended over it, and until Brad hurt him, Justin blamed his mother for not giving his father a second chance.

Brad came out of the bathroom. He'd removed his clothes but had a navy towel wrapped around his waist. He held the paper bag from the pharmacy.

Justin couldn't help but stare. He'd never been as attracted to anyone as Brad. No one he'd ever known in his life before or after. Tall, lean and muscular without being over built like a weightlifter. Brad had lived his whole life in California and had a light tan all year round. Thirteen years hadn't changed that. Justin's mouth watered.

"You sure about this?" Brad asked with a slight frown that didn't mar his drop-dead gorgeous face. His jaw was shadowed with a bit of dark stubble. "I mean, what about your injuries?"

Justin's already too-hard cock leaked pre-cum. His hand curved around the tip, stroking himself in anticipation of what was to come. "Yes, I'm quite sure. And I am fine. Just a few leftover bruises and tender spots."

Brad's gaze fixed on Justin touching himself. His tongue darted out to lick his lips. He glanced down at the bag he held as if just remembering it. He reached into it and removed a box.

"What have you got there?" Justin asked, rubbing the pre-cum into the tip of his cock. His body quaked. He was on fire and thought if Brad didn't fuck him into the mattress soon he would explode.

Brad smiled a little, exposing his way-too-sexy dimples. He tossed the box at Justin, who caught it.

"Pre-lubed condoms? Is that what you bought at the pharmacy?"

Brad reddened. "Uh yeah. I-I didn't have any and I thought..." He shrugged.

Justin swallowed, not sure why Brad hadn't had condoms. Was it because he had sex so much he ran out, or he hadn't had it in a long time? Justin didn't know. He'd said he didn't have a boyfriend but that wasn't the same as being celibate. It shouldn't matter anyway. He wasn't thinking of forever here, just casual sex with a friend.

Yeah sure.

Justin opened the box and took out a foil packet. He set the box on the nightstand next to his briefs. "Well, then come here."

Brad hesitated for only a moment but then he dropped the towel, exposing his totally nude body to Justin's hungry gaze. The cock he'd so recently tasted had grown hard again, jutting out between Brad's muscular thighs. He walked over to the bed and lay down.

Justin scooted up to lay right next to Brad, facing him, their chests within mere inches of each other. He reached out and grazed one of Brad's nipples with his fingertips. Touching him, lying on the bed again with Brad seemed like a dream.

"Kiss me," Justin urged.

Brad bent his head and touched his lips to Justin's with the barest of touches, his breath fanning against Justin's skin.

"Justin," he murmured, his blue eyes boring into Justin, drowning him in lust and anticipation.

Covering the back of Brad's head with his hand, he brought his lover's lips hard against his. After a moment of letting Justin take the lead in the kiss, Brad turned more aggressive and pushed Justin on his back, pressing him into the mattress. He tugged Justin's bottom lip with his teeth.

"Where's that condom?" Brad asked.

Justin had let the packet slip through his fingers, so he felt along the bed around them until his hand closed around it. He brought it to his teeth and tore it open. He bent at the waist and reached for Brad's erection. He fully intended to roll it on himself.

Brad snatched it from his fingers. "Trust me. I'd better do it."

Justin was practically drooling watching his lover encase his magnificent cock in the latex.

"Lie back," Brad ordered. He pushed Justin for emphasis. He squirted some lube from the bottle on his fingers.

Justin lay on his back and spread his legs, anticipating what would happen next. Brad placed his head between his lover's legs and lifted his buttocks. His tongue dived into the entrance there.

Justin clenched his eyes tight, lifting his ass up, pressing closer to Brad's probing tongue. From their first time, Justin had always been the bottom. He loved it. Loved the submissiveness of it. Since their breakup, a few times he'd topped, but really Justin found he preferred this position. And he definitely preferred this man.

Brad tongued him for several minutes before he added a lubed finger. He stretched Justin's hole then inserted another. He worked both of them in as well as his tongue and then finally a third finger, stretching him even more, preparing him for Brad's cock.

The thirteen years seemed to have vanished. He was back in Brad's bed. Back in his arms. Writhing underneath him like before. Begging to be taken.

"Brad, please."

Brad straightened and poised the head of his cock at Justin's hole. He pushed in with frustrating slowness. Justin wanted them to be joined. He lifted up, trying to urge Brad's cock in faster.

"Hell," Brad muttered, gritting his teeth.

"Just do it," Justin said.

Brad gave him an exasperated look but he thrust in all the way.

Justin gasped at the slight burn, his eyes widening.

"You okay?"

"Yes, it's just been a while. And especially with someone of your size." Justin squirmed a bit, moving left then right until he found a more comfortable position. At last the sting went away to be replaced by the incredible sensation of being completely filled.

Brad watched him for a moment, unmoving. When he appeared satisfied by what he saw, he started to pull out then push in, very slowly. He repeated the motion with aching, poignant care. As if he weren't just fucking him but rather making love.

The thought caused an uncomfortable sadness to wash through Justin. The reality was those thirteen years hadn't vanished after all. They weren't a couple making love. They were just two old friends having casual sex under the circumstances.

It was what he told himself because it was what he needed to believe. He couldn't go back to wondering who Brad would be with next. He had to push that aside and not dwell on that. They didn't have a relationship.

His gaze locked with Brad and he thought he caught the same desolation in Brad's blue eyes. Brad looked away, though, before he could be certain.

Brad grabbed Justin's hands, trapping his arms in his grip and holding them over his head. He pounded his cock in Justin's ass now. Almost too hard, as if he wanted to punish them both.

"Come for me," Brad commanded. He closed his free hand over Justin's cock, rubbing him fast and furious. "Do it."

A cry escaped Justin's lips before he could stop it. On Brad's command, his balls tightened, his cock tensed and he spurted cum all over both their stomachs.

Brad closed his eyes and thrust a few more times before yelling Justin's name. Justin clung to him through Brad's orgasm, holding him tightly.

When Brad pulled out, Justin felt the withdrawal to his very soul. After discarding the used condom, he lay next to Justin, their sides touching. Neither of them said anything for a long time.

Justin turned his head to watch Brad. He watched his lover's lashes lower as he blinked, studied his slightly curved lips, the beads of sweat on her upper lip. He was so damn beautiful.

"Is that your stomach I hear growling?" Brad asked, glancing his way, grinning.

"I still haven't eaten that damn frozen pizza."

Brad chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I really do need to reheat it. And we need to talk."

"Talk?" Justin's heart raced, threatening to plummet straight to his stomach.

"Yeah, no more distractions, Justin. I want to know about these letters. Are they emails?"

"Yeah some of them. If you have a computer, I'll show them to you."

Brad nodded and sat up. "Okay. I'll stick the pizza in the microwave and then fire up the computer."

Chapter Four

Justin sat in front of Brad's desktop computer, waiting for it to power on. Next to him was a paper plate with a half-eaten slice of cheese pizza on it.

Brad stuck his head out of the kitchen. "You want milk and sugar in your tea?"

"No, I've become Americanized. Actually, if you have green tea, I'd prefer that."

Brad nodded. "Coming right up."

Justin clicked on the internet icon and punched in the address for his email account. Neither he nor Brad had bothered getting fully dressed. In fact, they were both only wearing terry cloth robes. Of course, Brad being so tall, the robe Justin wore swam on him. He didn't mind. It smelled spicy and masculine, just like Brad.

Brad came out of the kitchen carrying two steaming mugs of tea. He set one next to Justin's paper plate and then the other on a nearby end table. He crouched next to Justin's chair and peered at the computer screen.

"So show me."

Justin studied Brad's profile, unable to look away. He had looks that could be called classically handsome or movie-star handsome. Could have had any woman he wanted if he'd been straight. Justin had always been grateful Brad was gay.

His long lashes lowered, flickered and then he glanced at Justin. "No more distractions, Justin," Brad said, his face serious. "I mean it."

Justin sighed and turned his attention back to his email. He went into his file folders and found the one marked in capital letters SCARY.

