



Saved by the Pitcher

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A handsome actor meets and falls for his baseball idol, but will his hero have the power to save him?

James Vicksburg should be happy that he's finally achieved acting success on Broadway, but his conservative senator father controls what he can do and who he can love. When James's baseball idol, Mike Cooper, meets him backstage after his show, the mutual attraction is palpable. The two begin what they think is a secret affair, but James quickly learns that nothing stays hidden from his vindictive father for long.

James is torn between his growing love for Mike and his desire to protect him from his father. What he doesn't realize is that Mike has his own plan to fight for James's happiness, even if it means losing each other.

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Chapter One

James sat in the window-facing café booth, awaiting his brother Billy and Billy's girlfriend, Nadia. He had missed them for the three weeks they had been overseas on a charity mission. Although James had kept busy with his starring role in a successful Broadway musical, the downtime between performances had reminded him of the companionship dependency he had on his sibling.

James had casual friendships with the cast and crew of the show, but his colleagues were more like neighbors who chatted in passing without ever inviting each other to visit. He assumed they were wary of him because of his right-wing senator father, Charles Vicksburg. The senator's wealth and extreme views didn't sit well with the diversity of artists who made up the Broadway community, most of whom struggled to reach their positions. James thought they might not trust his proclaimed liberal views, but he had his own reasons for remaining quiet about his father's politics. He knew that to those around him, his silence made him appear like a coward at best—and complicit at worst. They didn't understand his father's reach or connections, nor the willingness of so many to do the senator's bidding, even when nefarious. James had been a target himself on more than one occasion, and he had learned discretion equaled survival. James did his best to offset negative perceptions by being a supportive, dedicated team-player in the workplace.

During her marriage, James' mother had been miserable, contradicting his father on almost everything. While in boarding school, James learned of his mother's fatal car accident via a text from his father. The notification was brief, followed by a command to pack in preparation for the funeral. James had longed to read that his father shared his grief or was thinking about his love for his family. Instead, the text

had closed with a message to be strong.

After a few years of living as a widower, Charles Vicksburg met Caroline Finney—the woman who became Billy’s mother when James was nine years old. It was ironic that it was the second time James’ father was smitten by a woman from a left-leaning family which deplored Charles’ politics. Undeterred by pressure from her parents and siblings, Caroline married Charles, believing he must be a good man to have been raising James on his own.

Not having taken time to acquaint herself with her fiancé proved fatal for her marriage, as she disagreed with him on every culture-war issue. The bigger wedge was their different opinions regarding child-rearing. Caroline abhorred Charles’ support of corporal punishment, emphasis on masculine sports for his boys and his compulsion to see his children match his career success at any cost. The couple divorced after two years, sharing custody of their then-one-year-old son. Once he was grown, Billy often complained to James about his childhood and how he had been bounced between two households with different expectations. Like James, Billy grew up to be sensitive, gravitating to his mother’s more liberal views of the world, much to his father’s chagrin. Charles blamed the adult versions of his sons on soft mothers and the influence of their New York City friends. The senator had hoped his sons’ circles would be comprised of citizens from the more conservative districts of New York—the areas that had voted Vicksburg into office.

When Billy had begun dating Nadia, the daughter of a white man and an African-American woman, James’ father couldn’t conceal his contempt. In public, he didn’t criticize the union, recognizing it would be frowned upon by most—even in more conservative circles. In private, he bemoaned white Americans losing their identity, heritage and more powerful positions in society. Billy was shocked when his father told him that Nadia was the type of girl he could experiment with, but to use protection so there wasn’t an undesirable consequence which would ‘tarnish’ the Vicksburg lineage.

While James and Billy were expected, and sometimes coerced, to appear at their father's campaign rallies, Senator Vicksburg made it clear that the platform was for family members only. That sidelined Nadia, despite her two-year relationship with Billy.

James broke into a broad smile when the five-foot-six Billy and his taller girlfriend entered the café. Unlike the stoic and constipated-looking Vicksburg clan, Billy and his girlfriend were cute and exuded fun and affection. Upon seeing James, Billy returned the joyous expression and rushed to him with arms outstretched. After a couple of pats on each other's backs, James kissed Billy's forehead. James adored his little brother, and he didn't care if their being affectionate seemed odd to others. He knew it was distasteful to their father, for sure. But James wanted Billy to experience how much he meant to him. It was something he never had himself when growing up.

Nadia laughed and rolled her eyes, pushing Billy away from his brother so she could wrap her own arms around James. She pulled the man in for a quick peck. When she backed away, she was still beaming, brushing aside a lock of James' thick, shiny mane.

"It's so good to see you guys," James said, pointing to the booth for them to sit. "How was the trip? It killed me that we couldn't connect much."

Billy and Nadia shuffled into the booth, and James sat opposite them.

"Oh my God, dude, the devastation from the earthquake was awful," Billy began.

"But it was really rewarding to be there to help," Nadia finished. "We weren't able to participate in recovery missions, of course, but they let us help care for the injured, find places for displaced pets..."

"Oh man, that was so sad, James. You should have seen all the poor animals that

were wandering, lost and looking for their owners. It broke my heart,” Billy added, his eyes watering at the memory.

Nadia placed her hand on Billy’s thigh, nodding in agreement. “It was sad, but going there helped, and I’d do it again in a minute.”

“Yeah,” Billy concurred, then he turned to face James. “I wished you could have been there with us, bro.”

“Me too,” James admitted. “But you know, the show must go on, as they say.”

“Still filling the house?” Nadia asked.

James tapped his fist on the table for good luck. “So far, so good. I’m afraid I’ll jinx it by saying this, but box office receipts are holding up. Variety magazine called the show an ‘official smash.’ I knew it was possible when we prepped this show for the last two years, but to see it happening is wild.”

“I’m happy for you.” Billy smiled. “You deserve it. And the show is super good. So much better than some of the other crap you’ve performed in.” He snickered, then gulped some water from the glass before him.

“Stop it,” Nadia chastised. “Be nice. You haven’t seen James in weeks.”

“It’s okay.” James laughed. “He’s right, and I’m glad he’s honest. At least when he says something is good, I can believe that he means it.”

“Dude, I always praise your work,” Billy reminded him. “It’s just some of the shows you’ve been in weren’t worthy of your performances.”

A blonde, large-busted server approached the table to take their orders, directing most

of her attention to James. When she walked away, Billy gave James a leering look.

“What?” James inquired.

“She’s hot, and I think she has an eye for you,” Billy responded. “I’ll bet she saw you sitting on the other side of the booth all by your lonesome, thinking how she’d like to make us a quartet.”

“She was being polite. She wants a good tip,” James dismissed him.

“Nah, she took one look at you and thought, ‘I know the other guy is much cuter, but he seems to be taken. Fortunately, the loner isn’t too hard on the eyes,’” Billy quipped.

“Ha! I doubt it. I think she’s wondering why Nadia isn’t sitting with me instead of you. She’s worried she fell into some upside-down parallel universe,” James retorted.

“Guys, stop! Do we have to go through this all the time?” Nadia snapped, though unable to hide her amusement. “I wish you each had a dose of humility to go with your handsome features.”

“Ask her out,” Billy prodded, ignoring Nadia.

“What? I don’t know the first thing about her. She could be taken,” James reasoned.

Billy glanced around the café to see if he could spot the server. “Hmm. I don’t see her. Bet you ten dollars she’s in the ladies’ room primping to make a better impression with you.”

“You don’t have ten dollars to bet,” James rebuked. “If it hadn’t been for the government aid to pay for your trip, you two would never be able to afford to leave

your apartment.”

“That’s the truth,” Nadia said. “We might not have had to pay for the trip, but it was also three weeks where neither Billy nor I made money. I’ll be glad to get back to my own server job so I can pay this month’s bills.”

James knew both his brother and Nadia spent most of their spare hours working. Billy tended bar at a busy club while his girlfriend was a diner-counter waitress. Together, they had to earn enough to cover the rent of an East Village walk-up apartment and pay their living expenses. Nadia’s parents were of modest means, and it was with some hardship they were helping her with college expenses. Despite his wealth, Charles Vicksburg was willing to cover only the cost of Billy’s NYU tuition and books as he continued his education to become a veterinarian.

“You could tell Father that you’ve had an epiphany, and you’re joining the Proud Boys or some other white supremacist group.” James laughed. “He’d pay for everything then.”

Nadia rolled her eyes. “A Proud Boy dating a biracial girl? I think there’s a big hole in that plan.”

“Yeah, the big hole being Father,” James sniped.

“I’ll bet Lilah will have all expenses paid for anything she wants when she gets out of high school.” Billy pouted.

Lilah was the last child of Charles Vicksburg, courtesy of third wife Victoria. Unlike his first two marriages, Charles was pleased with the stuffy, proper Victoria Kent-Vicksburg—a woman with an abundance of money, cosmetic surgeries and blood-red lipstick. Lilah was the precocious offspring Charles had always craved—besotted with Daddy, agreeing with his every word and looking down on anyone from another

social class. She was eleven. James shuddered to think of the monster she'd be once she hit adulthood.

"Hmm, Lilah the Pariah." James smiled. "But can we be sure she's Father's child? Some speculate she's the devil's seed."

"Same thing," Nadia added.

The server brought the customers their food, and James admitted to himself that she was making overtures with her eyes and smiles. He grinned at her in return, but looked away quickly enough to discourage a connection.

Once the three were alone, Billy laughed. "Told you."

"If I ever start flirting like that on my job, please rip out my tampon and use it to wipe up my leaking dignity." Nadia gagged.

James paused mid-squeeze of the ketchup on his veggie burger. "Um, bad timing for that image, thank you."

"And why would you be flirting with the customers?" Billy asked.

"Maybe because my boyfriend hogs all the French fries," she replied, pointing at how he'd dumped the 'shared' platter of potatoes next to his hamburger.

"Oh, sorry," he said, looking down at his plate with embarrassment. "You know you're welcome to pick food off my plate."

"And I will," she responded, taking a napkin to grab a handful of fries and relocate them to her dish.

“So, are you guys still coming to the show tonight?” James asked once their mouths were chewing instead of bickering.

“Of course,” Billy replied upon swallowing. “I told you. We’re bringing Maria. She can’t wait to see you, dude.”

James smiled. Maria was the woman who had helped care for him and Billy when they were being raised in their father’s house. She had been brought illegally to the United States by her husband several years earlier when much of their family had been executed by a Mexican cartel in a case of mistaken identity. Maria’s husband had crossed back to meet with the gang leader, hoping to secure safe passage home, but had ended up losing his head instead. Maria had performed cleaning services in progressively wealthier homes, working the last several years in the residence of Charles Vicksburg. The irony of him employing an illegal immigrant was never lost on James or Billy, considering his campaign slogans about closing the Mexican border to everyone, including asylum-seekers. Nevertheless, James and Billy never called out his hypocrisy for fear he’d fire or deport Maria in response.

“I can’t wait to see her,” Nadia said. “She’s the only one in that Vicksburg house that’s normal.”

“She’s wonderful.” James grinned. “I love that woman.”

Billy chuckled, turning to Nadia. “One of Father’s favorite things to do was to challenge me or James as we started eating dinner. He’d ask about our grades or our political positions on something, and if he didn’t like the answer, he’d tell us we were dismissed from the table. It was his way of sending us to bed without supper.”

James laughed. “What he didn’t know was Maria would sneak food to us, and as kids, we always thought it was better than the fancy shit he made us eat.”

Billy smiled. “It was the only time we ate grilled cheese sandwiches, burgers or chips.”

“Or French fries,” James added, grabbing one from Billy’s plate.

“Hey!” Billy protested. “Nadia can do that because she sleeps with me.”

“Charming,” Nadia said.

“Oh, Billy, you’re not going to get me to sleep with you by offering me French fries,” James snickered.

Billy scrunched his face. “Dude! So gross. I told you a thousand times that brother-on-brother jokes are nasty.”

James hooted out loud. “I just had to see that expression on your face. You crack me up when you get that look like you just ate poop.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “You’re one twisted, sick man, James. Anyway, since Maria never gets to go out, we figured we’d take her to dinner after the show.”

James nodded. “That’s nice. But you guys just said you’re having money problems.”

Nadia nodded. “By ‘we,’ Billy meant ‘you.’ Can you spring for it tonight? We’ll try to pay you back in a couple of weeks.”

James was paid quite well for his theater work, but his swankier West Village apartment sucked up most of those earnings. He did a mental calculation and surmised he had enough in his account to cover both the café lunch and dinner for all of them. He gave Nadia his assent with a smirk and a nod. “Fine, but it needs to be healthier than this place. I can’t keep eating like this if I want to fit into my stage

costumes. And make sure the restaurant isn't too expensive. I don't have Father's money."

Nadia laughed. "Not yet. I keep telling you to knock him off already so you and Billy can inherit."

Billy narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm sure Father's cut us from his will since the thing from Victoria's womb emerged."

James grimaced. "She is our half-sister. We should try to be nice."

Billy huffed. "You mean like when I saved and saved to buy her an American Girl doll for her spawn-day, only to discover later from Father that she used it for target practice when he took her to the shooting range?"

Nadia gasped. "Your father took an eleven-year-old to a gun range? And they let him use a life-like doll for shooting practice?"

"Never too early to learn how to handle a gun, Father would say," James answered. "And people tend to do what the senator tells them to do. I'll bet Lilah is already capable with a gun."

"Great. Another school mass-shooter in the making," Nadia grumbled.

Billy snarled. "She'd be an efficient one, too. Father confirmed her aim is excellent. She blew a hole through the doll's head."

"Why would he even tell you that?" Nadia snapped, disgusted.

"He said, 'William, it's time to get her a new doll'," Billy recalled. "Well, fuck that."

“Now that’s the brotherly love I was talking about,” James deadpanned.

“Whatever, dude,” Billy replied. “So, the server is a no-go?”

“Um, that would be correct,” James concurred.

“Why not?” Nadia pressed. “She seems to be your type. Slutty and desperate.”

James shrugged, ignoring the jab. “Not in the mood.”

Billy’s countenance became serious. “Maybe you should stop messing around and look for something meaningful. Bro, it’s been a couple of years since...”

“Don’t,” James warned.

There was uncomfortable silence for a couple of moments, then James signaled the server for the check.

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Chapter Two

Mike Cooper held the phone to his ear with one hand and wiped his face with the other, becoming frustrated with his agent. “Bob, you’re not listening to me.”

Bob Daly, known for representing some of the biggest names in sports, expressed his own frustration. “Mike, I am listening to you. I just don’t like what I’m hearing. Why do you need to tell the world you’re bisexual? You’re not even with a guy, so what’s the point? You spent twenty years with the Yankees keeping your secret, so why come out now?”

“It was two decades of denying who I am,” Mike reminded him. “Don’t you get it? I’ve never been with a man because it was forbidden, not because there weren’t guys that I was attracted to. Now that I’m retired, I don’t need to worry about what my teammates think and I can date any girl or dude that I want.”

“You still have the public’s reaction to worry about. You have deals with how many companies to advertise their products? Now, start thinking about how many of those deals you’ll lose.”

Mike rolled his eyes, even though Bob couldn’t see his reaction. “This is the twenty-first century. None of them would dare. The protests from liberals would be too great.”

“Do you not watch the news? Look at the financial hit beer-makers and department stores are taking when they support Pride month or other LGBTQ causes. Sure, the companies you work with won’t drop you on your announcement because they won’t

want that backlash from mainstream America. But they'll pay you to do nothing then ditch you when your contract is up."

"I don't care," Mike complained. "I have enough money to live in comfort for the rest of my life. I'm getting too old to be doing some of those gigs anyway, don't you think? Like, what about the underwear print and television ads? How much longer will people want to see me photographed half-naked?"

Bob laughed on the other end of the line. "Mike, you may be forty years old, but trust me, the reaction to those underwear ads is still off the charts. Your body is displayed in the men's section of half the country's department stores, and the ads are in every fashion magazine. You've become better known as the hunk-in-trunks than as a former star relief-pitcher for the Yankees."

"Wonderful. That's not tempting me to continue," Mike responded. "I think I'd rather be remembered for my contributions to the team than for my pec muscles."

"Such problems," Bob said, and Mike could hear the sarcasm in his tone. "Besides, what makes you think it's your chest that's being gawked at?"

"God," Mike muttered. "I try not to think about that. They airbrush out the visible penis line, so what do people think they're seeing?"

"A bulge. Your happy trail. Who knows? It's not like I'm the one drooling," Bob volleyed back.

"You noticed I have a happy trail," Mike teased. "Anyway, I'd rather use my retirement to do meaningful things. I was thinking if I come out, imagine how much easier it could be for younger players to declare their sexual orientation while they're still playing. Someone needs to break down the barriers. There's nobody in major league baseball who has claimed membership in the LGBTQ community."

Bob sighed. “There’s a reason for that. They’d be shunned by their teammates and attacked on social media by the fans. You coming out isn’t going to make anyone else eager to do it. It will just reinforce that you had to wait until you retired to make the announcement.”

Mike closed his eyes, trying to respond, but he knew Bob was right. “Okay, maybe it won’t help others come out. But sharing my truth would allow me to communicate in other ways. I could help educate through the talk circuit, and I could throw some money and energy at helping LGBTQ causes.”

“I still say you should keep quiet. Mike, you can keep dating girls and live a happy life. Why screw it up?”

“I’m shutting off the possibility of a potential match with half the population. I’m tired of appeasing others. This is what I want to help change, Bob. I don’t want people hiding their identities because they think it’s easier than being honest.”

After a moment of silence, Bob responded. “Mike, if you’re hell-bent on doing this, then we need to formulate a strategy. We can try to secure deals with gay-friendly companies who will capitalize on your announcement. Maybe your current contracts will end, but other companies may be eager to sign you. I’ll do some research. Aren’t there underwear companies that market to gay men? They may be happy for you to endorse their products, though I’ll bet you’ll need to wear skimpier stuff and nix the air-brushing.”

“Geez, now you’re an expert on gay-preferred underwear, too? Are you sure there isn’t something you want to tell me? I’m a sure-bet supportive ear.”

Bob snickered, unoffended. “Mike, if I swung that way, you’d be at the top of my list. Even I can see you’re a stud. My wife salivates when your name comes up in conversation. But, pal, there is no way I’m going near a dick and a pair of balls. Kind

of gross, if you ask me. No offense.”

“I guess that’s good news for your wife. It means you’ll always want her instead of jerking off if you don’t want to go near a dick.”

Bob let out a guffaw. “Yeah, well, I don’t watch myself when I whack off. And unfortunately, it’s the only choice more and more these days. After forty-three years of marriage, the magic is gone for my wife, I suspect. If I walk around naked, she turns up her nose and tells me to cover up.”

Mike laughed. “Can’t say I blame her. I’d tell you to cover that body, too.”

“Thanks, asshole,” Bob shot. “Listen, don’t announce anything until we have a plan, okay? If we strategize, you can do good for others while still capitalizing financially.”

“How philanthropic,” Mike commented.

“Donate your earnings then, Mr. Bleeding Heart,” Bob suggested. “As long as you donate after I get my cut.”

“Of course.” Mike sighed. “Hey, I need to go. I’m supposed to pick up Jessica. She wants to see this Broadway show tonight.”

“Okay, so what’s up with that? You’re talking about staying open to a match with a guy, but you’re still dating Jessica? You told me last time we talked that you were going to break up with her.”

Mike put his fingers to the bridge of his nose to ease the throbbing he was experiencing behind his eyes. He wished he could just lie down and skip the date. “I know. I’ll do it tonight. Trust me, she’s my ex-girlfriend. She just doesn’t know it yet. Like I told you before, she’s into having a celebrity on her arm. I want someone

who'd love me even if I wasn't Mike Cooper, famous baseball player."

"Or the hunk-in-trunks," Bob needled. "Anyway, I hope you learned your lesson with her. You're not getting younger, so don't keep falling for someone just because they have a pretty face. And that applies to men, too. Don't think there won't be just as many of them that wouldn't hook up just because of your fame and wealth. So, what are you and Jessica seeing tonight?"

"The More Things Change. It's a show about the parallels between Nazi Germany and today's right-wing politics. Sounds heavy, but it's a musical comedy. Go figure. Jessica heard it got great reviews, so she showed me the ad for it in the paper. I bought her the tickets as a surprise a few weeks ago when I thought our relationship might go somewhere. At least the lead actor in the advertisement looked cute."

Bob snickered. "Hmm, that's not awkward. You're taking your girlfriend to a show where you'll be ogling the man who stars in it."

Mike narrowed his eyes, even though Bob couldn't see him. "She's my ex-girlfriend, and at least I'm letting her see the show before she finds out her new relationship status."

"When you dump her, don't tell her you're bisexual," Bob warned. "She may be pissed enough to use the information against you. Once you've come out, you'll need to be ready for her social media attacks about how you tricked her."

"I wasn't planning to tell her," Mike assured him. "I haven't trusted her for a while now, so I haven't shared much of anything personal about myself." Mike plopped himself down on the sofa, indulging in a moment of self-loathing. "God, listen to how hypocritical I sound. I'm talking about how I haven't trusted her while I've been withholding from her that I like guys as well as chicks. This is why I can't keep doing this. I don't want to be a liar by omission. There are times when people have a right

to know.”

“Okay. We’ll talk more about it later,” Bob soothed. “Let me put together some ideas. Go enjoy the show. Good thing the theater will be dark so Jessica won’t see you boning for the star.”

* * * *

When Mike and Jessica arrived at the theater, he was pleased to remember he had purchased the two seats closest to the aisle. Once the lights dimmed, he’d be able to stretch his long legs and slump in the seat to avoid people seeing and recognizing him as a celebrity.

“Can I sit on the end?” Jessica asked him before they could park their butts in seats.

“What? Why? I start to get aches from old injuries after an hour of being cramped,” Mike protested.

Jessica leaned in toward Mike’s ear to whisper. “I think I have diarrhea from dinner. Just in case I need to get up.”

Mike grimaced. He realized his reaction proved he didn’t care enough about her. He figured if he loved the person, he would have empathy instead of wishing she’d sit somewhere else in the theater. “Fine.”

“Sorry,” Jessica offered, obviously suspecting Mike was either annoyed, disgusted or both.

Mike walked to the second-to-last seat in the row, sitting next to an older woman who appeared to be of Mexican descent. She was chattering with the young couple that were seated to her left. Mike sighed, worrying the trio would be noisy throughout the

program. Mike slouched down in the seat as much as he could to hide from the people who continued to mill about in the aisles. So far, nobody had approached him, and Mike attributed that to the possibility Broadway patrons weren't interested in sports. Jessica sat next to him, put her bag on the floor then placed her hands on her stomach.

"I hope I can make it through this thing," she muttered to him. "Can you imagine if I have a major blow-out right in the middle of the show?"

Mike had grown up in a blue-collar home, so he had never thought of himself as classy. But since dating Jessica, he was grateful to his parents that they had instilled in him a sense of decorum. He wondered what had possessed him to accept the first date with Jessica before remembering it was her perfect breasts. Shallowness had a price.

"Excuse me, sir?" the woman on his left asked.

Mike turned to her and saw she was smiling. "Yes?"

"Are you Mike Cooper?"

The lady was the last one in the audience he expected would identify him. "Um, yes. I am. Don't tell anyone, okay?"

The woman beamed. "Oh, did you hear that, puppies? It is Mike Cooper," she told the pair that had accompanied her.

"I knew it," he heard the young man reply, leaning over the elderly lady to talk to Mike. "I'm a huge Yankees fan. You were the best relief-pitcher they ever had. You saved so many games for them."

“Oh, well, thank you,” Mike responded with some uneasiness. “Of course, I’m not playing anymore. Listen, I’m trying to keep a low profile, so...”

“Dude, could I get a selfie with you?” the young man asked.

“Ugh. I need to run to the toilet. Did you see where it was?” Jessica exclaimed from his right.

“Oh, maybe get a selfie with me too?” the older woman asked with eyes beaming.

“Did you notice where the restrooms were?” Jessica repeated in a panic.

Mike put up his hands in a surrender pose to stop the people from talking. “Can you all just...” He turned to Jessica and exclaimed with more volume than he had intended, “It was on the right-hand side when you enter the lobby. Christ, just go and stop describing your fucking bowel problems.”

Audience members in front of him turned their heads to the racket behind them. Mike wiped a hand over his face and tried to slouch farther down in the seat.

“You’re making a scene!” Jessica whispered before rising from the seat. “Thank you so much for embarrassing me.” She turned and raced up the aisle toward the rest rooms.

Mike looked back to the elderly woman who appeared to be surprised and uncomfortable. “I’m sorry. I’ve been under some stress.”

The lady nodded with uncertainty, and the young couple by her side were looking at him like he was the one who just announced he was in danger of soiling his clothes.

“Well, maybe the show will help you forget your troubles,” the woman said after

everyone was silent for a few moments.

Mike glanced at the three patrons, all who had been looking like frightened deer since his outburst. “Look, I’m sorry.” He locked eyes with the young man. “If you still want, I’ll take a selfie with you. With all of you. Let’s just wait until after the show, okay? Maybe somewhere that doesn’t draw attention. Once you start with a selfie for one person, then everyone wants one.”

The young woman of the group mumbled, “I doubt it. People might be thinking you’re a jerk now.”

The older lady rebuked her. “Nadia! He apologized. Be nice.” She then turned back to Mike and smiled. “It is okay. It must be tiring having people approach you everywhere you go. I keep telling my boy that he had better be careful what he hopes for. This show is already making him famous enough that people are asking him for selfies!”

“Your boy? Your son is in this show?” Mike asked, somewhat surprised by the coincidence of sitting next to one of the cast’s family members.

“Not my son. But I helped raise him when he was growing up,” she explained. Then she nodded her head in the direction of the young man by her side. “And that one, too. Billy.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Mike managed. He looked to Billy and the girl beside him and added, “I need to work on my patience. It wasn’t you that caused me to lose my temper.”

The elderly lady nodded with a knowing expression. “You’re stressed by the woman you’re with.”

“Excuse me?” Mike gaped.

“She might be a nice girl, but she’s not the one for you,” the woman responded. “I have a nose for these things. Your chemistry is off. I could see it right away by the way you look at her.”

“Maria!” Billy warned. He turned to Mike. “Sorry about that. Maria thinks she has mystical powers when it comes to matchmaking.” He then narrowed his eyes at Maria. “And she sometimes forgets that most people don’t believe in that stuff.”

Mike was still astounded, but also amused. Maybe this Maria woman did have a gift. He leaned over to her with a conspiratorial look. “I’m nervous because I was planning to break up with her later.” Once the words were out, he almost couldn’t believe he had volunteered something so personal to this stranger, but she seemed harmless and he pitied her when she appeared dejected by Billy’s reprimand.

Maria’s expression became victorious. “Ah, see! The good Lord has blessed me with this gift.”

The corner of Billy’s lips lifted. “Well, maybe he has. Maria told me right off that Nadia was the one for me.” Billy turned his head toward Nadia and smiled. “And she was right.”

“So, you are Maria, Billy and Nadia,” Mike concluded, looking to each. “Nice to meet you.”

Nadia’s stern expression hadn’t softened. “So, why are you taking this woman to the theater if you’re going to break up with her later? That seems douchey.”

“Nadia!” Billy chastised.

Mike shook his head, wondering if he should tell her to mind her own business. “Um, we had the tickets before I concluded that I just couldn’t do this anymore. I didn’t want to make her miss the play, too. She has been looking forward to it.”

“Musical,” Nadia corrected, still eyeing him with skepticism. “It’s not a play. It’s a musical.”

“Right,” Mike muttered.

“My brother is the star,” Billy beamed.

“The star?” Mike gasped. He assumed that Maria had been alluding to a cast member who would be on stage for a heartbeat. He wondered if the brother was the attractive man from the ad. “The good-looking, dirty-blond guy you see on the advertisements and the theater posters?”

Billy smiled and nodded. “Yup. That’s him. He’s awesome. You’re going to be bowled away. There’s buzz he could win this year’s Tony for best actor in a musical.”

Mike grinned. “Wow. That’s great. I’m looking forward to his performance. You must be proud.”

Their three heads nodded with acknowledgment, then Billy’s eyes widened. “Hey, we were going backstage after the show. You can join us and meet him. He’s a fan of yours, too. Maybe we can take selfies there, since it’s private,” he suggested. “You wouldn’t have to worry about attracting a crowd.”

Mike imagined he’d stepped into a tornado. He was used to people being forward with celebrities, but this group took it to another level. “Um...”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful idea, puppy,” Maria chimed in. “Yes, James used to have your poster on his bedroom wall. He would be happy to see you, though he may not recognize you with a shirt on.”

“What?” Mike gulped.

Billy laughed. “Maria used to check out that poster of you shirtless every time she cleaned James’ room, didn’t you, Maria?”

Maria became flustered. “If God blesses a man with striking good looks and that man works hard to build a beautiful physique, then he and the good Lord are inviting you to enjoy the view.” She turned to Mike. “Yes?”

Mike blushed. “Uh, I posed that way to make the sponsors and my agent happy. It’s rather embarrassing.”

Nadia piped in. “You want to know what’s embarrassing? James’ father made him take down the poster because he thought it would turn his son gay. Talk about ignorance. And people elected that bigot to a U.S. Senate seat.”

Billy shot Nadia a cautionary look. “You know we don’t criticize my father in public.”

Nadia shrugged and looked over to Mike with unmasked sarcasm. “Oops. I meant to say, he’s a great guy who, besides being a U.S. senator, is Billy’s and James’ very supportive father.”

Mike mumbled, “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear any of that.”

Maria sighed. “Puppies, stop. You’re making Mr. Cooper uncomfortable.”

“More than telling him he has bad chemistry with his date?” Nadia smirked.

“I was saying what he already knows,” Maria noted. “He should find his true mate.” She turned back to look at Mike. “I can help you with that, if you want. What good is a gift like mine if it isn’t used to help others?”

Mike was sure his mouth was open as he was absorbing the odd conversation. The people sitting in front of them had glanced back at the group a few more times, too. He hoped they hadn’t heard anything incriminating. Mike was sure his agent wouldn’t like his name associated with the hubbub, and he was even more certain the senator would be furious about how his family spoke of him where others could hear.

Billy ignored the uncomfortable expression on Mike’s face. “So, you’ll come backstage after the show?”

Mike could only nod. He was still shocked at the insanity of the conversation, though he had to admit he was intrigued by the group as well.

“Great!” Billy smiled, his leg bouncing with joy. “James is going to cream his jeans when you walk into his dressing room.” Then, catching himself, he added, “Not in a literal sense. I mean, he may have rubbed one out a few times when looking at your poster, but he would control himself in public.”

Maria gave him a scolding glance, then blessed herself while shaking her head. Billy smirked in return. Mike was shocked at the utterance, but had to admit he was titillated that the handsome actor was gay and had crushed on him. Of course, that had been many years earlier, and this James person might react with disappointment at how Mike had aged.

Mike was still absorbing the craziness and revelations of the past few moments, debating whether to go through with the backstage visit when he heard a moan from

his right. He hadn't even realized Jessica had returned to her seat.

"False alarm before, but not this time," Jessica complained, rushing from her seat once more. Mike worried it was a premonition that he was walking into a shit storm. He looked over to Maria to see if her expression belied a 'reading,' but she was smiling at the stage, eager to see her 'boy' perform. He watched her distinguished features fade into the darkness as the theater lights dimmed.

Chapter Three

Mike tried to remember, without success, the last time he had laughed at a live performance. The show had far surpassed his expectations with its humor, memorable songs and intricate dance routines. He thought the entire cast had been excellent, but James Vicksburg was nothing short of incredible.

Each cast member played a character from two eras. Vicksburg played a gay American soldier who seduced a hypocritical Nazi commander and stole information to help the allies win the war. Prior to being awarded a medal by the American president, his homosexuality was discovered and he was imprisoned instead. In current times, he played the American president himself—one who capitalized on the hatred of his ignorant base until he accomplished what Hitler had not—world-dominance for neo-Nazis. The show ended with the victors singing and dancing in the White House as the audience witnessed the outside world burning. Despite the show's many one-liners and pratfalls, the comedy was dark, to say the least.

Mike had to admit to himself that the leading man's beauty was another reason he enjoyed the show. There had been a scene where Vicksburg wore a white undershirt, a pair of very short boxers and a pair of black nylon socks with garters. He danced and sang a provocative number for the Nazi soldier, and Mike was mesmerized by Vicksburg's gorgeous arms and legs throughout the sexy routine. Mike could appreciate an athlete's build because he knew how hard it was to achieve. Unlike fellow baseball players, though, where certain muscles were over-developed compared to others—like a pitcher's arm or a catcher's legs—Vicksburg's body was proportioned like a Greek statue. Although he had the slenderness of a dancer, each time he flexed an arm or put pressure on a leg, well-pronounced muscles showed off

under glistening skin.

“Mr. Cooper?” Maria interrupted his train of thought as he continued standing and clapping after the final curtain-call concluded. “Will you still be joining us backstage?”

Mike had almost forgotten the promise. Now, the chance to meet James Vicksburg was like a gift. “Yes! Lead the way.”

“What?” Jessica pouted. “We need to go backstage? I want to go home and lie down.”

Mike knew the right thing to do would be to take Jessica home, but he had promised the group he would take pictures, hadn’t he?

“Jessica, I’ll take you home in a few minutes, okay? I promised to take selfies with these folks. They’re related to the star, so they want me to meet him. It won’t be long. Maybe you can sit here and relax.”

“Did it look like I was relaxing the dozen times I got up to go to the ladies’ room during the show?” Jessica griped.

Mike was beginning to wish he had broken up with her before the musical started. “Well, maybe you could visit the toilet again before we leave. Why don’t you go take care of business, and I’ll meet you in the lobby?”

Jessica huffed and reached for her stomach, obviously thinking it wasn’t a bad suggestion. “Fine. Don’t take forever.”

“Mr. Cooper?” Billy pressed.

“Um, yes, I’m coming,” Mike affirmed. Turning back to Jessica, he added, “See you in the lobby in a few.”

* * * *

Mike hung back in the doorway of the dressing room, watching Maria, Nadia and Billy rush to James to hug him and shower him with praise. James was still wearing the business suit costume he had donned for the last scene as the president, though he had removed the jacket, loosened the tie and unfastened the first few shirt buttons. Mike tried not to be obvious he was staring, but his gaze was drawn to the soft hollow of flesh right above James’ rib cage. It looked a little wet from the earlier exertion, and Mike had a desire to lick the smooth skin. When James moved his arms while speaking, it opened his shirt a bit, revealing a light dusting of chest hair that Mike yearned to touch.

“Look who came to visit,” Billy interrupted his brother, pointing over to Mike. Mike realized they had turned to see him and he had been gawking at James’ exposed skin. Although he reasoned they were unaware of what he’d been eyeing, Mike blushed from his internalized guilt.

“Oh my God,” James exclaimed while grinning. “Mike Cooper? Come on, is this a joke?”

Mike regained his composure, smiling in return. “I hope you don’t mind. Your brother and friends said it would be okay. I just wanted to tell you that I thought you were amazing in the show. I was blown away.”

James nodded, but bowed his head with some humility. “That’s nice of you to say. Thank you.”

“Well, get over here,” Maria ordered.

Mike's face reddened again as he was certain his awkwardness was belying his attraction. He walked to James, extending his hand to shake. James grabbed it and pulled Mike into a brotherly side-hug. Mike could smell the faintest amount of sweat as well as fragrances from whatever James used for shampoo and soap. James pulled away too quickly for Mike's taste, leaving Mike looking into the prettiest, most expressive green eyes he had ever seen.

"Sorry," James uttered. "The show is a workout. I'm wet and I'm sure I stink."

