

VICKTOR ALEXANDER

It's  
*You,*  
Then  
*Breathing*

## **IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING**

Carlos Herrera has been in love with his friend Burke Thornton for years, but as professional baseball players for the Boston Red Sox, he has never felt as if he could make his feelings known.

Plus there's the little thing of Burke being straight.

But the Red Sox have just won the World Series, everyone's celebrating, getting drunk, and Carlos notices that Burke keeps looking at him not with friendship in his eyes but with something... more.

Can he make his feelings known to his longtime friend without ruining what they have, forever? Is it possible that Burke is open to a relationship after the celebration is over? And when it's all said and done can Carlos finally admit to Burke that for him "It's You, Then Breathing"?

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING

By Vicktor Alexander

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING

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## Photo Description

Two men are pressed together in a corner, both are wearing white t-shirts that are wet and white briefs, but no pants. One is blond and the other has black hair. They appear to be either outside or in an outdoor shower, but they are wet and are close together, the blond is touching the shorter black-haired one's stomach intimately.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I don't know what to do. How to feel. We just won the World Series. The whole locker room is going crazy, champagne is spraying everywhere. And here I am, in the corner. I'm watching him. The smile on his face, his wet hair plastered all over his face, the muscles in his arms flexing as he soaks our rookie centerfielder. I should be happy. But, I'm not. Not really. I love him. And now the season is over, and everyone will go their separate ways. I love him. And I can't tell him... Can I?*

*Sincerely,*

*Holly*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** sports, friends to lovers, baseball, teammates, closeted, violence, Spanish, exhibitionism, family, gay bashing, athletes, interracial, HFN

**Word Count:** 18,490

# **IT'S YOU, THEN BREATHING**

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## Chapter One

Carlos Herrera stood on home plate, his gloved hands wrapped firmly around the baseball bat and his gaze trained on the pitcher from St. Louis. He could hear the deafening roar of the crowd all around him but he tried to block it out. He couldn't let himself get distracted. He had to focus. This was his big moment. The bases were loaded. It was the bottom of the ninth inning and they had two outs. He was the last hope for his team.

The pitcher shook his head at whatever signal was given to him by the catcher, then glanced out of the corner of his eyes as David "Big Papi" Ortiz took two steps off of third base, watching him carefully. *He's not going to steal, bastard. Make the pitch.*

Everyone knew that Big Papi was an excellent ballplayer, but he was also all about the team. He wouldn't do anything that would jeopardize the Red Sox. He would take those two steps and he would stop. Right in the man's line of sight. Distracting him.

*Make the pitch.*

The pitcher returned his gaze back to the catcher and nodded. Here it was. The ball he was waiting for, *the* pitch. The butterflies that had been fluttering steadily in Carlos's stomach began flying around in his gut like mad, crashing into each other. Carlos swallowed the bile that rose in his throat as he prepared for the ball to come sailing across the plate, adrenaline thrumming through his veins. The first ball was a little off center. He pulled back on the bat. *No. Don't swing.*

"Ball," the umpire shouted.

Carlos stepped out of the box and exhaled, rolling his neck to relieve the tension that had gathered there. He could do this. He *would* do this. His team was depending on him. His family. The whole of Boston was placing their trust and hopes squarely on his shoulders. He would not let them down.

"C'mon Hercules! You got this!"

Carlos turned to look toward the Red Sox dugout and grinned widely, his heart beating out a maddening rhythm of "A Thousand Years" by Paramore in his chest as he stared at the man smiling back at him. One of his biggest supporters. His best friend and teammate, Burke Thornton. Carlos nodded and



stepped back into the batter's box, returning his attention to the pitcher and away from Burke. He couldn't think about Burke. Thinking about his friend was dangerous. Carlos had to focus and Burke was a distraction. A major, major distraction.

The Cardinals pitcher spit into the grass and scowled at Carlos before concentrating back on the catcher. Carlos ignored him too and focused instead on the ball. The pitcher wasn't important. His hand wasn't important, neither was the way he hurled the white spherical object. The ball was important. The ball was Carlos's fixation right now, the center of his world in that moment. He noticed the dance the pitcher did again. Passing on two different signals before nodding. Carlos tensed, but he forced his shoulders and hips to relax, keeping only his arms tight, ready for the swing. He twisted his hands around the handle of the bat. This was it. He didn't know how he knew, he just did. This was his pitch. And he couldn't just hit it. He had to get under it and drive it as far out as he could.