"When did these first start to arrive?" Brad asked.

"About three months ago. The first one I didn't really think much about. As a fairly successful writer with a website, I've learned you sometimes attract a few strange people."

Justin opened the first email and watched Brad read it. "You can see it's not all that threatening or anything. Just sort of ominous. 'I've been keeping track of you for a long time.' That sort of thing. It could easily be interpreted to mean keeping track of my career or whatever."

"All right. Let's see the next one."

It was crazy, stupid really, but with Brad there next to him, acting like the leader he always was, Justin felt better. Less afraid. Through the years, Justin had tried not to be such a follower, but if he was honest with himself, he'd always loved it when Brad seized control. For Brad it was instinctual.

"This second one was more disconcerting."

Brad quickly scanned the email saying the writer knew where Justin lived. His mouth thinned. "Is this the one that made you contact the police?"

"No."

Brad arched his eyebrows at Justin in a definite look of disapproval. "Really? This didn't send off enough alarm bells to call the police?"

Justin shrugged. "I just figured it was some whacko trying to get my attention."

"Do you know how many whackos end up acting on their obsessions?"

"Sometimes I wish you weren't the son of a psychiatrist." Justin clicked on the next email. "Before this next one came, I actually got a package in the mail."

Brad turned away from the computer and stared at him. "Package? What package?"

"It contained a paperback of one of my stories shredded."

"So you notified the police then?"

Justin shifted uncomfortably. "Well, no. Not until after the email that came right after it." He held up his hands to stave off whatever Brad intended to say. "I know, I

just figured it was someone's way of saying they didn't like the book. At first I didn't think it had anything to do with the bizarre emails."

Brad's eyes narrowed but then he glanced back at the computer screen. "You'll be shredded next," he read aloud.

Justin winced. "That's when I called the police. Unfortunately, as I've already said, they didn't think much of my concerns."

"What did they do?" Brad stood and reached for the cup of tea he'd placed on the end table. He took a sip.

"They came to my house, looked at the three emails and the shredded book, made a report and announced that it was just some sort of prank by an obsessed fan. All three of those emails were from different generic free email accounts and had been sent from different IP addresses. They suggested I change my email address." Justin reached for his own mug of tea. "Anyway, a couple of weeks went by and nothing more happened. I might have even started buying into that story."

"But?"

"One day I'd spent most of the day out of my house. I'd gone shopping and then to dinner with a friend." Noticing the shuttered, wary expression on Brad's face, Justin added, "Not a lover, just a friend." Not that he owed an explanation to Brad. They *weren't* a couple. Recent hot sex notwithstanding.

"Go on."

"When I returned home, everything looked normal. At first." Justin realized he was shaking and he took a fortifying sip of his tea. It didn't help.

Brad knelt beside him and took the cup from his hands and set it aside. He grabbed Justin's hands in his, lacing their fingers together. His calm assuredness, his warmth helped far more than the tea to calm Justin's nerves. Far more than it ought to.

"I found one of my shirts hanging from the ceiling in the kitchen. It had been slashed to shreds and smeared in what-what looked like blood."

"What?"

Justin swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah. It was all red. I thought it was blood but it wasn't. Well, after I called the police, I found out. I didn't touch it, just called them. They came and took it down. It was fake blood. The kind they sell in Halloween shops."

"My God."

"Yeah. The police acted as though it were a prank but they said they'd look into it and keep an eye out around my house. I had an email waiting from yet another unknown person and it said next time it would be me and the blood would be real."

Brad tightened his grip on Justin's hands. "And you showed that to the police, right?"

"Yes, of course. But they said they still couldn't trace it. I changed the locks, but it didn't do any good. I had trouble concentrating. I jumped at every noise, distrusted every stranger I saw. Even people I knew. I wouldn't leave the house, I was afraid." Justin shook his head. "But the emails stopped and I didn't get any more packages. The police pretty much dropped it then. They decided whoever it was had given up."

"Then what?"

"I decided I needed to get away. The book signing in California was the perfect excuse. And...I guess some part of me thought of you too. I haven't been back here since-since we broke up. Then, well, you know what happened after I got here."

"Did you get a good look at the driver of the other car?"

"It was dark and raining. And he wore a hooded sweatshirt so I didn't see him all that well, but there was something vaguely familiar about him. I-I wish I could figure out what it was. I've been trying to think what it was but I can't."

Brad's phone chirped to life. He released Justin's hands and stood. "Hello. Speaking. Oh, thank you. That's great. We'll be by to get it." Brad glanced at a nearby clock. "Yeah, okay. Tomorrow morning, then. Thanks a lot. Bye."

"Please tell me that was about my bags."

Brad nodded. "Yes, they have them at the impound lot. Unfortunately the guy's getting ready to close. We can go in the morning."

Justin turned from the computer and stood. He picked up his tea and finished it off. "It'll be nice to have my things."

"You've told me everything?"

"Yes."

"And you have no idea who it could be?"

"No. I've been thinking about it for weeks. You know the police always ask you if you have any enemies. I can't think of anyone."

"Want another slice of pizza?" Brad gestured to Justin's empty paper plate. He scooped it up and brought it into the kitchen. Justin followed. "How about old boyfriends?"

"I've had a couple but none who were obsessed with me." Justin smiled. "I'm not all that great."

"It doesn't take much for some and they could feel as though you slighted them."

"Maybe, but the police looked into them and came up empty."

Brad handed him the plate with a new slice of pizza. "They didn't contact me."

"Well, I didn't tell them about you, Brad," Justin admitted.

"Why not?"

"I knew it wasn't you. And I didn't want you bothered by them."

"It isn't me. But you shouldn't assume anything, Justin. It could be anyone. Look, I have a friend in the detective bureau of LAPD. I'll call tomorrow and see if he can help us."

"Great, thanks."

Brad's phone rang again and he left the kitchen to answer it.

Justin finished the other slice of pizza and tossed the paper plate in the trash under the sink. He leaned against the counter, his arms folded and tried to picture the man

who'd run him off the road. The man was dangerous. He already murdered Justin's driver and tried to murder Justin. Surely the police here would do something about it. If they actually believed Justin.

Considering he wrote mysteries with detective characters, he'd expected to get more cooperation from the police. More interest in his dilemma. He'd taken pains to research and ask questions of some of the same police officers. They treated him politely but still acted as though he were somewhat of a nuisance.

With a heavy sigh, Justin straightened and left the kitchen. Brad was still on the phone. Justin watched him for a moment. The terry cloth robe was open at the chest, revealing his muscular chest. Justin's mouth watered. Okay, it hadn't been that long ago since they'd had sex but he wanted it again. His cock rose beneath his own robe.

He wondered who Brad was talking to. His voice was low, almost intimate. Justin couldn't make out any of the conversation. An annoying twinge of jealousy flowed through him. He tried to push it aside.

Brad hung up and turned to Justin with a smile. "All right, then. We have the evening free. What do you want to do? See a movie? Watch television?"

"No." Justin returned the smile. "I have a better idea. If you're up for it."

"What?"

Justin walked over to him and slipped his hand into the opening of Brad's robe. "Let's see. Are you up for it?" His hand closed around Brad's cock.

Brad swallowed. "I think I can be persuaded."

Justin gestured with his head toward the bedroom. "Shall we?"

* * * * *

Honestly, they should be talking about where all this would lead them. Logically having sex again was probably not the brightest decision. Brad was all too aware it didn't solve anything. Nothing had changed between them other than they were

thirteen years older. Somewhere in the back of his brain he knew he should protest. But, hell, he was still a guy and what did logic have to do with anything?

Brad yanked the robe from Justin's shoulders. Even though athleticism had never been Justin's forte, he still had a great body. Broad shoulders, sculpted muscular arms. He eased the robe down Justin's arms, past his wrists and let it drop at their feet. Justin had a smattering of chest hair, not too much but not completely bare there. A perfect amount as far as Brad was concerned. He'd seen guys with hairy backs and found it not very sexy.