"No, not at all," Mike assured him. "You smell great." Realizing he sounded flirtatious, Mike tried to backpedal by adding, "I've been around guys after a ballgame. Trust me, you smell nothing like that."

James laughed. "Okay. Well, I think I'll still shower before we go to dinner anyway. If you don't mind waiting around, you're welcome to join us."

At first, Mike was delighted by the invite, but his obligation to Jessica soured his mood. "Oh, I would have loved to. I'm afraid that my date and I have already dined, and now she is ill. I need to take her home."

James' eyes clouded for a second. "Oh, sure. I guess that was weird for me to ask anyway. Sorry. It's just such an honor to meet you."

Nadia piped in. "Mike has a mission to complete. He's going to break up with his girlfriend tonight."

Mike and James looked at her with shock. "Um, I don't know if that's the right thing to do, under the circumstances," Mike mumbled.

"Don't string her along," Nadia pressed. "If it were me, I'd just want to know whether I was sick or not."

Mike looked to Maria, and she nodded, agreeing with Nadia. He was still surprised by the forwardness of the trio he had met earlier. “Yes, well, we’ll see.”

James looked back to Mike with bewilderment. “Uh, okay. I have no idea how they know any of this, but I won’t keep you from...whatever you need to do. Thanks for stopping by. It was a dream-come-true.”

“Wait!” Billy protested. “He promised selfies.”

Mike huffed a nervous laugh. “Yes, I guess I did. Who has a phone?”

Billy retrieved one from his pocket and handed it to Nadia, then rushed to Mike’s side. “Nadia, take a couple of us.”

Mike put his arm behind Billy so he could place his hand on the young man’s shoulder. He gave the camera his poster-ready smile as Nadia snapped multiple shots. Billy then instructed Nadia to hand the phone to Maria so Nadia could join them in the pictures. Mike was surprised to see Nadia smile—he hadn’t seen her do so yet. She was stunning.

“Okay, puppies, I must get a photo with this handsome man,” Maria complained.

Billy laughed and took the camera from her, instructing her to stand next to Mike. Maria put her right arm around Mike, then leaned into him and placed her left hand on his chest. Mike thought her infatuation was sweet, and he almost laughed more than smiled for the series of photos.

“Maria, let James get some with Mike,” Billy suggested.

Mike looked over to James, noticing there was a shyness and something else that was unreadable in his expression. He thought James’ eyes were asking if Mike would

mind. To answer the unasked question, Mike walked to James and pulled him to his side. James rested his hand on Mike's back, and Mike loved that it was a strong, confident grip.

After several more shots were taken, Mike pulled away from James' grasp with some reluctance. "I should go. My date is waiting." Upon his announcement, James affected the same cloudy-eyed expression Mike had noticed earlier.

"Well, thanks again for stopping by," James said. "I've always been a huge fan. You made my night."

Mike didn't want to walk away without a reason to communicate with James in the future. "It was my pleasure. Hey, would you mind sending me those pics of us?" James' face transformed from polite pleasantness to incredulity.

"You'd want the pictures?" James asked.

Mike shrugged, trying to act casual. "Sure. You're going to be famous when you win the Tony Award for best actor. Imagine how jealous my friends will be when they see that I met you."

James chuckled. "I doubt I'll win a Tony, and I doubt your friends would be jealous even if I did. I'm sure you've hung out with far more famous people than me."

Mike pulled out his phone anyway. "What's your cell phone number? That way, when the text with pictures comes through, I'll know it's you."

James shot Mike a skeptical look but recited his phone number. Then Mike instructed James to retrieve his own cell so he could type in Mike's number. James did so, starting to smile with a bit of giddiness. "I can't believe you want the photos."

“I do. I will be very disappointed if you don’t send them to me,” Mike assured him. He looked to the others in the room and he could tell they were each reaching their own conclusions about why Mike was insisting on the photos. He didn’t care. In some ways, he hoped they suspected he was interested in James. The actor was just as beautiful up close as he had been on stage, and Mike would relish the chance to get to know him better.

“Good luck tonight,” Nadia offered.

“Uh, thanks, Nadia,” Mike replied, turning to Billy to shake his hand.

Maria pulled Mike in for a hug and whispered in his ear, “Remember, I’m here to help.”

Mike pulled back, surprised he was surprised at this point. “Uh, okay. Thanks Maria.”

He then turned to James, wondering how someone could be so masculine-looking and yet so pretty. He wished he could lean in to kiss James’ perfect lips. Instead, he clapped a hand on his shoulder and smiled. “I mean it. Send me a text. Congratulations again on your show. You’re incredible.”

“Thanks,” James whispered.

As Mike was ready to exit the doorway, a young woman he recognized from the show was passing the dressing room. She had taken a moment to pause so she could shout to James, “Hey stud, you left your undershirt in my apartment the other night. You’re welcome to come retrieve it whenever you want.” From her smile and lascivious tone, Mike could tell that her encounter with James had been sexual.

Once she was out of eyesight, Mike rushed out the door, silently cursing his foolishness. Billy’s comment about James gratifying himself while looking at his

poster must have been a joke, and James was involved with a female cast member. He prayed that none of the people in the dressing room realized how he'd swooned like an infatuated teenager. He imagined they would joke about him once they went to the restaurant. He never thought he'd be in such a hurry to find Jessica so he could leave the premises.

Chapter Four

Although his dinner companions continued discussing the show and James' performance, James was more focused on his encounter with Mike Cooper. Before seeing him in person, James assumed the athlete still looked good based on the underwear ads that bombarded the senses everywhere one went in the city. But he had also thought the photos were airbrushed and Photoshopped to hide the inevitable aging and imperfections. When Mike Cooper entered the dressing room, though, he blew away those assumptions. James was as floored by the athlete's real-life attractiveness as he was when he saw the print ads. It was clear that Cooper was still in peak condition, and his face was more handsome than any career-models with whom James was familiar.

"Don't you think so, James?" Nadia asked.

James stopped the fork-full of salad midway to his mouth. "What?"

Billy laughed. "Where's your head at, big brother? That's like the third time during the dinner you've asked what we've been talking about."

"Sorry," James mumbled, completing the motion of forking the food into his mouth.

"I'll bet he's thinking about Mike Cooper," Nadia teased, taking a bite of her own meal.

James flushed, catching Maria and Billy both looking to him trying to gauge his reaction. "What? No. Just zoning out from the performance. It takes a lot out of you."

“Bro, is he still your fantasy?” Billy asked, ignoring James’ explanation.

James half-laughed. “I’m not a teenager anymore. And I never said he was my fantasy.”

“Come on. You had a poster of him shirtless. And what’s age have to do with it?” Nadia asked. “The guy is hot, and you’ve got eyes. There’s nothing wrong with you noticing it.”

James was sure his face was heating even more. “God, I saw him for two minutes. Who had time to think about that?”

“Billy, pull up the pictures of us with Mike Cooper,” Nadia suggested. “Let’s see how they came out.”

Billy smacked his forehead. “Oh, right! I can’t believe I haven’t checked them yet.” Billy retrieved his phone and started to scroll through the shots. “They came out good.” He turned to Nadia. “And you’re right. The guy is a hunk. Maybe I’d jerk off to shirtless pictures of him.”

James felt flushed. “God, shut up. I never said I did that.”

Nadia giggled at Billy’s comment. “It’s okay, Billy, if you have a tiny crush on a male celebrity. If I weren’t with you, I’d do something with Dua Lipa if she were ever so inclined. Maybe everyone has at least one secret same-sex infatuation.” Nadia then turned to James. “And Mike Cooper seems to have an unfair share of men attracted to him.” She paused before affecting a mischievous expression. “Just because you never told Billy you worked one out when looking at the poster, it didn’t stop Billy from telling Mike Cooper that you did.”

“What?” James exclaimed. He glared at his brother. “Please tell me you didn’t.”

There was silence in response, so James looked to Maria. “He didn’t tell him that, did he?”

Maria dropped her eyes. “It may have been muttered at some point.”

James’ anger rose, and he turned an accusatory gaze on his brother. “Billy! What the fuck? Why would you do that?”

Billy held up his hands in defense. “It wasn’t a big deal, was it? I’m sure he knows some guys are into him, too. It just slipped out. Sort of.”

James snarled. “How does that just slip out? Hey, you’re Mike Cooper? My name is Billy Vicksburg and oh, by the way, my brother wanked to your poster in high school? Jesus!”

Maria looked uncomfortable. “Don’t get upset, James. And don’t use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“That’s the thing that shouldn’t have been said?” James shouted to Maria. “My brother just told a famous person that I masturbated when I looked at his poster!”

Nadia shrugged. “I agree with Billy. You and thousands of other people did the same thing. Do you think Cooper is so naïve that he poses for underwear ads and doesn’t realize there are guys as well as girls fantasizing about him?”

“I repeat, I never said I did what Billy accused me of. That’s Billy’s dirty mind projecting,” James protested.

Billy smirked. “Dude, there were dozens of posters of Mike Cooper in uniform you could have bought. The only reason an eighteen-year-old buys the one where the idol is shirtless is because he’s boning for him. And let’s face it, at that age—you were

going to jerk off to something. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the picture was just as much inspiration as the Cindy Crawford bathing suit poster you had hanging next to it."

"Okay, puppy," Maria chastised. "Stop embarrassing your brother."

James wiped a hand over his now sweating upper lip. "This is a nightmare."

Billy shook his head. "I don't think so. If Mike Cooper isn't into dudes, it didn't seem to bother him when I made the comment. He still wanted to meet you, and he seemed to like you well enough once he did. I was getting a vibe. He even wants the pictures of you two together."

"He's being polite," James snapped. "And what do you mean, you were getting a vibe? He's dating a woman!"

"So? You date women all the time," Nadia noted. "Like the tramp who stopped by the dressing room earlier."

James shot her a warning glance. "She's not a tramp. She's just...friendly."

Maria put her fork on her plate so she could join the conversation. "She's not the one for you, James."

James rolled his eyes. "Maria, I'm not looking for a relationship, so stop talking about 'the one'. I'm just having fun."

"I don't think you are, puppy. I think you are not having fun at all," Maria responded. "I think you have a hole in your heart, and you are medicating by sleeping around. James, they are the wrong people. You think it is fixing your pain, but it isn't. Your fear of getting hurt has you doing things that hurt you more."

“Christ, can we just eat?” James complained, pushing more salad into his mouth.

“James,” Maria reprimanded. “I don’t like you using the Lord’s name like that.”

James was about to object that he didn’t share her religious beliefs, but he loved her too much to disappoint her. Instead, he turned to Billy. “I just don’t understand why you thought it was okay to say something that would humiliate me.”

Billy grimaced. “I don’t think sex is something to be ashamed of. And if you saw the way his eyes lit up when he heard we were related to the—quote—‘good-looking, dirty-blond guy on the print ad,’ you’d understand why I thought it might be good to put it out there that you could be into him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” James said. “You sensed he was interested in me because his eyes lit up?”

Nadia chimed in, “They did. And you left out the part that he called you good-looking. How many straight guys lead with that? I had the same thought as Billy.”

“You’re just trying to defend him,” James countered.

“I thought it, too,” Maria added. “And the way he was acting in the dressing room made me believe it even more.”

James shook his head with disbelief. “He was acting like a normal human being, unlike the three of you! Again, the guy has never dated a man to my knowledge. He’s dating a woman, as we speak...”

“One he’s breaking up with tonight,” Nadia pointed out. “It was an odd thing to share with us, don’t you think? Maybe, subconsciously, he wanted us to know he would be available. Maybe he wanted you to find out he’ll be single.”

James dropped his utensils on the plate. “My God. And to think of the four of us, I’m the one that spent time in an institution.”

Billy pushed his phone toward his brother. “Look at the pictures of you two. You’d make an awesome-looking couple.”

“Stop it! I don’t want to.” James sulked.

Billy shrugged. “Dude, check out this one where he’s looking at you. I think he’s attracted to you. It’s like you could add animated hearts coming from his eyes and nobody would question it.”

“He wasn’t paying attention to anyone else in the dressing room when he came in. His eyes were fixated on you,” Nadia noted.

“Well, he did come to meet me, so wouldn’t that make sense?” James shot back.

“He was eyeing you like a desert wanderer eyes a food cart selling ice water,” Maria said. “He didn’t look at his date that way.”

James mumbled, “Even if all of you are right, what makes you think I want to hook up with him?”

The three others laughed, irritating James even more. “Bro, you were acting like one of the Southern damsels in a 1940s movie. All shy and swoony.”

“Was not!”

“Okay, whatever. Just send the pictures to him and see how he responds. If he doesn’t text back, then I’ll drop it. But I’m guessing he will respond,” Billy commented.

“Big deal. He’ll be polite and tell me thanks and that it was nice to meet me,” James replied. “But then he’ll have the pictures to show his friends and laugh about how I’m the freak who used his poster as jack-off material. God, what if it gets to the press? Father will have a shit-fit.”

Maria reached across the table and stroked James’ hand. “James, you are letting your imagination run away from you. He seemed like a nice man. I’m sure he wouldn’t do that.”

“I’m not sending him the pictures,” James stated with determination.

“But...” Billy began to object.

“I’m not sending them,” James snapped. “And from now on, stay out of my business. I’m so pissed off at you right now. I mean it. You fucking embarrassed me, Billy. I can’t even look at you.”

Billy reacted like he’d been slapped, then looked down at the dinner plate before him. “I’m sorry, James.”

When Billy raised his head again, his eyes were moist. Nadia started massaging Billy’s arm. James knew Billy was sensitive and that he was his brother’s idol, so his infrequent reprimands always hurt him. But when he thought about how he could end up being the butt of Mike Cooper’s jokes when he was with his friends, it made him want to hide under the restaurant table and never reappear. He would normally tell Billy to forget about it, but this time, his brother had gone too far.

“You know, I’m beat. I’m heading home,” James announced. He pulled his credit card from his wallet and handed it to Billy. “Are you still coming over tomorrow for the mail I’ve been taking in for you while you were overseas?” Billy nodded, but seemed too afraid to speak. “You can return the card then.”

“James?” Billy’s voice cracked. “Please don’t go. I’m sorry.”

James nodded, but rose from the table and left the restaurant, choosing to walk home instead of taking a cab. He wanted time to clear his head. Billy, Nadia and Maria were right that he was attracted to Mike Cooper. He hoped it hadn’t been obvious to the athlete like the trio implied.

James thought Mike Cooper being into him was ludicrous—people didn’t just turn gay. James imagined that even if Cooper were attracted to men, he would never risk doing anything about it. The man had his reputation as a sports hero to protect. At best, James would be a dirty little secret—a quick encounter ending with Mike Cooper acting like he’d been seduced and leaving the scene in disgust.

James also had his father to consider. The last time Charles Vicksburg had discovered James was involved with a man, it hadn’t ended well. His father had warned him to break it off or he would be hurt. James kept seeing the man, figuring that even if his father went after him, it was worth it to be with his boyfriend each night. What he hadn’t anticipated was his father wounding James by destroying his lover. It had started when the suppliers to his boyfriend’s business started making excuses for why they couldn’t deliver. Soon after, more problems arose. James’ boyfriend’s employees were leaving for jobs where they were receiving large sign-on bonuses, his premises were failing health and safety standards over nonsensical observations and he was getting muscled by different organized crime families. The business didn’t survive, and neither did James’ relationship. James had vowed he would never again fall for someone and make them a target for his father.

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Chapter Five

Two months passed since meeting James Vicksburg before Mike posted about his bisexuality on his social media accounts. Mike gave into temptation and read the responses even though people had warned him doing so could be upsetting. Although Mike saw a good number of nasty remarks, most comments were supportive. There were even several flirtatious invitations from men, offering to show him the ropes if his experience was lacking.

He wondered what James Vicksburg would be thinking if he read the news. He had never received the selfies from James that he requested, or for that matter, any text or call at all. It confirmed, in his mind, that James was a straight man who was uncomfortable with what he realized was attraction from Mike. Ghosting Mike was, no doubt, James' polite way of discouraging thoughts Mike might have about the two of them together.

Mike had seen James on television a few weeks earlier where he was a guest on a talk show promoting his musical. It had been a coincidence that Mike caught the appearance, as he had been surfing channels just as the host had announced who her guest would be. Mike was entranced during the segment, still in awe of how beautiful James was. Even the host commented more than once that she would attend the show just to watch him dance in his short-shorts. Mike found himself agreeing that he would watch it again for that reason, too.

Watching the actor answer questions, Mike admired the man's composure and humility. James had spoken well of the musical and the talent surrounding him, but had deflected when the host had shared the positive reviews of James' own

performance. When the host had asked if there was someone in his life, Mike had noticed that James had laughed with discomfort before answering that there was not. James had offered the typical celebrity's excuse that he was too focused on his work to entertain a relationship. The host had never asked James if it would be a man or a woman that would interest James, which was understandable, but Mike wished she had. Despite the evidence of a sexual encounter James had had with his female co-worker, Mike hoped that, like himself, James might also be interested in men.

When the subject of James' famous father had been raised, Mike noticed the light in James' eyes had dimmed, though the smile had remained on his face. Mike knew the reaction well. It was the same empty grin he had displayed when answering reporters' questions about his love life, a look pretending everything was great while hiding that something was wrong or missing. When the host had asked James whether he supported his father's political positions and views, James had provided a neutral response that he sometimes agreed with his father and sometimes he did not—but that James was not a politician and he would leave it to the people to decide who they wanted to represent them in Congress.

Once the interview segment had ended and the network had cut to commercials, Mike had groaned when one of them was the stylized black and white cologne commercial that he had done. Mike had rolled his eyes as he had watched himself dive into a pool, emerging with water dripping from his bare chest. He had wondered if he was the only viewer who realized the actions had nothing to do with the fragrance that was being hawked. Mike had tried to remember that he had been paid a nice sum of money to shoot water scenes in a skin-tight, black Speedo. Mike now wondered whether the advertiser would continue airing the spot since he had proclaimed himself bisexual.

When the ads had ended and the talk show had resumed, James had been reintroduced so he could sing a number from the musical. It was one of the ballads that didn't require dancing, and the cameras had panned up and down and in and out

on James' handsome face and build. Mike had found himself, once again, blown away by the man's talent and beauty and wished James had sent the selfies, even if they never spoke again. Having a picture of himself standing next to James, each with their hands on each other's backs, smiling in a happy moment, would have brought Mike joy.

Now Mike wondered if he would ever find a man that could enthrall him the way James had, and he thought maybe his agent had been right. If no man could live up to the standard James had set in Mike's mind, Mike questioned whether there was a reason to have shared his sexual orientation with the public if he ended up with a woman anyway.

"Oh, James," Mike whispered to himself, looking at the playbill he kept with James' face on the cover. "What is it about you? I wish you were attracted to me like I am to you."

Mike pulled the playbill up to his chest and kept it there, falling asleep in the armchair. He relished the peace, knowing that, now that the story about his bisexuality was out, he might be hounded for several weeks to come.

* * * *

"Dude, did you see the news about Mike Cooper?" Billy asked as soon as James let him through the door of his apartment.

"Hello to you, too," James replied, pulling Billy into a quick hug. "Yes, I saw it."

"I told you. I just knew it," Billy bragged, throwing his coat onto James' nearby sofa. "So, are you going to call him?"

"What? Why would I call him? It's been over two months since we met. I'm sure he

doesn't even remember who I am," James answered, picking up Billy's jacket and hanging it in the coat closet.

Billy went to his favorite recliner and threw himself onto it. "Bro, if you ever want to get rid of this chair, just know, I'm happy to take it off your hands."

"Good to know." James smirked. "I hope it will fit whatever your décor is about twenty years from now, because that's when I'll be able to afford to replace it."

"Nah. You'll have so much money after winning the Tony Award, you'll be wanting to redecorate just because you can," Billy teased.

James shot him a wary look. "Stop saying that. I don't want to see how disappointed in me you'll be when I don't even get nominated."

Billy lost his grin. "James, I would never be disappointed in you. I would say you were robbed. I'd be pissed. But I promise, I would never, ever be anything but proud of you. You deserve to be nominated and to win."

James walked by the chair and tousled Billy's hair. "Well, I'm not the most beloved guy on Broadway, thanks to Dad and his politics. Don't forget, my fellow thespians have to vote, and it's going to be tough for them to overcome their preconceived notions that I'm a right-wing fascist like Father."

Billy called out to James as he continued walking into the kitchen, "Beer, please."

James came walking back to Billy with a bottle in his hand. "What did you think I was going to the kitchen for?"

Billy laughed as he took a swig, watching as James plopped himself down on the sofa. "I think you should text Mike Cooper."

“Are we back to that?” James asked with mild impatience.

“Yes, we are back to that,” Billy replied. “Bro, the guy is into dudes. I knew he was attracted to you. Why don’t you want to call him? He’s a total stud.”

James laughed. “Were you serious when you said you’d jerk off to a picture of him shirtless?”

Billy looked confused. “When did I say that?”

James continued laughing. “In the restaurant after we met him. You had drunk a couple of beers by the time you said it right in front of Nadia. She laughed it off, but that was bold, even if you were a bit tipsy.”

Billy shrugged. “Nadia knows I’m crazy about her. I would never cheat on her. But hey, Mike Cooper may be the best-looking dude out there. If you didn’t want him, and I wasn’t with Nadia, and he hit on me, I’m not sure my answer would be a flat-out no.”

James was shocked. “What? Are you bisexual?”

Billy took another gulp of beer before answering. “James, if I were, wouldn’t I have told you? There were like one or two guys in high school I imagined trying something with, but when I thought about the actual act, it was unappealing. Mike is one in a million, though. If he wanted to wank in front of me, I could be inspired to join in, I think. But I wouldn’t do anything more than that—even with him.”

James started laughing again. “So, you’re pretty much straight on the spectrum, leaving a little room for you and Mike Cooper to watch each other jerk off.”

Billy seemed to consider it, then nodded. “Yup, that about sums it up. But it’s hardly

on my top one-hundred list of things to do before I die. Besides, I love Nadia, so why would I do anything to mess that up?"

"She loves you, too," James noted. "You two are good together."

Billy beamed. "We are, aren't we? Hey, do you think I'm too young to get married?"

James almost choked. "You're thinking of proposing?"

Billy nodded. "I know we don't have a pot to piss in, but we don't need a big wedding. Nadia agrees we'd be wasting money we could use for other things. I just know she's the one for me, so what's the point of waiting? I've been saving up to buy a ring."

James was astounded. "Billy, why didn't you tell me?"

Billy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I was afraid you'd try to talk me out of it."

James went to pull his brother into an awkward hug. "I wouldn't try to talk you out of it. You're a grown man, and you can make decisions for yourself." Billy smiled and embraced James once more. "But..."

"Uh-oh, here it comes," Billy muttered.

James put up his hand to stop his brother. "No, I'm not trying to sow doubts. I just wondered if you thought about what Father would say...or do."

Billy nodded. "That's why you can't say anything. If I do this, we'll keep it small. We'd invite her parents, my mom, you and Maria. Then I'll tell Father once it's too late for him to stop me."

James went back to the sofa and sighed. “Yes, I think that would be the only way. Dude, I’d try to pay for a bigger wedding for you if we could hide it from Father, but those things are very expensive. I don’t think I have enough saved to even send you guys on a nice honeymoon.” James felt bad because he knew Billy’s mother had no means to help.

Billy shook his head. “I wouldn’t want you to. I would be happy to have a nice dinner after the nuptials with my girl and you.”

James chuckled. “You mean like we always do anyway?”

Billy shrugged. “Why not? Just because we always do it doesn’t mean it isn’t nice. I think there would be something charming about starting off my life with Nadia by following the routine that gives us enjoyment.”

James looked to his brother with affection. “I love you, Billy.”

“Love you too, man,” Billy answered. “Which is why I’m going to keep hounding you to text or call Mike Cooper. You owe it yourself.”

James ran a hand through his hair. “Billy, stop. It’s been too long. He might be pissed that I didn’t follow up with him. He could be dating someone. Like I said before, maybe he doesn’t even recall who I am.”

Billy rolled his eyes. “Bull. You’re making excuses. You hit on people all the time that don’t matter one hoot to you. Why wouldn’t you give it a whirl with someone you admire?”

James began to fidget with his hands. “Because I admire him. I mean, sure, I’d like to sleep with him. I hear he even makes predominantly straight guys interested in voyeuristic hand jobs.” He looked to Billy, who was smiling at the joke. “But I think

just sleeping with him would make me sad.”

“Then don’t just sleep with him. See if he’s interested in dating,” Billy suggested.

James groaned. “Are you forgetting what Father did to the last guy I dated?”

Billy sat up straighter. “This is different. Mike Cooper is rich and famous. What’s our father going to be able to do to him?”

“What about me, Billy? Do you remember when I was a teenager and I spouted off about Father’s politics in an interview? Remember how he had our family doctor convince a facility that I needed mental health treatment, and Dad put me in there for a month?”

Billy frowned at the memory. “I know, James. But he can’t commit you now. You’re an adult—an adult with your own doctor and people who can vouch for your sanity. It’s the memory of what he did to you that’s paralyzing you.”

“Of course, it is!” James shouted. “He fucking had me locked up, Billy. And years later, he destroyed my boyfriend’s livelihood. What would he do this time? Have the show shut down? He could do it. He already hinted at that when he first saw the storyline for it. I’m amazed he hasn’t done it already.”

“Maybe he hasn’t because he realizes his power is diminished now that you’re independent. As for Mike, just meet with him and don’t tell Father about it. How would he find out? Like you said, Mike may reject you and that will be that. Or maybe he’ll just want to sleep with you. Hey, it might make you sad to do it once and move on, but maybe it will be worth it to have slept with your idol, huh?” Billy sighed. “Take it one step at a time, okay? We’ll figure it out as we go along.”

“We?”

Billy nodded. “Yes, we. I’ll need you as I try to marry Nadia without Father’s interference. I’ll help you navigate what happens with Mike Cooper.”

“I don’t know,” James said, worried.

“I do,” Billy responded. “I’m emailing you the selfies right now. Then you’re going to send them to Mike Cooper and you’re going to apologize that you took so long.”

“He’ll see the coincidence of me sending them the day his story came out,” James protested.

“Dude, it will be the reason you’re sending them. You need to be honest with him. You’ll message that you didn’t send the photos before because you were mortified to find out that I had told him about you getting intimate with your hand while gazing at his poster. But now that you’ve read his story, you figure he might be cool with the revelation, so you’re following through on your promise. End your text with a congratulations on his announcement, tell him you’re proud of him and suggest he calls you if he’s interested in getting together.”

James put his head in his hands and growled. “Oh God. This could be so embarrassing!”

Billy smiled victoriously. “Good, sounds like you’re willing to do it. I’m sending you the pictures right now.”

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Chapter Six

Mike was giddy and nervous all at once. James had agreed to join him in Mike's reserved box seats at Yankee Stadium to watch a game against the Toronto Blue Jays. Once Mike had received a text from James with the two-month-old selfies along with an admission of his embarrassment over his brother's revelation, Mike had responded that he felt bad that James had been uncomfortable. Mike had added that he was flattered to have been idolized by someone who seemed so nice and who was so attractive. James had returned a message stating that Mike was just as hot now, and being bisexual himself, James had been afraid that he had been obvious about the attraction during their meeting. James then stated that he hoped they could be friends, despite his little crush. Mike had laughed and responded that he hoped so, since James hadn't been the only one interested that day. That had earned Mike a heart and a smiley face emoji, as well as an agreed-upon 'date' at the ballgame.

Mike had left instructions with security to escort James to the box upon his arrival. Now, Mike was pacing, checking the stocked bar and adjusting the air temperature, wanting everything to be perfect. He was bending over the mini-refrigerator to retrieve a water bottle when he heard footsteps behind him. He straightened and turned, happy to see a beaming James wearing a team baseball jersey, sunglasses, shorts and backwards Yankees baseball cap. Mike thought he would combust. The guy was so cute.

"You didn't have to stand up," James said. "I was enjoying the view."

Mike snickered and walked over to embrace James. Like the last time, he could smell James' skin and hair, and he reveled in touching James' strong back muscles as he

held him for a moment. “You look nice.”

James rolled his eyes. “I look like every other guy here.”

Mike grinned at the comment. “Trust me. You don’t.” James blushed but smiled, looking down at the concrete floor.

They were about to sit when the crowd was asked to stand for the national anthem.

“It’s been a dream of mine to sing that here at Yankee Stadium,” James admitted as he stood by Mike’s side to salute the flag.

“You’d be awesome, I’m sure,” Mike encouraged. “Maybe I can help make it happen.”

Mike saw that James looked at him with an unreadable expression. James didn’t answer, but when he turned his gaze back to the flag, he had a slight frown. Mike couldn’t understand what he’d said to cause that reaction.

Throughout the game, Mike noticed James knew baseball and he knew the players. He was cheering every Yankees hit, talking about what he expected would happen with each play based on his experience watching the team, and showing visible frustration whenever the Yankees made an error or an out. Mike tried not to laugh at how James was more involved with the team’s fate than he was. He took advantage of the situation, though, bumping his bare leg against James’ each time they raised their arms in elation, and running a soothing hand over James’ back each time something went wrong for the team. Mike was aroused more than a few times, but never noticed a reaction to the contact from James. He wondered if he had misread what he thought to be James’ flirtatious text messages.

“Want a hot dog?” Mike asked James just as the eighth inning began.

James grimaced and frowned at Mike. “Dude, those are so bad for you.”

Mike laughed. “And the beer we’ve been drinking is healthy? I’m starving, so I’m getting one. Want to share? I’d enjoy watching you put it in your mouth.”

James blinked with surprise, then snickered. “Jesus. You’re going to perv watching me eat a hot dog?”

Mike shrugged. “Maybe. It isn’t like the Yankees are worth watching today. They don’t have a chance in hell of coming back from a seven-run deficit.”

James looked offended. “Yes, they do! Some fan you are.”

Mike chuckled and rubbed James’ shoulder. “Okay. I won’t give up. And we don’t have to eat a hot dog. Maybe after the game, we can grab a bite somewhere else.”

James cast his eyes down to his sneakers. “I’m not sure that we should. If you’d like, maybe you could come back to my place. I could make us something.”

Mike nodded, assuming James was avoiding a public dining experience because he didn’t want tongues wagging before anything serious happened between them. “Sure. That sounds nice.”

James gave him a weak smile, then returned his attention to the game, yelling at the plate umpire for calling a ball instead of a strike against a Toronto Blue Jay. Mike grinned. There was some passion in the boy, for sure.

The Yankees ended up losing the game by nine runs. Mike wished they had been victorious so he could see a big smile on James’ face. Still, James turned to him and thanked him, telling him he’d never been in the box before and it was a thrill. It gave Mike the opportunity to suggest they do it again.

James' phone pinged with a text, causing him to look and bark a laugh.

"What?" Mike asked as they were rising from their seats to exit.

"My crazy brother," James replied. "He said he was talking to his girlfriend and he told her that right about now, I was creaming my shorts."

Mike swallowed hard, wiping a hand over his damp neck. "You all talk to each other with such candor—and to complete strangers, too." Mike recalled the indiscreet conversation from the night at the theater.

James nodded. "Yes. I suspect my father dropped us on our heads when we were babies—purposely."

Mike wasn't sure if that was meant to be comical or critical of his father. "Well, as long as you all have fun with each other."

James' phone pinged again, stopping James in his tracks so he could read the text. "Oh my God, he's such a weirdo."

Mike was beginning to get on board with their quirkiness. "Now what?"

James looked away with a bit of bashfulness. "I can't even say. It's too sick."

"Okay, now you have to tell me," Mike implored.

James sighed with resignation. "Billy made a comment once that you were so hot, even he would rub one out with you."

Mike's jaw dropped. "Uh, thanks?"

James laughed. “So now, he texted me for your number so he could send you a dick pic. He’s yanking my chain, of course. He wouldn’t.”

Mike regained his composure. “Well, as cute as your brother is, I’m kind of enamored by someone else. I’d rather be yanking that guy’s...chain.”

James’ face heated as he glanced away, unable to hide a bit of a grin. “Oh yeah? Who would that be?”

Mike pulled James by the front of his shorts until they were bumped up against each other face-to-face. “I think you know.” Mike leaned in closer to kiss James, but James pulled away with a jerk.

“Sorry,” James mumbled. “It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s just, people could see.”

Mike realized he should proceed with more caution. “Yes, you’re right. I’ll be more careful.”

James shook his head to signify it wasn’t a big deal, and they resumed their exit from the box. “I have to think of how to respond to that little fucker.”

Mike laughed. “Here. Hand me the phone.” James was hesitant, but then handed his cell over. Mike typed a text response to Billy and hit send.

“What did you type?” James wondered.

“I typed that it was me—Mike—and I gave him my number and told him to put up or shut up.” Mike looked at James’ shocked expression and wondered if he had crossed a line. “I assume he’ll know that I’m joking, as well?”

James broke into a grin. “Hmm, I think so. Problem is, he’s such a little phisher, I

could see him sending the pic just to call your bluff.”

Mike chuckled. “Well, maybe it will give me a preview of what I can expect from you? Are you built like him in that department?”

James’ coloring from his Scandinavian mother revealed his embarrassment once more. “First off, my brother and I aren’t in the habit of playing ‘show me yours and I’ll show you mine.’ Secondly, we don’t resemble each other at all and I assume that applies to everything. We had different mothers and we both favor them as opposed to our father. Thirdly, aren’t you being presumptuous when you suggest you’ll be seeing my equipment?” James’ smile showed he wasn’t offended.

“Am I?” Mike asked as they made their way into the hall.

James didn’t answer. Mike wasn’t sure if it was because he wanted to be a tease or if it was because James hadn’t decided. It was then that Mike’s cell pinged.

“Uh-oh,” James groaned.

Mike looked down at his phone. There was a text that started ‘this is Billy.’ Mike was somewhat relieved there was no attached photo. When Mike opened the text, he was shocked to read Billy’s warning not to sleep with his brother. A follow-up text was displayed. Mike read Billy’s message that if he were to sleep with James or even intimate that he wanted to, it would be game over. Billy’s message explained that James feared relationships, and if Mike wanted more than quick sex, Mike would need to be patient and try to help James see he could have more.

Mike was reeling from the message, surprised by the implications as well as Billy’s gumption and interference.

“Was it him?” James asked.

“Huh? Uh, no,” Mike mumbled. “It was business.”

Once they left the ballpark, James noticed that Mike had become quiet. His flirtatiousness had vanished. Mike offered to take James home in a car provided by a private service, and James wondered if Mike’s silence in the limousine was because he didn’t want to be overheard by the driver.

“Everything okay?” James ventured when they were only a couple of blocks from James’ apartment.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Everything is fine. I do have some pressing business to address, though. Maybe a raincheck on dinner?”

James felt his heart thud. All day, he had been coaxing his brain and other parts of his body to behave, focusing on the ballgame instead of the tickle of Mike’s leg hairs against his, or the touch of Mike’s strong hand caressing his back. James had been too afraid to escalate anything for fear someone could communicate back to his father about what they’d seen. Now he could have been with Mike in the privacy of his apartment, and Mike was going to bail. He racked his brain to think of whether he had said something off-putting. He didn’t think it was Billy’s dick-pic threat because Mike had played along. James tried to reason with himself that maybe Mike was being honest that a business issue was pressing.

“Okay,” James replied, knowing his tone didn’t hide his disappointment.

“I’m sorry. We can get together again soon.”

James felt some relief, hoping that Mike’s words were genuine. “I understand.”

“Do you play golf?” Mike asked.

James was puzzled. “That’s kind of random, isn’t it?”

Mike shrugged. “I was going to say that maybe we could play a game of golf someday.”

