

# The Sudden Stop

by julad

Once he concedes, if only to himself, that he's going to get his heart broken, Brian finds it much easier to manage. It's pathetic, but true: as far as Brian Kinney is concerned, the sun shines out of Justin Taylor's perfect little ass. The light in his fucking life beams from Justin's sudden smiles, glints in the corner of his eye, and shines from strands of pale hair. The twist in this hideous fairy-tale is that when Justin devoted himself to Brian Kinney, he was young and extremely stupid. Sooner or later, Justin will get bored and move on, and Brian will be left old, alone, and humiliated. Whether or not he acknowledges the inevitable outcome does not change it one bit.

He's going to get his fucking heart broken. Brian is not one to ignore the harsh facts of reality. He spent a few pointless years wishing he wasn't a fucking faggot, a pansy, a freak, but the fact was, he *was*. The only thing to do was do it better than every other fucking faggot pansy freak in town, which he did. He did it with style. If he's in love, the only thing to do is do it better than every sentimental fucking twat who thinks love is roses and candles and holding hands in the moonlight.

The first thing he does is go skydiving. He always meant to, anyway, but it never seemed urgent until now. Falling in love is not floating on cotton-candy clouds, it's this: a breakneck plunge from a ludicrous height, icy wind that burns his lungs, vertigo to make him want to puke and the deadly haul of gravity on his breakable bones. It's an act of such profound and pointless stupidity that he almost doesn't pull the cord on his parachute, because the only difference between skydiving and falling in love is that next time, the sudden stop is going to shatter him.

The violent jerk as the parachute fills hurts enough, for now. When his feet slam into the ground, followed quickly by his knees, chest and face, the damage to his body and his dignity are sufficient. It gives him a frame of reference. He has some idea of what it's going to be like. He stands up on shaking legs, detaches himself from all the strings and cords and buckles and straps and walks away.

When he gets home, he asks Justin to stay with him in Pittsburgh. "I need you here," he says. Justin seems to understand that Brian is being selfish, greedy and pitiful, putting his happiness in Justin's hands and expecting him to take care of it.

"Of course I'll stay," Justin tells him, and now Brian has to take Justin's happiness into his own hands, and make this sacrifice worth it. It's stupid, as stupid as jumping out of a fucking plane, because the only happiness a man can guarantee is his own. But he does it, and now he's in freefall, plummeting down to meet the harsh facts of reality. He signs half the loft and half of Kinnetik into Justin's name. Justin looks solemn and grave as he countersigns the papers.

"It's okay," he promises, and then smiles, lighting up Brian's world. "We're going to make this work." Brian remembers the dive, and it was actually pretty cool, the whole world spread out far below his feet, a tidal wave of adrenaline making him hard. They fuck in the car outside the lawyer's office,

banging elbows and knees on the ceiling and the steering wheel. It's stupid, but Brian comes harder than he ever has.

Justin works miracles on Deb and Emmett, and they throw a fantastic party with speeches blessedly free of appalling sentiment. Brian drinks champagne while his veins thrum and his head spins, still falling. They have dinner with Jennifer and Molly, which Brian is determined to enjoy. To his surprise, he does, because his blood is racing and they're not so different from Justin, who he needs and adores, helplessly. They have an awkward lunch with Craig Taylor and his new girlfriend, which is memorable only for the thrill of his arm slung protectively around Justin's shoulders. They have a hideous brunch with Joanie and Claire, who Justin is determined to win over. Claire begins to thaw under his barrage of charm, but Joanie manages to imply that Justin is a silver-tongued devil, a conniving boywhore, and a confused victim of Brian's sexual abuse. Justin is patient and sweet, until Joanie storms off and Claire rushes after her. Then Justin calls Joanie a frigid bitch, a pickled old alcoholic, a repressed lesbian, and a child abuser, with a glint in his eye that bathes Brian's world in brilliant light. They head to the baths and, with his dick in the mouth of the guy Brian's fucking, Justin calls Joanie and invites her to Sunday dinner.

The fall seems neverending, and Brian stays dizzy and breathless. They renovate the loft to give Justin studio space. Justin finishes his degree and gets a job at a trendy graphic design firm. They have two glorious weeks in San Francisco in the summer, and go to New York for a few days at Christmas. They rule the Babylon dancefloor with an iron fist, and preside benevolently over their big gay family. Brian gets it down to an art, their separate friends complementing the mutual ones, their different banks with a shared investment portfolio, his suits carefully chosen to complement Justin's casual streetwear. Justin and Joanie develop an elaborate charade of tolerance that seems to bring them both grim satisfaction. Brian goes to Molly's high school graduation and offends the fuck out of her principal. They play irresponsible gay dads for Gus and Lindsay. It feels better than sex, and the sex feels even better than that, raw and incandescent.