He leaned down and covered Justin's soft lips with his. Justin's hands worked their magic on his cock, stroking his shaft and squeezing his balls. He loosened the tie of his own robe and slipped it from his body. He pressed his bare chest to Justin's, sliding their skin together, rubbing their nipples.

"Ah," Justin moaned, his tongue darting into Brad's mouth.

They stood next to the bed. Justin's legs butted against it. Brad gently pushed him until he lay on the mattress then joined him on the bed. He'd already laid the tube of lube on the bed, so he reached for it and slicked it over his fingers. Spreading Justin's ass, he thrust two fingers in his lover's entrance.

Justin bent at the waist so he could watch Brad working in his fingers. His green eyes were wild with lust. He bit his lip and reached for the condom packet.

"God, I love the way you do that," Justin said. His hips raised and he pushed his ass toward Brad, urging his fingers in deeper.

With their recent sexual activity, Justin was already pretty ready for him. Brad caught the foil packet Justin tossed him and ripped it open.

"I want to watch you put it on your cock. Do it slowly," Justin said.

Brad's body felt hot and achy all over, electrified with hundreds of volts. Quaking, he rolled the latex as slowly as he could manage. His cock strained, pointing toward Justin, wanting to go where his fingers recently probed.

Justin turned over onto his stomach, presenting his ass to Brad. "Fuck me. Do it fast and hard, Brad."

It was an invitation he could not refuse. Brad pushed in without hesitation, going balls-deep in one long, quick thrust. They both cried out in unison.

Brad gripped either side of Justin's hips, pulling him tight against Brad's crotch. He held them there together like that, unmoving but connected. It had been so long. Surely he could be forgiven for just a touch of sentimentality.

Justin moved against him, reminding him without words that he wanted to be taken hard and fast. Brad pulled all the way out and then slammed all the way in, rough and punishing.

"Yes, oh Lord, yes," Justin gasped.

"I'd nearly forgotten you like it rough," Brad said with a little chuckle.

"Uh-huh. With you. Only with you." Justin pushed back, urging him to get rougher still.

Beyond words now, Brad slammed into Justin again and again. The sounds of their moans, heavy breathing and the slapping of his balls against Justin's pale ass filled the room.

Justin dug his fingers in the sheets, burying his face against the mattress. He grabbed the nearest pillow and bit down, screaming hoarsely as he came.

It took every ounce of control Brad had not to give in to his own orgasm. But he wanted their fuck to last. Wanted to take Justin to new heights. Heights he'd never get with anyone else. Only Brad.

Brad withdrew, briefly grinning over the slight whimpering noise coming from Justin. He turned over on his back and pulled Justin across his lap, straddling him.

"Lower yourself on my cock," he said.

Justin's eyes widened but he smiled and eased himself onto Brad's shaft. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back.

Brad had always liked the position. He loved Justin to ride him. He pushed up as far as he could and then reached for Justin's cock, his hand closing around it. He stroked it, working it to hardness again, all the while pumping into his lover.

Justin tightened around Brad, riding him fast and furious.

His orgasm tingled on the edge, fingering up his spine, tightening his balls. "Justin," he groaned, squeezing the other man's balls.

"Yes, yes, Brad, oh God." Cum splattered on Brad's stomach.

Brad tensed, grabbed Justin's hips and allowed his own orgasm to rock him, thrusting one last time.

Justin collapsed on him, lying across his chest. He wrapped his arms around Justin, holding him close. Wishing the last thirteen years of loneliness had never happened.

"Can I stay here in this room with you tonight?" Justin asked after a while. "I don't want to sleep in the spare room."

"Yes." Brad kissed the top of Justin's head.

"Can we make love again?"

Brad laughed. "Only if you let me recover. I'm getting old."

Justin kissed his chest. "Okay, you can rest for a short time."

Chapter Five

The street where Brad's mother lived could only be called affluent. Justin glanced around the San Marino neighborhood of Pasadena as Brad parallel parked his compact car at the curb directly across the street from Doctor Callahan's house.

The houses along the narrow tree-lined street were not newly built tract homes. They were homes built in the nineteen forties or nineteen fifties. They were similar to the Hollywood mansions of old. Large, imposing and full of extravagant personality. Brad's mother had a Victorian house painted in various shades of purple.

The house on the right had been styled after the Parthenon although it had been recently painted yellow. Justin grimaced. The house on the left had been made to look like a California mission.

Justin cleared his throat. "This is some area."

Brad grinned. "Yeah, absurd isn't it? Mom loves it. You should see the way she and what's-his-name decorate it for Christmas."

"What's-his-name?" Justin asked with some amusement.

"Yeah, the man my mother married."

"I didn't realize she remarried after your dad died."

During their thirteen years apart, Brad's big, muscular father had died. A mutual friend had told Justin. Brad's father had been a pro-football player and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Actually not entirely true. He wanted Brad to do even better than he did. Justin knew he hadn't been pleased when Brad told his parents of his sexual preference. In spite of their differences, however, Brad had still maintained a close relationship with his father.

Brad shrugged. "He's a podiatrist at the hospital where she works." He pulled the keys out of the ignition and opened the driver's-side door.

"Don't think much of him?" Justin waited until a car passed before opening his passenger door onto the street.

"What do I know?" Brad came around the car and headed toward the house. Justin followed. "This was actually his house before he met my mom. He raised his kids here. Never lets me forget it either."

Justin glanced sideways at him. "Why?"

"In case I get any ideas about getting the house after he dies or something."

Earlier in the day they'd gone to get Justin's baggage out of the wrecked car. He'd been able to change into light gray slacks and a charcoal dress shirt. For some reason, Justin felt he needed to impress Brad's mother. Pretty much he'd always felt that way around her. No matter what he did, though, it never quite seemed to work.

Brad walked up the two stone steps leading to the front doors. Etched stained glass made up the top half of the double doors. An old-fashioned bell pull hung from the outside wall to the left. Brad reached for the cord and pulled on it. In the distance, Justin heard a deep hollow ring.

"Ridiculously dramatic," Brad said, smirking.

"Don't tell me the door will be opened by a butler?"

Brad laughed. "No, not quite that bad."

The sound of footsteps approached from inside. Justin waited, wondering if Brad's mother or stepfather would let them inside. He hadn't seen the witch...er...Doctor Callahan since he'd left California.

The doors flung open and standing in the entryway was a strange bald man with a thin brown mustache. He was dressed in casual brown slacks and a tan polo shirt.

"Ah Brad, come in." The man eyed Justin. "You must be the mystery writer."

"Yes, sir."

The man stepped aside to allow them to pass into the house. "I'm Bill Shelton, Brad's stepfather."

Justin ignored Brad's grimace and offered his hand. "Justin Lowe. Pleased to meet you, sir. I understand you're a doctor."

"Yes, that's right. This way. Dorothy is waiting."

They followed Bill to a round room on the left. A sitting room. Brad's mother Dorothy rose from a large plush rose-colored chair. She was an attractive, petite woman whose dark hair was now gray-streaked.

"Darling," she exclaimed, embracing her much-taller son. "It's been forever."

"Hardly. I was over for dinner two weeks ago." Brad returned her hug and then released her, turning to Justin. "You remember Justin, Mom?"

Dorothy turned to him with a cool smile. "Of course. How are you, Justin? Feeling better after your accident?"

"Yes, much, thanks. How are you, Doctor Callahan? Or I suppose it's Shelton now."

"No, it's still Callahan. Why don't we all have a seat? We can have drinks before dinner." Brad's mother gestured to a green loveseat. "You two sit there and Bill can sit over here in this chair next to me after he gets our drinks. What would you like, Justin? We have all the usual hard liquor. Or perhaps you'd prefer wine?"

"White wine, if you have it." Justin sat on the indicated loveseat.

Brad's mother smiled. "Of course. Bill, dear, fetch Justin a Chardonnay. I assume you want your usual gin and tonic, Brad."

"Sure." Brad took the seat next to Justin and rested his hand over Justin's, almost absently. Dorothy's sharp gaze went right to their hands, Justin noted.