James nodded. “I do play golf. I’m pretty good, I guess. I’m only free on Mondays, though. It’s the day of the week Broadway goes dark. Starting tomorrow, I’m back at work for six days.”

“Okay. We’ll try for a Monday, then.”

James realized the change in their dynamic wasn’t his imagination. While it had seemed earlier that Mike couldn’t wait to be alone with James, he was now suggesting an unspecific Monday to venture back to a public place.

The car arrived at James’ apartment, and James feared it could be the last time he’d see Mike. “Um, do you think you could come up for a cup of coffee before you head to work?”

Mike shook his head. “I’m sorry. Maybe I can call you later?”

James nodded his assent. When Mike didn’t lean in for a kiss goodbye, James felt foolish continuing to sit in the car. “Okay. Talk to you later, then.”

James tried to act unbothered as he exited the car, not looking back as it drove away from the curb. He figured if he received a call later, his worries might be over nothing. If he didn’t receive a call, then James had to face the fact that Mike was making excuses to hide that something had changed between them.

James figured he would have a long wait by the phone, wondering if he’d done or said something to end Mike’s interest.

* * * *

Mike felt bad about the way he had parted with James. Throughout the ballgame, he had been anticipating an evening of making out at the very least, and he still wasn't sure listening to Billy had been the right thing to do. James had looked disappointed when Mike had told him he had to leave, and he worried that heeding Billy's advice might have had the opposite effect of what his brother had intended. Perhaps James would refuse a second date, figuring if he wasn't going to be a higher priority than work, then Mike wasn't worth wasting time over.

Mike reread the text from Billy and continued to find it odd. Mike didn't want to think there were underhanded reasons for the message, but James' comment about Billy wanting to masturbate with him weighed on him. He wondered if Billy could have wanted James to lose interest in Mike with the hopes that Mike would consider Billy's offer. He also found that hard to believe, remembering how Billy and Nadia seemed like a great match and that Billy and James had a close relationship. Mike hoped his suspicions were unfounded, not only because he liked James and wanted a shot at seeing where things went with him, but also because it would devastate James if his brother betrayed him.

If, on the other hand, Billy had been right that James would end things after a sexual encounter, Mike wondered what that would mean for him and James. Billy had said to try to build an emotional bond with James first. Mike found, though, there were moments when James had been guarded and wasn't easy to read. Mike questioned whether James would even admit it if he started to develop feelings for him because it seemed that James had a wall around him.

Mike realized that one way to get clarity would be another communication with James. Mike had suggested he might call that evening, and enough time had passed since they parted that Mike's excuse of having needed to tend to business would still seem plausible. He could pretend he had just wrapped up the last bit of work.

He was about to dial James when another call came in instead. It was from Jessica. Mike's instinct was to ignore it, but he knew from their history that she would be relentless. It was better to be done with whatever she was calling about.

"Jessica?" Mike answered after clicking the accept icon on his phone.

"What the fuck, Mike? You're into guys? Is that why you broke up with me?" Jessica yelled.

"No. Jessica, I told you why..."

"Were you screwing around with men while we were dating? Did you give me an STD?" Jessica demanded.

"Jesus. Of course not. That's closed-minded, isn't it?" Mike shot back.

"You're going to lecture me? Were you picturing some dude while you were with me? It makes me sick!"

"Jessica, calm down," Mike managed. "I didn't cheat on you, and I never pictured other people when I was with you. I am attracted to women too, and I'm a monogamous guy."

"Yeah, right. I'll bet you were picturing some sick sex act with that actor from the musical the whole time we were sitting there watching him perform. You went backstage to meet him, hoping you could screw him, didn't you?" Jessica accused.

Mike felt queasy. He wondered how she knew that. "What are you talking about?"

"And here I was, sick as a dog, and you were back there doing what? Lining up a time to get nasty with him?" Jessica continued.

“I don’t know why you’re saying that,” Mike replied, trying to stay calm.

“Because there’s a photo of you two online walking out of Yankee Stadium together. The caption under the photo reads something about him being the first guy you’ve been spotted with since announcing you’re a queer.”

“Shit,” Mike said, pulling up the screen on his iPad to search his and James’ names. As Jessica had stated, the photo had made it online, and the verbiage was as Jessica described, though the news wires were careful to note that Vicksburg was not known to be gay and there had been no public displays of affection—at least not caught on camera.

“He’s the reason you broke up with me, isn’t he?” Jessica continued.

Mike wiped a hand over his face, dropping himself on a nearby chair. “Jessica, he and I are friends.”

“Friends? How many times have you seen him since we went to that musical?”

“Today was the first time I saw him,” Mike explained.

“Then how are you friends already?” Jessica challenged. “No, I think you’re into this guy and that little date was the prelude to something sick. Question is, is he into you, too? Maybe I should talk to the press. It might be an interesting tidbit, don’t you think? Baseball star hooks up with conservative senator’s son.”

“Jessica, please don’t,” Mike implored. “Why would you do that to him? Nothing happened between us. I swear. He’s a Yankees fan. I had told him when I met him backstage that I could get him a seat in the box to watch a Yankees game,” Mike lied.

“Why? Why would you offer to do that, unless you’re attracted to him?”

“How about because I’m a nice guy? He seemed like a nice guy. Is it not okay to try to make friends with someone who seems cool?” Mike plowed on.

He could tell Jessica’s certainty about the situation was beginning to waver as she stayed silent for a moment. “Well, he must be an idiot if he went with you one-on-one the day after you announced you’re into cock. Didn’t he worry what people would think?”

“Did you call me to trash-talk me? Your choice of words is insulting and you’re sounding like a bigot right now,” Mike chastised.

“At least I’m not a liar!” Jessica shot back. “You made me the butt of jokes with my friends. One of them asked if I had to wear a strap-on when I had sex with you.”

Mike groaned. He knew some people would be unkind, but it didn’t make it easier to hear the ugliness being directed at him...and now toward Jessica. “I’m sorry they’re doing that. It seems to me they must not be very good friends to speak to you that way.”

“Don’t make this about them,” Jessica snarled. “You weren’t honest with me, and I don’t believe you weren’t screwing men while we were together.”

“I wasn’t,” Mike replied. “I’ve never been with a man like that.”

There was silence for a moment. Mike was surprised that Jessica’s tone then softened. “Well, how do you even know you like men? Maybe you’d hate sex with them. Why are you telling everyone this shit? It’s not too late. You can tell people it was a joke. We could get back together. We had something good, didn’t we?”

Mike leaned his head back against the seat cushion with frustration. “Jessica, stop. I don’t want to get back together with you. You and I are just too different.”

Her anger returned. “I don’t know about that. We both like men, except that’s natural for me and not you.”

Mike heard a disconnect. He thought he’d be ill from the way Jessica spoke to him. She had a right to be angry that he had deceived her, but he had treated her well while they were together and he had tried to be kind when ending the relationship. He was shocked to hear how hateful she was being to him now. It made him realize how many other LGBTQ individuals had suffered that and far worse.

He wasn’t in the frame of mind to call James. He didn’t want to speak with anyone. After a few hours of staring at the ceiling wondering if he had made a mistake in coming out—or in taking James to a public place—he fell into a restless sleep on the chair.

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Chapter Seven

After the photo of James with Mike leaving Yankee Stadium hit the news wire, James' father had phoned. And as James suspected, the call was about him being spotted with Mike. James was relieved that his explanation was an honest one—he had met Mike at his show and they decided to watch a ballgame together. Charles Vicksburg made an unkind suggestion that James should stay away from other men that shared his 'frowned-upon preferences' so as not to be tempted. His father not too subtly mentioned that Mike owned a restaurant in Manhattan—one which his father's connections could make difficult to operate—if it even remained open.

James pushed through his stage performance, trying to overcome the sluggishness that came with general depression. When Mike hadn't called him the night before as he had mentioned he might, James was convinced something had gone wrong. He wondered if one of his father's thugs had already reached out to Mike and threatened him, scaring him off. Though it made James unhappy, he couldn't blame Mike for backing off, and James thought it might be for the best in the long run.

Once James returned to his apartment from work, it was late, and he just wanted to go to bed to forget the sadness he felt from being trapped by his father and the impact it had on his life.

"Jesus!" James shouted when he flipped on the lights and saw Billy sleeping on his favorite chair.

Billy jolted awake, pulled his fists against his chest, and leaned into the side of the recliner. Once he realized it was James, his face was red from embarrassment and

angry that he'd been startled. "Are you trying to scare me to death?"

"What are you doing here?" James demanded.

Billy looked hurt. "Why are you asking in that tone? You told me I'm always welcome here."

James frowned before dropping his bag on the floor. He walked over to Billy to tousle his hair. "Of course, you are. But it's eleven-thirty. Did you and Nadia fight?"

Billy appeared offended. "No. We never fight. I was worried about you. You went on your date yesterday and you never even called me. I sent you text messages and you didn't respond."

James sighed and sat on the couch. "Sorry. I just felt like it was too much to put in a text, and I was too depressed to talk."

Billy went to sit next to him. He pulled James' face toward his shoulder. Because of their height difference, James had to scooch down to rest his head.

"What happened? We were joking around on text while you were at the game. I thought things were going well," Billy asked.

"They were," James confirmed. "I don't know. It was odd. We were heading back to my place, then he said he couldn't come up because something happened at work and he had to tend to it."

"Something happened at work? He's retired."

James nodded. "He owns a restaurant in addition to the ad work."

“Oh. So, then what’s odd about what he said?”

James shrugged. “Maybe nothing. It’s just that the whole day he was acting like he wanted to—get together—if you know what I mean. He was finding ways to touch me and make suggestive comments. Then, for no reason, it seemed like he was hitting the brakes.”

James felt Billy flinch and assumed it was Billy’s reaction to the news, suggesting he thought it was a bad sign too. “Did he say anything that made you think he wasn’t interested in you anymore?”

James pondered. “No, but there was a mood change. He did suggest we play golf at some point, but he left it open-ended. It was the sort of thing you’d say to a casual friend when you’re parting. The thing that makes me think something is off is that he told me he’d try to call me last night, then he didn’t.”

“Well, maybe the work thing went late.”

“He hasn’t texted or called me today either,” James muttered. “I wonder if Father had something to do with it.”

“Father?”

James nodded, assuming Billy could sense the movement of James’ head against his shoulder. “He called me after the picture of me and Mike hit the wire.”

Billy groaned. “Let me guess. You got a lecture to stay away from the newly outed bisexual man.”

“Yup, along with a few thinly veiled threats against Mike’s business ventures,” James confirmed.

“What an asshole,” Billy snarled. “James, you can’t keep letting Father control you.”

James pulled his head away from Billy so he could look at him. “You don’t get it. Father doesn’t go after me anymore. He threatens my co-workers. He threatens the people I date. I think we both know he’s good for delivering on those threats. I don’t want to be the reason more people get hurt.”

Billy squeezed James’ shoulder. “You should tell Mike, and let him decide for himself if he’s willing to fight Father.”

James barked a sarcastic laugh. “You mean the guy who doesn’t even call me? If he was already threatened by Father in some way, I think I have the answer as to whether he’d go to battle. Anyway, I’m relieved because I wouldn’t want him hurt.”

Billy nodded. “Of course, but maybe he wasn’t threatened and he didn’t reach out to you for some other reason. You could call him, you know.”

James shook his head. “No. If he was threatened, it would put him on the spot, and it could make him feel guilty that he’s not willing to stand up to Father. And even if he wasn’t threatened, I don’t want to be that needy, starstruck loser who’s begging to be liked by a celebrity. Pathetic.”

Billy was silent for a couple of minutes, then he made an expression where he folded his upper and lower lips into each other. His eyes signaled he was nervous. James knew from experience the look preceded Billy saying something he knew would anger James. “Um, there may be a reason he cooled off with you at the end of your date, and it had nothing to do with Father.”

James was confused. “What are you talking about?”

“I texted him,” Billy blurted.

“You texted Mike?” James asked. He was shocked. “Why? Wait, you didn’t actually send him a dick pic, did you?”

Billy looked mortified. “Dude, no! I would never do that. I was joking with you. Christ, he didn’t think I was serious about hitting on him, did he?”

James shrugged. “I didn’t think so. So, what did you text him?”

Billy started fidgeting with a button on his shirt, as if it was a point of physical irritation. “I might have suggested he not sleep with you,” Billy muttered at his chest.

“You might have what?” James exploded. “Billy, what the fuck? Why do you keep putting your nose in my business? And why would you have said that?”

Billy crouched like he was afraid he’d be punched, even though he knew James would never hurt him. “I was trying to be helpful.”

James dragged a hand through his hair multiple times, then looked down at the space between his knees. He stayed silent for several moments before speaking. “Okay, Billy. I’ve taken a few deep breaths. Now, tell me how you thought that was helping me.”

Billy’s voice was small at his side. “I told him that you were afraid of relationships, and that if you two got together too fast, that might be the end of it. I told him the two of you should get to know each other better first.”

James continued looking down and away from Billy, not responding for a moment. “And you thought that was your place to say that to him?”

“I’m sorry, James. I just hate that you’re alone. He seems like a nice guy, and you mentioned you might like something more with him,” Billy explained, his voice

cracking along the way.

James sighed. “Why do you keep meddling?”

Billy projected a bit louder now. “Because I care about you, dammit! You seem hell-bent on punishing yourself for what Father did to your boyfriend—what he did to Daniel wasn’t your fault!”

“Stop interfering!”

“No!” Billy shot back. “Did you stop interfering when Father ordered me to stop dating Nadia? When he cut me off from everything but tuition, you jumped in to cover what I couldn’t.”

“That’s different,” James protested.

“It’s not,” Billy shot back. “Listen, you thought I was wrong to tell Mike that you were into him when you were a teenager, but it opened the door to you getting a date with him. Maybe, just maybe, I have some idea how to help you.”

James resumed mauling his hair. “You sound like Maria.”

Billy smirked. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Maria is never wrong on these things, and she thinks Mike is the one for you.”

James stared at his brother with disbelief. “What? When did she say that? She hasn’t even seen him since the night he met us.”

“When I told her you and Mike were going to the Yankees game. She said, ‘good, he’s the one for puppy’.”

“I love her, but she’s nuts.” James scowled.

“She is not,” Billy defended. “And she loves you. I love you. Nadia loves you. We just want to see you happy, James.”

“Well, your help doesn’t seem to have left Mike too enamored with me,” James spat. “You as much as told him I sleep around and dump people right after. Maybe that’s why I haven’t heard from him. He might think I’m a sleazebag.” When Billy didn’t respond, James shot him a look. “What? Is that what you think of me?”

“I don’t think you’re a sleazebag,” Billy responded.

James couldn’t hide the hurt in his eyes. “I sleep around because it gets lonely.”

Billy reached a hand back to James’ shoulder. “I know. That’s what I’m saying. You deserve to have someone love you, the way Nadia loves me.”

James took one more grip on his now ruined hairstyle, pushing it back until it was sticking up. “Well, thanks. You meant well. I think it may have ended differently than you expected.”

“Call him,” Billy implored.

“If he wanted to talk to me, he would have called me. The ball was in his court,” James asserted.

Billy nodded. “Okay, James. I won’t butt in again.”

James was about to respond that it didn’t matter, as there was nothing to butt in about, but thought better of it. He could see that Billy felt bad enough already about what happened.

Billy rose from the sofa, grabbed his coat off its arm then started walking toward the door. He turned to say something to James, but seemed to realize there was nothing more that could be said, so he walked out the door with his head hanging.

James felt even worse than he had before arriving home. What a poor role model he must be for his brother that Billy believed he needed to help him. It made James sadder to think how he had then emotionally pummeled Billy for his good-hearted attempts.

He stripped down to his boxer briefs and went to the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. James sighed when he saw his hair. It was long enough to do crazy things if someone messed with it, and it looked a bit too much like Einstein for his taste. Even though he was going to bed, he took out a brush and tamed the follicles back to the style he'd sported for several years. He took one last glance in the mirror, thinking he didn't look half bad and how pathetic it was that he was wasting his best years. He knew there would come a time when the Mikes of the world wouldn't give him a second glance, and he'd be alone with no promise of a relationship.

Chapter Eight

All day, Mike had thrown himself into reviewing the financials of his downtown restaurant and inspecting the premises. The work had taken him away from social media and his thoughts about his conversation with Jessica.

By the time he had returned to his apartment, he knew he wouldn't sleep because of his nervous energy. He realized it was, in part, due to his angst about James. Mike remembered how James had sometimes seemed sad, and it made Mike wonder why such a handsome, talented man wasn't on top of the world. The text from Billy suggested James had issues with relationships, but why was a mystery. Nevertheless, Mike was drawn to James, and potential concerns couldn't dissuade his interest in pursuing him. He remembered he hadn't called James the night before and he didn't want another day to pass without the two of them connecting.

It was almost midnight and by most peoples' standards, too late to contact someone. However, Mike knew it was a working day for James, and he remembered James telling him that after an evening performance, he didn't get home until eleven-thirty or so. Chances were, James was still awake.

Mike sat at his computer to initiate a video chat. He figured if James was in bed, he would have shut down everything or, at least, he could ignore the pinging from his technology. The dial-up signal displayed for a couple of moments without response, so Mike was ready to disconnect just as James appeared on Mike's screen. James was sitting in a room lit by a background lamp, giving him an ethereal glow. Mike almost gasped at his good fortune, as James was shirtless. Although Mike could only see from the collarbone up, the exposed skin was making his heart beat faster. He hadn't

lost his attraction to the man since they had last spoken...that was for sure.

“What’s up?” James asked, seeming apprehensive.

“Hi. Is it too late to talk?”

James’ expression remained unreadable. “I was about to go to bed. I shouldn’t talk long. There’s a matinee tomorrow.”

Mike swallowed like a nervous teenager asking for a prom date. “Oh. I just thought you might be up, having worked tonight and all.”

“A call last night would have been better,” James stated.

Mike realized from the hurt in James’ voice that the man had felt rejected when Mike hadn’t called. The night before, Mike had been so focused on his conversation with Jessica, he hadn’t taken the time to consider how going silent on James would impact the man’s emotions. “God, James, I’m sorry that I didn’t call last night...or this morning.”

James’ expression turned sad. “I’m sure you had your reasons. You didn’t owe me anything, and you don’t need to explain. Thank you for your apology, though.”

“Listen, don’t disconnect. Please,” Mike begged. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ghost you. My head was in a bad place last night.”

“Why?”

“My ex-girlfriend called me,” Mike explained. “It was upsetting. She called me things I wasn’t expecting. I guess it was my first experience of what it’s like to be hated for who you are, and it wasn’t good. I should have called you, but I didn’t want

to end the day we had together by dumping and projecting drama on you.”

James seemed to contemplate that, and his expression became more relaxed. “I’m sorry that happened to you. You should have called me. If you want us to be friends, then it’s okay for you to share the bad as well as the good. I wouldn’t be much of a friend if I only wanted to hear from you when you’re happy.”

Mike nodded. “You’re right, James. And from now on, if I tell you I’ll call, I will.”

James smirked. “I believe your words were ‘maybe I can call you later,’ so you didn’t break a promise.”

“But I can tell I hurt you. I’m sorry about that.”

James smiled a little. “Okay, stop apologizing. I understand.” Mike sighed with relief and grinned in return. “Truth though, did you really have business to tend to when you dropped me off yesterday?”

Mike decided to be honest, even though he feared it would anger James. “No.”

James’ face fell. “I see. Listen, thanks for the apology...”

Mike cut him off before he could disconnect. “Wait. Let me explain. I shouldn’t have lied to you, but I panicked.”

“Over what? Did you think if you came up to my apartment, I was going to push you to do something you weren’t ready for?” James asked with annoyance.

“No, James. From what little I’ve seen from you, it’s obvious you’re not like that,” Mike replied. “I hate to tell you why because I don’t want to get your brother in trouble with you. He texted me...”

James rolled his eyes. “Ah, yeah. Don’t worry. He was just here. He told me what he did.”

Mike was surprised to hear that. “Oh? Interesting. James, no offense, but the two of you have an odd relationship.”

James shrugged. “I suppose.”

“So, then you understand why I backed away. I didn’t know what to do once I read his text. I had wanted to be more affectionate with you all day, then he threw a wet blanket on the idea. Did he tell you that his message was that if I had sex with you, that you’d be done with me? Listen, I don’t know what that’s about, and you don’t need to explain. I’m just saying, in that moment, I imagined what it would be like to never see you again, and I didn’t want to do anything that would cause that. I got caught up in my thoughts and wasn’t sure what to do next. But the bottom line, James, is I’ve enjoyed being with you. Even if you only want to be friends, I want to continue what we started yesterday.”

James nodded. “I liked being with you, too, Mike. And yes, I want to be friends.”

Mike bit his lower lip. “Just friends?”

James smiled. “Let’s say...at a minimum.”

Mike let out the air he had been withholding. “Good. Me, too. At a minimum, I mean. Okay...wait. No, I’m lying to you again. The truth is, I want to try for more than friendship, James. I’m not saying we have to do something right away. In fact, maybe it’s for the best we didn’t do anything physical yesterday. It gives you a chance to think about what you want, and if you do want more, it gives me time to build up the courage. Look, I’ve never had sex with a man and there’s no guarantee I’d be good at it.”

James wiped a hand over his mouth, unsure how much he should say. “Listen, I have fears, too. There’s stuff I need to tell you. But Mike, none of it has to do with being unsure of whether I want to be friends with you...or take things to a physical level. And I doubt you’d disappoint me.”

Mike blushed. “You say that now. My first time with a woman was a disaster. She didn’t criticize how awkward I was, and how...fast I was. But I knew, and it was mortifying. The thought of reliving something like that is scary. And based on Billy’s text, you have lots of experience in that department.”

James narrowed his eyes. “That isn’t the compliment you’re pretending it is.”

Mike gulped. “It wasn’t a slam. I promise.” When James’ face relaxed, Mike exhaled with relief. “Sorry. I’m saying things that upset you when all I wanted to say was how much I wish I could kiss you right now.” James looked away, and Mike could tell the man was holding back. “James, what is it?”

“Mike, there’s stuff...”

“Nothing that would change my mind,” Mike interjected. “I haven’t stopped thinking about you since the night I met you. Your attractiveness is a given. But yesterday, at the ballgame, I saw other sides of you that were doing things to me. You were fun and silly, manly yet sensitive, and you weren’t afraid to poke fun at me just because I’m Mike Cooper. I don’t think you understand how hard it is to find someone who is real with you when you’re a famous person whose picture is plastered all over the city. And James, I see how kind you are. You were nice to the people around us and Christ, you even went out of your way to make conversation with the guy who brought us beers. My impression is reinforced every time I see you interact with your brother. I can’t help but think how wonderful it would be if things between us got serious.”

“I don’t do relationships,” James cut in.

That blew the air from Mike’s bubble. “Oh. Okay.” They were silent for a couple of moments, just looking at each other through their cameras. “James, would you be willing to take things a step at a time? Maybe go slowly, and if you still want to, we could go back to being friends?”

James sighed, looking away from the screen again. “You saw the photo of us made the wire? My father already called me with a threat to stay away from you. You don’t want to go up against him.”

Mike grimaced. That was unexpected. Already, he hated Charles Vicksburg. “Would he hurt you?”

“By hurting you,” James responded. “He did it to someone else I cared about, my former boyfriend Daniel. My father destroyed his career.”

Mike nodded. “I’m sorry, James. That’s...terrible.” The two were silent for a moment. “Listen, James, I may not be a senator, but I have some clout, too. I’m not intimidated by people like your father. Maybe he should be the one who fears me.”

James stared back with surprise. “Mike, I don’t know that you should take that risk for me.”

Mike didn’t flinch. “Well, I do know.”

James was looking down at the keyboard, but Mike could almost see the wheels turning in the man’s head. “Mike, he will come after you if he finds out we’re seeing each other. You may not be afraid, but I am. If you’re serious about wanting to see where things go between us, we need to stay out of the public eye. And who knows? After a couple of dates, you might stop thinking I’m worth the risk. It’s better for you

to realize that before triggering a war with my father.”

“I’m sure I will think the same of you after getting to know you better, James,” Mike countered. “Unless you have a split personality that you’re not telling me about.”

“How would I know?” James laughed. “Do people with split personalities have awareness of their illness?”

“I don’t know,” Mike admitted with a grin. “James, I’m not afraid of your father, but I will do as you ask and keep quiet about us seeing each other.” James nodded, and they continued to look at each other for another couple of minutes. “Since we’ve confessed that we’re interested in more than friendship, maybe you could give me a little something that gets the ball rolling?”

James quirked an eyebrow. “Huh?”

Mike scratched the back of his neck with some nervousness. “Does it sound too weird to ask if you’d back up from the camera so I can see your chest?”

James jerked his head back, startled before grinning. “Mike Cooper...are you trying to turn this into a sex chat?”

Mike shrugged. “I just asked to see your chest.” When James still looked at him with suspicion, Mike added, “Pretty please, James?”

James chuckled, but pushed his chair far enough from the screen that Mike could see James’ entire torso. Mike looked at James’ lightly dusted chest, nice-sized nipples resting on chiseled pecs, and he thought his dick couldn’t get harder.

“Disappointed?” James asked, though his smile indicated he knew Mike wasn’t.

“Um, no.” Mike gulped. “You are as beautiful as I imagined. You know, when we were in your dressing room, your shirt was unbuttoned a bit. I kept trying to get a glimpse of your chest. I went home chastising myself for being a dirty old man.”

James laughed. “You aren’t that old. And from what I’ve seen from the underwear ads, you don’t look like an old man either. Of course, one never knows how much Photoshopping happens before the end-product is revealed. Perhaps you should take off your shirt to convince me that it isn’t false advertising.”

Mike sniggered. “Well, I wouldn’t want a customer to think we’d stoop to such depths.” He rolled his chair away from the monitor so James could see his torso, then lifted his shirt up and over his head.

“Jesus!” James whispered. “Okay, the advertising has been the real deal.”

Mike laughed some more. “Glad I staved off a customer complaint. But does my chest look as good to you as when you used to jack off to it?”

James blushed. “God, I still want to wring Billy’s little neck for sharing that.”

Mike bellowed with laughter. “Will it help if I confess something to you? Since meeting you, I’ve done it more times than I can count while picturing you—usually with you wearing that little Nazi-seducing outfit.”

James gave Mike a flirtatious side-eye. “You liked that, huh?”

“Oh yeah,” Mike groaned. “If that were on film, I’d be watching it every night. I think the skin on my palm or my dick would bruise from overuse.”

James chuckled. “Well, then it’s good it wasn’t recorded.”

“It would be worth it,” Mike countered. “What are you wearing below the waist?”

James eyed him with suspicion again. “So, you are trying to push online sex.”

Mike bit his lip once more. “So untrusting. I just wondered if you had on boxers or briefs—or nothing at all. It’s a natural thing to wonder.”

“Is it, though?” James snickered. “Well, for your information, you were wrong on all three counts.”

“Oh, pray tell,” Mike pressed.

“I’m wearing trunks,” James answered. “They’re shorter than boxer-briefs.”

“I’m familiar. I’m an underwear model, remember? May I see them?”

James shook his head like a put-upon school teacher, but stood from the chair so that Mike could see him from the waist down to his knees. Then, he sat back on the chair, smiling at the expression on Mike’s face.

“I know the other vision I’ll be jacking off to now,” Mike rasped. He delighted in James’ laughter. “Holy crap. You have such nice thighs—and a huge dick.”

James looked down, almost as if to remind himself. “Uh, guess the light gray-colored, jersey-knit underwear reveals more than I thought.” Mike just moaned in return. “Okay, it’s not fair that I had to show you my underwear and you don’t have to show me yours. I think you should return the favor.”

Mike mentally slapped himself from his daze. “Huh? Oh, you can see me in underwear any time you walk in a store.”

“Not with you having a hard-on, I can’t,” James replied. “I expect you to show me something more personal and special—just for me.”

Mike smiled. “Already, I can’t refuse you. Okay. I need to take my pants off first.” He did so out of camera view, watching James who was staring with anticipation. Once his trousers were chucked from his legs, he stood up to reveal his black boxer-briefs. He turned sideways so James could take in the view of his muscular butt as well.

“Um, that is...hot,” James managed to say, his excitement evident.

“I’m not as big as you,” Mike stated, taking his seat once more. “I can tell. I’m kind of average-sized. I’ve been told that’s a bigger deal to guys than it is to girls. Is it?”

James snickered. “Don’t perpetuate the stereotypes against the LGBTQ community. No, I’m not disappointed. It looks nice and...it works, right?”

Mike laughed. “Oh, it works, James. It’s always up for what needs to be done. In fact, it’s wanting to put in a shift right now.”

“Ah. Back to that, are we?” James mused.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ask you to show me anything else. I’ve decided I don’t want to see any more of you,” Mike declared.

James jerked his head back with surprise. “Ouch. Is it something I said?”

Mike shook his head, holding up his hands in the air. “You misunderstand. I want to see everything. Just not tonight. I’d rather wait until I can see you naked in-person instead of through a dimly lit blur.”

James laughed. “Clean your screen sometime. And we’ll see how things go before we talk about getting naked.”

Mike grinned with confidence. “James, don’t fight it. You know you’ll show me everything and you can’t wait. But as for tonight, I thought maybe we could jerk off together. We can just look at each other’s faces and chests while we do it.”

“Ha! I knew that’s where this was leading.”

“Hmm, another thing that draws me to you. You’re smart and perceptive. So, what do you say? You know if we don’t, you’ll end up whacking alone in bed when we disconnect anyway. Don’t deny it. I know I would. So, why not do it together instead?” Mike reasoned.

James blushed with a shy smile. “God, you’d think I was the same-sex virgin and you were the experienced one.”

Mike ignored James’ procrastination, reaching down to start stroking his cock through the fabric of his boxer-briefs. “Mm, so good, James. I wish you’d join me.”

James’ eyes hazed—he couldn’t hide his desire at watching Mike pleasuring himself. Mike knew he’d won when he saw James’ hand slip below the view of the camera. “I can’t believe we’re doing this.”

“Take your trunks off,” Mike commanded. “I want to know your hand is stroking your bare skin.”

James seemed past protests as Mike watched his partner bend forward, using his arms to push down the unseen fabric. James sat back up with a dreamy expression. “They’re off.” He held them up with his right hand to prove it to Mike.

“Oh my God,” Mike muttered, before reaching down to remove his own underwear. He grabbed onto his engorged dick and began stroking it, watching the panting and chest-heaving on the other side of the camera.

“I won’t last long,” James whispered. “I haven’t jerked off in a couple of days.”

“Me either,” Mike concurred. “Brush your fingers over your hole. It’s how I pictured you stroking with me when I masturbated to images of you.”

James blushed. “Jesus. Are you sure you’re a novice at this?”

“Just do it,” Mike growled. “I want to see your face when you’re touching your most private places.”

James hesitated, but Mike knew he had given in when James’ eyes fluttered and he emitted a soft moan.

“Are you doing it?” James ventured after a moment

“You want me to?” Mike asked. “You want me to breach myself?”

“God, yes!” James replied as he leaned back in the chair. Mike used the index finger of his freehand to penetrate his hole. “You’re so fucking hot,” James managed through his pants. “My dick is leaking like a burst pipe.”

“Mm. I wish I was there to see it. To lick it,” Mike gasped.

That statement put James over the edge, and he shot several hot spurts up his belly and chest. Mike was in awe, seeing the white cream splattering James’ torso, propelling his own intense orgasm. He felt the liquid creating mini-puddles into the crevices of his six-pack abs.

“Christ!” James shouted as he finished his orgasm.

Mike gasped as his ejaculation was ending. “Fuck. I needed that.”

Both sat looking at each other, watching the other’s breathing begin to slow. After a couple of minutes had passed, James managed to smile. “You need to clean the cum gutters now.”

Mike chuckled in return. “I’d say I hate when that happens, but I promised no more lies.” He looked at James’ messed-up stomach and chest. “And speak for yourself. You shoot high. That’s fucking sexy. I can’t wait to see you come in-person.”

James gave him the bashful smile that Mike was starting to love. “Maybe.”

Mike pursed his lips. “Nah. It’s a definite. And you know I’ll savor licking every drop.”

James was wiping himself dry with tissue, but he looked up with eyes wide at Mike’s comment. “Don’t get me hard again.”

“Why not?”

“Because, there’s a matinee tomorrow and I should be in bed already,” James reminded him. “Then I have an evening show, too.”

Mike frowned, beginning his own clean-up. “So, I can’t see you tomorrow, can I?”

James shook his head. “It wouldn’t be possible. Sorry. It’s more than just the two shows. I have rehearsals and physical therapy between performances.”

“Injury?”

James shook his head again. “No. The show is so rigorous, it’s just a good idea to keep my body limber so I don’t get hurt.”

“Well, you having a limber body just adds to your appeal. I’m not sure I like picturing someone else rubbing you down every day, though.” Mike frowned.

James sighed. “Mike, it’s a professional physical therapist. She’s massaging my muscles, not giving me a blow job.”

“Bet she wants to.” Mike pouted. “Don’t make me brand you so she knows you’re off limits.”

James raised an eyebrow. “Okay, that’s wrong on so many levels. Nobody brands me, I say when I’m off limits and I’ll remind you that I don’t do relationships.”

Mike swallowed hard. “James, I was playing. Your father may be a controlling jerk, but I’m not. And I won’t push you on the relationship stuff.”

James looked skeptical. “Are you sure you can refrain from trying to control me? Yesterday you said you have connections—people who’d help me get a gig singing the national anthem at Yankee Stadium.” Mike remembered the displeasure James seemed to have when Mike made the offer. “That’s something my father would do if he wanted to encourage my singing career. I don’t want your help, at least not like that. I’ve worked for everything I have, and I don’t need someone pulling strings trying to control me or my career.”

Mike nodded. “I understand. Thank you for telling me, James. I wish you had said something yesterday. I respect how you’ve carved out your own life, even in your father’s shadow. I don’t want to be someone else who is trying to bend you to their will.”

That seemed to cut the edge from James' expression. "Thanks."

Mike felt a bit shamed, but also relieved that he was beginning to understand what was behind some of James' troubled expressions. "Hey, go shower and get into bed. I don't want to be the reason you're off your game tomorrow. Maybe I could see you Thursday?"

"What time?" James inquired. "I need to go in for rehearsals by early afternoon."

"Perhaps I can bring breakfast over? I'll wear a nondescript hat and clothes and sneak in. Nobody will know it's me."

James laughed. "Just know, we're not having sex Thursday morning. I'll need energy for the show, which is already tough on Thursdays because of the two shows each Wednesday."

"I'll be on my best behavior," Mike promised.

James gave Mike a side-eye again. "Well, I'm not saying you have to go that far. I think you owe me a kiss that you withheld when we parted yesterday. I don't care what Billy texted. A kiss is just a kiss. That was cold of you, man."

Mike's expression dipped. "I didn't mean to be. It took everything in me not to kiss you."

"So why didn't you? Was the limo driver a homophobe?"

Mike shook his head. "Carl? Nah, he's cool. He congratulated me on my announcement. I didn't kiss you because I knew if I did, there was no way I'd be able to resist going inside with you and doing what Billy warned me against."

James nodded. "Okay. I would have had a difficult time refusing, too. Listen, if I have time tomorrow, I'll text you. It will be hard since I'll be on the stage most of the day."

"I understand. Hey, speaking of you being on stage, I'd like to see the show again. Next time, I want you to do your sexy parts knowing I'm watching you."

James moaned. "Christ. I don't think that's a good idea. Do you want me parading a boner on stage?"

Mike chuckled. "Oh, yes. I want that very much."