Justin's on cloud nine. "*I love you*," he says, every morning and every night, urging it on Brian with all his passion. "*I love you, I love you, I love you.*"

Brian knows the end is coming. It's coming in the form of a younger man or boredom or some unhappiness he can't anticipate because it won't be his own. Somewhere on the edge of his peripheral vision, the ground is rushing up to meet him. It's inevitable, but in the meantime, he's falling in style, and doing it better than everyone else.

When it happens, it happens fast, looming larger by the day and hour until it's filling his field of vision. The Rage movie, twice postponed, finally gets canned, and Justin wonders if he could have made a difference, had he been there. When Brian hears through the grapevine that Justin slept with some big soap star, he pretends he already knew. Kinnetik loses dozens of clients when a global agency opens a Pittsburgh office, and nothing Brian does can stem the flow of red ink. He works 24/7 while Justin's spending every minute with a guy who runs an art program for some fucking charity. The rival agency steals his art director, and Brian, desperate, asks Justin to fill the vacancy.

Justin refuses. If Kinnetik goes under, he argues, they'll need his salary. They can't put all their eggs in one basket.

"I already did," Brian tells him, gutted.

"I've been seeing someone else," Justin says. It was a mistake, he says, but it made him realise he needs some time. He never got to live his own life before he met Brian. He's sorry.

This is it, Brian thinks. The parachute didn't open. The fall didn't kill him, but at the end of the fall is cold, hard, brutal reality, billions of tons of solid rock, and not even Brian Kinney is a match for that.

It's Brian's cue to smash into smithereens, but he's got the agency to deal with, and then Ben gets pneumonia. Hunter goes off the rails and disappears. Brian tries to hold Michael together while his own seams unravel, threatening to spill out his stuffing all over Liberty Avenue. He can't shatter yet, because Michael needs him. Justin is gone, his home is hollow, the end is here, but he's suspended, twenty feet in the air. The gossip hounds are buzzing at the drama, but Brian doesn't have time to spare for being old, alone, and humiliated.

His mother brings a cake over. "I was talking to Debbie Novotny in church," she says, a bit awkwardly. "I want to be here for you in this difficult time." Brian is so pathetically grateful that he offers to make coffee, but regrets it as soon as the coffee machine is on. Justin lured him into sin, Joanie tells him, because he wanted Brian's money. It was sick and perverted and she's glad it's over. She loves Brian. She wants Brian to make his amends to God, before he too is struck down by God's plague.

Brian shoves her out of the loft so hard, she nearly falls down the stairs.

"I know what love is," he tells her as she lies weeping on the landing, "and you have never loved me." As he stands over her, he feels himself plummeting, and stops it by sheer force of will, six feet above the ground. He's sick to his stomach as he slams the door on her noise, and he needs to drink himself into oblivion so badly that he can't let himself have even one. Hands shaking, he pours every drop of alcohol down the sink. He can't crash yet.

By Ben's funeral, Brian is stone cold sober, terrifyingly so. Justin takes him aside and hugs him for a long time, and Brian knows he's got nothing left to lose. "I loved you," Brian tells him. "I love you. You can come back any time you want, on any terms you want."

"I don't know what I want," Justin confesses, and Brian can see it in his eyes, reflecting his own devastation. It gives him enough strength to hold on until the time is right to let himself go.

Hunter turns up at Michael's place three days after the funeral, a mess. Michael pulls himself together for Hunter's sake. Brian grits his teeth and scales back Kinnetik to a quarter of its size. He and Justin do the paperwork on refinancing the agency's debts, and then he is forced to ask about dividing their investment portfolio. This is it. He can't hold it off any longer. He's hitting the ground. His bones are shattering. His heart is breaking.

"If I want," Justin asks, very quietly, "can I still come back?"

"Yes," Brian says, just as quiet, and holds his breath. This is the harsh reality: his happiness is in

Justin's hands.

"I got scared, Brian," Justin whispers. "I didn't know how scary this was going to be."

"I did," Brian whispers back. "I was scared out of my fucking mind."

"So am I." Justin smiles at him through a fall of tears, and Brian blinks, remembering that this is what light looks like. He holds out his arms, and Justin comes to him.

Gravity swerves, adrenalin surges, and he's falling again, breathless. It's a breakneck plunge, from a ludicrous height. They go skydiving together, grip one another's arms and make out in mid-air. It's stupid, but with Justin right there with him, he doesn't care about hitting the ground.