"Well, it has been a long time, hasn't it?" Dorothy said, reseating herself. "Thirteen years?"

"That's right."

"I see your books everywhere, Justin. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Justin murmured, taking the glass of Chardonnay Bill handed him. He took a fortifying sip. "You have a beautiful home."

"Yes, it's our pride and joy, isn't it, Bill?"

Bill finished handing out everyone's drinks and sat in the forest green chair next to his wife. "Yes, indeed. At Christmas we quite get into decorating it. It's become so much I hire folks to help us with it."

Dorothy patted her husband's leg and then turned to Justin. "Such a shame you won't be here to see it at Christmas."

Brad choked on the sip of gin he'd just taken. He set his glass down to avoid spilling it during his coughing spell.

"Oh dear, down the wrong pipe, darling?" his mother asked.

"Yes," Brad gasped.

Justin laid his hand on Brad's back. "You all right?"

"Yes, peachy." Brad glared in his mother's direction but she had turned to her husband and was speaking in low tones.

Dorothy rose. "I'll go check on dinner. We're having roast beef." She paused and looked at Justin. "You're not a vegetarian, are you?"

"No," Justin said.

"What would you have done if he was, Mom?" Brad challenged. His hand tightened on Justin's.

"Why, found something else to serve him, Brad. What else?"

Brad's mother disappeared through the doorway, leaving the three men to sit in awkward silence.

Brad picked up his gin and took several large swallows.

"So...you and Brad were..." Bill turned red and stopped.

"Lovers," Brad finished for him. He gave Bill a cool smile. "Yes, we were, Bill. That makes both of us gay."

Great, he was in the middle of some weird family politics. Justin's temples throbbed with an impending headache.

"Well, yes, obviously." Bill stood, looking for all the world as if he wanted to be anywhere but there. "I'll just go see if I can lend a hand with dinner."

"Was that completely necessary?" Justin asked when Bill left.

"No." Brad shrugged. "But he's certainly made no secret that he thinks gays are some sort of abomination."

"Your mother okay with that?"

"I guess so. He mostly doesn't say anything and especially when she's around. But he makes remarks sometimes. He once introduced me as his *fag stepson*."

"I see." Not entirely surprising. While homosexuality was more widely accepted than it used to be, there were still some who found it offensive. Justin had certainly run into that over the years, even in the literary world. "You okay? You seem pretty tense."

"I know." Brad ran his long fingers through his dark hair. "I knew this would be a mistake. She's making judgments, saying rude things to you."

"Not really."

"The implication is there. She's probably analyzing both of us too."

Justin smiled and squeezed his hand. "She never liked me, even before."

"She's never liked any of my friends. When I used to bring Rick over, she used to follow him around with a broom and dustpan. She made me fucking nuts."

"Hey, where is Rick? I thought you guys were best friends but he hasn't been around since I got here."

Brad nodded. "Yeah, we kind of lost touch a few months ago. He had some drinking and drug problems and didn't really want to get help. All he wanted to do was party. I'm not really into that lifestyle. I miss him sometimes, though."

"Yeah, I bet. Sorry about that." Justin had never thought much of Rick and he was actually glad they weren't friends anymore, but he knew saying that to Brad wouldn't be cool.

"And I'm sorry I dragged you here," Brad said. He turned slightly to face Justin and leaned forward, his lips mere inches from Justin's.

Justin closed his eyes and waited for the touch of Brad's lips on his. He wanted to get out of there really and return to Brad's apartment so they could get naked again. A bad idea, probably. But something he intended to do once they *did* finally leave.

"Justin," Brad whispered against his mouth. His tongue slid into Justin's mouth, their lips meeting, pressing.

"Dinner is...served," Dorothy announced from the doorway.

* * * * *

Brad finished drying the last plate his mother had handwashed and placed it in the cupboard.

"Thanks, sweetie," his mother said, draining the sink of soapy water.

"No problem." Brad leaned a hip against the counter. "Hey, Mom?"

"Hmm?" She bent down to return a pot to a cabinet below.

"Why have you been such a pain in the ass all night?"

His mother froze and then straightened. She raised both eyebrows at him. "I beg your pardon?"

"You know what I mean. About Justin. You've done your best to get digs in all night."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I know I should have behaved better. But he hurt you."

"I hurt him."

"I know." She filled a tea kettle with water. "Look, you've both hurt each other. I just think it would be better for both of you to move past that and go on with your lives."

"Separately."

"Yes." She turned the burner on the stove and set the kettle down. "You've spent thirteen years miserable."

"Mom, I'm old enough to take care of myself. And those thirteen miserable years? I made those choices too."

"It's not healthy to avoid relationships."

"So you've told me at least a hundred times." He straightened and kissed her forehead. "I know you have my best interests at heart."

"I do."

"You always have. I know. You went to bat for me with Dad when I first came out."

She sniffed. "Of course. I knew he'd come around eventually. And he did."

Brad smiled, his throat tightening a bit. Damn, he still missed his dad. "Yeah, he did."

"Your father meant well in everything, but he was so disappointed when he realized you weren't going to play football."

"I know. I've lived all these years knowing I was a big disappointment to him," Brad said. And suddenly unexpected tears poured from his eyes.

Shit.

"Oh no, honey, I didn't mean that." His mother embraced him. "He was disappointed when you told him you didn't want to play pro but you weren't a disappointment to him. Not at all."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I am."

Brad pulled away and wiped the tears. He felt stupid crying. He thought he was over all that. "The thing was, Mom, I never wanted to play football. That was Dad's dream, not mine."

"Exactly. I told him that. You were good at it, though." She smiled and stroked his cheek. "I think that was why he thought you really liked it."

"I never liked acting or art either, Mom," Brad said, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the counter again.

"You didn't?"

"No. God, I hated that stuff. Acting made me break out in hives and art...meh."

His mother stared at him in silence for a moment, her mouth hanging open. "Really?"

He laughed. "Really. I didn't want to do that any more than the football. You wanted me to be some artist type and Dad wanted me to be an athlete. Mom, remember when I was, like, five years old and my favorite toys were fire engines?"

"Yeah. You were kind of obsessed." She removed the whistling tea kettle from the burner and poured hot water in a mug with a tea bag in it. "I was a little worried. It seemed..."

"Unhealthy, yeah." Brad grinned. "I've always hated having a psychiatrist mother."

She sniffed. "So you keep saying."

"Anyway, my point is, I wanted to be a firefighter even then. That's what *I* wanted. And I got my dream."

"No thanks to us, apparently," she said dryly.

"Well, you guys were pretty cool when I went to the academy. Then later when I decided to become a paramedic you were there for me then too."

"I guess that's what I get for letting you watch reruns of that silly *Emergency* television show."

"Guess so. Can you do me a big favor, Mom?"

"What?" She discarded her tea bag.

"Lay off Justin. Okay?"

"Well..."

"Mom."

"Okay, okay. Come on, we'd better rescue him from Bill."

* * * * *

It was already dark when, sometime later, Brad and Justin walked out to his car. Justin had been giving him sexual looks for at least the last half-hour. Brad wondered if Justin was even aware of it. Finally, after a boring board game his mother insisted they all play, Brad made their excuses to leave. At least she'd been much more pleasant to Justin when they'd returned from the kitchen.

They'd just crossed the street to reach his car, when his mother yelled from the doorway of the house.

"Brad!"

"What?" he called back.

"You forgot your leftovers."

Brad grinned at Justin. "I'll be right back."

He jogged back across the street and to the front doors. His mother waited, holding out two large plastic containers of roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy and brussels sprouts.

"Thanks, Mom." He kissed her cheek and turned to go back to the car.

A squealing tire froze him in his tracks. An engine was gunned.

"Those damn kids again," Bill said from behind his mom. "Always speeding down the street too fast."

A lump formed in Brad's throat. "Justin!" He took off running, his heart racing.

A dark sports car sped down the street. He couldn't make out the color with only the street lights. To Brad's horror, the driver turned the wheel and aimed straight for Justin.

"Fuck."