James shook his head with a grin. "You're a voyeuristic perv. Do you realize that? I'm seeing a pattern. I can get you a ticket for the Sunday show. There's only a matinee. Then I'm off until Tuesday."

Mike was excited at the prospect of that much time with James. "I like the way your head is thinking. I can accompany you home after the show is done?"

James nodded. "Sure. Now, let me go to bed. And you can go shower and think about what you'll surprise me with for breakfast on Thursday morning."

Mike's face fell. "Now you just put pressure on me. I don't know what you like."

"You've implied you know everything you need to know about me." James grinned. "I'm sure you'll come through."

"But..."

James smiled. "Goodnight, Mike."

Mike snickered to himself after James disconnected from their chat. James wasn't going to be a fawning groupie like so many others had been. Mike had a secret weapon, though—he had Billy's phone number from the text the man had sent. He would check with Billy about James' likes and dislikes, then surprise him on Thursday with his favorite breakfast food.

Mike was thrilled that his conversation with James had gone much better than expected. He hadn't thought they'd end up having online sex, and it made him hopeful that things would progress quickly.

Mike knew he'd have to tread carefully, though. That meant finding out as much about Charles Vicksburg as possible. He didn't want to be in reaction mode if the senator attacked him. He had to be ready to launch his own offense. Mike figured he had better warn his agent and publicist, as well. If it was his character that Vicksburg attacked, Mike wanted them ready to respond.

Chapter Nine

James wasn't as tired as he usually felt on Thursday mornings, buoyed by the knowledge that Mike would be stopping by for breakfast. James was committed to abstaining from sex, but he brushed his teeth twice, flossed and gargled mouthwash—anticipating his first kiss with Mike.

When he had awoken, James had searched for images of Mike online, finding the one where he was shirtless from many years earlier which had been made into the famous poster. James was impressed that Mike hadn't changed much at all. His hair was a bit shorter and had sprinkles of silver near his sideburns, and the skin at the edges of his eyes had faint crow's feet. The aging hadn't detracted from Mike's attractiveness in James' opinion. As for his body, from what James could tell from the online chat, it was as fit and beautiful as ever.

James studied his own image in the mirror. He knew he had great hair and enviable dancer's legs. As for the rest of him, he was never quite as sure how he felt about it. James always thought his chin was a bit too strong, his forearms weren't thick enough and his butt might be too full and muscular. If fan messages were any indication, it seemed James might have been overly critical—and he never had an issue finding a willing bed partner. But Mike was a god in James' eyes. Every feature was perfect. James wondered if Mike's attraction was based on James being the first man he had noticed after planning to come out, and James worried the man's infatuation would end once they had sex. James knew it was ironic that he was now the one worrying that moving too fast would cause the other to dump him.

The loud buzzer snapped James from his daydreaming. He ran a hand through his

hair one last time to pat it in place, then scurried to the door so he could buzz Mike up. Within a couple of minutes, James heard the approaching footsteps and knock on his door.

“Hey.” James smiled upon opening it and seeing the handsome athlete grinning on the other side.

“Hey yourself,” Mike replied, leaning in for a quick peck on the lips. “Mm. Minty fresh.”

James blushed. “Come in.”

Once Mike walked into the apartment, he looked around and nodded his approval. “It’s nice. Charming.”

James rolled his eyes. “Is that code for the place is small and quirky?”

Mike laughed. “It’s code for the place is cozy and full of character.”

“Oh,” James responded with some surprise. He looked over to the bag of food that Mike had brought and gave Mike a side-eye glance. “McDonald’s? You’re going to woo me with a McDonald’s breakfast?”

Mike laughed. “It is an egg McMuffin, a hash brown potato, and a Starbucks Americana sugar-free iced coffee with non-fat milk. While I would consider this a diet breakfast, I sensed this was a guilty pleasure that you don’t allow yourself often.”

James stared at Mike with disbelief. “It is. Right down to how I like my coffee. How did you know that?”

Mike grinned. “You were worth doing a little research.”

James connected the dots, realizing Mike had used his possession of Billy's cell phone number to make the inquiry of his brother. He appreciated the effort. "Well, I'll thank Billy for being so observant. I'm starved."

* * * *

After they had both devoured their meals and cleaned up, James took Mike's hand and led him to the sofa. Once they were parked side-by-side, James leaned over to kiss his date.

"Mm. You taste like your breakfast now," Mike whispered.

"Oh, sorry," James murmured.

"I'm not sorry," Mike assured, pulling him back for a deeper kiss. He thrilled at James offering his parted mouth and the soft darting of his tongue. James' lips were full and sweet, and his breath was warm. Mike relished the vision sitting next to him.

Mike raked his hands through James' luxurious mane, then began moving his mouth over James' chiseled facial features, over to his right ear and down his graceful neck and throat. James' soft moans egged him on enough to undo a few of the buttons on James' shirt as he pushed him down on the cushion. Seeing James' beautiful chest up close, heaving under his touch, was arousing Mike and it was killing him that they wouldn't be able to take the action too far. Still, he couldn't resist licking and sucking on one of James' perky, soft pink nipples. The man tasted fresh and clean, and there was a slight fragrance of spice and vanilla. James began squirming under Mike, moaning loud enough that they didn't hear the door to the apartment open.

"Hello?"

Mike popped his head up to look over the back of the couch faster than a jack-in-the-

box. “Nadia?”

James squirmed out from under Mike and looked over at Nadia with surprise. “Nadia? What are you doing here?”

Nadia looked embarrassed, then amused. “Oh, sorry. James, I thought you would have left for the theater by now. I forgot my chemistry book here over the weekend when Billy and I were visiting. I need it for class today.” She looked over to the kitchen counter where the textbook was sitting. “Um, I’ll just get it and be on my way.”

Mike was still blushing. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

Nadia paused halfway to the counter, looking back with a quirked eyebrow. “It’s not? Because I was thinking you’re mauling my boyfriend’s brother. But please, set the record straight.”

Mike glanced at James, who still seemed discombobulated. Not wanting to concede, Mike opted for humor instead. “James was bitten by a rattlesnake. I was sucking out the venom.”

Nadia laughed, retrieved the book, then paused again to study the two. “Yes, I can see that James’ lips are swollen. Those apartment rattlesnakes have a pesky way of biting peoples’ most sensitive areas. Well, carry on.”

With that, Nadia exited the apartment, leaving James and Mike looking at each other with a mix of embarrassment, annoyance, and amusement.

“Your family members don’t have boundaries, do they?” Mike asked.

“No,” James acknowledged, buttoning his shirt. “I should get going anyway.”

Mike touched James' chin and pulled it toward him. "Hey, I don't care that she caught us. It was worth it. I loved kissing you and I can't wait to do it again."

James smirked. "Who knows how many will be in the audience watching us the next time?"

Mike chuckled. "Zero, I hope. It will be my first time trying to suck venom from a guy's dick. I don't need spectators."

James gave the side-eye look that Mike was beginning to realize was James' flirting. "Oh, you're sure that will be necessary, are you?"

Mike nodded. "Mmhmm. You heard Nadia. It's only a matter of time before those pesky apartment rattlesnakes find their way to a man's most sensitive areas. I will save you, James."

James shook his head. "Apartment rattlesnakes. I thought you said you were done with lies."

Mike shrugged. "I'm done lying to you. Lying to everyone else is fair game."

Just as James was rising from the sofa, Mike pulled him in for another kiss. Once Mike pulled away, he looked into James' eyes and was happy they had clouded once again with lust. "Does my kissing make up for the lie?"

James pulled him back for a deeper kiss to give him his answer.

Chapter Ten

Mike had enjoyed the last few days of texting back and forth with James, learning a little more about his crush each day. James was becoming more and more comfortable revealing his snarky sense of humor, and Mike saw that as a positive sign that James' walls were coming down. Mike noticed too that James was even more sensitive than he'd first realized, and he imagined that resulted from James having lived a lifetime of being criticized and experiencing worse for being out of step with his father's thinking. But Mike also learned just how many sacrifices James made for his friends and co-workers while asking and expecting nothing in return. Contrary to James' prediction that Mike would tire of him once he got to know him better, the opposite had been true. Although there had been no more sexting or sexy video chats, much of the back and forth had been flirtatious, leaving Mike wishing there was a way to skip the Friday and Saturday that kept them apart.

When Mike arrived at the theater for the Sunday matinee, he smiled—the ticket James had reserved for him was for an aisle seat. He was glad that James had remembered his complaint about his old injuries and how Jessica had deprived him the comfort of being able to stretch. Billy and Nadia had offered to join him in the audience again so he wouldn't be alone, though he would have gone anyway. Still, he was glad they would be there, and pleased to see them already seated and waiting. Before they noticed him, they were chuckling between each other, touching each other in the sweetest, lightest ways.

“Hi guys,” Mike greeted, taking the seat they had left empty. Billy and Nadia both smiled when they heard him, and Mike was relieved that they seemed happy to see him too.

Billy pulled him into a side hug when they were seated and stated the obvious. “Dude, you made it.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it,” Mike gushed.

Nadia laughed. “Someone has it bad.”

Mike blushed, but figured he would out-sass her. “Yes, James does. I didn’t want to disappoint him.”

They both laughed. Billy got a mischievous look on his face. “So, how are those apartment rattlesnakes? Still a problem?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “No secrets in your family, are there? One of the apartment snakes bit my ass earlier, leaving some venom. Since you’re studying to be a vet, why don’t you suck it?”

Nadia covered her mouth to suppress her laugh and Billy’s mouth and eyes opened wide. When Billy recovered, he responded, “Dude, so not my scene.”

Mike wasn’t going to let it go. “Then why is the side of your car spray-painted with the words ‘Billy’s Suck-it Services—call 888-ass-lick’?”

Billy’s look of surprise returned as Nadia continued laughing. “It does not!”

“You sure? When’s the last time you checked?” Mike grinned. “Interesting fact—did you know they won’t let you carry aerosol paint cans into Broadway theaters? Just learned that.”

Billy joined in the laughter, causing the woman in front of them to turn to the three with annoyance. “Would you lower your voices? The three of you look too old to be

acting like juveniles.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Mike offered, though his smirk remained. He retrieved his phone from his jacket pocket and typed ‘Isn’t she too old to be here without an oxygen mask on her face?’ and passed the phone to Billy. When Billy read it, he couldn’t suppress a bark of laughter before showing Nadia. She had a similar reaction, causing the offended woman to huff.

“No wonder Maria said you’re the one for James,” Nadia commented.

“What?” Mike sobered.

Billy shot her a look. “Nadia, you’re not supposed to tell him.”

Nadia shrugged. “Why not? You told James.”

“You told James Maria said that?” Mike asked Billy. “Did he freak out?”

Billy shook his head. “No. Despite his relationship phobia, he didn’t. That’s a good sign, huh?”

Nadia smiled. “She’s never wrong, Mike.”

Mike wasn’t sure how to respond, but as the lights dimmed and the curtain began to rise, he found he wasn’t panicking at the idea of Maria being right. All he could think about was seeing his guy.

* * * *

As the performers were taking their final bows, James blew a kiss to the audience. James had been facing Mike and gazing straight at him, and Mike felt certain the

gesture was meant for him. He gave James a heartfelt smile in return. Long after the actors left the stage, Mike was the last one standing and applauding.

“Come on, lover boy.” Nadia nudged Mike, tugging at his elbow.

“We’ll join you backstage for a few minutes,” Billy informed. “Just to say hello. Then we’ll leave you two to each other.”

“Oh, you don’t have to leave,” Mike said, though his tone was disingenuous.

Nadia laughed. “Um, I think we’ll let you perform your life-saving skills in private today.”

“Thanks.” Mike chuckled, but sobered when he saw that Billy was fidgeting and looking worried. “Is everything okay?”

Billy nodded with uncertainty. “Mike, James likes you, but I’m sure he still has apprehension. I worry he’ll do something to sabotage things. It’s like, subconsciously, he can’t help himself. You won’t give up on him, will you? He deserves happiness, and I think you’re the one who can give it to him.”

Mike nodded in response, though he wasn’t sure he exuded confidence. The thought of James pushing him away at some point was too uncomfortable. He hoped Billy’s concerns stemmed from James’ fear of his father, and if Mike could solve that issue, James would relax. But in this moment, after waiting three days to see James, all Mike wanted to think about was seeing his man. “Come on. Let’s tell your brother what an amazing talent he is.”

They walked with their arms around each other to James’ dressing room, finding him already removing his makeup, wearing the dress shirt and pants that comprised his last scene’s costume. When they entered his doorway, James rushed to embrace them.

“Was it okay?”

Nadia rolled her eyes. “It was awful, dude. The five-minute standing ovation at the end should have told you as much.”

Mike stood back, giving the family space. He did, however, want to provide a serious answer to James’ question. “You were brilliant, James. I appreciate your immense talent even more after seeing you a second time.”

James’ mouth parted, taken aback by Mike’s effusiveness. “Thank you, Mike. That means a lot to me.”

Billy nodded in agreement. “I swear James, if you don’t win the Tony this year, I’ll start a boycott on social media of the other musicals.”

“Please don’t,” James chided.

“Well, we just wanted to say ‘hi’ and tell you that you did great, as usual. We’re going to head out, right Billy?” Nadia coaxed.

Billy looked at her, making it obvious to Mike and James that they had made a prior pact that they weren’t going to loiter so the new couple could enjoy the rest of the day with each other. “Oh, right. We’ve got things to do.” Billy winked at James when they parted, escorting Nadia out the door after she waved farewell to James and Mike.

James’ expression turned shy. “So, I’m going to change behind that screen. Then we can head to my apartment.”

“Why do you need to change behind the screen?” Mike teased.

James darted his eyes. “Anyone could walk in here.”

Mike pouted. “My God. You get less privacy than a man in prison.”

James contemplated that, then nodded. “I think you’re right. But there’s nobody that will be stopping by my apartment, so the longer you keep whining, the longer it will be before we get there.”

Mike made James chuckle by miming that he was zipping his lips, followed by him giving a warning hand-signal to his crotch to behave.

* * * *

When James entered his apartment, Mike followed and was on him before he could shut the door. “Mike!” James chuckled. “Stop.”

Mike frowned. “Why? I’ve been wanting to kiss you since I saw you walk on stage.”

James chuckled. “I want to kiss you too, but then we’ll start doing more...”

“Yes, please!” Mike laughed.

“And I’m sweaty. I want to take a shower and be nice for you.”

Mike shook his head. “You are nice. You’re perfect.”

James put his hand on Mike’s lips. “Please. I don’t want to be self-conscious the whole time. I’ll be quick.”

Mike donned a mischievous smile. “Or you could let me watch you shower.”

“What? You’re into this watching thing, aren’t you?” James accused, though his slight smile showed he didn’t mind much.

“I’m into watching you,” Mike corrected. “Come on. You’re a performer. You can pretend you’re filming a sexy movie scene.”

James huffed, looking away from Mike’s face, then shrugged. “Sure.”

“Really?”

“Don’t make me re-think it,” James warned.

Mike snapped his mouth shut, then smiled. “Okay. No more talking from me. I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

James smirked. “If you’re a mouse, you’d better be careful. I understand the apartment has snakes.”

Mike moaned. “Hmm, well this mouse is eager to see your snake, that’s for sure.”

James snickered. “You’re a freak. Come on, before my better judgment makes me renege.”

When they entered the bathroom, James maneuvered Mike into a sitting position on the toilet, which faced the glass-encased shower.

“Um, do you want me to close my eyes until you’re in the shower so you’re more comfortable?” Mike asked.

“Well, what would be the point of that? You might as well sit in the bedroom and wait for me, then,” James reasoned. When Mike shrugged, James shook his head at him. Then he lifted the hem of his polo shirt and pulled it over his head, baring the chest and stomach. James continued moving quickly, afraid he’d lose his nerve if he thought about stripping for someone who wasn’t removing clothes as well. He

unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers, then pushed them down his legs and off his feet. James was wearing a pair of olive-green trunks that hugged his body. He looked over at Mike, wondering if he had, in fact, closed his eyes. He hadn't. Mike was staring at him like someone had shown him the secret to eternal life. That encouraged James to continue. He slid the underwear down, revealing more and more of his long, thick shaft. Once he'd lowered the trunks well under his balls, his erection popped up. The heft of his member kept it from rising much above a forty-five-degree angle.

"Jesus," Mike muttered. "That's the most fucking gorgeous thing I've ever seen."

James pushed the trunks off his legs and turned to walk into the shower, knowing Mike was now gazing upon his ass. He hoped he liked it as much as he liked everything else.

Once he shut the shower door, James turned on the hot water and tried not to think too much about the fact that Mike was on the other side of the glass. He went through his routine as usual, washing his hair then soaping his body. James knew he was spending more time than usual washing his cock and balls, and the added attention kept him erect. The sound of the water was blocking any other sound in the bathroom, so James could only hope that Mike was still there and turned on. He reached behind himself to wash his butt, running a soapy hand deep into his crack to make sure he smelled as good as possible for whatever might happen. It was a bit embarrassing, but since there was so much steam by now, he was pretty sure Mike couldn't see anything but shadows and blurred skin.

When he turned off the water and opened the shower door, Mike was still sitting, looking like he had been hypnotized, his mouth halfway open and his eyes transfixed.

"Towel?" James asked, hiding most of his form behind the fogged-up glass.

"Huh? Oh, yeah." Mike gulped, rising from the can to grab a towel off a wall hook

and handing it to James.

James dried himself behind the glass, then wrapped the towel around his waist. When he emerged from the stall, he wondered if his body hair, now darker and more pronounced from the water, would be too much masculinity for a man who had only been with women. He ran a hand through his locks then shook his head like a golden retriever to remove the excess water. “Uh, I could blow dry my hair so it looks nicer, if you want.”

Mike shook his head. “Please don’t. It’s sexy, and I want you too much right now to wait. You are the hottest guy I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

James looked down at the floor, almost too embarrassed to maintain eye contact. “Thanks.”

“No. Thank you,” Mike said. “I’ve seen lots of guys shower after a game, and it was never, ever interesting to me. You are nothing like them. You’re so beautiful.”

Mike pulled him into an embrace. James gazed into Mike’s eyes and saw nothing but affection and admiration. James felt more emotional about the intimacy than he had with recent partners—nobody had looked at him with that warmth since his last boyfriend. It was the connection he longed for but knew he had to deny himself. He tried to remember that this was just sex. Mike lifted James’ chin and began to kiss him deeply.

“Want to go to the bedroom?” James asked after pulling away from Mike.

“Please,” Mike whispered. He figured the hardness in his pants pressing against the monster jutting against James’ towel would have made it obvious.

Once in the bedroom, Mike turned James to face him again, pulling him into a wetter,

more passionate kiss. They used their tongues to taste their mouths and their hands to explore each other's bodies. Mike broke away long enough to blink his eyes at the towel James was wearing. "May I?"

James nodded, allowing Mike to uncinch the cloth and let it fall to the floor. Mike then pushed James until the back of his legs hit the side of his bed, causing him to fall onto the mattress. Mike thought he'd come just looking at the incredible man lying before him. James' arms were outstretched, revealing his somewhat hairy armpits and sculpted biceps. His hard stomach was expanding and retracting with nervous energy. James' thighs were pressed against the side of the mattress, pushing muscles forward, displaying their impressive girth. His circumcised cock was hard enough to point toward Mike, allowing Mike to appreciate its thickness and wet tip. Mike glanced lower, turned on by the sight of James' sexy balls hanging over the side of the mattress.

"Are you going to join me?" James asked him.

"Holy shit, James. I knew you'd be hot, but...your beauty could make me cry." Mike gasped.

James smiled shyly. "Um, thanks. Can I see you now?"

Mike didn't want to seem like a pervert, just ogling the naked man before him. He unbuttoned and removed his shirt, made quick work of his trousers then ripped off his socks. When it came time to push down his boxer-briefs, he took another look at James' member and wondered anew if he would be desirable enough. Closing his eyes, he shoved the garment down his legs and off his feet, standing up straight so James could scrutinize him.

"Mike. You're perfect," James whispered.

Mike emitted a nervous laugh. “You don’t have to say that. That dick is perfect,” he noted, pointing at James’ crotch.

Mike thought James’ face looked like it had saddened a bit. “Come here, Mike. Please...lie down with me. I’ll prove to you that I love everything about you, including that beautiful cock.”

James scooted back on the mattress so he was no longer half hanging off it, holding out his hand to help pull Mike down next to him. Mike climbed onto the mattress and pulled James into a full-body embrace. They kissed for several minutes. After a bit, they started exploring each other’s torsos, chests, bellies and hips. They intertwined their legs, rubbing them together, and started to grind against each other. Mike reached over James’ hip and started to massage a muscular butt cheek, encouraging James to do the same to him.

“James, remember that I said I wouldn’t lie to you again. So, believe me when I tell you that you are the most handsome man I’ve ever seen,” Mike said in awe.

James did his gesture where he pulled his head back with a disbelieving look, but then grinned. “Okay.”

Mike frowned. “I mean it.” He kissed James’ nose then brushed his lips with his fingers. “Can I see the back of you?”

“Didn’t you already see everything when I took a shower?” James asked, somewhat amused.

The corner of Mike’s lip turned up. “Um, not everything. You know what I mean.”

James seemed uncertain. “You sure you’re ready for that? You’re moving kind of fast, first-timer.”

Mike was surprised by the question. “James, I just came out. It doesn’t mean I haven’t been bisexual since puberty. I’ve looked at enough gay porn over the years to have kept half the industry in business.”

James chuckled. “Geez, no wonder you’re so into watching. It’s all you’ve done.”

Mike shrugged. “Maybe. So, can I?”

James raised an eyebrow like he was preparing for a challenge. “Are you going to let me look at all of you? You aren’t the only one who’s fantasized about the other, and all of his private places.”

Mike grinned. “Have you thought about me showing you my junk and my butt since we did the video chat? How many times have you stroked yourself picturing me?”

“Shut up.” James laughed. “Why doesn’t anyone respect my privacy?”

Mike leaned in to kiss James and affected an apologetic expression, though insincere. “Okay, you don’t have to tell me. But keeping your hole private is not negotiable. I’ve thought about it too much.”

James didn’t seem to know what to make of Mike. “God, you aren’t shy about any of this, are you? Who would have thought I’d be the one... Okay, fine. But you’re going first for a change since you don’t seem to have any jitters. Lie down on your stomach. I’ll give you a massage.”

Mike smiled and rolled over on his stomach. James climbed over him and spread Mike’s legs so he could kneel in between them. Mike was surprised that James knew what he was doing from a therapeutic perspective—the massage was like what he’d received from the team trainer when he was with the Yankees. Well, except the trainer didn’t whisper how handsome he was like James was doing, or press kisses

into Mike's back.

Mike was erect from the touching, and he couldn't resist pressing his dick against the sheets to relieve some of the tension. It didn't help that James' hands were now down to his lower back, pressing on his tailbone, then sliding them over his butt cheeks.

"Mike, your ass is a work of art," James murmured. "It's like someone modeled them from two melons and encased them in creamy skin." Mike didn't respond. He was too busy panting. James used his knees to nudge Mike's legs farther apart, widening his ass crack and revealing the hint of his hole. "Sweet Jesus," James whispered. He kissed the delicate skin, causing Mike to buck his ass against James' face.

"Sorry," Mike panicked. "I wasn't expecting that. It was like... I don't know. No woman has ever done that to me, that's for sure."

James kept his mouth nearby, letting out a warm breath over Mike's pucker. Mike squirmed and pressed his cock back down on the mattress. "You like it, though?" James asked.

"You have to ask?" Mike yelped. "I'm about to soil your sheets if you do that again."

James chuckled. "I have a washing machine." He opened Mike back up and bent down to run his tongue from Mike's tailbone to his hole, circling and licking the little cavity.

"Jesus. You're going to kill me," Mike breathed into the pillowcase.

James smiled and pulled away, scooching up the bed so he could lie on Mike's body. "I don't want to explain to the police why there's a corpse in my bed. I'd better let you cool down."

Mike remained in position, still panting. “I think I’m doing some serious leaking on your linens, James. That was mind-blowing. Will you do it again, and for longer, when I’m not ready to blow?”

James grinned. “Sure, I can do that.”

“So, you like rimming?” Mike asked, talking into the pillow. “I don’t know if that’s an expected thing in gay sex.”

James paused. “Nothing is expected, Mike. Not everyone likes everything, and I would only do something someone wants, providing I’m into it, too. As for rimming, I’m not into it in general. The person needs to be hot and very special.”

Mike smiled into the pillow. “So, you think I’m hot and very special?”

“Don’t milk it,” James warned, unable to hide his amusement.

“I’m not touching it,” Mike replied, pretending to have misunderstood. “I think what you said makes sense, James. I want to rim you, too.”

James jerked his head back. “You don’t need to, Mike. I didn’t mean to imply it was a test for what someone thinks about you. You’re inexperienced...you shouldn’t rush.”

Mike used his strength to move out from under James and turn them so they were facing each other once more. “I know it wasn’t a test, but if it had been, I would have had no problem responding that you are hot and very special, too. And yes, I want to try it with you. Can I do it now?”

James still appeared uncertain, but then nodded. He flipped himself onto his front to give Mike access. Mike caressed his back before massaging one of James’ butt

cheeks.

“That’s good, Mike,” James murmured.

Mike took his cue from James on how to proceed, pulling James’ legs apart and kneeling between them. He was too anxious to do a slow tease, so he muscled the two thighs farther apart so James was open and vulnerable. “Great. Now I’m going to come just from looking at that sweet pussy.”

“Pussy, huh? You think I’m going to let your dick in there?” James mused.

“I hope so. Maybe soon? I’ll be your best friend,” Mike begged, causing James to laugh. “I’ll never be able to watch your show again when you’re in those short-shorts. I’ll be ejaculating when you twerk your cute ass, knowing this is how it looks naked. Holy Mother of God.”

“Are you going to let me fuck your pussy?” James asked, daring to look back enough to see Mike’s expression.

Mike couldn’t hide his nervousness. “Uh, at some point. I’m not some jughead who thinks it’s too ‘gay’ for him. But I think I need to work up to it, if that’s okay.”

James nodded. “Of course, it’s okay, Mike. I told you, I’m only into doing what other people like, providing I like it, too. How did you get sidetracked, anyway? I thought you were going to show off your cunnilingus skills.”

Before James could make another sarcastic comment, Mike plunged his tongue onto his hole, circling then probing it deep. Mike pulled back for a second. “Like that?”

James panted. “Jesus, Mike. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but my butt will still be here tomorrow. There isn’t an ass-eating contest you have to win.”

Mike blushed. "Sorry." Then he snickered. "Are you from some freaky town where the state fairs featured ass-eating contests? Can you imagine? All you can eat..."

"Mike..."

Mike sobered. "Sorry." He leaned back down, massaging one of James' ass cheeks while kissing the other. Once he alternated the move with each cheek, he worked his tongue along the inner edges of James' cheeks until James was squirming beneath him. He made little licks along James' taint, then put his forearms under the front of James' hips so he could pull James' crack up to his mouth. The movement exposed James' hanging sack, so Mike licked and kissed his way over James' balls. He was pleased that James was muttering nonsense words in response. Mike used his elbows to push James' legs even wider, then buried his face in James' ass crack. He licked James' tight hole and pressed his flattened tongue against the sensitive skin.

James was making small cries, arousing Mike even more. He started to tongue-fuck James' opening, then reached under James' scrotum to find the hard, pulsing dick. Mike started to stroke James as he continued his oral administrations on him. Within a few moments, James was bucking and whimpering, then shooting a hot load of semen onto Mike's hand and onto the bed sheets. James' spurting continued through a few more spasms, and Mike never stopped licking James' entrance through his orgasm.

Once he knew James was spent, Mike gave multiple little kisses to James' buttocks and back. He lowered James back down onto the mattress and pressed his body on top of him.

"Did I do better on the retry?" Mike asked.

James sighed. "Quick learner. Head of the class."

“So, the town with the weird fairs had schools with Rimming 101 classes, too? Wish I had grown up there.” This time, James did chuckle a bit, which brought a grin to Mike’s face. “That was so fucking hot. I loved it. You’re amazing, James. I could kiss and lick you all day.”

James smiled. “I don’t think my body could take it.”

“Yeah? So, I did good? You aren’t just being nice?” Mike asked.

James maneuvered out from under Mike and rearranged their bodies so Mike was lying on the front of James. “Hey, I couldn’t fake an orgasm like that. Besides, even if it hadn’t been spectacular, which it was, I’m not that shallow. I’m here with you because I like you. The fact that you’re the most incredible-looking creature on two legs and can use your tongue like a pussy-eating ninja are just added bonuses. Okay?”

Mike laughed. “But not the most incredible-looking creature period? You mean there are four-legged animals you find prettier?”

“Shut up,” James joked, pulling Mike into a kiss while Mike’s still hard dick pressed against his softening one. “And it’s your turn.”

* * * *

James had been so impressed with Mike’s maneuvers that he had mimicked them step-by-step, causing Mike to spasm and shoot his cum like bullets from a semi-automatic. Once they both collapsed onto their shared mess, they decided a shower was needed. Though their sexual urgency had dissipated, the enjoyment from touching and gazing upon each other’s bodies hadn’t. It wasn’t until the water started to cool that they felt compelled to pull apart and towel dry.

As James stood naked with Mike, he grinned. “Um, all cleaned up with nowhere to

go.”

Mike quirked an eyebrow. “We could go back to bed.”

James chortled. “No. I’ll end up falling asleep, and it’s important that I stay on my sleep schedule.”

“You’re very disciplined,” Mike complimented. “Much more so than I ever was when I was playing baseball. I could have used you in my life to keep me on the straight and narrow. Maybe I would have been a better baseball player.”

James looked surprised. “You were one of the best in the game.”

“Maybe I could have been the best in the game,” Mike countered.

“Would it have mattered?” James challenged.

Mike shrugged. “Fair point. Maybe I should be grateful I enjoyed my life and still had success.”

“And made lots of money from pitching products,” James remarked, though Mike could tell he wasn’t being sarcastic.

“It’s helped me to be financially secure, yes,” Mike agreed. “It’s given me some clout that I wish you’d let me use to help you.” He saw James’ guard go up, so he added, “Not to help you achieve things unfairly. I mean to help you get free of your father.”

James frowned. “It is what it is.”

Mike didn’t want to argue when they were both standing naked. It was odd, considering the seriousness of the conversation they had begun. “I’m just saying, you

don't have to be a victim."

James narrowed his eyes and grimaced before wrapping a towel around his waist and storming from the bathroom. Mike cinched a towel around himself as well, following.

James spun on him. "You know how insulting that is? Not everyone has an agent and a family who loves them no matter what, or a job that brought them so much money and fame that they could do whatever they want. Throughout history, there have been people with unchallenged authority, supported by an infrastructure that allows them to abuse that power. That describes my father and his legion of enablers. He has legislators, police officers and mafia heads in his pocket to help him do his bidding. What do I have? And don't reply that I have you, Mike. You may be a giant in your field, but he owns people who can destroy you. And they will, just like they did to my last boyfriend. If I try to go public with anything, my father threatens he'll release a press statement that I have mental health issues and a persecution complex. He'll cite how he had me institutionalized when I was younger, and he has a doctor, also in his pocket, who will back up his claim. When Billy threatened him, my father cut back on his financial assistance. I am not choosing to be a victim, Mike! Sometimes people just are."

Mike swallowed and looked away from the anger lasered on him from James' eyes. "I'm sorry. I haven't lived through your experience, and I had no right to make judgments about it. I swear, I was speaking from a place of wanting to help, not trying to criticize. But your exception to my characterization is fair, and I deserved your rebuke."

James' expression softened, but he still snapped back, "God, sometimes you talk like you went to a prep school. You deserved my rebuke?"

Mike ventured a grin. "Yes, I did go to a prep school. My parents made education a priority, and I had a wealthy uncle who was kind enough to pay for it. And why so

judgmental about it? I'm guessing you went to one, too."

"Yeah, and it had an administrator who kissed my father's ass. My father found a way to make my life hell in and outside the house."

Mike shook his head. "I wish I could go back in time to try to protect you, James. Please don't be angry with me. I'm still learning about you. I'm not a perfect man."

James nodded, and Mike could see the defensiveness leave his body. James even attempted a smile of his own. "Well, you may be as close to perfect as a man can be."

Mike approached James and pulled him into an embrace. He kissed the side of James' head and stroked his arms. "Isn't this better? I like having you in my arms—not you using yours to push me away."

James' sigh sounded more like a whimper of surrender. He let his body sag into Mike's, holding the man around his waist. Mike continued to kiss the top of his head and stroke behind one of his ears.

"I'm sorry," James whispered.

"Shh," Mike soothed. "Don't be. At least you called me your boyfriend during your tirade."

"Did not."

Mike chuckled. "It was implied when you said your father would destroy me like he did your last boyfriend." James grunted in protest, but said nothing. "Anyway, maybe your father will destroy me, but I meant what I said to you before. You're worth the risk. Maybe we can figure out something together. Maybe you, me and Billy, huh? I just know I like being with you, James. I'm not ready to let your father tell me I can't

be.”

James pulled away from Mike, his expression sad. “You want to eat?”

Mike grinned. “I enjoyed what you fed me in the bedroom.”

James laughed out some of his stress. “Christ, give my ass a break, will you? I mean actual food.”

“Let’s go out.”

James shook his head with alarm. “Too reckless.”

Mike crossed his arms. “Nope. We’ll go incognito. I’m putting my nondescript baseball cap and sunglasses back on, and you’ll do the same. This is New York City. People don’t pay attention. Come on. Getting some fresh air will do you good,” Mike pleaded.

James contemplated for a moment, then nodded. “Okay, but we don’t eat at any place where you have to sit in a closed space.”

“I was thinking we could grab something from a food truck, then I’ll take you to my favorite ice cream place nearby,” Mike informed.

“Jesus, how do you keep that body of yours?” James wondered.

Mike shrugged. “Lots of exercise. And since I missed my routines today, you’re going to have to give me a workout later in bed.”

James laughed. “One-track mind.”

Mike grinned. “Mmhmm, and that track leads right back to your sweet tunnel.”

James played along. “Tacky. And what is your dick? The engine that thought he could?”

Mike snickered. “Oh, he knows he can. And he will. He’s been on a mission to park in that pretty little spot for quite some time.”

James went to his closet to retrieve some clothes, not bothering to look at Mike with his next retort. “Well, if he’s just going to park, the tunnel’s owner is going to evict him pretty quick.” He pulled out a shirt, shut the closet door then looked over to Mike, who was at a loss for words. “That little fucker better plan to practice forward and reverse maneuvers in that tunnel, and test his ability to do it at increasingly accelerated speeds.”

Mike gulped. “I’ll make sure he gets the message.”

Chapter Eleven

James admitted that the outdoor air was a refreshing change. It was a beautiful early summer day, and there was a breeze with low humidity. His mood was lighter as he and Mike walked through his neighborhood. He laughed when Mike took him to a food truck and ordered his dreaded hot dog. James settled for a baked pretzel. It wasn't the most nutritious thing to eat, but it seemed healthier to him than the rest of the vendor's offerings.

James rolled his eyes when Mike bit into his frankfurter then licked his lips, moaning with pretended ecstasy. James finished half his pretzel, then handed the rest to Mike, who sucked it down like a human vacuum.

"Come on. Here's the ice cream parlor I was telling you about," Mike announced, pulling James into the shop.

"Are you going to be able to eat ice cream now?" James teased.

"Always room for dessert," Mike replied in a matter-of-fact tone, rubbing the palms of his hands together. "And this place has the best ice cream flavors, mix-ins and toppings."

"Can I help you?" the bored girl behind the counter questioned James.

"One scoop of vanilla in a cup, please," James responded.

"Anything mixed in or toppings?" the server asked.