Justin scrambled up frantically onto the hood of Brad's car, one of his shoes falling to the ground. For a heart-stopping second, Brad thought the driver would hit the car with Justin on it. But at the very last minute, the car veered away and continued speeding down the street.

Brad reached Justin and pulled him into his arms. He glanced at Justin's shoe in the street and closed his eyes when he noticed it had been crushed. "Oh my God, are you all right?"

"Yeah," Justin said, resting his head on Brad's shoulder and holding him tightly. "Yeah. What the fuck was that?"

"Someone trying to kill you."

Chapter Six

Justin fidgeted and shifted in the too-uncomfortable metal-framed chair. Was it his imagination or were icicles forming in the freezing office? He rubbed his arms, trying to keep the circulation going.

The door of the small office opened and Brad walked in holding two Styrofoam cups. Steam wafted from them and Justin eagerly held out his hands. He took a large swallow of the brown muck and then stuck his tongue out. Nasty.

"This swill is awful."

Brad laughed. "Yeah, sorry. I've never known coffee to be particularly good in a police station. The fire station coffee is a lot better."

"They ought to arrest themselves for this," Justin murmured. He stuck his tongue out again, grimacing.

"You look like a cat hacking up a hairball," Brad said, taking a sip from his own cup. He shrugged and took another sip.

"Well, at least it will keep my hands warm." Justin wrapped his hands around the comforting warmth radiating from the cup.

"It is a bit cold in here, huh?" He sat in a chair identical to Justin's.

"Yeah, a bit."

"Sorry it's taking so long. My friend should be back any minute."

Justin nodded. He'd wanted to go back to Brad's apartment for some hot sex, needing Brad's comfort, but Brad had insisted they go to the police after they left his mother's house. Justin thought it could maybe wait until morning.

It wasn't as though they would be able to catch the guy who'd tried to run him down. It had been too dark to see much. And, hell, he didn't want to think about it, how close he'd come.

Brad leaned forward in his own chair and rested his hand on Justin's knee. "It won't be much longer. Are you okay?"

Justin swallowed. "Someone just tried to kill me. Again. The first time, maybe, when the car forced us off the road, I could think it was possibly road rage or something."

"You never thought that."

"No," he admitted. "But it could have been passed off as that. But this time, that driver turned toward me intentionally. He aimed for me."

"I know."

"I don't know what I could have done to cause someone to want to kill me. You know they always ask you about enemies..." Justin shook his head. "I don't have any."

The office door opened again and in stepped Brad's cop friend Joey Martinez. Detective Martinez was a good-looking Hispanic man in his early forties. Justin didn't know how he and Brad were acquainted, but he hadn't failed to notice they shared a long embrace earlier when they first arrived.

He knew he shouldn't wonder, shouldn't care, but he couldn't turn off his mind. Thoughts that Brad and Martinez had been lovers would not stop swimming around in his head.

"Okay, sorry about the wait," Martinez said, walking to behind the desk in the room. He sat in the chair behind it. The office, he'd said, actually belonged to his captain, who was currently out, so they were able to use it for privacy. "We're working a murder case here so things are a little unpredictable right now."

"Thanks for whatever time you can spare," Brad said. His hand still rested on Justin's knee and he squeezed it a little.

Martinez nodded. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you gentlemen that there's really not much to go on here." He glanced at Justin. "You said the police in New York investigated the emails and the break-in?"

"Yeah."

"I can see if they'll share their findings with me. And you're sure you didn't recognize the man who ran you off the road?"

"I did recognize him or at least there was something. I don't know, I can't quite place it...place him." Justin ran his hand through his hair, frustrated.

Martinez wrote something on a pad of paper. "Being a mystery writer you must have quite the imagination."

Justin rolled his eyes. Here it was. He imagined it. Saw too much into unfortunate events. He'd been through it before. "Yes, I suppose I do."

"Wait, Joey," Brad interrupted. "You aren't trying to say Justin imagined being forced off the road? My station was called to the accident. It was not imaginary."

Martinez held up his hands. "No, of course not, Brad. I'm aware of the accident. I pulled the police report. But it *was* raining that night. Pretty hard according to the report. And the company who sent the driver advised the police that the driver was new and not very experienced. He could have done something to piss off the other driver and cause a road-rage incident. Or it could have just been an unfortunate accident. The police report determined it was just a hit and run accident in the rain."

Brad's mouth thinned and he drummed his long fingers on the edge of the desk. "I believe Justin. He says he was forced off the road. And I don't think it was a road-rage incident."

Martinez nodded. "But it could have been. That's all I am saying."

Justin was severely tempted to get out of the arctic office and just end this ridiculous interview with Detective Martinez. He straightened in the chair but Brad's grip on his knee tightened.

"How do you dismiss what happened tonight?" Brad demanded.

Martinez shrugged. "You said yourself your stepfather mentioned that kids speed up and down that street all the time. The local police confirmed that. Likely some asshole kid was just trying to scare Mr. Lowe. Naturally it seemed like more to the two of you given what else has been going on. Not to mention neither of you can tell me what color the car was or even what make it was. You think it was maybe a Porsche."

"This is bullshit," Brad said.

"Now, Brad, I'm just trying to explain it from our point of view. I'm not saying I won't look into it. I definitely will. Especially given the emails and the break-in Mr. Lowe mentioned. It merely seems unlikely that whoever sent those emails and package and broke in to Mr. Lowe's house would follow him here, that's all. I will check it out, absolutely."

"Let's go, Brad," Justin said. He couldn't really blame Detective Martinez. Hell, if he'd been writing this as a novel, his cop character would have said much the same thing. Still it didn't feel good getting that treatment himself. "We've taken up enough of Detective Martinez's time."

Brad stood and reached for Justin's hand, pulling him up. He threaded his fingers with Justin's.

Detective Martinez stood too. "I'll call you tomorrow with anything I find out. In the meantime, keep your eyes and ears open to anything unusual. Don't put yourselves in any situation that could lead to something dangerous. When going out, keep to populated areas and heavily traveled roads."

Justin offered his hand to the detective. "Thank you for listening."

He smiled a little. "I was listening, even if it doesn't seem like it. Try not to worry too much, Mr. Lowe. I'll get to the bottom of this." He turned toward Brad as though he wanted to say more.

Justin nodded, glanced at Brad, and said, "I'll wait outside."

Brad held on to his hand for a moment longer then let it go.

Justin tossed the Styrofoam cup in the basket and stepped out of the office.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry," Brad said as he pulled his car out of the police station parking lot.

"For what?"

"Making you go through that. I thought it would be taken more seriously. Especially by Joey."

Justin leaned his head back. "He's just doing his job, Brad."

"Maybe. But it still wasn't cool." Brad took the freeway onramp toward home.

"About Detective Martinez?" Justin wanted to bite his tongue. But he couldn't stop himself from asking.

Brad briefly glanced at him before returning his gaze to the road. "What about him?"

"Is he... Were you two lovers?"

Brad's knuckles tightened around the steering wheel. The muscle in his jaw flexed. "Joey Martinez is married with four children, Justin."

"Oh." Of course he felt completely foolish. He closed his eyes and wondered if he would ever get past this. He somehow doubted it.

Brad didn't say anything for several miles. The silence in the car was ominous. When they reached the exit for Brad's apartment, he finally said, "I have a lot of friends, Justin."

Justin swallowed. "Yeah?"

"It doesn't mean I'm having sex with them."

"I know."

"Do you?" Brad asked sharply.

"Yes, or I am trying to anyway."

He was becoming just like his mother. His parents' marriage had broken up over infidelity. His father had an affair when Justin was still a child and his mother found out. At first, Justin's mother claimed she could get past it but she didn't. She watched her husband's every move, questioning everything he did and everyone he knew. They divorced and Justin went with his mom.

He'd known that his father regretted the affair. Many times his father had tried to apologize, tried to reconcile with her but she never budged. They'd both died alone and still in love. A very sad ending in Justin's opinion.

He'd gotten so angry with his mother for not giving his father a second chance. But that was before it happened to him. He'd found it so easy to judge other people before walking into that damn locker room all those years ago.