“Nope.”

“What? I just said, you can get any combination you want, and you choose plain, old vanilla?” Mike exclaimed.

“I like vanilla,” James explained.

“Well, sure. Everyone does, but you can have that any time,” Mike protested.

“No, I can’t,” James answered. “I need to stay in shape. So, I never have ice cream. If I’m going to splurge and eat some, I want to get what I like.” The girl handed him his treat, and he handed her a twenty, telling her that he was paying for the two of them.

“You don’t have to do that,” Mike interjected.

“You paid for the pretzel.”

“Big whoop,” Mike snarked. “And I ate half of it.”

The server turned her attention to Mike. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have the coconut and chocolate swirl ice cream, the Mounds candy mix-ins, the hot fudge sauce topping, along with whipped cream, nuts, a cherry and toasted coconut flakes,” Mike replied.

James barked a laugh. “Jesus. You’re like a little boy in a candy shop.”

Mike shrugged, then whispered in James’ ear, “And you’re a big boy, made for swirling my dessert then letting me lick your utensil clean.”

James almost choked on a spoonful of his ice cream, then turned away from the

counter so the server wouldn't see him blush. Once Mike had his order, he joined James at his side and they walked out of the store and over to the park.

"Man, you're a pig in more ways than one. You're going to have to spend all day in the gym tomorrow," James scolded.

"Yes, Dad." Mike smirked.

Once they were seated on a park bench, they sat quietly while eating. Once James finished his food, he sighed with a grin. "I haven't had that in a long time. Why does it have to taste so good?"

Mike chuckled. "You want something that really tastes good? Here, eat some of this before I finish it," he offered, holding a spoonful of his concoction to James' mouth.

James did his move of jerking his head back with an amused expression. "Keep that away from me, Satan."

"Come on, just one spoonful isn't going to ruin your pretty figure," Mike teased.

James gave him a side-eye, but leaned forward and allowed Mike to spoon the ice cream into his mouth. James moaned, causing Mike to laugh.

James swallowed and chuckled as well. "Okay, that was delicious."

"See? Want some more?" Mike offered, holding up another spoonful.

"I do, but I will refrain. Thank you," James replied, looking off toward children playing on a jungle-scape.

"Ever wish you had kids?" Mike asked.

James looked surprised. “What? No. Billy is sort of like my kid, as well as being my brother. There’s only a nine-year age difference, but I felt responsible for him. I still do.”

Mike nodded. “I see that. You’re good to him. He’s lucky to have you.”

James shrugged. “I’m lucky to have him, too.”

“I heard you on the phone earlier, telling him you’d accompany him tomorrow to pick out an engagement ring for Nadia. I guess that means we won’t be spending the whole day together after all, huh?” Mike asked, though he tried not to sound like he was whining when he did.

James avoided Mike’s eyes, looking back to the kids instead. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I have a hard time saying no to him. This is important, and he values my opinion.”

Mike put a hand on James’ thigh to reassure him. “It’s okay. I get it.”

James smiled in thanks. “But we have the rest of today, tonight and tomorrow morning. If you still want to stay over, that is.”

Mike laughed. “That’s like asking me if I want another bowl of ice cream.”

James shook his head. “And I won’t ask you that because you’ve had enough. Come on, let’s walk back to my place.”

They threw their empty cups into a nearby trash can and exited the park.

* * * *

“Maybe you should turn off the air-conditioning and open the windows,” Mike

suggested when they returned to the building. “It’s so nice out. The cool breeze will be nice on our naked skin.”

James gave Mike a flirtatious look. “We’re not naked.”

Mike advanced on James and put his arms around him. “Not yet, we aren’t. But I don’t want you wearing clothes for the rest of my visit.”

James chuckled. “Oh? Well, I’m not in the habit of walking around my apartment naked, even when I’m alone.”

Mike smirked in return. “I don’t care that you’re modest when you’re by yourself. But when you’re with me, you’ll be an exhibitionist. So, take your clothes off, please.”

James crossed his arms in mock protest. “Such a voyeur. My God. Fine—after you.”

Mike laughed before throwing his baseball cap onto the kitchen table and pulling off his jersey. Before James could comment, Mike unzipped his jeans and shucked both them and his underwear down his legs and off his feet, leaving him only in white athletic socks.

James clicked his tongue. “Wow, stunning. What brand of socks are they? I can’t take my eyes off them.”

“Asshole,” Mike chastised, reaching over and tickling James until he was crying from laughing so much. Mike didn’t wait for James to remove his clothes. He knocked the cap off James’ head and yanked up his T-shirt and pulled it off his body. Mike backed James against the wall and undid his jeans and, as he had done for himself, pushed both the pants and underwear down with one fell swoop. James’ hardening cock bounced up to greet him. Mike knelt before James, pulling the clothing off his

legs and feet, then removed James' socks. Still on his knees, he reached over to touch James' now engorged dick, examining it with affection and lust. "It's magnificent."

James let out a nervous laugh. "Yeah, well it seems to be drawn to you. Literally."

"Mm," Mike moaned, taking the head of James' member into his mouth. Surprised, James dropped his head back against the wall, gasping. Mike swirled his tongue around the crown, surprised by how much he loved the taste and scent of the man. He ventured to swallow more, getting as far as filling his mouth without entering his throat. James was gasping, and it made Mike erect as well. He sucked and slurped on his new favorite oral treat, reaching his left hand to James' balls so he could caress them.

"Mike," James whispered. "Let's go in the bedroom."

Mike released James' cock with a wet popping noise and blushed. "Sorry. Am I being too messy?"

James shook his head. "God, no. Wet is nice." He reached his hand down to take Mike's so he could assist him to his feet and lead him to the bedroom. Once they were there, James pushed Mike onto the mattress like he had done to James earlier. James pushed against Mike's knees so he knew to scooch back on the mattress. What Mike hadn't expected was James taking hold of his calves, lifting them and pushing them up until Mike's knees were resting near his chest.

"What the hell?" Mike whispered. "You aren't going to fuck me, are you?"

James laughed. "Someday, I hope. But not now." Mike relaxed, then James knelt before him so he could start kissing the backs of Mike's thighs.

"Jesus," Mike muttered.

“Nah, it’s just me,” James replied. “Keep your knees in place. I like looking at a hot guy offering himself to me.”

Mike whimpered at that, pulling his knees as far forward as he could. He knew he was wide open and felt even more exposed than earlier when he was rimmed from behind. He was a little embarrassed and aroused at the same time. Mike liked offering himself to James and letting him be the one to see him in this most intimate position. He was relishing the light licks and kisses along his legs until a few moments later, James pressed his tongue on his opening. “Oh God,” he cried.

James pulled his head back and snarked, “You keep going up the deity chain, but it’s still just me.”

“You’re my god,” Mike exclaimed. “And I’m here to serve you.”

James snorted. “Such a poet. And right now, it seems I’m the one serving you.” Then he went back to caressing Mike’s sensitive skin with his tongue until Mike was vocalizing deity names and vulgarities in the same word stream. After a few minutes, he backed off and climbed onto the bed. He shifted Mike so that his entire body was on the mattress, then aligned himself over Mike in a sixty-nine position. “I’m going to suck your cock, and I’m going to finger your ass,” James asserted.

Mike was staring at James’ privates hanging over his face, wondering if James wanted him to resume blowing him.

“Suck me at the same time,” James ordered, as if answering the unasked question.

Mike didn’t know where the controlling James came from, but he liked it. “I want to try taking in as much of you as I can.”

James spoke a bit more softly. “Be careful. Remember what I told you—I’m not

expecting you to be a porn star. Do what you like and what makes you comfortable. Use your hand to stroke what you can't manage."

Mike didn't have to hear more instructions. He grabbed James' hips and lowered the throbbing tool until it was seated past his lips. Mike resumed the pleasurable sucking he had started earlier, only this time, James was also sucking Mike and using his fingers to breach Mike's hole. Mike had never felt ecstasy in so many places of his body, especially when James started finger-fucking his ass. Mike pulled off James just for a moment so he could exhale and mumble, "Yes, keep doing that, please." He sucked James' manhood back into his mouth, starting to let some of it slide into his throat. The gagging he experienced was unpleasant, and he remembered James' warning. He moderated how much he took in and he massaged the rest of James' tool with his now slick hand.

James pulled off for a second so he could handle and look at Mike's wet hardness. "Your cock is beautiful, Mike. Tastes so fucking good." He went back to sucking it, taking him to the root. James took long, deep swallows of Mike, picking up the speed of poking Mike's prostate with his finger. Within seconds, Mike began shooting his cum down James' throat.

Mike had pulled off James as he was ejaculating, unable to keep from gasping and crying out. "James! Oh God!" Once he felt himself cresting, he took James' dick back into his mouth, reaching up to James' ass with his other hand and inserting one of his fingers into his lover's now sweaty hole. The sensation caused James to drop Mike's softening prick from his lips. James bucked back and cried out. Mike slid his finger in and out of James' opening as he continued applying pressure to James' manhood with his hand and lips. After a moment, for the first time in his life, Mike experienced a man coming in his mouth. He was afraid he'd gag, but realized it was as easy as swallowing any other liquid. Mike loved the warmth of it, ecstatic to have this beautiful man share with him such an intimate part of himself.

Once Mike's sucking was making James' softening dick too sensitive, James pulled himself away and repositioned himself so he could lie down, face-to-face with his companion.

James reached over to stroke Mike's hair, watching him pant. "Are you okay?"

Mike smiled. "Holy shit, yes!"

James began to laugh. "Okay. No first-time regrets for this one."

Mike turned to look at James, his smile fading into an expression of affection. "Who could regret something so wonderful with the most handsome man in the world?" He wrapped his arms around James, noticing he tensed for only a moment before surrendering to the embrace.

Chapter Twelve

“What’s your family like?” James asked, snuggling up to Mike’s body.

Mike continued stroking James’ glossy hair as he spoke. “They’re cool. My mom worked in a school cafeteria and my dad was a construction worker. We grew up outside of Pittsburgh. My uncle was a well-to-do banker. I think I mentioned he was the one who paid for my schooling. He’s a great guy. Gay. My folks always knew it. It didn’t matter to them. They appreciated how much he helped me. I think their love for him helped pave the way for their acceptance of my announcement.”

“Did you go to college?” James wondered.

Mike smirked. “I thought you were one of my biggest fans. How do you not know that?” James shrugged. “I went for a couple of years on an athletic scholarship. I quit when I got an offer to join the Colorado Rockies farm league. From there, I got noticed and drafted by the Yankees. Played with them my whole career.”

“Did you like it?”

Mike pondered for a second. “Yes, for the most part. I loved playing baseball. Staying in the closet was a bummer. The traveling got tiring, and some of the teammates were asses. There were unspoken rules like not ratting out a teammate you knew was finding ways to juice, even though it would piss me off that they had an unfair advantage and were cheating the system.”

“My father would have applauded them,” James muttered. “He always used to say, it

doesn't matter how you win, as long as you do. Nobody remembers the good sportsmen or the people who play by the rules. They only remember who was successful."

"You think that's true?" Mike worried.

"Unfortunately," James answered. "I don't think it's fair. It's not the philosophy I apply to my own life. But yes, I think it's true."

"It's a fucked-up world, isn't it?"

James sighed. "It's almost hard to blame my father. People prove him right all the time. His colleagues and voting base claim they care about morality and fairness, but they reward the exact opposite."

Mike kissed James' head. "Well, I admire your principles."

"My father is involved in baseball too, you know," James informed him.

Mike's eyes widened with surprise. "How so?"

"He's part owner of the expansion team, the Cherry Hill Marksmen."

Mike whistled. "No shit. I'm not that familiar with who owns the teams—except the Yankees, of course. Well, the Red Sox and the Chicago Cubs, too. I don't know, I guess that never mattered to me."

"He wants sole ownership, but he only owns forty percent. Typical of my father, he's tried underhanded ways to wrestle the sixty percent owned by his partner, Stan Lyons," James continued.

“The internet mogul? Why do these guys want to own professional sports teams?”

James laughed. “Why else? Money. Power. Status. Although I’m guessing that Lyons, unlike my father, is a decent guy.”

“You’ve met him?” Mike asked.

“No, but my father hates his political views and his fight for things like an increase to the minimum wage and preservation of social security and Medicare. Those are worthy causes in my opinion. Plus, if Lyons is on the opposite side of my father on anything, it speaks well of him,” James mused.

“Must be an uncomfortable partnership,” Mike agreed. “Can I ask? How did your mother die?”

“Car accident.”

“That’s rough,” Mike soothed. “I’m sorry. To think you were left alone with the likes of your father...”

James sighed. “I learned to manage. He wasn’t physically abusive often. I mean, he supports physical discipline, and he slapped my face hard a few times. But I have to say, he seldom lost it like that when we annoyed him. Instead, he’d take something from us or send us to our rooms without dinner.”

“He courts the worst element for votes,” Mike stated. James looked at him in surprise. “What? Just because I’m a baseball player doesn’t mean I don’t follow politics. Plus, I’ve read more about him since meeting you. I wanted to be prepared for what I might have to deal with if he finds out about us.”

James nodded. “There’s not much you have to research when it comes to him. Just

look up ‘douche’ in the dictionary, and you’ll see my father listed as the second definition of the word.”

Mike chuckled. “And you have a sister?”

James groaned. “Lilah. A spoiled, bratty, entitled, future-fascist.”

Mike laughed. “So, I see you’re close.”

“She takes after her mother, Morticia,” James mumbled.

“Her mother’s name is Morticia?” Mike asked.

“No.”

Mike blushed—he hadn’t recognized it was a joke.

They stayed quiet for a bit, enjoying the wind that was blowing through James’ now open bedroom window. The air tickled their naked bodies, and it was just cool enough that it made them want to press against each other for warmth.

“James?” Mike whispered.

“Hmm?”

“When’s the last time you let a guy make love to you?” Mike ventured.

James tried to gauge Mike’s exact meaning. “Um, about a half hour ago?”

Mike chuckled. “Thanks, but that’s not what I meant. Was it with your boyfriend?”

James closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes.”

Mike touched James’ chin, lifting it a bit so they were staring in each other’s eyes. “You pretend you’re carefree, but you save the most intimate acts for the very few who have been special to you.” James didn’t reply. He just closed his eyes again. “I respect that. In fact, I’m glad. I won’t joke about being with you like that anymore. If, one day, you’re ready to do that with me, I’ll consider myself lucky and be very grateful.”

After a moment of silence, James pulled from Mike’s arms. Mike worried he had offended James, but saw that he was reaching over to the nightstand. James pulled out a box of condoms and a bottle of lubricant. Mike’s eyes went wide.

“You’re special to me,” James stated, handing the items to Mike.

“James...” Mike gasped.

“I’m sure,” James cut in, as if anticipating the rest of Mike’s question.

Mike pulled his man back to him and kissed him. Within seconds, both were aroused, caressing and kissing every body part within their reach.

Mike turned James onto his back, then climbed on board, sucking on James’ tongue while flicking James’ nipples. “You are so beautiful, James,” he panted.

Mike was beginning to realize James was sarcastic when he was nervous, so he wasn’t surprised when James still found the strength to utter, “But if you make choo-choo noises while you’re entering me, we’re done.”

“Baby, the only noises you’ll be hearing from me are the whimpers of a man who’s in disbelief at what’s happening,” Mike assured him, kissing James once more.

Mike decided he'd better proceed to the next step before each exploded from their anticipation and passion. He kissed his way down his lover's body to the soft, soapy-smelling pubes. He then moved down to the hard cock that still struck his awe. Licking James made the man moan, squirm and flex his thighs in Mike's roaming hands.

"Mike," James panted.

"James, I want you so bad. I can't get enough of you," Mike confessed, taking James' leaking dick into his mouth and sucking until James was losing control beneath him. With some regret, he let James fall from his lips so he could push James' muscular legs up. James pulled his knees to his chest, exposing himself as Mike had done earlier. Mike had to agree with James' earlier comment that there was nothing more beautiful than someone offering themselves—especially this hot man. He used his tongue to create a wet trail over James' balls, taint and anus, eliciting a guttural cry from James. Mike bathed James' opening with his saliva, circling and probing the twitching hole.

"Stop teasing, Mike," James pleaded.

As much as Mike was enjoying burying his face in James' warm buttocks, he was even more eager to bury his dick. He slowed his excitement so he could prepare James by lubing and stretching him. When he probed with his forefinger, James hissed, and his tight muscles contracted. Mike pushed and twirled his digit until the resistance diminished. He inserted a second finger, loving the look of penetrating his lover. He twisted, pushed and scissored his fingers, making certain James was slick, loosened and ready. "Baby, tell me when."

"Now," James groaned.

Mike sheathed his cock with a rubber, then lubed it. Holding up James' legs, he lined

the head of his shaft to the impossibly small-looking entrance. He pushed about an inch of himself inside James. James moaned, a mix of discomfort and pleasure.

“I’ll go slow, James,” Mike promised. “I know it’s been a while.” James didn’t respond, which Mike took as agreement with the plan. He pushed bit by bit, watching James’ expressions to see when pain turned to relaxation, and when comfort moved on to lust. When he was fully inside James, Mike looked down at where they were joined, marveling at seeing himself immersed in the beautiful man.

Jolting him from his reverie, James snapped, “No parking.”

Mike chuckled, pulling his dick back. He loved watching his cock working James’ opening while also seeing James’ ecstatic face. Mike started a slow rhythm of in-and-out thrusts, the wet tightness shooting bolts of pleasure to him with each movement he made. Once the slide was smooth and slick, Mike hurried the pace, pounding against James’ prostate.

James was whimpering words, but Mike couldn’t decipher them. They could have been satanic, as he thought James must be the devil himself to inspire such lust and gratification. Mike felt and heard his balls slapping against James’ ass with every downward stroke, heightening his pleasure as the sounds mixed with those of his and James’ cries. Mike looked down to watch himself pull out of the now-sweating ass, then plunge back in with one hard stroke. He repeated the movement a couple of times, causing James to shout his name.

Unable to take any more, Mike resumed fucking at a frenetic pace, yelling as James’ rectum coaxed multiple hot spurts into the condom. Mike continued pumping while grabbing James’ cock and twisting it in his hand. James let out a loud groan like he was in pain, but the streams of milky cream erupting from his throbbing dick revealed what he was truly experiencing. Mike watched with awe as the cum from his lover continued to splatter his beautiful torso until it came to a halt and James lay covered

in a pool of his emissions.

Mike pulled out of James, holding onto the condom. He removed it, tied it and tossed it over the bed, collapsing on top of the guy who had just given him the best orgasm of his life. Both were still panting and touching each other as they tried to catch their breaths. After a moment, Mike grabbed his T-shirt from the floor and cleaned up his partner. Tossing the cum-soaked garment back to the carpet, Mike used his clean hand to pet James' hair while kissing his nose, cheeks and lips. "James, that was so wonderful. Thank you." He almost found himself saying 'I love you,' but stopped himself in the nick of time.

James kissed the side of Mike's head, but remained quiet. He stroked Mike's back, though, giving Mike a sense of peace.

After two rounds of sex, both were sated and sleepy. Mike rolled to his side, pulling James into a cuddle until they both fell into a deep slumber.

* * * *

When Mike awoke, the apartment was as dark as the night outside the window. He glanced to the nearby alarm clock—it was two in the morning. He was surprised James wasn't in bed. Mike glanced at the ensuite, but he could make out that the door was open and the lights weren't on. Beginning to worry, he rose from the bed and walked into the kitchen-living room area of the apartment. Once his eyes adjusted, he saw that James had put on sleep pants and was standing by the window, staring at the dimly illuminated street.

Mike wasn't sure how to make his presence known without startling the man, but it seemed James sensed his presence. "I couldn't sleep," James murmured without turning around. "My sleep pattern is screwed up now."

Mike walked to where James was standing, worried that James' comment was an accusation that Mike had let them fall asleep in the afternoon. James had mentioned that it was important for him to maintain his schedule for work. "I'm sorry, James," he offered, even though he knew he was no more at fault than James.

James nodded. "I fell asleep too early."

From behind, Mike put his arms around James. "Are you okay?"

James ignored the question. "You shouldn't be standing in front of a window naked."

Mike laughed. "It's dark in here. Nobody can see. Besides, your body is shielding me." James didn't respond, and Mike sensed that something more than a disrupted sleep pattern was bothering him. Mike rubbed James' upper arms and kissed the back of his neck. He was relieved that James didn't pull away or signal that it was unwanted. "Was I keeping you awake? I'm never sure if I snore or toss around a lot in bed."

James huffed a soft laugh. "You snore a little. It wasn't a big deal. You don't toss around. Your death grip on my body prevented that."

Mike wasn't sure if the last statement was made with affection or annoyance. "Oh, yeah. I've been told by people that I'm a cuddler."

"They were right," James replied.

Mike started to worry that James was angry with him, or that this was the start of James pushing him away, just as Billy had warned. "James, you only need to tell me what to do or not to do to make you happy. If you come back to bed, I'll keep distance between us."

James turned to Mike and even in the darkness, Mike could see that James had been crying. Mike knew James' pride would be wounded if he pointed it out, so he remained silent. Instead, he stroked James' chest, still hoping he wasn't the reason for James' tears.

"I like cuddling," James whispered. "It wasn't the reason I couldn't sleep. Just one of those nights, I guess."

Mike dared to lean in for a soft kiss. James didn't resist, but he didn't stoke the passion either. "Maybe you'll be able to if you come back. Besides, I thought we agreed you'd stay naked through my whole visit."

That drew the laugh from James that Mike had hoped for. "Are one-sided declarations the same thing as agreements in your world?"

Mike sighed. "They can be if the declaration is from you. As I said, you need only tell me what you want and I will honor it as an agreement between us."

Mike dared to look back at James' eyes—they had moistened a bit again. As if realizing Mike was on to him, James blinked and cleared his throat. "I'm good. There's nothing I'm asking of you."

Mike tried not to read too much into the statement. He knew it would be easy to worry that James was communicating that he wanted nothing else from him. "James, please come back to bed." When James nodded, Mike sighed with relief. He wondered if he should try to lighten the mood again. "And take off those ridiculous sleep pants. It's dark, so I'm hoping my eyes are deceiving me and the pattern isn't a bunch of ponies."

As Mike had hoped, the teasing snapped James from his funk. "They're horses, and what's wrong with them?"

“Nothing, if you’re a twelve-year-old girl.” Mike grinned. “There’s only one stallion I’m interested in seeing. Hint—he’s the one who’s hung like one.”

James chuckled and shook his head. “Fine. I’ll take them off. Come on.” He took Mike’s hand and led them back to his bed, shucking his pajama bottoms before climbing back onto the mattress.

Mike was a bit fearful of holding him again. He watched James to sense what would be welcomed. When James scooted a bit closer, Mike stroked his forearm, enjoying touching the silky hair over hard muscle. “Just to clarify, it is okay to hold you?”

“Yeah,” James replied, snuggling closer to Mike, putting his arms around his torso and resting his head on the pillow next to Mike’s.

After a few minutes, Mike whispered, “I’m falling for you, James.”

James didn’t respond, and Mike wasn’t sure if he was ignoring him or had already fallen asleep. It took Mike several minutes longer to reach that state.

* * * *

When Mike next awoke, the sun was shining and the cooling breeze from the night before had blown itself out to the Atlantic. The usual street noise was louder as people were making their way into the city for another workday. Because the air-conditioning was off, it was warm in the room, and Mike realized they had never felt the need to pull the covers over their naked bodies.

He glanced over at James, who had moved onto his back, an arm up under the pillow that cradled his head. Since James’ eyes were still closed, Mike shifted a bit so he could take in the view of James’ incredible body. James had lightly hairy calves, the follicles lying straight and flat against James’ tanned skin. His thighs were thick with

muscle, and James' knees were knobby enough to avoid the elephant-leg look. The creases from his hip bones down to his groin were like chiseled stone—surface-level paths leading to morning wood that lay over James' hip. Mike wanted to run his hand over James' little concave belly-button and up his stomach until he could trace his fingers under the sculpted pecs. The exposed armpit revealed James opted not to manscape it, and Mike thought that was masculine and sexy. In Mike's mind, as beautiful as the body was, nothing could be more glorious than James' head. Mike loved James' beautiful light hair, the green eyes that were so full of emotion, the well-proportioned nose and the soft, pink lips. The ridge between James' nose and mouth was a bit deeper than on most people, and it gave him a sculpted, noble look.

Mike blushed when taken by surprise as one of James' eyes popped open and James' expression signaled he knew he'd been gawked at. "Perving again?"

"Yes," Mike admitted. "I couldn't help it. What sight-privileged person could?"

James chuckled, then groaned as he stretched and forced himself to open his eyes more. "What time is it?"

Mike glanced at the clock. "Quarter after eight."

"Hmm. Should get up. Need to eat, then get ready to meet Billy."

"Oh," Mike replied with disappointment.

James glanced back at Mike and felt some sympathy. "What? Do you still have spunk in that tank of yours?"

Mike reached down to his hard-on and gave it a couple of strokes, which drew James' eyes to what he was fondling. "Seems there is."

“Insatiable,” James stated as if perturbed, but his slight grin said otherwise. “Maybe, if you’re good and get up to make coffee and toast while I throw these sheets in the washing machine, I’ll entertain letting you shower with me.”

“And I’ll suck your cock,” Mike added.

James wiped a hand over his eyes while laughing. “You’re too much.”

Mike shook his head. “No, you’re too much. For now. But I’ll learn how to swallow it all.”

James shook his head and pretended to snarl. “Go put some bread in the toaster and start the coffee.”

“If that was a yes to cock-sucking, I’ll have your coffee and toast ready right away!” Mike joked, jumping out of bed and hauling his bare ass into the kitchen, leaving James to snigger at his exiting nakedness.

Once the coffee was done and the toast was ready, Mike was surprised when James emerged from the bedroom still undressed. It was a pleasant surprise that James would indulge in sharing breakfast nude.

The two sat on counter stools side-by-side, eating their food and drinking their beverages. They didn’t talk. They just touched each other’s arms and pressed each other’s bare legs together. Once done, James took the dishware and utensils to the sink and deposited them. He turned and saw that Mike had been watching his every move.

“Your ass cheeks look so nice in motion,” Mike observed.

James smirked. “Full circle. I believe that’s what you admired when you first saw me

on stage.”

“It was. But it’s so much better when they aren’t covered.” Mike drooled. “And that huge dick—wow. I like watching that sucker swing when you’re walking.”

James strode to the other side of the counter, faced Mike and leaned his arms across to take Mike’s hands in his. “It’s official. I slept with a voyeur. A very perverted, relentless voyeur. But glad you enjoyed the show. How about we brush our teeth and take that shower now? Billy’s sweet, but he gets impatient if you keep him waiting.”

Mike nodded and stayed in place until James circled around the counter so they could leave the kitchen together. In the ensuite, James handed Mike a wrapped, unused toothbrush and the tube of toothpaste, then walked over to the toilet to relieve himself. While Mike brushed, he watched his man taking a piss, and he found the intimacy domestic and heartwarming. When he noticed James giving him a side-eye, Mike decided to refrain from sharing the in-love couple part of his thinking. “Kind of hot,” he mumbled with a mouthful of toothpaste and brush protruding from his lips.

James snickered, shaking his cock to drain any remaining drops. “Like I said in the kitchen...”

James bumped Mike with his arm to give him room at the vanity so he could wash his hands. He took his own toothbrush and began to brush his teeth.

Mike spit into the sink and washed his mouth, then looked back at James. “I can’t help it, James. You’re the guy I’ve always dreamed of being with.” Mike caught James’ reflection in the mirror, and he could tell there was sadness and a bit of retreat. Mike decided to turn his statement into a joke. “I mean, who wouldn’t have pictured a dick like yours on their fantasy man?”

James seemed to relax and rolled his eyes. Mike moved to the can and let loose his

own stream of pee, finishing as James completed brushing and gargling.

Mike took it upon himself to open the glass door to the shower and turn on the hot water. He then held out a hand to James, inviting him to join. Under the hot spray, James followed through on his promise to Mike, letting the man relieve him orally before they washed each other.

Once they had dried off and dressed, it was time for them to leave the apartment and part ways. Mike turned James around at the doorway, pressing him against the frame. “I need to kiss you one more time, James. Please.”

James nodded, falling into Mike’s arms. The two kissed with passion until James pulled away a couple of minutes later. “Mike, I have to go.”

“I know.” Mike frowned. He rested his forehead against James’, closing his eyes. “Please don’t make me wait another week to see you, James.”

James was quiet. Mike opened his eyes to receive a nod that appeared more like uncertainty.

“Let’s go,” James whispered.

Chapter Thirteen

James and Billy ventured through multiple stores throughout the jewelry district, passing on almost every ring because of price. Billy's limited budget didn't match what he thought was suitable for Nadia.

When they neared a pawn shop, James suggested they peek inside. Though Billy was reluctant to buy his girlfriend a second-hand ring, he acquiesced, saying it was better to get something nice than something new and cheesy. James didn't love the sketchiness of the place, but they did have engagement rings. One of the rings caught the eyes of both brothers.

"That's beautiful," Billy whispered to James. James had advised before entering the store to avoid letting on that he wanted something so they'd have greater bargaining ability.

"It is," James concurred. "Based on what we've been seeing, this would be twice as much brand new."

"How do we know it's genuine?"

James shrugged, then walked to the counter to question the salesman. "The one my brother is looking at, is it a genuine diamond?"

"Yes, sir," the older man responded with a charlatan smile. "Purchase it today, and I'll knock off another hundred."

“We’ll buy today, with cash, if you knock off another five hundred dollars, and you write us a money-back-guarantee that an expert appraiser will value the ring at the price we paid or better,” James offered.

“Why not just hold a gun to my head if you want to steal it?” the owner barked.

“Okay. Come on, Billy. Plenty of other pawn shops,” James suggested.

“Fine,” the owner agreed with an irritated tone. “Since you’re paying cash.”

James smiled. “I’m sure we’ll be paying more than you paid for it, or you wouldn’t be agreeing to my offer. And if the price we’re paying is a steal, then you shouldn’t mind my appraisal conditions.”

“I know a guy who can do the appraisal...” the older man suggested.

“So do I,” James cut in, not trusting a reference from the owner. “I’ll be sure to bring along his credentials and the name of his reputable jewelry store with the appraisal, should it be necessary.”

“It won’t be, unless the guy who sold it to me swindled me,” the shop owner replied.

Once they had the ring and note in hand, James exited with Billy, smiling at his brother’s exuberance.

“I would never have thought to ask for that big of a discount on something that seemed so reasonable already,” Billy admitted.

“Well, not to be a kill-joy, but we do need to get it appraised to make sure that we still didn’t overpay.”

“It looks pretty, though, doesn’t it?” Billy asked, popping open the box to take another look as they were walking.

“Close that,” James ordered. “You’re begging for trouble.”

Billy sighed and put the ring box in his front pants pocket. “I hope she says yes.”

“Of course, she will,” James assured him, trying to slow his pace a bit so his much shorter brother didn’t have to jog to keep up. “You two were made for each other.”

His brother grinned and nodded. “I know. I think you and Mike are, too. Did you enjoy your Sunday with him?”

James started glancing at store window-fronts, nodding an assent without eye contact. “Sure.”

Billy grabbed his arm, forcing James to look at him. “What happened?”

James jerked his head back and gave his brother a quizzical look. “Nothing. Why?”

Billy shook his head. “After all these years, you still think I can’t tell when you’re withholding something? Why aren’t you gushing? God, please tell me it isn’t because you two didn’t fuck. Maybe he’s just following my advice to get to know you first.”

“Jesus,” James chastised, resuming their walking. “Can you try to remember we’re on a public street?”

Billy grabbed James’ arm once more and before he could object, Billy started to drag him across the avenue to an empty bus-stop bench. “Come on. I’m not walking any farther until you tell me what happened.”

Once they sat, James frowned and stared off at the graffiti-covered metal doors that were closed over some of the defunct store-fronts. “You’re a pain.”

Billy shrugged. “Uh huh. So, what’s wrong? Is he moving too slow for your taste?”

James scowled at his sibling. “You know, I’m tiring of your man-whore implications.” He huffed, then looked back at the steel doors. “And what makes you think we didn’t fuck? Not that it’s any of your business, but we did.”

“Oh.” Billy paused and absorbed the information, obviously worrying James would repeat his pattern of being a hit-and-run lover. “So, you fucked. It wasn’t good?”

James rested his elbow on the arm of the bench, then rested his chin on his fist, looking away from his brother. “It was good.”

“So, why aren’t you happy? You still like him, don’t you? Please tell me you aren’t thinking of dumping him now that you two got together.”

James quirked his head and pursed his lips. “It can’t go anywhere.”

“Why not?”

James’ eyes burned into his brother. “You know damn well why.”

Billy huffed and ripped a hand through his hair. “James, stop letting Dad control you!”

The sudden anger James felt had the blood pressing against the vein in his forehead. He was tired of people criticizing his fear of his father. They hadn’t experienced his wrath as James had. He bolted from the bench and started his way back across the street with Billy scrambling behind him. James picked up the pace. He knew Billy

would have to run to catch him, and he was thankful when his brother didn't try. James wanted time away from everyone trying to pressure him into something he knew would lead to disaster.

* * * *

Remorse was setting in as night fell.—James was sitting on his sofa, thinking about nothing and thinking about everything. He knew he should call Billy to apologize, but he didn't want to resume a conversation about Mike. And calling Mike was out of the question. He didn't want to give the man false hope. James had heard Mike whisper that he was falling for him before they fell asleep the night before, and he had chosen to pretend he was already in dreamland, unable to respond. He didn't do relationships—not even with Mike Cooper. James had started falling for Mike too, and he didn't want him to experience the inevitable eventual hurt.

The cell phone ringing jarred James from his worrying. He thought it might be Billy or Mike, but when he glanced at the screen, the display showed the call was coming from Mount Sinai Beth Israel Hospital. James thought about ignoring it, thinking it might be a solicitation for money. Troubled it could be something urgent, though, James picked up.

“Hello?”

“Is this James Vicksburg?” the voice on the other end inquired.

Still unsure if it was a money-grab call, James replied with skepticism, “Yes.”

“Mr. Vicksburg, I'm calling from Mount Sinai. You're listed as the emergency contact for William Vicksburg?”

James panicked, shooting upright on the sofa. “Yes. I'm his brother. Is he okay?”

“He will be. William is in the emergency room and he will be discharged shortly. He informed us he couldn’t call his girlfriend to take him home because she’s working. William has been medicated, and the hospital would rather he not leave without accompaniment. Would you be able to take him?”

“Oh my God,” James blurted. “Yes. What happened?”

“There was an incident. I’m not familiar with the details, Mr. Vicksburg. I work the desk and I wasn’t given notes from the physician who treated him. I’m sure your brother can fill you in. He’s a little banged up and, as I said, he’s been given medication to lessen the discomfort, but it’s made him a bit woozy. It’s the hospital’s policy not to let someone in his condition go unaccompanied, even by cab or Uber. We’d prefer a family member or friend take him. I should tell you that he fought us calling you, but he gave in when we refused to discharge him.”

James silently cursed himself, knowing Billy didn’t want James contacted because of their earlier argument. He felt sick. “He’s stubborn and might try to leave on his own anyway. Please keep him there. I’m coming over now. I won’t wait for a subway or a cab. I’ll run and be there in about fifteen or twenty minutes.”

Once the woman on the other end promised to help detain Billy, James grabbed his keys and jogged through the neighborhood for his destination. Tears welled up as he thought about how it was his fault that Billy was in the hospital. Whatever happened could have been prevented if he had stayed with him. The hospital employee had said Billy was a little banged up. James wondered what that meant, but hoped that it wasn’t too serious if Billy didn’t have to be admitted to the hospital for an overnight stay.

When James reached the emergency room, he scanned it quickly to find the admission counter and, in doing so, saw his brother sitting in the waiting room with his head bandaged.

“Billy!”

Billy looked over, revealing that he also had a small bandage over a swollen eye, his upper lip was cut and there was bruising pretty much everywhere. Billy’s arm was in a sling. He looked away from James, making James wonder if he did so because of embarrassment, sadness, lingering anger or all those emotions.

“You didn’t have to come,” Billy mumbled without making eye contact when his brother neared him. “I told them I would rest and leave on my own. I’m fine.”

James rushed to sit next to him, encircling him with his arm. “You call this fine? What happened?”

Billy huffed a pained breath. “I got mugged. They took the ring.”

“Oh, Billy,” James gasped, then side-hugged his brother, causing him to wince with pain. James let go like his hand was scalding Billy’s skin. “I’m sorry. What are your injuries?”

“Nothing permanent,” Billy replied. “Had to have stitches above my eye. My arm has a mild sprain from the way they grabbed it. Everything else is just a bunch of cuts and bruises.”

James kissed the side of Billy’s head. “It’s my fault. I never should have left you. God, I’m such a shit. I’m sorry, Billy.”

Billy shook his head. “What were you going to do, escort me to my apartment door? They attacked me near my place. I would have been alone by that point anyway.”

“And they got the rest of your money? Your credit and debit cards? I can help you get them canceled,” James offered, desperate to be helpful.

Billy shook his head once more. "It's like I told the cop that came here, the strange part is, they only took the ring. I still have my wallet. There's still over two hundred dollars in it, thanks to the good deal you got on the ring." He looked down at his feet. "Not that the discount helps me now."

"Wait, they only took the ring? How did they even know you had that on you? Do you think they followed you from the pawn shop?"

"I don't know." Billy sighed. "If they did, they got on the same subway near the pawn shop, then they followed me for several blocks from the subway stop I left from. It seems like a lot for a ring they don't even know the value of."

"People who are connected to the pawn shop owner, maybe?" James wondered. "Perhaps it's worth more than we thought, and he wanted his ring back while pocketing your cash at the same time? I can go back there to see if it reappears in his showcase."

Billy shrugged. "I didn't think of that. I still don't get why they wouldn't take my wallet, too. And why did they have to beat me? I wasn't resisting. I'm not stupid enough to fight two guys that are way bigger than me."

"What did the cop say about that?"

Billy smirked. "He was a tool. I told him that it was two white guys, each six feet tall or more, and they both had husky builds. I told him that one of them sounded like he had an Italian accent. The cop told me there was a witness who said the assailants were black. I told him that the witness was wrong and he shrugged. He told me that because of the discrepancy, I shouldn't get my hopes up that they'll find these guys because they had no idea who they should be looking for."

"That's bullshit," James spat. "You saw them and heard them up close. Why can't

they take your description of them and at least use that?"

"I asked him about security cameras in the area," Billy continued. "He claimed he had already checked that and they weren't operational at the time of the attack."

James believed the cop was giving Billy the runaround, no doubt figuring that the theft of a ring with unknown value wasn't worth their time investment. He couldn't understand how the police could have already checked all the security cameras, questioned a witness and come to the hospital to interview Billy.

"Come on. Let's get you home," James suggested, taking hold of Billy's elbow and helping him rise. "Why wouldn't you call me?"

"I told you. I'm fine," Billy muttered.

"No, you're not," James countered. "Billy, they said you've been given medication that could make you vulnerable if you left on your own. Jesus, do you want someone else to attack you and take the rest of your money?"

Billy let James shoulder him as they exited the building. "James, I saved for over a year for that ring," Billy cried, once they were in the open air. Tears were flowing now, and he leaned into James' larger body for comfort.

James knew there was nothing he could say to resolve that issue. Instead, he continued kissing the top of Billy's head, noticing some of the locks of hair were stiff and discolored from dried blood. "Come stay at my apartment. I don't want you to be alone tonight."

"I'll be all right," Billy said with uncertainty, choking on some nasal drip and wiping his eyes.

“It wasn’t a request,” James answered. “I don’t want to be alone tonight either.”

Once James hailed a cab, he helped his wounded brother into the backseat and cradled him in his arm for the short duration home. Billy drifted into sleep on the ride as the effects of the sedatives kicked in. At the stoop of his apartment, James maneuvered Billy from the car the way he’d help an intoxicated friend, guiding him up the front steps, then up the inner staircase to the floor of his apartment. Inside James’ home, Billy emerged from his drug-induced fog a bit, asking if he could sleep on James’ bed. James stroked Billy’s hair and nodded, leading him into the bedroom. He took off Billy’s shoes then tucked him in, figuring one night of Billy sleeping dressed was better than James injuring him further by trying to remove clothes.

James was pulling an extra blanket and pillow from his linen closet to make up the sofa for himself when his phone buzzed. He looked to the screen and saw the incoming text had been from his father. It informed him that the patriarch wished to talk to him in the morning.

Wiping a hand over his face in frustration, James dropped to the couch and punched keys, typing that Billy had been attacked and he needed to stay with him.

His father responded that he was aware of what happened and that Billy would be fine, still demanding a meeting in the morning. Before James could protest, his father texted that a driver would be at his door at seven in the morning, and that he’d be sure to return him to the city on time for James’ theater rehearsal.

“How do you know he’ll be fine, you son of a bitch?” James yelled at the phone, as if his father could hear him. “You haven’t even talked to us!” James flung the cell to a nearby chair, vowing to ignore his father’s request. Seconds later, he knew he’d meet with his father. It had been a summons, and the driver was going to show up regardless of whether James protested. James imagined there might be added muscle to force James’ compliance.

James retrieved the phone and texted Nadia to explain that Billy had been mugged and beaten, and he asked her if she could be at his apartment before seven in the morning to stay with Billy. She called back right away, alarmed at what had transpired, but promised James she would be there. James hadn't mentioned the engagement ring so as not to disclose Billy's intent to propose.

He peeled off his shirt and pants, and grabbed a blanket for cover. The awful taste of the day still lingered in his mouth, but his usual nightly teeth brushing required energy he didn't have. Instead, he stared at the darkened ceiling with tears rolling down his cheeks.

* * * *

James let Nadia into the apartment at six-forty-five a.m., whispering to her that Billy was still sleeping. She tip-toed into the bedroom and curled up beside her man, crying when she saw his bruised and broken body. James whispered a thanks for her help, gave her the doctors' medication instructions then went to the front stoop to wait for his ride. He knew keeping his father waiting would make the meeting even more unpleasant.

James was surprised that the car had only a driver when it arrived. James figured that his father must have guessed he'd make the trek without a fuss. James wondered if his father respected his obedience or if James' lack of pushback was just another weakness in his father's eyes.

Once they arrived at the Hudson Valley mansion where his father resided, James was submitted to the usual body-search for weapons or concealed recording devices. James hated that his father treated him and Billy like every other visitor to the home, as people who couldn't be trusted.

"The prodigal son arrives," Charles commented as James was deposited by a security

person at the entryway of Charles' office. "Well, come in. Sit down. If you want to be back in time for your rehearsal, don't dilly-dally."

James didn't bother greeting his father. He didn't know why he had been summoned, but he was certain it wasn't for father-son fun time. He took the seat on the other side of Charles' desk, staring at the older man with what he hoped to be an unreadable expression. "Billy was still resting when I left the apartment, in case you were curious as to how your son is doing after being brutally attacked."

His father sighed with impatience. "Stop being so dramatic, James. I texted you last night that I know he is fine."

"How did you know that, Father? The hospital can't disclose his medical information to you unless he authorizes them to do so," James pointed out. "You're no longer listed for either of us as an emergency contact."

His father pursed his lips. "James, when will you learn that I have connections everywhere? In this case, the police officer who responded to the call notified me of how William is doing."

James nodded with disdain. "Just how much of the NYPD is in your back pocket, Father?"

Charles grinned. "Enough. And you two may as well forget about someone solving the crime. It's buried."

"Why?"

"Because I want it to be," Charles responded with a matter-of-fact tone. "James, if you're upset that William was beaten, you have nobody to blame but yourself. I told you there would be consequences for you continuing to see that ballplayer."

James gasped. He realized with a wave of nausea that his father had Billy beaten because of James' relationship with Mike. "But Mike and I are just friends."

Charles slammed his hand down on his desktop. "Don't lie to me on top of defying me. I had people watching your apartment. Male friends don't share their spoons of ice cream with each other. They don't touch each other the way you two touched. And unless one is drunk beyond awareness, they don't spend an entire night in the other's one-bedroom apartment."

"You had Billy beaten?" James asked, even though he had already figured that out. He just wanted to hear his father admit to his vile behavior.

"Don't blame me," Charles replied. "It wouldn't have been necessary if you had listened to me."

James tried not to tear up from the guilt. "It wasn't necessary at all! If you wanted to take your rage out on someone, why didn't you have them beat me? Billy didn't do anything."

"James, contrary to what you may think, I'm not a monster. If I had had you smacked around, you would have had to pull out of your show. Nobody wants to watch a lead actor wearing bandages and sporting a fat lip, now, do they? I'm not trying to keep my boys from making a living. A bruised face won't affect your brother's ability to perform his menial bartender job. More importantly, I'm guessing William taking your punishment will do more to keep you in line than anything I could have done to you."

"How do you live with yourself?" James' voice cracked. "He can't even afford the medical bills."

"Don't start blubbering, James. I know it may be a lot to ask of someone who gives

their body to another guy to then act like a man, but how about you give it a try? William will heal just fine. Instructions were clear that he wasn't to suffer permanent or serious injuries. As for his bills, he's still on my insurance until he's twenty-six years old, remember? Since you're no longer covered by me, I considered that as well. As I said, I ensure punishment is administered in a way that doesn't cause too much hardship for either of you. You'd think you'd be grateful."

"Grateful? Billy had to go to the emergency room. He's your son!" James cried.

"And he's your brother. If you care about him, stop putting him in harm's way. I told you that the beating was because of you. But you're right that he is my son, which is why I have a responsibility to steer him right. I had to stop that ridiculous notion he had of marrying that...girl. Taking the ring should stall that idea for a while. It will take him a long time to save the money to buy another. By then, I hope he'll have come to his senses," Charles explained. "The fact that you needed to be set straight—pardon the pun—provided an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Or, in this case, one stolen stone." James' father grinned at his play on words.

James was taking deep breaths, squeezing his knees so hard he thought his knuckles might pop through the skin that covered them. "How did you know about the ring?"

Charles laughed without glee. "Again, do you think you boys do anything without my knowledge? The better question is, why were you accompanying and helping him? What were you thinking? He's too young to get married. William is incapable of taking care of himself, let alone a family."

"And the fact that she's biracial had nothing to do with your objections, huh?" James spat.

"That doesn't help," Charles stated without shame. "You're running out of time to have children, James. If, God forbid, William is the only one of my sons to carry on

my name, I'd like it to be with someone other than her. Her race isn't the worst part. If she came from a strong, reputable family, I could tolerate the marriage."

"Her parents are wonderful," James shot back. "Far better than you were at raising kids."

Charles sighed, signaling he was tired of trying to reason with a son he viewed as ignorant. "James, you've always confused a doting parent with a good parent. I know lots of people who indulged their kids then wondered why the ingrates turned into drug addicts or deadbeats. If it weren't for your mother and other terrible influences in your life, you would be far more successful. I should have done more to guide you. That's why I keep trying to help, even if it doesn't seem like it to you. You don't need to like me. My job is to make you a better man, not to be your friend."

James rolled his eyes with disbelief, but his gesture was ignored by his father, who continued. "Unlike William, the literal runt of the litter, you had—and still have—promise. You're handsome—very much so. Those may be the only good genes your mother passed to you. If I looked like you and had your ability to charm, I'd have made it to the Oval Office. If you turn your life around, it could still happen for you."

"What are you talking about? I don't want that!"

His father shook his head. "When are you going to get tired of being trod on, son? You want me to stop controlling you, then show me you're capable of directing your own destiny in a way that makes me proud. This singing and acting garbage...if you persist with it, then at least use it to build a fan-base you can leverage later to run for a political office. That possibility has kept me from interfering with your current musical production because, despite its hateful commentary about people in my party, you have a chance to win the top award—a Tony, is it?" Charles waited for a response but received nothing other than a look of surprise. "If you win, James, then

you have power in your field, right? Won't it allow you to demand better parts, more money? Maybe then you'll understand what I mean. Being the man with the power is everything, James. Without it, you're groveling for scraps. With it, you decide who gets them and who doesn't."

"It's not my place or anyone else's to play God," James chastised.

"Bullshit," his father snapped back. "Men have played God since they learned how to fight. And you know what, James? The masses crave it. They want to follow someone they believe is divinely inspired, blessed with the strength and will to make the decisions that affect their lives. It's a relief for them not to live with the consequences of making those decisions themselves. Most people are followers, and if they see you as the man to lead them, you can say or do anything and their support remains unwavering."

"I have to go," James said, starting to rise from the chair.

"Sit down!" his father bellowed. James dropped his butt back onto the seat. "If you fail to take what you want, someone with less ability will step over you to claim it. You'll be in the muck with everyone else. I have lower expectations of William, which is why I haven't pushed him as hard. But James, you're wasting the gifts you were given. Now you have a chance to change the course of your life. Win that Tony and get the fame and accolades that come with it. Down the road, you can parlay that notoriety into a political career, like Reagan and Trump did. As a bonus, that will attract a different type of woman than the ones you've fraternized with. And for God's sake, if you must indulge your sick attraction for men, wait until you're married with a family and have a successful political career. Then, like half the politicians in this country, you can do as you please and threaten to destroy anyone who tries to spill your truth."

"I can't even believe you're saying this. You hate my political views. Me being a

politician would be your worst nightmare,” James snarled.

“You’re wrong,” Charles replied. “My greatest fear is our name being forgotten. We could be a dynasty, James. So, you’d be a politician with different views than mine. Who cares? If I thought I had to change my position on issues to stay in power, that’s what I’d do.”

James decided to scuttle the discussion of politics, knowing it would be a debate he couldn’t win. No matter how much he rejected the notion, his father wouldn’t relent. “Why did you bring me here?”

Charles sighed. “Let me spell it out for you more clearly. The first thing I want you to do is call it quits with that worthless underwear model. If nothing else, I would think you’d be smart enough to see he’s using you. If he’s just ‘come out’ as you people call it, then what makes you think he’ll want to settle for only having had one man in his life? You’re his experimental toy, and you’re letting him play with you. If this becomes public later in life, you won’t be able to deny the homosexual liaison you had with him. It’s bad enough I had to cover up your last tryst with a homo. To make things worse, you’ll be a joke when he leaves you for someone even younger. And mark my words, James—he will. If I know you, you think this is love. For him, you’re just a mouth, an asshole and a new set of parts that interest him.”

The comment wounded James, and he realized it showed on his face when his father removed his eyeglasses and pinched the bridge of his nose in apparent frustration at James’ sensitivity. The senator put the glasses back on and sighed. “As you know, I’m up for re-election this fall, and I don’t need my base questioning why I can’t control my own son’s deviant behavior. Allowing you to star in that woke musical is bad enough.”

“Of course, it’s about you,” James shot back. “You don’t care about whether I get hurt.”

“On the contrary. I do care. In fact, I wish very much he would hurt you right now and be done with the inevitable. Then, you could move on,” Charles argued. “But what I’d like a whole lot better is for you to beat him to it. You’d leave with your dignity intact, providing you don’t tell him that you’re breaking up with him because of me. That would just make you weak and pitiful in his eyes. Be the man who tells him you’re done playing with him. You think I’m mean, but you’re the one who forces me to use a stick. James, I’d much rather use a carrot. Once you’re done with this Mike Cooper mistake, I can help you. I could use my money and connections to influence votes in your favor for the Tony award. From there, we can accomplish so much together.”

James’ face heated with anger and angst. “Don’t interfere with the voting. I don’t want to win like that.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? It doesn’t matter how you win. Nobody will know what happened behind the scenes when you take the stage to accept your statue. If you don’t influence votes, then someone else will. James, you can’t win if they’re all playing the game and you’re sitting in the bleachers watching.”

James dropped his head to his hands. He didn’t want to believe everyone else was as jaded as his father. But one thing had rung true to him. James knew he was powerless, and it made him want to scream in anger. Collecting his emotions, he raised his head and whispered, “I will break up with Mike if you leave Billy alone.”

“Of course,” his father answered. “I’m not the one who’s trying to be unreasonable, James.”

“And please stay out of my business,” James added. “No influencing votes. I’d rather never win than win unfairly.”

Charles gritted his teeth. “Fine. Stay a loser, James. Just like your brother. No wonder

you two are so close.”

James sucked in the air, then blinked hard to keep a tear from falling. “Are we done? Can I go now?”

“Go. If you don’t want additional punishment, break up with that degenerate no later than tomorrow,” his father warned. “I’ll expect to hear back from my men that it’s taken care of.”

As James was about to exit, his father said, “Give my regards to William.”

Chapter Fourteen

Nadia had requested time away from work to tend to Billy. Knowing his brother was being cared for was how James managed to plow through his rehearsal, physical therapy and evening performance. Throughout the show, he had to remind himself that some of the audience members were seeing it for the first time, and he had to put his worries aside so he didn't disappoint. Nevertheless, he messed up his lines twice and almost brought down a co-star with the wrong dance move. James was embarrassed to take a bow at the show's conclusion, knowing he wasn't worthy of the standing ovation the crowd still awarded him. After most performances, the cast would mingle backstage and share some laughs. This night, James scurried back to his dressing room, wanting to escape the humiliation, the memory of his father's lecture and the thought of breaking up with Mike.

"Knock, knock." James turned to see who had spoken from the hallway outside his dressing room door. He returned a weak smile when it registered that it was his co-star, Emily Hunt. James could see the concern in her eyes, and it reinforced for him that he had been as bad on stage as he had feared.

"Hey."

"Can we talk for a minute?" Emily was still in the sexy outfit she wore when she portrayed the president's mistress. James had been pleased when she had been cast in the role. Emily had many stage credits under her belt, was very talented and was prettier than many of the other women with whom he'd worked. She didn't have a big ego, and she had befriended James from the start, even though many of the other actors kept a polite distance because of his last name. He was thankful that he and

Emily shared the same agent and publicist team, as it made it easier for them to bond over common experiences. At one point, James had even contemplated asking her out, but he needed a friend at work and he didn't want to jeopardize losing the one he had if the relationship went sour.

"I was just heading out," James apologized. "My brother is staying at my place. He was mugged and assaulted last night, and..." James cursed under his breath, tears stinging the corners of his eyes. "Emily, I'm sorry I wasn't very good tonight. I let everyone down."

The actress walked into his room, closing the door behind her to allow James his privacy. She didn't ask him questions as she pulled him into a hug to let him cry. "Shh. You didn't let anyone down, James. The audience didn't even notice the mistakes. I promise. You covered them like a pro."

Once he regained his composure, he blinked away the last tears and straightened. "Sorry about that. It's been a rough couple of days."

"I'm sorry about your brother. Will he be all right?"

James nodded. "Yeah. He's a tough little fucker." He let out a melancholy laugh, and she joined with a similarly toned one.

"Did they catch who did it?"

James sank back down on the single chair in his space. "No."

Emily tried out a small, encouraging smile. "Well, I'm sure he'll never see them again."

James dropped his head, wishing that was true, but knowing that depended on his

actions going forward. “This constant pressure is unbearable.”

He saw Emily drop to her knees, squeezing herself between his legs. She looked up at him with caring, and it restarted a tear at the corner of his eye. James was embarrassed by his emotion, and it made him recall his father’s accusation that he wasn’t much of a man.

“What’s going on, James? What do you mean? This is more than your brother being attacked, isn’t it?” James remained motionless, regretting his careless comment. “James, everyone here sees how sad you are. The fact that you give such an amazing performance every night, so full of life and confidence, doesn’t jibe with how you are off stage. People want to reach out, but they’re afraid to overstep. Everyone cares about you.”

James was shocked that the reason they kept their distance was because they were trying to be respectful. “I thought they didn’t want to get close to me because of my father, figuring I’m cut from the same cloth.”

Emily’s eyes widened. “Oh, James, no. How could you be like your father and still star in a show with a message like this one has? They admire you, knowing what you’re doing must piss off your father. We can see that you’re nothing like him—or at least nothing like his image. You’re always kind to everyone. I told them how I see you give food to the homeless guy out front every day.” James blushed. He didn’t realize anyone had been watching. It had become a routine for him to bring some of his homemade food to the poor old guy named Hal. The two had even started conversing about which dishes James made better than others. James felt guilty that on Mondays when the theater was dark, Hal could be going without food.

“Thanks,” was all James could murmur in response.

“You’ve almost seemed happy the last couple of weeks,” Emily continued. “I thought

maybe you met someone. Then, today, you came in and I could tell right away that the joy was gone. So, I'll ask again. This isn't just about what happened to your brother, is it?"

He wanted to share. He wanted a friend who would tell him he would be okay. "I wish I could talk about it, Emily. I'm not trying to shut people out. It's just, the less people know, the safer they are."

"Maybe you need to let others help you sometimes, the way you help the old man out front. James, there's nobody here but us. We're safe. Trust me not to do something stupid with what you tell me. I think you should get it off your chest."

James contemplated her words, then rose from the chair and offered it to her. "If you mean that, then you should make yourself comfortable. There's a lot to tell."

She took the seat, bracing the arms as if awaiting an electrocution. James paced and she let him wander about the room until he was ready to speak.

"My father had his goons beat up my brother," James blurted. He turned to see Emily gasp and let her mouth drop open. She remained silent, though, knowing there was more. "My father told me everything this morning. He did it to hurt Billy and me. Billy had just bought an engagement ring for his biracial girlfriend, and my father found out. He wasn't happy about it. They took the ring. The beating they gave him was to punish me for dating a man. My father knew Billy taking blows for me would hurt me more than if I had ended up in the emergency room myself."

"Oh my God, James. That's horrible!"

"What he did, or me dating a man?" James asked, unsure what or whom he could trust anymore.

“James, you know me better than that. Of course, I’m talking about what your father did. Nobody here would think anything of you dating a man. More than half the show’s male actors are in relationships with men. It’s Mike Cooper, the baseball player, isn’t it?”

That caused James a moment of panic. “What? Why would you say that?”

Emily smiled. “When he announced he’s bisexual, and it coincided with that photo of you and him at the Yankees game, you seemed happy for the first time. It made some of us pay more attention the couple of times he came backstage to see you. Mike Cooper seemed like a man with a mission, and we were hoping that mission was bringing some happiness into your life.”

James wiped his still-damp face. “Please don’t tell anyone, Emily. I’m breaking up with him anyway.”

“Why? Maybe your father will come around.”

“Having Billy beaten wasn’t an aberration. In the past, my father had me institutionalized for bad-mouthing him in an interview. He financially destroyed a man that had the bravery to date me a couple of years ago. When I first started this show, my father told me I had better not use interviews to criticize him or his party, or he’d use his connections to have the show shut down. If people wonder why I don’t speak out against him, that’s why. He’d hurt you. He’d hurt anyone he deems to be a threat to his interests.”

“James, I had no idea...”

“I should never have taken this part. Everyone I meet and everything I touch is endangered by my presence. I just don’t know what to do anymore, except I know I need to break up with Mike.” James grimaced, looking down at the floor. “I can’t let

my father hurt him or anyone else I care about. It's killing me, of course. I like him so much, and the thought of crushing him by telling him I don't want him is making me sick."

"Why wouldn't you tell him the truth?"

James frowned. "Because if he knows the truth, he'll try to fight my father. Mike's that kind of guy. He wouldn't win, though, and there'd be lots of people who'd get hurt during the battle."

Emily shook her head, also looking down at the floor, obviously frustrated she had no advice to offer. "James, I'm so sorry. Do you think maybe you could go to the police?"

James barked a sarcastic laugh. "The police? I don't know who in the NYPD is dirty and who isn't. They've already turned a blind eye to my brother's assault. You don't understand—he has his fingers in with bad cops, organized crime and every dirty politician sitting in office."

"What if you went public with everything?" Emily suggested.

He shook his head. "It would be my word against his. The word of a son who was once committed for mental health issues versus the upstanding politician. I didn't realize it when he first had me admitted as punishment, but he set the stage to stave off future allegations I'd make. His quack physician friend documented that I had a persecution complex and imagined horrible things my father was doing." It occurred to James that Emily might now wonder if the doctor was right. "Emily, I don't have a mental illness. Everything I told you is true."

Emily nodded. "I believe you. But I do see how he could spin it and make things worse for you."

James walked over to his co-star and pulled her into a side-hug. “Thanks for listening, Emily. I know it doesn’t change anything, but you were right. It was a relief to let someone know. I can’t even tell my brother everything. There’s a part of Billy that still hopes our father loves him. It would devastate him to know he’d been beaten by some of Father’s thugs.”

“Jesus, James. Won’t Billy call you out for splitting with Mike Cooper? He must know you like the guy. He’s going to think you and Mike should stand up to your father to get what you want,” Emily reasoned.

“I thought about that,” James acknowledged. “After I’ve broken up with Mike, I’ll tell Billy that Mike dumped me. It’s like you said—if Billy knew the truth, he’d try to help me by telling Mike the real reason I broke up with him. Then I’d be right back to Mike trying to fight my father and Billy being unaware of the danger it puts him in. The only way this works is for Billy to believe Mike left me because he’s interested in someone else. That will bring out Billy’s protective streak and desire to break Mike’s nose, but he wouldn’t, knowing it would upset me. Absent the ability to wreak physical violence on Mike, Billy will just go silent on him. That would leave Mike none the wiser about the true reason I left him.”

“I hate this,” Emily moaned. “All the secrets you need to hold to protect everyone around you. It isn’t fair.”

James nodded. “Well, they’re not secrets from everyone anymore. Thanks for listening.”

Emily pulled him into another hug and kissed his cheek. “Somehow, some way, I believe things will get better for you, James. They must. I hope I’ll still know you and be friends with you when they do. I want to see you have the peace you deserve.”

James hugged her back. “Thanks, Emily.” He wanted that too, but figured the only

way it would happen was if his father died. And try as he might, every time he wished for that, those hopes were washed away by a larger wave of guilt and remorse for harboring such hateful thoughts.

* * * *

James had been able to arrive home from his Tuesday night performance in time to have a late dinner with his brother and Nadia. He grimaced as Billy struggled to chew scrambled eggs and toast. The sight made him more determined about what he'd need to do the next day.

When James awoke the next morning to head to rehearsal, Nadia was making coffee, but signaled that Billy was asleep in the bedroom. They both figured his body needed the rest, so they went about their morning preparations with little noise or conversation. That was fine with James, as he was strung tight thinking about how Mike had asked if he could visit James in his dressing room at the end of the matinee. He knew that would be the time he would need to tell Mike it was over, and he had to do so without emotion to convince Mike he wasn't being pressured to do so. Tears could only be shed before and after Mike's visit.

James made it through rehearsal and physical therapy on autopilot, then managed an error-free matinee, albeit one with less passion than he could typically muster. Even the crowd must have felt the lower energy, as the standing ovation felt obligatory and polite rather than enthusiastic. He hoped that after he spoke with Mike, he could focus on his work and give an evening performance that the audience deserved.

Once James was settled in his dressing room, he took deep breaths. He had to view himself and Mike as two characters in a play. James needed to deliver the acting performance of his life. He thought he had psyched himself into the right frame of mind, but something in his stomach still took a major drop when Mike knocked on the doorframe. James dared himself to look over. The handsome man was smiling

with a basket in hand.

“Hey, gorgeous,” Mike greeted. “Thanks for squeezing me into your day.”

Mike entered the room and pulled the door closed behind him, then winked conspiratorially. Before James could say anything, Mike had rushed over to plant a sweet kiss on James’ lips. Once Mike pulled back, James shuddered, trying to muster the strength to do what needed to be done. “Mike, what’s in the basket?”

Mike grinned more broadly. “I made you something to eat. I know the show taps a lot of energy and you don’t eat properly on Wednesdays because of the two shows.” James frowned.

“Don’t worry,” Mike assured him. “I know you think I brought junk food. I do know how to make healthy stuff. This is my mother’s amazing recipe for turkey salad, using non-fat Greek yogurt. I put it on whole-grain bread.” Mike beamed. “I made the bread. It came out tasty, if I say so myself.”

James turned his head away, wincing as hard as he could to fight the tears from forming. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“What’s wrong?” Mike asked. “It’s okay if you don’t want it. I won’t be hurt. Well, maybe just a little, but I should have asked you first. Do you hate turkey?”

James spun back to face Mike. “Mike, this isn’t going to work between us.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry,” James mumbled, looking down at the floor, avoiding the hurt that he had glimpsed in Mike’s eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Mike sputtered. “Did I do something wrong? Am I coming on too strong?” There was a long moment of silence, so Mike plowed forward. “James, we’ve been having a good time, haven’t we? Whatever I did, we can talk about it and I can adjust.”

James shook his head, still refusing to look Mike in the eye. “There’s nothing to adjust. There’s nothing you did.” Another long moment of silence ensued.

“James, look at me,” Mike pleaded. James did not. “James, if you’re breaking up with me, at least have the courtesy to say it to me eye-to-eye.”

James raised his eyes to look at Mike’s face, which was crestfallen instead of angry. God, he’d rather see Mike furious. “Mike, I want to break up with you.”

Mike swallowed hard and his eyes watered. “May I ask why?”

Trying to psych himself again that he was an actor in a play, James hardened his expression before responding. “You were a crush. What can I say? I liked your poster when I was eighteen. Being with you was fulfilling a horny teenager’s dream at the age of thirty-four. But that’s all it was, Mike. The sex was great, but you want more. I don’t. I warned you days ago, I don’t do relationships.”

Mike shook his head. “If this is about your father...”

“It isn’t,” James snapped.

“James, please don’t do this,” Mike pleaded. “I don’t believe this was just sex to you. You and I connected. Our calls, our text messages, our time together—you were into me. I know you were.”

“It was fun,” James replied. “And now it’s not.”

Mike gasped and James wondered how Mike could retain so much moisture in his eyes that it was visible without any of it leaking down his face. “James, I’ve been falling for you.”

James couldn’t maintain his gaze any longer. He looked at a mark on the wall behind Mike’s head. “I wish you weren’t. They call it falling for a reason. Someone always gets hurt. I didn’t want that for you. You’re a good guy. You should find someone who wants what you want.”

Mike stood silently for a few moments before speaking. “This is what you were thinking the other night when I woke to find you by the window, isn’t it?” James didn’t correct Mike. He figured Mike’s assumption would make it more believable that James wanted the breakup. “I understand. I’m sorry, James. I misread the situation.”

James dared a glance at Mike, and he noticed a single tear had escaped and trickled down his cheek. He watched the man he had idolized for two decades pick up the basket, walk to the door then pause. James knew he shouldn’t, but he found himself hoping Mike would turn around to protest and demand James give them a chance. Instead, Mike sighed, opened the door and walked out of his life.

Chapter Fifteen

It had been a couple of months since his last meeting with James, but Mike still followed news articles about the senator on the chance his son was mentioned. Each day, Mike searched online for James' name and, on one occasion, it reaped results. Mike found a news story that had hit the wires listing the year's Tony Award nominations. The article's headline was that the show that starred James, *The More Things Change*, was nominated for the most Tonys, including best musical. James' name was called out separately, as it was newsworthy that the son of a famous senator was nominated for best lead actor in a musical.

Despite the split, Mike was smiling that James made the cut. He hoped James felt pride for securing the votes to be nominated.

Mike tapped his fingers on the steering wheel as he pulled into the New York suburban mansion of Charles Vicksburg. He never thought he'd be in contact with a Vicksburg again—certainly not James' father. Mike wondered if the senator had alerted either of his boys that Mike was paying a visit. He hoped not. Mike didn't want them interfering with his plans.

Mike was surprised by how thoroughly he was searched by the security team before being led to the senator's palatial office. When the guard knocked on the closed door, the senator commanded they enter. Once they did, Charles Vicksburg shot Mike an unreadable stare, then signaled with the blink of his eyes that his security team member was to leave and close the door.

“Have a seat, Mr. Cooper. But don't get comfortable. I have a full schedule.”

Vicksburg waited for Mike to follow his orders, watching Mike as he sat on the chair on the opposite side of the desk. Mike projected a confident and fearless demeanor. From Charles' expression it was obvious he didn't like that.

"So, you got a hold of my Chief of Staff to let him know you had a business proposal that you were sure I'd be interested in, and that time is of the essence. Well, I have to say, you've piqued my interest—but keep in mind—my time is of the essence. Make it quick."

Mike tried a cocky grin. "Gosh, not even a question as to how your almost-son-in-law is doing first?"

Charles' face darkened with anger. "You were never close to being that, Mr. Cooper. It must be tough, getting so old that your team, your advertisers and even your lovers wish to retire you." Mike raised his eyebrow. "Yes, James told me he split with you, and I saw the news that your underwear sponsor dropped you."

"My lawyers think it's because of my sexual orientation," Mike mentioned without defensiveness.

"Perhaps. I guess you have nobody to blame but yourself. It's like I've said to James, if you like women too, why are you choosing to disgust people? His dumping you was one of my proudest moments as a father."

Mike refused the bait. "More than his recent Tony nomination?"

Charles barked a laugh. "People wasting their lives portraying fictitious characters, nominating other foolish people for doing the same? No. Of course, I hope he wins. If he chooses to continue his ridiculous career, he may as well get something that will help his earning power. But no, it doesn't make me proud, Mr. Cooper—any more than you should be proud that you made your money playing a child's game and

displaying your body to sell...banana hammocks.”

“Interesting tidbit. I never posed in jock straps or thongs.” Mike grinned, trying to show the senator’s derisions weren’t affecting him. “Well, not for ads, anyway. Your son seemed to enjoy seeing my ass, though.”

The senator seemed to be finding it harder to keep his cool. “Apparently, not enough. Why don’t you tell me why you’re here? You claimed that I would not regret this meeting. So far, you’re wrong.”

Mike stopped smiling, ready to play ball. “You have forty-percent ownership of the Cherry Hill Marksmen. I’ve always wanted team ownership.”

Charles’ eyes bugged out for a moment, then he laughed. “And I wanted to be president, but fate didn’t bestow that on me either. If you’re looking to buy from me, you’ve wasted your time. I’ll have security escort you out.”

“I’ll have sixty-percent ownership of the team within a week,” Mike stated before Vicksburg could press the button to summon his guard.

“What are you talking about? Stan Lyons owns the remaining sixty percent, and last time I checked, he wasn’t selling. Believe me, I’ve tried enough times to get his shares.”

“He promised to sell to me,” Mike responded. “We sign the papers next week to make it official.”

“Bullshit! Why would he sell to you?”

Mike shrugged. “Maybe because I know baseball and he’d be putting it in good hands? Maybe because he hates you and knows how much you wanted it?” Mike

enjoyed watching the senator's face contort with fury. "Or, maybe because he doesn't want me going to the feds with the photos that my private investigator took of him with underage girls."

"Lyons? You're lying," Vicksburg spat, but his eyes revealed he wasn't sure of his assertion.

"I'm not." Mike smiled. "If you don't believe me, you can call him. He'll tell you that he's selling to me. Oh, but don't mention that you know why. He gets a little testy about that part."

"You're an idiot," Charles shot. "You haven't signed the papers yet. I could blackmail him with that information now."