Brad parked his car under his assigned carport and they both got out and headed to the apartment.

"You hungry? We could heat up the leftovers from Mom's."

"No, not hungry. What time is it anyway?"

Brad glanced at the clock on the microwave as he opened the refrigerator to set the containers inside. "A little past midnight."

"Lord, it's been a long day. I could use a long, hot shower." Justin stretched.

"Hmm. Me too. Want to shower together?"

Justin liked the sound of that. *Oh yeah.* "I would love to."

"We never did this before," Justin commented as he soaped Brad's chest in the freestanding shower. "I wonder why."

Brad quaked when Justin brushed his thumbs across his nipples. "I sure don't know the answer to that."

Justin pushed Brad toward the shower spray to rinse him off. "Well, if you think about it, we were only together six months."

Brad closed his eyes when Justin's soapy fingers massaged the muscles of his back. Damn, that felt good. He hadn't realized how tense he was. "Plenty of time to have showered together."

Justin inched his hands down to Brad's buttocks. "At least we're doing it now."

Brad reached for his own cock and stroked it, sliding his index finger along the slit on the head.

"Hey, I can do that," Justin murmured. Brad opened his eyes to see Justin come around to stand in front of him, grasping Brad's shaft with one hand. The other hand reached under the shampoo dispenser in Brad's shower for a dab. He massaged it into Brad's hair.

"Interesting to have someone bathe me and play with me at the same time," Brad said, grinning. He was glad the tension of the car ride home had disappeared even if he knew it was temporary. The truth was they were going to have to talk sooner or later.

Brad wanted Justin to consider having a relationship again. He still loved Justin and had decided Justin probably still loved him. He was tired of wasting his life dreaming of what might have been. He wanted that life, the one he was meant to have with Justin. But only if they could get past their differences.

He leaned down to kiss Justin, sliding his tongue in.

"Ahh," Justin moaned. "You did bring a condom and lube in with us, didn't you?"

"They're on the shelf with the bar of soap. I'm surprised you didn't see them."

"Stick your head under the spray," Justin said, rinsing off Brad's hair.

It felt surprisingly good to have someone taking care of him. Really, Brad couldn't remember anyone doing so for many years. Even in his prior relationship with Justin, Brad always took care of him.

When Justin had finished washing him, he dropped to his knees in front of Brad and slowly drew Brad's cock into his mouth. He worked it in and out in an unhurried fashion, much in the same way he'd carefully washed Brad.

Brad reached behind to squirt shampoo from the dispenser and then he scrubbed it into Justin's hair. For some reason it made him smile to see Justin's lathered head bobbing up and down on his cock. Eventually, he pulled out of Justin's mouth and helped him to stand under the spray, rinsing the shampoo.

Next, he reached for the condom packet and tore it open.

"Here, I want to put it on you," Justin said, grabbing it from Brad's hand.

Justin rolled the latex slowly over Brad's cock, leaning up to kiss him. There was a poignancy to their kisses that hadn't been there thirteen years ago. A sort of sweet desperation.

When the kiss broke, it was Brad who dropped to his knees in front of Justin. He cupped his lover's balls, squeezing gently and then swallowed Justin's hard cock.

"Brad!"

He wrapped his hand around the base, his mouth sliding down, taking as much in his mouth and to his throat as he could. Justin wobbled. Brad steadied him with a hand on his leg.

"Hand me the lube," Brad said.

Justin reached behind him to the soap dish and grabbed the lube. He handed it to Brad, who squeezed out a generous amount before setting the tube on the shower floor.

Brad eased Justin's cock out of his mouth and then turned to licking and sucking his balls. He used his hand to stroke up and down the shaft.

"Oh jeez, I'm going to come," Justin groaned.

Brad inserted a wet finger in Justin's ass, continuing his assault on his lover's balls and stroking his shaft. After a few more licks, he moved his mouth back to the cock head and drew it in. He added a second finger to Justin's hole.

"God, I love you," Justin breathed, emptying into Brad's mouth.

Brad continued sucking, his mind reeling at the words that came out of Justin's mouth. While he had suspected it was true, he hadn't expected Justin to say them. Not

yet. Of course Brad knew people said all kinds of things when they were making coming.

Justin pulled out, panting heavily. "Enough, Brad, enough. No more."

Brad stood, turned Justin around and bent him at the waist. "Brace yourself," he ordered.

Justin rested his hands against the shower tile and spread his legs. Brad's cock probed at his entrance. "All right?"

"Yes, please," Justin said, his eyes closed.

Brad pushed in, his lover's entrance opening easily to allow him access. He pressed past the ring of muscle and then slid in to the hilt. For a moment he just stayed still, letting their joined bodies enjoy the intimacy. He closed his eyes and rested his head against Justin's back. He wanted to say he loved Justin too but really couldn't tell if it was the right time.

Justin pushed his ass back against him, causing all rational thought to fly out his mind. He started pounding. His fingers pressed into Justin's hips. Pushing in, pulling out, again and again. The spray of the shower pouring down on them.

His orgasm slammed into him, he roared with it, snapping his hips, nearly pushing Justin over with the force of it. His breath came out in shattered, short gasps.

Snaking his arm around Justin's chest, Brad pulled him closer, nuzzling his neck.

"Wow," Justin murmured.

"Yeah," Brad said, and then chuckled.

"We definitely should have showered together before."

Chapter Seven

A little after nine the next morning, Brad came out of the bathroom fully dressed in jeans and a dark blue t-shirt. He intended to have a very serious conversation with Justin, and even though it was probably stupid or even strange to care, he didn't want to be half naked or even in pajamas.

They'd shared Brad's bed last night after their shower together. It seemed ridiculous for Justin to sleep in the spare room. When they both woke up around seven, they'd had sex again. That's when Brad decided he couldn't put off talking about their relationship, whatever it was going to be.

Justin sat on the edge of the bed, bending over to tie the shoelaces of his athletic shoes. He'd dressed in khaki slacks and a lime green polo shirt. He glanced up and smiled at Brad's approach.

"Want to have breakfast?" he asked.

"Maybe in a bit." Brad took a deep breath. "I have to return to work day after tomorrow. But listen, I think it's time we talked."

Justin straightened, suddenly looking very wary. "Okay. About what?"

Brad pulled up a chair he had in the corner of the room with a small writing desk. He brought it up close to Justin on the bed and sat down.

"I want to talk about us, Justin."

"Us?"

"Yes. Look, I need to know. Are we...are we getting involved in something serious now a-again, or are we just old friends having casual sex?" Okay, there. He got the words out, even past the lump in his throat, even past the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Justin didn't look at him. More to the point, he seemed pretty interested in his own shoes. Brad's stomach twisted, the lump in his throat seemed to get larger.

"Well, honestly, that's what I was thinking when this all started," Justin said, his voice soft, distant.

Brad blew out the breath he'd been holding. He nodded, trying to let numbness take over but not sure he was very successful. It hurt. *Damn*. It took him a few seconds to get his mouth to work again.

"All right. Now I know."

"Brad —"

"No, it's all right, Justin. I get it." He held his hands out, almost as if he could stop the hateful words from Justin from coming out. "Really. I pretty much expected you'd say that." He'd hope he'd be wrong of course.

"Brad, I want... The thing is, I wish it didn't bother me still," Justin said. His eyes brimming with tears, he looked at Brad. "But the truth is it does. I'm not sure it will ever not bother me."

Brad swallowed hard. It did nothing to dull the pain. "I understand. You don't think you can ever forgive or forget what happened thirteen years ago."

Justin didn't reply, just gave a little nod.

"So then you'll go back to New York when—" Brad stood, running his hand through his still-wet hair. "You know, it was just the one time. You know that, right? I know that doesn't excuse it. I know that. But I-I never did it before and since I've —"

"Brad."

He shook his head. His heart hammered painfully in his chest. "No, it's okay. Listen, I've spent thirteen years wishing I could take that one moment back. It's something I've regretted more than you can ever know. But, I can't take it back with wishing. It happened. Do you know who I've been with since we broke up?"

"No," Justin whispered.

"No one." He laughed bitterly. "I've tortured myself for thirteen years. Made myself miserable because I deserved it. Like I was some martyr. And for what? You still don't give a shit. You still can't get over it. *I am* pathetic. My mother is right."

"What? Wait."

"I'm sorry, Justin. But obviously, I can't say it enough to make it matter. You wouldn't even talk to me after it happened. Wouldn't give me the time of day. I guess I didn't blame you. I should have moved on then, but I didn't." Brad paused, gathering his thoughts. Wondering why he'd put himself through this after all. "I guess I haven't moved on yet. You came here with your problems—and yes, I know serious problems—but still. And I'm instantly into rescue mode again. Brad can fix it. Can fix anything." He laughed. "I can't even fix me."

Justin shook his head, trying to speak, but Brad wouldn't let him.

"You talked about how I sabotaged everything. Remember that? You said that with such arrogance, Justin. Like I was somehow less than you." Unreasonable anger flowed through him.

"Brad, I didn't mean that. I was upset."

"The stuff you think I *sabotaged* was all what someone else wanted, not me. And why I did what I did? I have no idea. I just made a mistake. The biggest fucking mistake of my life. But I loved you then and I love you now."

"Brad—"

He sat in the chair again, his sudden rage deflated and replaced by searing pain. "Justin, sometimes love really isn't enough," he said softly. "Sometimes even when you love someone, you aren't meant to be with that person."

Justin stared at him, now his tears flowed freely.

Brad clenched his eyes shut. "I need some air."

"No, no, I want to talk about this," Justin said. "I'm trying."

What a joke. Who was he kidding, really? Himself, he supposed. He thought maybe Justin would finally trust him. But he never would. "I really think I need some time alone right now, Justin."

Justin bit his lip. "O-okay."

Brad felt like a complete ass seeing the crushed look on Justin's face, but he really did need to get away from his lover for a time. When he came back, maybe they could talk more. Or maybe not. He wasn't sure if there was anything left to say.

He stood and leaned down to place a chaste kiss on the top of Justin's head. Then he turned and walked out the bedroom.

Justin stared at the empty door for several seconds after Brad left. His mind focused on everything Brad had said. He'd barely had a chance to get in a word. He had a feeling Brad needed to say the things he'd said.

Among them that Brad loved him. He loved Brad too. Was Brad right? Did it not matter that they loved each other? Could it be that it wasn't enough?

Justin rested his head in his hands. He didn't want to be like his mother. Or for him and Brad to end up miserable and alone like his parents.

Could he get over his distrust of Brad's every move? Every time Brad talked to another guy?

He sighed heavily and rose from the edge of bed, pacing the room. He didn't want to let foolish pride or an old hurt ruin what he might have with Brad now.

Justin stopped near Brad's dresser, several framed photos catching his gaze. He picked up one of Brad as a child with his parents. He couldn't keep the smile off his face. Brad had been such a cute little boy. He picked up a high school picture of Brad next. Then he found one of himself with Brad and Rick from college. For a second he let the old pain overcome him and he nearly turned away, sure he couldn't get over Brad's cheating after all. But he pushed it away with effort, glancing at the next photo.

The photo appeared to be a more recent picture of Brad and Rick. They stood outside a bar with their arms around each other. Justin blinked, his heart pounding hard in his chest. He picked up the frame, staring hard at Rick. He'd changed a bit since college. Everyone did. But Rick, who'd always been blond, had lost quite a bit of hair and put on maybe fifty pounds.

Justin's blood ran cold. *Rick*. The man in the other car who'd run him off the road.

A scuffling noise followed by a muffled curse from the living room caught his attention. He set the frame down on the dresser and headed for the bedroom door.

"Brad?" he called, as he opened the door.

"Justin, no!"

The hair on the back of his neck stood up. A strange sort of panic filled him. Justin stepped into the hallway and out to the living room.

"Come in, lover boy."

Rick stood near the front door of the apartment, his arm wrapped around Brad's chest. He had a revolver pointed at the side of Brad's head.

"Oh God," Justin exclaimed, feeling a little lightheaded.

"Long time no see." Rick grinned. "You're just in time."

"In time for what?"

"To see me take Brad away from you."

Justin shook his head. "No. No, it's me you want to kill."

"No, Justin," Brad said quickly.

"Shut up," Rich snarled, pushing the gun against Brad's head. "This is all your fucking fault."

"Rick, let Brad go."

"No way, lover boy. You're right. I did want to kill you. But it's all because of him."

Justin swallowed the bile rising in his throat. "I don't understand. Why?"

Rick laughed. "Because I wanted him. All this time. Do you know what it's like being in love with someone who doesn't even think twice about you? I've known him my whole life and he can't even figure out that I'm gay."

"Rick—"

"I told you to be quiet." Rick's hand shook on the gun.

Justin prayed his lover wouldn't antagonize Rick.

"When you broke up, I thought my chance would come," Rick continued. "I just thought if I bided my time, eventually Brad would see what's been right in front of his eyes all this time. But he didn't. He still only thought of me as his buddy Rick. I tried so many times over the years. I tried hints. I pretended to get drunk one time and grabbed his dick. Do you know what he did then?"

"No," Justin whispered.

"He pushed me away. Said I was drunk and would come to my senses in the morning." His arm tightened around Brad's chest. "*Come to my senses. And you.* You fucking broke his heart and he still can't get over you. He buys all your damn books, looks at your website. It makes me sick."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, you should be," Rick snarled. "I wanted you to die. I thought if you were dead, if they thought I was some obsessed fan and you were out of the picture, maybe—" Rick narrowed his eyes. "But here you are. You broke up and you're back here fucking."

Justin wanted to throw up. He needed to help Brad. He couldn't let this sick fuck kill Brad.

"Look, Rick, you're right. It's all my fault. It's me you want, not Brad. Let him go. Please."

"That's just too sweet, Brit. But my game plan has changed. I'm sacking the quarterback now."

"Rick –"

"Shut up, Brit. I'm done talking. I'm taking Brad out of here."

"What?"

"That's right. We're going to have some fun. Then I'm going to blow his pretty little head off and then I'm going to blow mine off. We'll die together. We'll be together in the end." Rick's hand shook a lot now. He backed up several steps toward the door, dragging Brad with him. "And you. You will get to know Brad died because of you."

"No, Rick. Don't do this," Justin begged desperately. He felt completely useless and he couldn't stop the tears brimming in his eyes from falling onto his cheeks.

Rick turned Brad to face the door. "Open the door, Brad."

When Brad didn't act quickly enough, Rick shook him violently. "Now!"

Brad reached out and turned the door knob. Rick pushed him through the door first and followed after.

Justin grabbed the phone on the counter and dialed 9-1-1. His heart in his throat, he gave the information as fast as he could and then hurried out the door.

Rick dragged Brad toward an SUV parked by a large trash receptacle. But Brad wasn't going without a fight. He struggled the whole way.

"Son of a bitch," Rick yelled. "I can shoot you right here, Brad."

Brad suddenly elbowed Rick hard in the ribs and then ducked down, breaking Rick's hold. Justin watched in shock as Brad did some crazy kind of kick move that reminded him of something out of a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie. The gun went flying out of Rick's hand.

"Ow fuck!" Rick grabbed his wrist.

Justin rushed forward and picked up the gun. Brad continued to attack Rick. He knocked his former friend to the pavement.

Rick tried to get back up.

Justin pointed the gun at Rick. "Don't even think about it, asshole."

He heard the squeal of sirens getting closer to their location.

Brad bent at the waist, breathing heavily.

"Are you all right?" Justin wanted to embrace his lover. Feel him to make sure he really was all in one piece. But he wasn't moving the gun from Rick.

"Yes. You?"

"I'm all right now. What the hell was that you just did?"

"Tae Kwon Do," Brad panted. "I took self-defense classes. That's where I met Joey Martinez, actually. I've always thought gay men should learn to defend themselves. Would have done it before but I wanted to get him away from you. See that you were safe."