"I have proof. You don't. And I'm pretty sure if you hire your own investigator to get evidence, it would be too late. Seems Stan decided to end his dirty ways after he and I spoke. I'm sure he's deleted any incriminating evidence. I'm the only one with photos, and they're in a very safe place."

"What is this?" Vicksburg spat. "Are you coming here to shake me down now? I can assure you, Cooper, I'm not Stan Lyons. You threaten me for my shares of the team, and it won't end well for you."

Mike sat back in the chair and looked at his nails, showing he wasn't afraid of the man across from him. "I'm well aware of your tactics, Senator. Your son was very clear about them. You want the truth? I wasn't ever that interested in James. I used him so I could learn more about you. I may not have been with him long, but it was enough time for him to share all sorts of stories about Daddy."

The senator fumed. "That's all they are! Stories. James has mental health issues."

“No, he doesn’t,” Mike countered. “I was around him enough to know that. But you made sure that the first time he said anything about your underhanded dealings he was labeled as having a neurosis. It takes a special kind of coldness to find an unethical doctor to institutionalize your son just to shut him up.”

“If James told you that, he’s lying.”

“Come on, Senator. Your security team did everything but a cavity search on me—not that I’m complaining. The dark-haired guy is cute.” Mike enjoyed watching Vicksburg squirm with revulsion. “Point being, I’m not wired. Anything I would say you can dismiss as third-party rants repeating the delusions of your mentally ill son.”

Charles sneered back. “So, what are you trying to accomplish? If you know that I’d do that to my son, you should understand that I can do much worse to you.”

“I have no doubt,” Mike answered. “Maybe have me assaulted like what you did to your other son? Why was that again? Oh, right. He bought an engagement ring for a black girl.”

“That’s not why...” Vicksburg started. He took a large inhale of breath, then composed himself. “You should leave now.”

“But you haven’t heard my proposal yet,” Mike pressed. “As my new business partner, you should hear my thoughts.”

Vicksburg grimaced. “You won’t be my partner. I’ll stop this deal.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure how,” Mike mused. “Stan sure seems concerned about his reputation and his freedom. I don’t think you throwing cash his way is going to change his mind about selling to me. Whatever money you could give him won’t make watching the baseball games on his cellmate’s lap better, especially if he’s

worrying about getting shanked at every turn.”

“Careful, Cooper,” Vicksburg warned. “You may be the one who gets shanked before you can sign the papers. Not that I would have anything to do with it, of course.”

Mike grinned. “Of course not. After all, you can’t know what your crazy connections might do, right? And you are very well connected, according to James. Organized crime, the police, fellow politicians... But here’s the thing, Charles. Can I call you Charles?” He didn’t wait for assent. “Stan already communicated to his business associates and his family of his intent to sell to me. His lawyer is putting together the paperwork. I’ve informed my agent, my publicist, my business manager and my family. So, if something untoward were to happen to me between now and the signing, it would raise a lot of questions in those peoples’ minds, wouldn’t it? You should know that I have someone ready to go straight to the New York District Attorney with a statement that I feared for my safety once you were informed of the purchase.”

“What do you want?” the senator repeated.

“Like I said, I have a business proposition. I’m ready to sell you ten percent of my shares. We’d be fifty-fifty.”

Vicksburg sat quiet for a few moments, and Mike supposed the man was attempting to discover the angle Mike was playing. “Go on.”

“To make things more enticing for you, I’ll sign over twenty-percent ownership of my restaurant in mid-town, as well as twenty-percent ownership of the one I want to build next to the ballfield in Cherry Hill,” Mike continued.

“How generous,” Vicksburg quipped. “You keep telling me what you’ll do for me. So, what are you getting in return?”

“Your muscle and your connections,” Mike answered. “I want my restaurant competition bruised or eliminated. Right now, the Castalini family provides my mid-town location protection. Of course, I don’t have to tell you that’s their way of forcing me to pay a monthly invoice to prevent harm befalling my restaurant.”

Vicksburg shrugged. “I might have heard about their tactics.”

“I want protection from your team, free of charge, and I want them to lean in much harder on the restaurants around me,” Mike elaborated. “Could you make that happen?”

The senator didn’t respond.

“And when I’m building the new restaurant in Cherry Hill, I don’t want to pay the usual exorbitant contractor fees to get it done. You and I both know that a third of the costs go to mob associates. I want that fee eliminated. I want the same free protection you’ll give me for the mid-town establishment, as well as the same squeeze applied to area competition.” Mike was seeing no push-back, so he plowed on. “I want inspectors to look the other way at code violations, and I want special attention from the cops to keep the riff-raff away from my places of business.”

“You want a lot,” Vicksburg mocked.

“Maybe,” Mike acknowledged. “But since you’d own twenty percent, you’d have an ongoing incentive to make it happen.” He paused for effect. “You can make it happen, can’t you, Charles?”

After a long silence, Vicksburg nodded. “I can, but I’m not putting that in writing.”

“Of course not. It would implicate me as well. Anyway, I don’t need it in writing to know you’d follow through.” Mike smiled. “Like I said, it’s in your best interest to do

what's needed when you have twenty-percent ownership in the businesses."

"Twenty-five percent," Vicksburg pushed.

Mike snickered. "Don't be greedy. This is a generous offer where you give very little to gain a lot. On the record, you'll pay me for the extra ten-percent ownership of the team, and the twenty percent on the restaurants. We wouldn't want anything to appear suspicious to the IRS or the Department of Justice. I'll repay you off the books. I'm guessing you have some offshore bank accounts you use to hide money and evade taxes?" When the senator didn't respond, Mike understood that to be acknowledgment. "From there, any ongoing expenses related to the business dealings we discussed are on you. Do we have a deal?"

The senator made a steeple with his hands in front of his face, pondering. "Get the paperwork together. I want to sign the same day you get Lyons' shares."

Mike rose from the chair and reached over to shake his new partner's hands. "Charles, you may be the second Vicksburg man to give me an orgasm."

"Jesus," Vicksburg spewed, pulling his hand from Mike. "If we're going to be partners, no more talk about my son or the revolting things you've done with him. And don't go anywhere near him again."

"No problem," Mike assured him. "Been there. Done that." He winked lasciviously. "New territory to explore and plow."

"I suggest you leave," Vicksburg warned. "It will do you well to be a silent partner."

Mike chuckled and walked toward the door before turning back to the senator. "You know, once James finds out that you and I are in business together, he'll be upset. Do you think he'll cause a problem?"

Vicksburg smirked. “He might for a second. He’s like a cub. Sometimes, he tries to assert himself and take a swipe at me. Then he remembers how the hierarchy works when he gets swatted back harder. He won’t be an issue. I’ll make sure of it.”

Mike nodded. “Gentle swat this time, okay? I may have started the relationship to gather intelligence, but I did grow rather fond of him. If we’re in business together, I need to know you won’t hurt him.”

“He’s my son,” Vicksburg replied, sounding almost sentimental. “I know how much he can handle. You know, maybe I should tell him how this deal transpired. It might change the way he thinks—make him realize the men on pedestals, including the man he thought should be on one, are there by asserting their will. You may not believe me, but I care what happens to James, despite his failings. He’s still my son.”

“It’s up to you whether you tell him,” Mike replied. “But not until the deal is done. We don’t need him interfering.”

When Vicksburg nodded his agreement, Mike opened the door and was met by the dark-haired security guard. Mike eyed him from head-to-toe, then gazed back up his body again, winking and smirking. He glanced back at Vicksburg, who grunted with disgust, making Mike smile.

Chapter Sixteen

Mike waited for Billy to find where he and Maria were sitting in the NYC Public Library. Maria had texted Billy directions to the mostly secluded spot she had selected, but had led Billy to believe she would be alone. She had agreed with Mike that Billy wouldn't have come if he knew Mike was present. He was still angry with Mike because of how James had characterized his breakup.

When Billy entered the cavernous room, he scanned it and saw where she sat and gave her a small smile. His expression darkened, however, when he spotted Mike sitting next to her. Billy approached with a deliberate pace, but his expression showed a mix of anxiety as well as hostility.

"What's he doing here?" Billy rasped.

"Please, sit," Maria coaxed. "I'll explain everything to you."

Billy jerked the chair from the table in anger, scraping the legs across the marble floor and creating an echo that caused patrons' heads to turn. "Maria, how can you meet with him after what he did to James?"

"Billy..." Mike began.

"Shut up! I wasn't talking to you," Billy snapped, raising his voice as much as he could without disturbing others around him.

Maria placed her hand over Billy's to calm him. "Billy, please listen. I asked you to

come here so the three of us could meet unwatched by your father's henchmen. Mike and I have something important to tell you. But I must warn you, it will be painful to hear."

Billy's eyes showed momentary panic. "Did something happen to James? Is he hurt?"

"No, nothing like that," Mike interjected.

Billy darted his eyes back and forth between the two, then his jaw dropped when he reached a conclusion in his head. He shot visual daggers at Mike. "You can't be serious. You're dating Maria now?"

Maria began to choke on a cough as Mike tried to suppress a laugh.

"I'm old enough to be Mike's mother," Maria managed after clearing her throat. "What is wrong with you?"

Relief spread over Billy's face, followed by a scowl. "Well, you said you think he's attractive. Who knows what this animal would do?"

"He's not an animal," Maria scolded. "Do not talk about him that way."

"Maria, he dumped James for another person just as he and James were getting close. I'd call him something worse, but I'm trying to be civil," Billy fumed, turning to Mike. "Lucky for you we didn't meet outside. You may be bigger, but I'm younger and quicker. I'd like nothing more than to kick your cheating ass."

"Billy!" Maria chastised like a mother.

"It's okay," Mike stated, placing his hand on Maria's arm. "He doesn't know. I'm glad he cares so much about James." He returned his gaze to Billy. "I didn't dump

your brother. He broke up with me. James wasn't being truthful with you."

Billy's eyes clouded in confusion. "No. You're lying. Why would he make that up?"

"To protect you," Mike answered. "Billy, it's a long story. Just let me tell you what happened, okay? I'll answer any questions you have when I'm done."

"Why isn't James here to tell his side of things?" Billy pressed.

"Because we didn't invite him. I'm not sure he would want to see me," Mike explained.

"Hmm," Billy huffed, crossing his arms. "Because you did hurt him."

Mike shook his head. "I promise, I didn't. Please, let me explain." Once he saw Billy blink and keep his mouth closed, Mike took it as permission to proceed. "A couple of months ago, I went to see your brother after his matinee. I didn't know it at the time, but you had been assaulted a couple of days earlier. He never mentioned it. Instead, he told me that he didn't want to see me anymore. The truth is, I was shocked and hurt. I thought we had something good going, but he assured me it was one-sided."

"That's not true," Billy whispered.

"Unbeknownst to me at the time, James told you a very different version of what happened," Mike continued.

"But why?"

"Because Billy, when you were assaulted, it wasn't by two random men wanting to rob you. They were sent to attack you and to retrieve the engagement ring you had purchased. Their intent was to stop you from proposing to Nadia. The reason they

beat you was to send a message to James.”

“To James? What are you talking about?” Billy demanded.

“The men were sent by your father, Billy. Your father wanted to stop you from getting married, and he wanted James to know that you were beaten as punishment for him dating me. It was a warning to end it or things would get uglier,” Mike explained. Billy’s eyes went wide with disbelief and hurt. “I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. If you confront James about it, I’m sure he’ll come clean.”

“James knew?” Billy asked, his face contorting like he was trying to process the information.

“Your father summoned him to his house the next day to tell him.” Mike paused and saw a hint of remembrance in Billy’s expression. He realized Billy must have known about James’ trip to visit their father.

“But why wouldn’t he tell me?” Billy murmured. “I don’t understand.”

Maria put her hand back on Billy’s. “Puppy, he didn’t want you to know how cruel your father could be to you. He was protecting you, like he always has. James broke up with Mike the next day. He told Mike that he felt nothing for him because he feared if he was honest with Mike, Mike would insist they stand up to your father. But Billy, your father knows James’ biggest weakness. Your brother would never put you in harm’s way for his own happiness.”

Billy nodded as he absorbed the information, seemingly open to the plausibility of what he was hearing. “But even if he wanted to keep it from me that Father was behind my attack, he still could have told me the truth about his breakup with Mike. He could have said he was afraid of what Father would do, and it would have made sense to me.”

Maria shook her head. “Billy, you were pressing him to stop letting your father control him. Do you think James could trust that you would accept him walking away from Mike? You would have pushed him to fight for himself, and you might have engaged Mike to help. But Puppy, James knew things you didn’t. He knew how ruthless your father could be, and he saw with his own eyes the measures he was willing to take to get his way.”

Billy sank his head into his hands for a couple of moments. When he uncovered his face and looked to Mike, the expression of confusion had returned. “How do you know all this? If James made excuses to break up with you, then he didn’t tell you.” He looked over to Maria. “Did James tell you? Did you tell Mike?”

“No,” Maria replied. “I was in the dark, too. James would never have laid that burden on his family.”

“James told his co-star, Emily Hunt,” Mike clarified. “He requested that she not share the information, but she could see he was struggling. She told her agent, who happens to be your brother’s agent too. Emily thought it might be helpful for their agent to know in case James imploded from the pressure and the crap he was enduring.”

“And their agent called you?” Billy asked with an expression that showed he found that odd.

Mike chuckled. “No, of course not. But it turns out, James’ agent is very good friends with my agent, Bob Daly. Bob shared with me that my break-up with James became a topic of conversation during a golf outing. Once Bob found out what happened, he told me the whole story. He knew I was down in the dumps, and he wanted me to know that I hadn’t misread my relationship with your brother.”

“Oh,” Billy whispered. “So, that’s it? Why are you even telling me? James didn’t want me to know, so what gives you two the right to betray his wishes?”

Mike sighed. “Because that’s not the end of the story. In this very small world we live in, turns out my agent’s wife, Ginny, is good friends with the New York District Attorney, Alyson Hansen. Once Ginny learned of what your father had done, including how your father once institutionalized James for making disparaging comments in public about him, she felt obligated to report him to Ms. Hansen.”

“Shit,” Billy mumbled.

“And this is the part that you and James may never forgive me for. I can tell you that I did it because I care about you both and I thought it might be best.” He saw Billy was waiting without the need to interrupt, so he continued. “Hansen approached me to ask if I would participate in a sting operation to bring down your father.”

“What?” Billy gasped. He glanced at Maria and she nodded, confirming Mike’s statement. Billy gave Mike a look to carry on.

“Seems your father owns a portion of the Cherry Hill Marksmen. His business partner, Stan Lyons, owns a greater share. When we were together, James had shared with me that your father wanted all the shares. The D.A. and I thought we could play on that. We brought Lyons into the know about what we planned to do, and he agreed to let us convince your father that he was caught with underage girls by a private investigator I had hired. Lyons didn’t love that angle, but we assured him it was just a ploy to ensnare your dad and it would be made clear in any court, if we were successful, that there was no truth to the allegation and that Lyons cooperated to bring about justice. I used the lie to convince your father that I had blackmailed Lyons into selling me his shares.”

“Why? What does that have to do with his crimes?” Billy asked.

Mike continued, “It set the stage. I set up a meeting with your father to let him know I was his new partner. As expected, he wasn’t happy—at least not until I made him see

how he could profit. I used the information that James had shared with Emily to trick him. I told him I knew about his connections and that if he used them to protect my interests, I'd hand over ten percent more of the team, plus twenty percent of my restaurant businesses. He took the deal, acknowledging he has connections with organized crime, the police and fellow legislators. Your father wanted me to know that if I crossed him, it would not end well for me. He pointed out that if he could have one of his sons put in an institution and have his other beaten that he would have no qualms about doing something worse to me."

"Jesus," Billy muttered. Then he grimaced. "Shit, what good is any of that? It will be your word against his. I know you wouldn't have been allowed in his house while wearing a wire. He even has me and James searched before he talks with us."

Mike smiled. "I didn't need a wire. There was a hidden camera and mic in your father's office. Everything was captured and handed over to the District Attorney's office."

"How could anyone from outside bug the office without Father knowing?" Billy challenged. "It would be like getting into Fort Knox."

"True. That's why it was done by someone on the inside." Mike grinned. "I informed Ms. Hansen that we had an ally in the mansion." He shot Maria a small smile.

"Maria?" Billy gasped.

Maria grinned proudly. "They taught me how to set it up. I felt like I was in a spy thriller."

"This isn't funny, Maria." Billy gaped. "Who knows what he could have done to you? Still could, if he finds out you were involved."

Maria shrugged. “I am an old woman. It was worth the risk for my boys.”

Mike placed a reassuring hand on Billy’s arm. “He won’t know it was her. Maria has cleaned his house for years and she’s never crossed him. Knowing your father’s bigotry, I’ll bet he wouldn’t think she’s capable of setting up the equipment. There are lots of people on his staff that have access to the office. He’ll spend the rest of his life wondering which one betrayed him. Ms. Hansen promised the information wouldn’t be divulged, even to your father’s lawyers, as it isn’t relevant—all a grand jury needs to know is that the D.A.’s office was able to infiltrate and record your father.”

“But...”

Maria cut him off. “Billy, I know what you’re thinking. Yes, the D.A. knows my immigration status. In return for my cooperation, she isn’t contacting ICE. And Mike offered to hire me once I resign from your father’s residence. Mike is going to help me secure my green card and work my way towards American citizenship.”

“That sounds great, but won’t it appear suspicious to my father when you resign?” Billy asked.

“Why wouldn’t I resign? I assume that your father will be going to prison and losing most of his assets. All I need to tell him is that I will be looking for other opportunities. I’m sure me leaving will be the least of his worries. Of course, I won’t tell him that I’ll be going to work for Mike.”

Mike grinned at her. “Maria, I thought we agreed? You’ll be on my payroll, but you won’t be working. I think you deserve a nice retirement.”

Though Mike and Maria were smiling, Billy was biting his lip, still working through the possible consequences of his friends’ actions. “So, it will come out that my father

had me beaten? That he did horrible things to James and people he was close to?"

"I would think so," Mike affirmed. "Billy, neither you nor James should be ashamed. There wasn't much you could do, and I can't imagine decent people being anything other than empathetic for your situation. In fact, it's almost a blessing you and James were victims of your father's crimes, I am sad to say. Nobody will think you two were complicit or supportive. You can avoid the fate that Bernie Madoff's kids had to endure where people questioned whether they were involved."

Billy grimaced. "Yeah, I'm so lucky."

Mike nodded. "It's going to be tough as all this comes out, but at least you and James will be free from your father once and for all."

Billy scratched his head. "I wonder how James will handle hearing what you two did to entrap Father. Who's going to tell him?" Billy looked at each and from the change in his expression, it became clear when he realized the answer. "Oh."

Mike offered an empathetic half-smile. "He won't meet with me, Billy. You should talk to him as soon as possible. Ms. Hansen was kind enough to hold off on the indictment until you and James were given a heads up. The charges they can make stick right now are orchestrating an assault and robbery, as well as accepting a bribe to commit additional crimes. Of course, the D.A. is more concerned about the corruption surrounding your dad. She is involving the DOJ as well, because she thinks there are federal crimes...even international ones where your father is hiding assets overseas. With all that will be hitting him, she thinks he might accept a deal to flip on his many high-powered connections."

"And while he's out on bail awaiting trial, are any of us safe?" Billy questioned.

"That's another reason I kept you and James out of it," Mike noted. "Your father has

no reason to retaliate against you. You didn't do anything. You may have to testify about the incident, but you wouldn't be directly incriminating him. All you can do is describe the assailants and share that you've been told third-hand that it was orchestrated by your father. It isn't like eliminating you as a witness would help his case. Everything is on tape. Who knows? They may not even need you to testify at all."

"I guess." Billy frowned. "What about James? And you?"

"I doubt the D.A. will pursue charges regarding the false institutionalization of James when he was younger. I think the statute of limitations has expired, so I don't see James needing to testify. Still, I'm sure it will be revealed in court to demonstrate an ongoing pattern of abuse by your father. As for me, I think I'll be safe. Eliminating me doesn't rid your father of the recorded exchange between us. It would just add a potential murder charge to the mix. Nevertheless, I'm taking precautions. Ms. Hansen offered police protection for all of us. Considering your father's ties with the NYPD, though, I thought we'd all be happier and safer with my own security team."

The three of them sat for a few minutes, allowing Billy to absorb everything he had heard. Mike was surprised when a small smile started to form on Billy's lips.

"So, this means you and James can get back together," Billy noted.

Mike shook his head. "I don't think that's wise. While I believe we're safe, until your father is neutralized, I don't want to poke the bear. He'll be angry enough without us resuming our relationship. Plus, I'm not sure your brother wants to be with me. Listen, I know the main reason we split was to protect you, but I sensed he was relieved to have an excuse. He was acting a bit off after he and I..."

Billy waited, then whispered, "Fucked."

“Billy!” Maria chastised.

Mike blushed, but nodded. “Yeah. Well, he warned me he doesn’t do relationships. I’m not sure that’s all about your father.”

He saw Billy register something that looked like affirmation, and it cemented Mike’s decision to let sleeping dogs lie.

Chapter Seventeen

It had been several weeks since James had learned from Billy of Mike's and Maria's roles in his father's arrest. He thought he might hear from Mike, but he never did. Enough information had been released to the press for people to know that his father was behind Billy's assault, as well as the crime being motivated by bigotry against blacks and the LGBTQ community. While there had been a couple of extremist congressmen who had excused Charles' actions as a man trying to protect his children, the vast majority—even in his own party—knew they had to cut ties. His father had resigned after the arrest and there had been no contact between him and his sons. So, it was a surprise when he awoke to a request from Charles to meet with James and Billy. It had been arranged that the visit would be at the Hudson Valley mansion since Charles had an ankle bracelet and was not allowed to leave his residence.

"I wish Father hadn't chosen the day before the Tony Awards to meet with us," James shared with Billy as they ascended the steps of the grand home.

"You could have refused to see him," Billy pointed out.

James sighed and rang the doorbell. "So could you."

Once they had been searched, the two rolled their eyes at each other and made their way to the living room where they found their father.

"Boys," Charles greeted. "Thank you for agreeing to see me. Please, sit."

James and Billy exchanged another uncomfortable glance, then took seats on chairs as far from their father as the room permitted. “Father, we can’t stay long. We have things to do in preparation for tomorrow’s awards ceremony.”

Charles chuckled. “You’re in the driver’s seat now, aren’t you, James? Well, I admit it is nice to see you when you aren’t cowering. My regrets that I never congratulated you on your nomination. You proved me wrong. I guess you didn’t need to buy votes to secure it. I still think you would have had a better chance of winning tomorrow if you’d heeded my advice. At least with you taking William to the ceremony, you’ll have someone to console you when you lose.”

Billy bit his lower lip, trying to remain civil. “James never had to cheat to get what he has. He’s earned everything with talent and kindness. Unlike you. What did you want us here for, Father? I can see that it wasn’t to apologize for what you’ve done.”

Charles nodded, the cool facade cracking a bit. “Believe it or not, Billy, I have wanted to apologize to you. Perhaps my punishment was too extreme. My lawyers told me to stay quiet, though, fearing outreach would incriminate me further. But now I’ve pled guilty to the charges and there’s no reason to remain silent. I am sorry that you were hurt. I should have tried harder to find a different way to achieve the desired outcome.”

“You suck at apologies,” James blurted. “Don’t even bother.”

Charles pursed his lips. “I apologize for the tactics. However, my intentions were honorable. I was trying to steer the two of you on the right path.”

James snarled with a biting laugh. “The right path? You mean like the one you chose?”

Charles held up his hand in surrender. “As I’ve already acknowledged, some of my

tactics were misguided. You know, I watched my own father and thought his ways were the keys to success. For a long time, they were, for both him and for me. I should have remembered that he went through multiple wives and died alone with me being the only one at his funeral who loved him. And now, it seems, history is repeating itself. Possessions, it seems, are built on sand. I'm afraid there will be nothing I can leave for the two of you. That is one of the reasons I brought you here. I wanted to inform you that there is no pot of gold coming your way. You'll need to make your own ways in life. As for me, if it is any consolation, I recognize I'll end up as my father did—dying alone.”

“You have Victoria and Lilah,” Billy muttered.

“Victoria filed for divorce,” Charles stated. “She would have been the first one on a lifeboat from the Titanic. And Victoria hasn't let me see Lilah since she left.”

“I'm sorry,” James said. He wasn't sure if he was, but it seemed the right thing to say, regardless of what had transpired.

Charles acknowledged the gesture with a sardonic smile. “Boys, I've had lots of time to reflect on things. I've reconciled myself to the probability of one son marrying into a poor, black family and the other ending up with a man. I won't say that I love either scenario, but I recognize your decisions are out of my hands now. You may not agree with what I thought was best for you, but I did what I did out of love.”

“Oh, come on,” James spat. “Your reputation with your base had nothing to do with it?”

“Yes, but the two were aligned, James. My politics represent my beliefs of what is best not only for you, but for this nation. I understand you don't agree, and that is your right. You are grown men now. So, I'll just say that whatever you decide for yourselves, I do wish you success and happiness. Contrary to what you may think, I

do love you. Therefore, live your lives as you see fit. You can't end up worse than me in the end." He paused, looking out the window for a moment to compose himself. "I'll be going away. I'm sure you'll be happy to hear that you'll never see me again."

The sons exchanged looks of surprise. "What do you mean? You think you'll be given a life-sentence?" James gasped.

Charles shook his head. "I'm not going to prison. I'll be in a witness-protection program. I've shared the names of every corrupt political, judicial and law enforcement official I know, as well as how we worked together. I also named organized crime actors and arrangements we had. I will have a target on my head for my remaining days, but the Feds are giving me a new life, albeit a much more modest one. As part of that deal, once I'm relocated with a new identity, I can never contact you or anyone I know from this life again. I wouldn't, anyway. It would put you in danger."

James wasn't sure if he felt sorry for his father or thought he was getting off too easy. "Will they come after us anyway?"

"I doubt it. I said some things during my testimony that were lies." James frowned to hear that even after his father's arrest, he had continued breaking the law. "I know. I perjured myself under oath. Just chalk it up to another instance where I did what I thought was best for you, even if the tactics were less than honorable."

"What lies? What are you talking about?" Billy inquired.

"I told them that I had no problem doing the things I did to the two of you because you were embarrassments to me. I denied I cared about either of you," Charles explained. "That was the lie."

"I don't understand." James swallowed.

Charles stiffened his back, appearing uncomfortable with being vulnerable and emotional. “My enemies have no reason to harm you if they think I wouldn’t care. But as I told you, I do love you and would care if something bad were to happen to you because of me. I gave Victoria and Lilah the same cover by testifying that my wife is a greedy bitch and my daughter is an ungrateful little brat.”

James and Billy shared another look—they didn’t see how that part was a lie.

“When will you leave?” James asked.

“Tomorrow,” Charles responded. “That was the other reason I wanted to see you. I wanted to explain myself for past actions, as well as why you won’t hear from me again. It would be a great favor to me if, in time, you both could forgive what you perceived as cruelty and consider my motives.” He rose from the chair, pulling each son into an awkward embrace. “But I realize that time is not today.”

* * * *

The moment had arrived to announce the winner for lead actor in a musical. James heard his name mentioned along with the other nominees just as Billy grabbed his hand with a supportive squeeze. James was prepared to hear another actor’s name announced. The disaster made by his father and the crimes he committed couldn’t have helped him during the voting process.

“James Vicksburg,” the Broadway veteran actress announced to thunderous cheers.

The world blurred. James wondered if he had imagined the moment until Billy was shouting in his ear, “You won! James, you won!”

James was even more shocked when the crowd rose to give him a standing ovation. Billy was nudging him to rise from his seat, and James realized his legs were moving

on automatic pilot. The occasional slap on his back from audience members as he passed them reminded him that this was, indeed, reality. His actor instincts kicked in as he reached the podium. He kissed the presenter on the cheek and took the statue from her before looking out to the audience. Billy was pumping his fist in the air and smiling so broadly that James feared he'd pull a jaw muscle.

Once the crowd settled down and was seated, James struggled to remember the speech he had rehearsed over and over on the remote chance he won. But try as he might, it was gone, like any comprehension of how this moment had occurred.

"Uh, I've forgotten everything I wanted to say," James admitted, eliciting polite laughter from the spectators. "I am so shocked to have won. Of course, I'd like to thank the amazing cast and crew of the show. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to be surrounded by their talent and kindness every day." There was clapping from the audience. "Thanks to our amazing director, the people who do all the stuff that never gets recognized in support of the show and, of course, the fans who brought their love and energy."

James caught his breath, listening to more applause. He thought what he would say next might bring tears, and it did. "I know my life has been a news topic of late. I want people to know that I'm sorry about my father's actions and, even more so, I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to stop him from hurting others. I have excuses, but when all is said and done, I let the fear I had for myself and for the people I love stop me from speaking out." James now felt so many tears that he knew his face was wet. "I should have trusted people who offered support. I'd like to extend a special thanks to those who helped me get to this place despite my stubbornness. My good friend and castmate, Emily Hunt." There was applause from the audience for the noted actress. "My brother, Billy. He helped me survive everything, has always been my best friend and has always had my back. I love you and your beautiful girlfriend, Nadia." James glanced to the audience. Billy was wiping tears away, too. He reset his eyes on the trophy to compose himself. "And the person I owe most is Mike Cooper."

The audience clapped some more, recognizing from the news stories that Mike was the one who had set the senator's trap and that he had been in a brief relationship with James.

"He was my hero when I was eighteen, and he's my hero now." James waited for the clapping to stop. "And so are the others who helped Mike that I won't name for their safety. Just know I appreciate you. You cared about me even though I didn't deserve it." James sucked in a sob, then looked out at the audience, smiling with some embarrassment. "All this has taught me to trust others and believe in myself more. I hope to use my art, my voice and my means to help bring greater justice, kindness and assistance to those who aren't as fortunate as me." James raised the trophy triumphantly, shooting an expression of gratitude to the audience. "This means so much. Thank you!"

He didn't remember being whisked away by the presenter or the emotional reception to his speech from the audience. Before he knew it, he was in the press room with his eyes adjusting to multiple flashes and his ears being bombarded by the many questions being hurled his way. James hoped he had handled everything better than the mess he felt he was.

After the program was over, James and Billy attended a post-ceremony party and danced together and with other celebrators to all the fast numbers, not caring if they drew attention or looked like fools. Breaks from dancing were filled with notable and not-so-notable actors and technicians congratulating James on his victory.

When James spotted Emily Hunt, who had won featured actress in a musical, he rushed to hug her. "Emily, I was so glad when you won!"

She smiled in return. "I was happy when they said your name, too. I'm just sorry your award was given right before the best musical was named. You were with the press when they announced our show's victory. You should have been on the stage with the

rest of us!”

“It’s okay. I can’t believe this night,” James gushed. “I was sure I would come in last with votes. How could people vote for me?”

Emily grabbed his face with both of her hands. “First off, because you deserved it for your amazing performances every day. And James, don’t you get it? You think people blame you for your father’s actions? You’re his son. They understand you can’t just hate him. And they learned you did speak out once, and look what he did to you. They saw the sacrifices you made to protect people around you while still fighting his actions, in a more nuanced way, like starring in a show that repudiates the behaviors of people like him. James, you think you’re weak, but everyone I talk to thinks you’re strong. You’re becoming a bit of an urban legend.”

James laughed. “I don’t deserve to be. Emily, thank you for everything you did to help me. I am glad I opened up to you.”

Emily kissed him. “Me too. And thank you for the call-out during your speech. I’m also glad you said you can trust others now. There are lots of people who want to be there for you, James. You don’t have to be alone anymore.” He nodded and hugged her. A slow-dance number started. “Come on. Let’s dance. Unless you wanted to dance with your brother some more?”

James chuckled. “I love him a ton, but I don’t slow dance with him.”

As he and Emily swayed around the ballroom, James noticed a troubled look on Billy’s face as he watched from the side. When the song was over, he kissed Emily’s cheek and thanked her. She ran to other cast members for an embrace and more talk about the awards.

James approached Billy with a questioning expression.

“She’s not the one,” Billy murmured.

“What?”

“She’s lovely. And I’ll always appreciate what she did for us,” Billy explained. “But she’s not the one for you. Mike is.”

“Billy...”

Billy clapped a hand on James’ shoulder to silence him. “The danger is over. Father is gone. And even he gave you his half-assed blessing to do what’s best for you. Mike is what’s best for you. He’s the one who made you the happiest. You said it yourself earlier—he’ll always be your hero. Call him. It’s time.”

James felt the same warmth and dizziness he had experienced upon hearing his name called at the award ceremony. “After what I said to him, what if he doesn’t want me anymore?”

Billy hugged James and whispered in his ear. “Be strong enough to be vulnerable. He has his pride, too. You dumped him—it’s on you to ask for another chance. If you do, I bet he’ll say yes.”

* * * *

It was three in the morning when James arrived back at his apartment, a little tipsy from the generous amount of alcohol that was offered to him at the post-event party. He removed his tux jacket, undid the bowtie then plopped in front of the computer. Once logged on, he started reading the news articles about his win and his ‘emotional’ speech. James was wary of reading the comments. He didn’t want to ruin the high he was experiencing.

James switched to his chat application. He had missed many messages and well-wishes from friends and acquaintances. He scanned the list, disappointed that there wasn't one from Mike. He did notice, however, that Mike was one of his 'Facebook friends' that was displaying as 'online.'

James debated messaging Mike, considering the early morning hour. Nevertheless, if Mike was online, it wasn't like he'd be waking him. Maybe it was the liquor, maybe it was Billy's prodding, but James found himself typing the question 'you up?'

There was an uncomfortable pause, and James began to regret his action. Then he saw the ellipses displaying, showing Mike was typing a response.

After a moment, the words 'Yes. I was just reading all the news stories about you. I lost track of time' displayed.

"Would you be willing to video chat with me?" James asked through the keyboard.

Instead of receiving a typed response, the computer pinged, asking if he would accept Mike's invitation to video call. Once James accepted, he was greeted with an image of a shirtless Mike sitting in front of his computer. He sighed, reminded of Mike's handsomeness.

"Congratulations," Mike greeted. "You deserved to win."

James blushed and looked away from the screen. "I don't know. I'm guessing that people voted out of sympathy, but thank you. Are you sure it's okay to chat now? I see you're ready for bed."

Mike glanced down at his bare chest, then he looked back up and shrugged. "I've been sitting in my boxers since the awards show ended, and here I am, still up."

“I’m glad,” James whispered.

“Yeah? Hey, thanks for what you said during your speech. That was sweet.”

“I meant it,” James said. “You are my hero.”

Now Mike blushed. “I didn’t do anything to be a hero. I helped because I wanted you and Billy to be free.”

James nodded. “And because you love me.”

Mike flinched. “I...I didn’t tell Billy I love you.”

“I know,” James replied.

Mike frowned and was silent for a moment. “Well, it doesn’t matter anyway, does it? You don’t do relationships.”

James grimaced, remembering their last conversation. “Mike, I’m sorry. I was stupid. I should have asked you for help. I should have trusted you. I was wrong.”

“James, I understand you wanted to protect Billy. This isn’t about what you said when you broke up with me. It’s about the way you seemed to have second thoughts after you and I made love. I think I knew then that you couldn’t commit to me.”

James didn’t think there were any more tears left in him, but he realized he was wrong. A couple formed in the corner of his eyes to mock his planned stoicism. “Mike...”

“It’s okay,” Mike cut in. “I’m not trying to guilt you, James. My falling for you doesn’t necessitate you falling, too.”

“But I was,” James blurted, his voice cracking. “That’s what scared me. I thought I had closed my heart off to others. I was angry with myself because I knew what was happening would end badly. I was afraid to see you get hurt.”

“But I did get hurt,” Mike reminded him.

“Not financially. Not physically,” James explained.