"God, I love you, Brad." He was so overcome with emotion he could barely get the words out.

"I love you too."

* * * * *

Hours later, Brad poured boiling water over two teabags in mugs. Rick had been arrested and now the police had finally left. He yawned. A short time ago he and Justin finished two fast-food hamburgers.

Justin came up behind him in the kitchen and wrapped his arms around his waist. He leaned his head against Brad's back.

"What time is it?" Brad asked.

"Almost seven. How are you?"

Brad exhaled. "Exhausted. Shocked. So many emotions are going through me. I'm damn glad to be talking to *you*, though. Know what I mean?"

"God, yes. You have no idea how good it feels to touch you."

Brad turned in Justin's arm to face him. He leaned in to kiss Justin's lips. "Kind of puts a few things into perspective, huh?"

"You could say that." Justin framed Brad's face in his hands. "I don't care what we have to do to make it work, Brad. Whatever it takes, I want to be with you. If you want me to see a therapist, I'll do it. I don't want to waste even one more day without you."

Elation soared through Brad. Funny, considering all they'd been through that day.

"Me too. I love you, Justin. I'll spend every minute of every day for the rest of our lives trying to make you believe that."

Justin kissed him. "I do believe it. I feel the same way."

Brad closed his eyes, leaning his forehead on Justin's. "And Rick. I had no idea. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Brad. You couldn't have known."

"Maybe, maybe not. He seemed to think I should have known. I didn't even know he was gay."

Justin sighed. "There is no such thing as gaydar, Brad. He never came out and told you. Don't you dare blame yourself for this."

Brad smiled. "Okay. I'm too beat to argue."

"Forget the tea, Brad. Let me take you to bed."

"To sleep or for something else?"

Justin nipped Brad's bottom lip. "For something else. I want to..." He stopped, his cheeks flushed.

"Why, Justin Lowe, are you blushing?"

"Yes, damn you." Justin laughed. "I want to fuck you. If...if you'll let me."

Unexpected anticipation filled him. He'd never...well, never. "Have you ever?"

Justin turned an even darker shade of red. "Topped? A couple of times. Mostly I prefer the other position. But I want to try it with you. You haven't ever bottomed, have you?" He shook his head. "I know you haven't since me because you said you haven't been with anyone else."

"And not before you either. I've always topped."

Justin nodded. "So can I? Do you want me to?"

Brad considered the idea. He'd not thought about ever being on the bottom. Now with Justin he did.

"Yes. Let's." He laced his fingers with Brad's and led him out of the kitchen.

They walked hand in hand down the hall and to the bedroom. Brad pushed open the partially closed door and flipped on the light switch.

He released Justin's hand and immediately pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it in the nearby hamper. He paused to watch Justin removing his polo shirt. A smile tugged at his mouth.

"What?"

"Nothing. You're just beautiful."

"Uh-huh." Justin nodded. "Get naked."

Brad laughed and sat down on the bed's edge. He pulled off his loafers and socks and then stood to undo the zipper of his jeans. He yanked his jeans and briefs down in one pull and stepped out of them. His cock was hard and leaking pre-cum.

"Come on, come on, now you," he urged Justin. Justin had just gone to unfasten his pants.

"Get the condoms and lube," Justin suggested. "I left them in your nightstand."

Brad reached into the nightstand for the lube and a condom packet. He then lay on the bed, waiting. He wondered which position Justin would want him in.

Justin, now completely naked and obviously quite aroused, came toward the bed. He had a huge grin on his face. "You nervous?"

"Nervous?" Brad's stomach fluttered. "Nah. Anxious. I can't wait to feel you inside me. On my stomach or on my back?"

"Stomach for now." Justin jumped on the bed and scooted up to Brad. He waited for Brad to turn onto his stomach.

Justin's fingers were cool on his naked ass. "First I am going to rim you."

Brad quaked with anticipation, bending his knees and offering his ass to Justin. He closed his eyes and leaned his head on his folded arms in front of him.

He moaned loudly when Justin's cool tongue slipped into his entrance. Justin gripped his cheeks and spread them. His tongue probed farther in.

"Okay, are you ready for a finger?" Justin asked, his breath fanning across Brad's ass.

"Um...yeah."

He heard a sucking noise and then Justin inserted a wet finger into his hole. Brad pushed against the intrusion which spread him wider. Another sucking noise and Justin slipped in a second finger.

"Ah jeez," Brad gasped.

"All right?"

"God, yes. Do another," Brad ordered.

Justin chuckled and stuck a third finger in as well as his slippery tongue, stretching Brad's entrance. Justin pressed in, searching, Brad knew, for his prostate.

"Holy shit," Brad yelled, rising.

"Found it!"

"Yeah, you did." Brad moved his hips back and forth, up and down on Justin's fingers. "God, that's amazing." With that and the friction of his hard cock on the sheets his balls tightened, his spine tingled. "Justin?"

"Hmm?"

"Fuck me."

"Are you ready?" Justin removed his fingers.

"Yes."

He heard Justin ripping open the condom packet then a few seconds later he heard the slosh of lube being squeezed out. Justin's fingers re-entered his entrance slicked with lubricant.

"Ah, that's cold."

Justin laughed. "Don't be a baby."

"Oh yeah. I dare you to say that to me later. I'll turn you over my knee," Brad grumbled.

"Except I might like that," Justin said. His fingers slid out again.

Brad glanced behind his shoulder at Justin. His lover knelt behind him, his cock sheathed and generously covered in lube. The look of love on Justin's face was magical.

Justin poised his cock at Brad's ass and he pushed in, his gaze holding Brad's.

The burn of the intrusion caused Brad to clench his eyes closed for a second.

"Brad?"

"I'm all right. Just a little tight."

"Oh yeah." Justin pushed past the ring of muscle and all the way to the hilt.

Brad fisted the sheets, thrusting back against Justin.

"Brad," Justin breathed. He began to pump Brad's ass in earnest.

Brad's orgasm was close. He hoisted himself up with one hand and reached for his cock, running his hand up and down the shaft.

Justin's hips snapped as he slammed harder and faster. He growled low and deep in his throat. "Brad. Gonna come."

"Me too," Brad moaned, his orgasm going over the edge, cum shooting out.

Justin tensed and pumped two more times before collapsing on Brad.

A while later, their arms wrapped around each other, Justin kissed his lover. "So? How was it?"

Brad smiled. "Fantastic."

"We can do it again then?"

Brad nodded. "Yep. Every once in a while. I still think I prefer to top."

"And I prefer to bottom," Justin admitted. His heart was light with happiness and hope. Something he really hadn't felt for a long time.

"We can do this, can't we?" Brad asked.

"Yes, I want to. More than anything."

"Me too." Brad rose and looked down at him. "Think you can learn to trust me?"

Justin cupped his cheek. "I'm already well on my way in that regard. I've been very stubborn and I cost us a lot of years."

"I hurt you pretty badly."

Justin swallowed. "Yeah, you did. But I know you're sorry. I knew you were sorry then. Anyway, I don't want to think about all that anymore. I want to think about us and the future."

Brad kissed his palm. "About that. I really like being with the Los Angeles Fire Department."

Did he care about his house in New York? He'd chosen that house, so of course he cared. But he could let it go. He nodded. "I'm all right with that. I'll sell my house in New York. We can buy a place together here."

"Buy a place? You mean like a home with a white picket fence?"

Justin laughed. "Well, I don't know about the fence but yes."

"That doesn't seem too fast to you? Like we should maybe take it slowly? Take some time?" Brad frowned.

"Nope. I want a house and I want it with you. I love you, Brad. And that's not going to change."

Brad kissed him hard. "Great. Because I love *you*. And that, Justin Lowe, you can trust."

About the Author

Shawn Lane believes love and passion know no boundaries. Shawn writes both erotic love stories involving men in historical or contemporary settings and interracial romances between men and women. Shawn is always looking for new stories and new characters to create while holding down life in California.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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