“No. It was worse,” Mike stated.

James stared down at the keyboard. When he was able to catch his breath, he continued. “Can you forgive me? Is it too late? Mike, I do love you. Please give me another chance.”

Mike looked at James’ wet, pleading eyes. “James...”

“Mike, you won’t need to worry about me doubting us again.”

Mike gave James a slight smile. “I needed to hear you say that...to believe this is really what you want. James, I can’t tell you how happy that makes me. I want it, too.”

James wiped a tear away and his eyes widened with hope. “Yeah?”

Mike nodded. “Yeah. And I want you to take off that beautiful tux so I can see your even more beautiful body.”

James jerked his head back with surprise, then he wiped a remaining stray tear before gulping and laughing. “What? As quick as that, you return to being a voyeur perv again?”

Mike smiled. “Well, at least I didn’t ask for online sex this time. Unless, that is, you’re offering...”

James shook his head with relief that Mike was on board with reuniting. He fell back into their typical snarky banter. “Is this how it’s going to be with us?”

“All the time,” Mike stated in a matter-of-fact tone. “Now, dry those tears. You’re not as attractive when you’re crying. I should point that out.”

James looked offended. “Thanks.”

Mike shrugged. “Just saying. Although you were very cute at the ceremony tonight, even with the flood on your cheeks. I was wishing I could kiss and lick you dry.”

James smirked. “Oh yeah? That might have boosted the ratings.”

“Mm,” Mike agreed. “Good thing there was a podium. It would have helped to hide what I would be doing next when I got down on my knees in front of you.”

“Jesus,” James murmured.

“You look so sexy in a tux,” Mike continued. “Can I tell you about one of my fantasies?” James nodded. “I’ve thought about you in black tie, just like tonight. But no jacket, shirt unbuttoned and chest exposed, the loose tie still around the collar. Then you unzip those tailored trousers and slide them and your underwear down those incredible legs. I get to feast upon your body wearing nothing but the opened dress shirt and tie and a pair of black socks.”

James swallowed. “Oh. So, you have a thing for black socks?”

“No,” Mike replied. “I have a thing for you, undressed in different ways to tease the

hell out of me.”

James nodded, undid his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt. He watched Mike’s eyes light up with surprise and lust. Once he reached the last button, he pushed open the shirt and exposed his chest. “Like this?”

Mike moaned. “I didn’t think you would...”

James pushed farther back from the camera and removed his shoes, then stood, undid his pants and used his fingers to hook them and his underwear before gliding them down his legs. James heard Mike make a guttural noise of appreciation. Once the trousers were off his legs, James stood to give Mike a full view. “See, Mike? I’m willing to push past my fears and insecurities for you. I want to make you happy. I need you to believe that things will be different for us now.”

Mike inhaled a sharp breath. “Wow. How I feel about you sure hasn’t changed.”

James sat back down on the chair and rolled it closer to the camera lens so that all Mike could see was James’ shoulders, neck and face. “How I feel about you never changed either. I’m sorry I led you to believe otherwise. Hey, tomorrow is Monday. Broadway is dark. Do you think maybe you could come over?”

Mike raised an eyebrow. “I could. But maybe you should come over here instead. You’ve never been. And unlike your place, your brother and Nadia don’t have a key to mine.”

James smiled. “Perfect. I’ll bring breakfast.” Then he took one more look at Mike’s happy face and sighed. “And condoms.” When Mike gasped, James chuckled. “Goodnight, Mike.”

Chapter Eighteen

James arrived at the address Mike had provided and, as he expected, it was nothing like his own modest walk-up. The apartment was on the Upper West Side in a swanky mid-rise overlooking Central Park. He was surprised when, upon entering the lobby, the doorman recognized him.

“Mr. Vicksburg. Welcome, and congratulations on your Tony Award last evening,” he greeted James with a charming accent.

Between the news story about his father and now the award, more strangers were glancing James’ way, sometimes following the look with a smile. He was thankful that the selfie requests seemed to be limited to the fans who stood outside the theater at the end of each show.

“Thank you,” James replied. “That’s very kind of you. I’m here to visit Mike Cooper.”

“Yes, sir, he’s expecting you. You can take the elevator to the twelfth floor.”

“What’s his apartment number?” James asked, realizing he had never received the information from Mike.

The doorman grinned. “It’s just the twelfth floor, sir.”

James blushed, then nodded a thanks and made his way to the elevator. He could smell the food he had brought for Mike, certain that the calorie-filled, heart-stopping

contents of the bag would bring a rumble to his boyfriend's stomach. James had picked up a smoothie for himself.

He wasn't sure what would happen when the elevator reached the twelfth floor. When the doors opened, James was welcomed to a foyer, and on the far wall was the front door of the apartment. He rang the bell, hoping he wasn't too early.

Mike opened the door wearing pajama bottoms and no top, making James' heart race. "Come in, gorgeous."

When James entered, he was in awe at the sun-filled space, architectural details and top-of-the-line kitchen. "Oh my God. Is that a balcony?" James wondered, unable to stop himself from exploring the space. He looked through the French doors and was greeted with a view of Central Park.

"Stunning," Mike muttered behind him.

"Sure is," James agreed.

Mike reached out to encircle James from behind and rubbed his nose against James' neck. "I meant you."

James' face heated. "I'm just wearing jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt."

"I wasn't talking about your clothes," Mike whispered, kissing James' ear. "God, I missed this. I love the way you smell and taste."

James laughed. "I think you're smelling your breakfast. I picked up your favorite."

Mike pulled away long enough to show his curiosity. "My favorite? I don't believe I ever told you what my favorite is. What is it?"

“Grease,” James snarked, pushing the bag to Mike’s chest.

Mike frowned, then chuckled. “Smart aleck. It would be my favorite if it’s grease to prepare your ass.”

James gulped. “Jesus.”

Mike chuckled and pulled the Styrofoam container of pastries, breakfast potatoes, sausage and fried eggs from the bag. “Mm. That does smell wonderful.”

“If you say so,” James said. “Half the dogs in the city followed me here.”

Mike ignored the barb, retrieving the clear plastic cup that contained James’ smoothie. “Yuck. Some green, slimy thing made its way into the bag.”

“That’s my kale smoothie,” James clarified, grabbing the cup from him.

Mike rolled his eyes. “I hope I won’t be tasting kale when I swallow your semen later.”

James was taken aback, then huffed. “Presumptuous, aren’t we?”

Mike shrugged. “Not especially.”

The two sat at the massive island in Mike’s kitchen, laughing as they each watched the other consume a perceived horrible breakfast. Mike teased with a sausage link, licking the end and moaning. “Nothing like a good piece of meat.”

James snickered. “If you’re comparing that miniscule sausage to mine, I didn’t put enough in your mouth last time.”

Mike's eyes darkened. "You'll have to train me to swallow more."

James could sense that he was flushed. "God. Finish your breakfast already."

"Then the bedroom," Mike commanded.

James shot him a side-eye. "Is that your plan for the day? Spending all of it in bed?"

"Mmhmm." Mike nodded, popping the sausage link into his mouth.

James cleared his throat nervously. "Mike, when I said you loved me, you never confirmed it. I know you like me, and you like the sex..."

Mike pushed the uneaten food aside and leaned into James. "Baby, I've had it bad for you since I met you. And no, not just for the sex." He tipped James' chin and planted on him the kiss he'd been wanting to bestow since they had greeted each other.

"I love you, James. When I'm eager to have sex with you, it's because of that—it makes the sex more wonderful than anything I've ever experienced. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. Same," James confirmed, pulling Mike back into a lip-lock.

When James tried to make the kiss open-mouthed, Mike pulled back and grinned. "Okay, now you're the one signaling you want to go to the bedroom."

James rolled his eyes. "Come on, I'm going to show you what a meaty sausage tastes like. And best of all, it's calorie-free."

"Mm," Mike replied, licking his lips. "Gives literal meaning to the phrase 'pork me.'"

James chuckled and grabbed Mike's hand, leading him into what he assumed was Mike's bedroom. "Christ, it's massive."

Mike nodded. "I remember. Oh, you mean the bedroom? I guess. But this is one of the guest rooms."

"What?"

Mike laughed and pulled James back out the doorway and down the long corridor to the master suite. When he opened it, James gasped. "You like?"

James was still surveying the room, shocked at the size, elaborate fireplace and the same incredible view of the park courtesy of floor-to-ceiling windows. "This room is twice the size of my apartment."

Mike shrugged. "I had to have something bigger than you."

"Besides your ego?" James teased, turning back to face Mike.

"Fresh," Mike replied. "Get naked. This time, I'm controlling what we do. I'm going to lick you from head to toe before beginning my gag-control lesson. We'll finish with you rewarding my efforts with your delicious cum."

"Oh," James murmured.

"That is, if it doesn't taste like kale today," Mike joked.

That elicited a snort from James, who gave a light smack to the side of Mike's head. "Is this how it's always going to be?"

"Yes. Always."

Chapter Nineteen

James was still fussing with his hair when there was a knock on the bedroom door. If it was Mike, James was going to lose his shit. He'd learned to listen to Maria's premonitions, predictions and superstitions. She was never wrong, and she believed that two partners shouldn't see each other on their wedding day until they were at the ceremony.

James opened the door a crack. It was Billy. "Oh, it's you. Get in here."

Billy walked through the doorway, looking dapper in a black tux that worked with his dark hair. "Can you help me with my bowtie? I've never worn one."

"Sure." James smiled, then he walked to his brother to help with the finishing touch. "Nervous?"

"Nah," Billy assured him. "I've been wanting to marry her for so long, I'm just happy the day has come. What about you? Are you nervous about marrying Mike?"

James shook his head. "Not even a little. Who would have thought a year ago when you convinced me to try to patch things up that we would have moved so quickly?"

"He knew you were the one right from the time he met you," Billy reminded him. "He was just waiting for you to catch up."

James sighed. "I guess Maria is still batting a thousand, huh? Mike is jealous. His best hitting average was .245."

“Well, he was a relief pitcher,” Bill noted. “They save games. They don’t make the hits, especially American League pitchers who only get the experience when playing a National League team in a National League ballpark.”

James nodded. “Yeah, he knows that. He was kidding around.”

“It was nice of him to pay for everything and use his house here in the Hamptons for the wedding,” Billy gushed. “I could never have afforded to have a wedding like this.”

Mike had known Billy and Nadia had wanted to marry and would have been on course to do so if Charles Vicksburg hadn’t set them back by stealing their ring. After Mike had proposed to James a few months earlier, he had suggested to Billy that he propose to Nadia and the couples marry at the same time. When Billy had worried about Mike footing the bill, Mike had laughed, saying that four could marry as cheaply as two. Mike had also given Billy an engagement ring he had bought years earlier for a woman that he thought was his soulmate—until he had discovered she was sleeping with a player from the New York Mets as well as Mike.

“He can afford it, buddy. And you know how generous Mike is. I’m still in awe that he put up my homeless friend Hal in an apartment and helped him find a job.” James smiled.

“And influenced a bank to give your former boyfriend a loan to start up a restaurant again, with an anonymous outrageous check to help things along,” Billy added.

James nodded with pride. “With a note that said it was from someone who had enjoyed his former restaurant. Mike is...”

“Yeah, he is,” Billy interrupted. “And now, he’ll be yours, bro.”

James finished with Billy's bowtie, turning him toward a full-length mirror. "Stunning," James said, admiring how handsome his brother looked in his tuxedo.

"I do look pretty nice, don't I?" Billy half-grinned. "You know, I wasn't sure about sharing the stage with you and Mike. I mean, Nadia is already way out of my league. Now I'll be up in front of everyone with two Ken dolls, too."

James frowned. "Stop it. You're beautiful, Billy. Inside and out."

Billy's smile widened. He took a longer look at James and whistled. "I wasn't sure about the midnight blue tux, but it's great. And the longer jacket makes you look even taller. Are you trying to make me look even shorter?"

James took a hold of both of Billy's shoulders. "I never think of you as short. Maybe it's because I always look up to you."

"You're such a sap." Billy snickered, but pulled James into a hug. "And you know darn well that you're the one that is looked up to, James. Mike may be your hero, but you'll always be mine."

They parted when there was a light rap on the door. It opened a crack before Emily Hunt popped in her head. "Hey guys, they're ready for you."

"Thanks, Emily," James called out to the closing door. He turned back to Billy. "Does my hair look okay?"

Billy rolled his eyes. "If it was any more perfect, people would think it's a wig."

"You think it looks fake?" James glanced back at the mirror and messed up one of the waves a bit, hoping others would realize it was natural.

Billy laughed. “You’ve become so vain. It must be all the praise that Mike keeps heaping on you. Come on. We don’t want him and Nadia to think we jilted them at the altar.”

James frowned. “That would be bad. I think they’d shrug and marry each other. I swear, sometimes I think they look like they have a crush on each other.”

“Hmm.” Billy nodded. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

James put his arm around Billy. “Bro, she’d never cheat on you. She’s crazy about you.”

“I know.” Billy smiled. “Mike would never cheat on you, either.”

The two made their way out of the bedroom and down the hallway to the French doors that led to the grounds outside. Many guests were already seated on folding chairs facing the makeshift platform that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. The brothers waved at the people they passed. There were agents, fellow actors and crew members who were there for James. Numerous athletes and business associates of Mike’s were in attendance, too. College buddies and co-workers, as well as Nadia’s friends and family, were there for Billy.

Maria and Billy’s mother Caroline stood at the end of the aisle, bestowing kisses on the cheeks of the grooms when they met them at the front of the crowd. Once Maria and Caroline were seated in the first row, the justice of the peace nodded to the hired orchestra which started playing classical music to begin the ceremony.

Mike was the first to start his way down the aisle, his right arm hooked with his father’s, and his left arm hooked with his mother’s. James sucked in a breath. He had never seen Mike in a tux, and the traditional black made his guy look like the best James Bond one could imagine. Upon locking eyes with James, Mike beamed a

megawatt smile. When Mike and his parents reached the altar, Mike's father gave his son a hug and his mother kissed his temple. Once they took their seats, Mike gave such an obvious appraisal and approval of James that the guests started laughing.

Everyone's attention turned to Nadia making her way down the aisle. Like Mike, she had chosen to have both parents accompany her on her walk. Billy's mouth was open, seemingly in disbelief at the vision before him. James thought he had good reason. Nadia had never looked more ravishing. Her hair was upswept, her make-up was gorgeous and the gown was an expensive designer piece that was courtesy of Mike. The form-fitted top sparkled from small jewels that disappeared into the smooth, white silk skirt of the dress. As she approached the makeshift altar, James could see that the gown had a long train, giving his friend a regal, elegant look. Once Nadia was by Billy's side, it could have been a cloudy day and James still would have felt the warmth of her brilliant smile. When he glanced to Billy, he saw that a shy grin had broken through his haze of awe.

The music stopped and everyone faced the justice of the peace, Dan Moyer. "Well, with these four up here, I don't feel very attractive right now," Moyer joked to a chuckling crowd.

The two couples had chosen not to write their own vows, figuring the guests would get tired of listening to the ramblings of four different people. Instead, Moyer had the two brothers face their betrotheds and repeat the traditional vows of loving, cherishing, supporting and befriending the ones they loved until they were parted by death. Then, Nadia and Mike repeated the same vows to their Vicksburg boys.

"Well, this is the most unusual wedding I've officiated," Moyer joked, again to mild laughter. "But I might add, I think it is one of the most beautiful. I am pleased to say that by the power vested in me by the state of New York, I now pronounce you married. You may kiss your spouses."

The crowd cheered as Billy chastely kissed his bride while Mike grabbed and kissed James like he was going to peg him right then and there. His enthusiasm elicited more laughs from the guests, especially when he pulled away and James was flushing.

Moyer waited for the four to congratulate each other and share embraces before closing the ceremony. Then Billy and Nadia walked back up the aisle, followed by Mike and James. They all grabbed hands and shared smiles with guests as they made their way back to the house.

“What now?” Billy asked Mike.

“Now you go back to your guest room and spend some time with your bride. They’re going to let the guests chow down on finger foods and get drunk on free booze. No need for us to watch. We come back out in thirty minutes to them cheering and we’ll dance the rest of the day away.”

Nadia laughed. “Sounds good to me. I’ll be glad to get a half hour off these high heels.”

Mike laughed. “Oh, Nadia, I planned the thirty-minute interlude for you to be able to remove more than your shoes.”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe you guys can strip, have sex and redress in a half hour, but I can assure you, it’s a lot harder for me with this contraption.”

Billy frowned. “So unfair.”

Nadia grabbed him and pulled him into a kiss. “I’m sorry. We can still kiss and cuddle for a while.”

Billy smiled. “I love you so much.”

Before James or Mike could comment further, Billy rushed Nadia to their guestroom.

Mike turned to James and wiggled his eyebrows. “Up for a thirty-minute sprint?”

James snickered. “Seriously? You’d think we’d never had sex.”

“We haven’t as a married couple,” Mike reasoned. “Those were the test-drives. I want to enjoy the ownership now.”

“Well, now we have about twenty-five minutes, and I don’t want our first drive as owners to be so speedy we don’t enjoy the view,” James said. “When we make love for the first time as a married couple, I want it to be something I remember.”

Mike pulled him closer, pressing his hardness against James’ hip. “Yeah? You want it nice and slow with lots of kissing and caressing?”

James moaned and buried his face into Mike’s neck. “Yes.”

“Okay, my sweet husband,” Mike whispered. “I’d like that, too. I can’t imagine having you inside me for the first time any other way.”

James jerked his head back with a questioning look, the way he often did. “Wait. What?”

“I told you I’d want you to top at some point. I’ve wanted it for a while now, but as it got closer to the wedding, I figured I’d rather wait. You’re my husband. I want you to mark me as yours.”

“How am I supposed to go out there now and spend the rest of the day eating and dancing?” James pouted. “You put me in irreversible boner mode.”

Mike laughed. “Oh, baby, I promised to cherish you and care for you, remember? I won’t leave you hanging, so to speak. Let’s go to the bedroom. I’ll take care of your predicament. We’ll save the making love for later. But while our guests are shoveling food in their faces outside, you can feed me inside. Just don’t make a mess where I have to explain to my parents what I spilled on my clothes.”

James didn’t know if he should laugh or gulp, but Mike pulled him to their bedroom before he needed to decide.

* * * *

Billy smirked at James when they were back with the crowd. “Gee, I think your hair isn’t quite as perfect as it looked earlier.”

“Shut up.” James laughed. “I told him to leave my hair alone but he said he had to grab onto something.” James looked down at the knees of his trousers. “Hey, my pants aren’t wrinkled funny now, are they?”

Billy raised an eyebrow. “No, but Mike’s looked like the knees were a little shiny from rubbing against the rug.”

James blanched. “Oh no. The fabric can wear that fast?”

“No,” Billy replied with an eye-roll. “Don’t be a dope. And you call me gullible.”

James swallowed. “We are weird, aren’t we? Do all brothers share stuff like this?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t know. Don’t care. Do you?”

“I guess not.” James grinned. “Hey, I want to ask you something.”

“Nadia and I just kissed in our thirty minutes,” Billy informed him.

“Not that, doofus. I wanted to ask whether you and Nadia would consider moving in with me and Mike in his apartment.”

Billy was taken by surprise, but then his expression soured. “I don’t need charity, James.”

James refrained from disagreeing. “Listen, since Father stopped helping you with college, you’re struggling to pay for everything. Mike’s place in the city is huge. We get lost in it. He has multiple guest rooms and two living rooms. Billy, he’s the one who proposed it. He’d like to have you and Nadia there.” He saw the resistance on Billy’s face. “I’d like to have you there.”

“I don’t know, James,” Billy mumbled. “It’s like I just keep taking. When do I ever take care of you?”

James pulled him into a side-hug. “Billy, you’re kidding, right? You always look out for me. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t be with Mike right now. It’s like we’ve had a pact since you were born, you know? We’re here for each other. Mike sees how happy I am when you’re around and that makes him happy. We want you to move in. Talk to Nadia, okay?”

Billy thought for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. I’ll talk to her.”

James rubbed Billy’s shoulder with affection. “Hey, I think they’re trying to summon us to dance with our new spouses.”

The two walked down to the dance floor to the hoots and cheers of some now inebriated guests. “There they are,” one shouted.

Mike's eyes lit up when he saw James and he pulled him close to his body. Billy rushed to Nadia. The floor cleared to spotlight the two couples as they danced.

Once the song ended to the applause from the wedding attendees, Nadia asked Billy, "Would you mind if I dance with the other hot Vicksburg boy?"

Billy responded, "Sure. He'd like that."

James shot her a welcoming grin, offered her a hand then pulled her in close for a slow dance.

Mike saw Billy making his way off the floor, so he stopped him by tapping on his shoulder. When Billy turned to face him, Mike held out his hand.

"May I? I may not grant your one-time, half-hearted invitation to rub one out with you, but I'd enjoy dancing with the other good-looking Vicksburg," Mike stated, unsure if he was crossing a line and Billy might turn up his nose.

Billy chuckled. "Okay." He let Mike pull him into a close dance, and Mike's heart almost broke at how sweet, non-judgmental and caring Billy was.

"You are the coolest, Billy," Mike murmured. "James isn't the only one who loves you and Nadia. I'll always be grateful that you're there for my guy."

Billy looked up at him. "I will be. Mike, you will be too, right? You'll never hurt him?"

Mike gave Billy's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I promise I never will. I'm crazy in love with him, Billy. I know I can be a flirt sometimes with people, but he's the only one for me. I'm pretty sure he knows he has the power to destroy me."

“He wouldn’t. You’ll never find a more loyal person.” He pulled his head from Mike to look at his face. “Mike, did you mean it when you told James you’d like for me and Nadia to move in with you? Are you sure we wouldn’t be intruding?”

Mike kissed the top of Billy’s head the way James did. “Billy, I’ve hated being alone. I’ve always wanted loved ones around me. I’m forty-one years old now, and I was afraid it wouldn’t happen. James, Maria, you and Nadia—and any kids you and Nadia have together—will be cherished by me. I wanted to marry James, but I also wanted to marry this family. At least, I hoped I could be part of this crazy family.”

Mike almost laughed when Billy jerked his head back the way James often did, giving him a look of surprise. “You are a part of our family. You have been for a long time now, Mike.”

A tear fell from Billy’s eye, and he buried his face in Mike’s lapel to hide his emotions from the crowd. As Mike swayed to his right, he caught James and Nadia giving him a questioning, concerned look. Mike gave both a thumbs up to let them know Billy was fine. At the relief and affection on James’ and Nadia’s faces, Mike felt a wave of emotion. He knew that all his success and money would never make him feel as content as he did in that moment.

* * * *

Mike finished washing and brushing his teeth, and when he opened the bathroom door, James was on the other side, waiting for his turn to do the same.

“You could have joined me. Can I stay in here with you while you get ready?” Mike asked.

“No.”

Mike frowned. "Why not? We're married now."

"I have to pee," James explained.

"You let me watch you pee once before." Mike pouted.

"That was before I realized just how much of a pervy voyeur you are. Go wait on the bed for me," James demanded.

"Fine," Mike said to the door being shut in his face.

After James brushed his teeth and washed his face, he went to the toilet to empty his bladder. He heard Mike calling something, but not loud enough to hear over the piss stream. "What?"

"I said hurry. I miss you," Mike yelled.

James shook his head, chuckling. "Stop it!"

"Are you still peeing?" Mike shouted.

"Yes. Leave me alone!" James replied.

"Why do you have so much pee? You only had a couple of drinks. Can you speed it up?" Mike teased.

"Christ on a scooter," James muttered. He went to the sink and washed his hands and face, then he brushed his teeth. He purposely took longer than usual to punish Mike for his harassment.

"Now what are you doing?" Mike called out.

“I’m loading a pistol and thinking how to stage a suicide scene,” James barked back, unable to keep from laughing. He opened the door to the bedroom. Mike had already removed his clothes and was waiting not so patiently in bed.

“You might want to delay that plan until I have all the financial paperwork changed to list you as my beneficiary,” Mike suggested.

“Hmm, get on that already,” James joked. “Your taunting is making my finger trigger-happy.”

“I’ll show you what you can do with your trigger finger,” Mike smirked. “And you don’t need my money,” Mike added as James joined him in bed. “Now that your contract with the musical is done, you have offers coming in from everywhere.”

James didn’t answer. He pondered some more. “I was thinking about the gay romance flick, but it required nudity.”

Mike grunted in agreement. “You’re kind of shy about that, even with a partner in the bedroom. I don’t see you being comfortable with it.”

James turned Mike’s face toward his. “Yes, but it’s more than that. It’s old-fashioned, I know, but I feel like being naked is something I want to share with you alone now.”

Mike grinned. “Hmm, I think I appreciate you being old-fashioned.”

James leaned in to kiss Mike. It started slow and sweet, but soon their passion ignited. James rolled on top of Mike and smothered his lips, ears and neck with pecks, nips and sucks. He moved his way down, kissing the hollow at the base of Mike’s throat while running his hands over the lightly-haired pectoral muscles. James pinched and flicked his husband’s nipples, turned on by the hardened nubs and the vibration of Mike’s fluttering heart. “You’re so handsome, Mike. When you showed up today in

that tuxedo, I thought I was going to pass out—my head was doing all sorts of crazy things.”

“Baby, I thought the same when I saw you,” Mike confessed. “Every time I’ve seen you and thought you couldn’t be any more beautiful, you somehow manage to prove me wrong.”

James was half-listening. His face was already down to the happy trail that made its way over Mike’s belly button and down to the soft pubic curls. James kissed and licked his way to Mike’s dick, smelling his musky scent from the earlier blow job. “Want to suck you some more,” James whispered.

“Oh God, James. Don’t make me come. I want you inside me,” Mike pleaded.

James tasted Mike’s engorged cock, diving down until it filled him to his throat. He hummed with pleasure, causing Mike’s dick to expand even more. When James touched Mike’s sack and realized it was already tightening, he released the prick from his mouth. “Shit. It’s like being in an ice-cream shop and only getting to choose one thing,” James complained.

“Excuse me? I thought you only order vanilla?” Mike joked.

James stopped his kissing and sucking and scowled at Mike’s grinning face. “You literally want to talk about ice cream right now? Maybe I’ll keep things vanilla between us.”

Mike shook his head and sobered. “I’m sorry.”

James chuckled and resumed licking Mike’s nut sack, pinching the loose skin that was under his balls and tugging it as far toward Mike’s anus as he could. Mike gasped and moaned from the slight burn mixed with tingling pleasure. James

continued the action, each time brushing fingers with more pressure over Mike's sensitive hole. Mike lifted and tried to get more friction on his entrance, so James tapped Mike's thighs to suggest he allow greater access. Mike pulled his knees forward and spread his legs, opening himself to the man he loved.

"You're so fucking hot, Mike," James whispered before plunging his lips over the wet, tight warmth. Mike began gurgling as James flicked his tongue over and over the clenching hole.

"God, James! Don't let me come before you get inside me," Mike reminded him.

The two had long since stopped using condoms, as they had both tested negative and were monogamous. James reached for the lubricant on the nearby nightstand and applied the liquid to James' rectum. Mike was bucking against James' hand, wanting deeper penetration. Over the next couple of minutes, James worked a second then a third digit into Mike's ass, stretching and probing until the ring of muscle that gave initial resistance began to relax.

"You ready, baby?" James asked.

"Yes," Mike gasped.

James applied more lubricant to Mike's channel, just to be safe. Then, he slathered more over his own aching cock. James took a hold of Mike's legs and leaned into them, bringing their faces close enough that they could kiss while they made love. "It means so much that you want to give yourself to me, Mike," James whispered, kissing his husband while his leaking dick head rubbed along the inside of Mike's ass crack.

"My incredible husband—show me I'm yours," Mike begged.

James took his right hand to position the tip of his member against Mike's entrance and began to push. "Baby, look at me. I'm not going to hurt you," James assured him. "Look at me—the man who loves you with all his heart."

Those words relaxed Mike enough that James was able to get the head of his dick into the tight hole. Mike grimaced. "James, you're so big."

"Shh," James soothed. "Just keep looking at me and I'll go slow. I love you so much, baby."

Mike pulled James down for another passionate kiss. Sensing Mike relax, James pushed in a bit farther. Mike's breath hitched, but then he started to kiss James once more. James showered his husband with soft caresses and kisses as the tunnel of muscle opened and allowed him full entrance. When James bottomed out, he looked into Mike's eyes. They were stunned, yet full of adoration. "James? You're all the way in?"

"Yes, baby. Are you okay?"

"So full. It's like I'm going to give birth," Mike remarked.

James kissed his husband's head. "I'm pretty sure a woman who's given birth would tell you to go fuck yourself."

"Not when your dick is already in me. I don't think my ass could handle more." Mike smiled. "I think you can begin moving now. The burn is gone. It's nice. God, James...I'm full of my husband's dick." Mike laughed. "It's kind of amazing."

"It is, Mikey," James smiled, then kissed Mike once more before starting to slowly thrust his hips.

“My God,” Mike panted. “Please keep doing that.”

“You like?” James asked.

“Love it,” Mike confirmed with heavy breaths. “It’s like I’m having a continuous orgasm in my ass.”

“That’s good, baby. Want me to go a little faster and harder?”

Mike nodded, unable to answer. His state of ecstasy was becoming too intense. James quickened the pace, eliciting cries that echoed throughout the bedroom. He took harder and deeper plunges, banging Mike’s prostate, causing his husband to muffle his screams of pleasure with his fist.

“James.” Mike was trying to talk, but he had obviously never experienced something so intense in his body. “So...fucking...I can’t.”

James pushed on Mike’s legs more, positioning him so that he could go as deep as possible, pounding Mike’s buttocks repeatedly. James was light-headed from the tight muscles squeezing his wet cock, and the sound of his balls slapping Mike’s ass. Mike screamed out an orgasm. With the way his body was positioned, jets of cum hit his chest and chin as he thrashed around as much as his confined body allowed.

James was overcome by watching Mike’s face contort with an ecstasy he’d never experienced, and seeing his husband’s dick cover the athlete’s torso with globs of warm spunk. He bent down and licked Mike’s cum from his chin, then plunged his tongue into Mike’s still-panting mouth as he shot his own sperm into Mike’s hole. He continued pumping, feeling the warmth spilling around his hardness and in Mike. He collapsed on top of Mike, panting in his ear until the throes of his orgasm subsided.

“Am I still alive?” Mike panted.

James kissed the pulsing artery in Mike's neck and touched Mike's chest to feel his heartbeat. "Seems you are."

Mike grinned and gave James a sassy look. "Good thing. Still time to name you as my beneficiary."

"Stop it," James scolded. "I shouldn't have made a joke about you dying. I want you around for a long time."

Mike chuckled. "Now that you know I make a great power bottom?"

James jerked his head back and bit his lower lip. "Now that I know I'd be lost without you."

That sobered Mike, who ran a hand through James' tresses, finding the spot on the back of James' head he liked to hold as he pulled him in for a kiss. "Then you'd best never leave my side."

James smiled. "I won't. I'm a relationship kind of guy."

Epilogue

It had been two years since Mike had married James, and he felt blessed by the lives they had built together. Mike was enjoying renewed success with an expanding restaurant chain, an exclusive contract to model menswear for a top designer and speaking engagements throughout the country regarding inclusivity.

Billy and Nadia both continued to live in Mike's apartment, joking they were like an old-time immigrant family that didn't care about individual privacy, and where everyone had the right to opine on what the others were doing. When they were home, they ate together as a unit and shared chores. With the crazy schedules of Billy's veterinarian practice and Nadia's budding career as a fragrance-designer's apprentice, that together-time with James and Mike wasn't as frequent as they would have liked.

Maria was often a guest at the apartment, but she spent most of her time relaxing by the ocean in her gussied-up caretaker's quarters at Mike's house in the Hamptons. When the clan found time to head to the mansion, she mothered them and did everything she could to make their stay a pleasant respite from their jobs.

James had wrapped a movie musical and was set to star in a film where he would play a rural priest sent to help a drug-riddled community while hiding his own opioid addiction. A few months earlier, he had been asked to sing the national anthem at Yankee Stadium—without Mike's influence—with a smiling Mike watching from the private box.

"The limo is here," Mike shouted to James from the living-room area of their Los

Angeles hotel suite.

James emerged from the bedroom with his stylist, dashing in a traditional black tuxedo. Even though Mike was also wearing black, they avoided looking too matchy-matchy by Mike wearing a black suit-tie while James wore a bow-tie.

“How do I look?” James asked, his anxiety making it clear he wasn’t fishing for compliments. Mike wondered how James could ever be insecure about his beauty.

“Like you’re once again going to be named best-dressed man on the red carpet,” Mike assured him. “Come on. Your category is the first award presentation of the night. It would be a shame if you weren’t there when they call your name.”

“Stop it,” James warned. “I told you, there’s no way I’m going to win.”

“You said that about the Tony award, too,” Mike reminded him.

“Just stop,” James pressed, before grabbing his wallet and hugging the stylist goodbye with thanks. “I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

Mike had to admit, deep down, he would be disappointed if James didn’t score the Academy Award for best supporting actor. Mike thought James’ portrayal of a terrified Vietnam soldier in the war drama 1968 would be one of his husband’s best. The role had already won James a Golden Globe and several critics’ awards.

“Well, you’ll want to be there so the camera can see your handsome face politely smiling when a competitor’s name is unjustly called,” Mike teased.

“Shut up.” James snickered, punching Mike’s arm without force. “If that happens, I’ll be counting on you to give me a prize when we return to the hotel room.”

Mike winked. “Baby, I’m going to show you how much you’re adored, whether

there's a trophy in the bed with us or not."

* * * *

The previous year's winner for best supporting actress had just finished reading the names of the nominees, then grimaced as she tried to unseal the envelope that revealed the winner's name. James rolled his eyes, wondering if the presenters pretended to struggle so they'd get a few more seconds of air time.

"James V. Cooper," she read. James V. Cooper was the name James had started using since he had married Mike.

James smiled and huffed a breath of relief as his husband massaged his shoulder in congratulations. He turned to Mike for a quick kiss and a hug, then he made his way through the standing crowd to the stage to accept the trophy. When he turned to the audience, he was overwhelmed. His fortunes had changed so much since meeting his one-time idol.

"Thank you. I am so grateful to the Academy, to the amazing cast and crew who made this important film, the writers, the director, my agent, publicist and production company for making this happen. My sincere gratitude to the brave men and women who have served to protect our country. It was an honor to portray your sacrifices and your courage. Also, I admire the other actors who were nominated for this award. Each of you was just as deserving."

James paused, gazing at the trophy with gratitude, then turning back to the audience.

"I'd also like to thank my beloved brother and sister-in-law. Sorry you got the nosebleed seats." That elicited chuckles from the audience. "But it's a good deal considering the two seats are seating three. Can't wait to be an uncle." That received some polite, congratulatory applause from the audience. "Thanks to Maria, the woman who helped raise me. You mean the world to me. Mom, if you're looking

down right now, I hope I'm making you proud."

Just as the orchestra began playing music to signal he should exit the stage, James held up the trophy to the audience. "This is a wonderful gift for which I'm very grateful. But everything I am and everything I want to be is because of my husband. Mike, thank you for finding me, saving me and loving me."

The audience broke into applause as James headed backstage where he was asked to pose for photographs. He worried his smile was ridiculously big, but he couldn't change his expression if he tried. He was overwhelmed with joy. And though some happiness was due to his career success, he attributed most of it to Mike and the rest of his beloved family. He knew it was their love for him that had brought him to this place in his life.

As wonderful as the night was, James was more excited about how it would end. Mike had promised him a prize at the hotel, and James was determined he'd earn it by giving his hero another award-worthy performance.