The crowd faded away, everything around him blurring as the pitcher released the ball and Carlos brought down the bat in a low arc, his eyes never leaving the sight of those red stitches painstakingly sewn on the side of that pristine white ball. As the two kissed in a powerfully hard connection of wood against rubber and cork, the vibrations traveled up through his hands and arms, spreading through his body. Carlos never let go of the bat, following through with the hit with his right arm, pulling it all the way up. His eyes followed the trajectory of the ball as it went up, up, up sailing past the pitcher's head, flying by the outfield and over the back wall.

Carlos stood in shock for a moment. He'd done it. He'd fucking done it. He could hear the roar of the crowd growing louder. Hear his coach yelling for him to run, but he needed a moment. Just one goddamn moment to savor this reality. He'd hit a homerun. No. Not a homerun. He'd hit a motherfucking grand slam.

"Hercules! Move your fucking ass, *Boricua!*" Burke yelled.

*Burke.* If anything could get him moving it was Burke's voice. And, as if someone had popped the bubble surrounding him, the sound of the crowd screaming came to him in an instant and Carlos let out a whoop, jumping in the air, pumping his fist as his team ran onto the field. He started running the bases, waving to the fans, smiling at them. He looked up into the Skybox and waved at his parents, their images displayed on the big screen, his mother's eyes filled

with tears as she applauded and waved. He was her baby. The youngest of eight children. The only one who didn't end up working as a teacher. The only one who was gay. He hoped that he'd finally made her proud.

He rounded third base, shaking hands with the third base coach, and saw his team waiting for him at home plate, celebrating, hugging each other, tears flowing down their cheeks. It had been a hard year, but they'd made it. They had won. They were champions. Carlos ran toward them, leaping onto home plate and tossed himself in the middle of the fray. Right into Burke's arms. His friend lifted him up, spinning him around, laughing. Carlos held up his hand screaming at the top of his lungs as he tried to ignore exactly how close Burke's face was to his groin. How close the man's hands were to his ass. *Oh god. Sweet torture. I've got to get out of his arms. I can't do this.*

Carlos pushed out of Burke's embrace and dropped to the ground, shoving on his friend's shoulders, chuckling. He scratched the back of his neck and shook his head.

"Good job Hercules! You did a good job, Little Man," Ortiz said as he slapped Carlos's back, making him stumble forward and collide with Burke.

"Thanks, Big Papi," Carlos choked out.

Burke chuckled. "You need another spine there, Herc?" Burke asked.

Carlos wiggled. "Maybe a new spleen too," he told his friend. Burke let out a snort and Carlos joined him in a laugh. When their sounds of amusement calmed, Carlos's stomach clenched at the look of intensity he saw in Burke's eyes. He opened his mouth to ask him what was wrong when he heard his name being yelled. Turning, he saw a reporter heading his way. He glanced back at Burke to tell him that they would talk later but Burke had already walked away to celebrate with the rest of the team.

*Damn.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*What the fuck did you think you were gonna do back there, Thornton? Declare your love for Hercules in front of the whole goddamn world? Stop thinking with your dick for once!* Burke continued to berate himself mentally even as he smiled and congratulated the rest of his team, posing for pictures with fans, teammates, the owner, and conducting interviews. The entire time, his mind fixed on Carlos Herrera. His teammate, his best friend. A man.

Oh, he knew what the world thought. That he was straight. That he was a ladies man. He'd gone to great lengths to make them think that way. He and his best friend, Holly, from college, had carefully constructed the lie. One where they were a couple who were madly in love with each other and they would get married when it was legal for "everyone in the world to get married regardless of sexual orientation." It made everyone think they were the greatest, most liberal, socially conscious couple in the world. Next to Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, of course. Those overachievers. But no one knew that the excuse they gave was really just so he and Holly would never have to take that ill-fated walk down the aisle. What with Burke being gay and Holly madly in love with a man her family didn't approve of, they had the best of both worlds.

Sort of.

Except Burke was in love with his best friend, and while he'd caught the occasional glances from Carlos, he wasn't sure if they were the "I'm interested in you" glances or the "I know your secret and wish you would tell me so this would stop being awkward" glances. Burke was pretty sure that his super awesome gaydar broke the instant he signed his contract to play professional baseball.

"Yo, Thornton! Man, we are going out to party tonight! You are *definitely* coming! You hear me?" his teammate, Jacoby Ellsbury, yelled at him. Burke turned to look at him and felt his stomach flip. Jacoby and Carlos could easily be related. Though Carlos was a shorter, slimmer version of Jacoby, both men were lean with toned muscles and had short, dark brown hair, light brown eyes and a square jaw dusted with a goatee. Though Jacoby didn't have a slight bump in the middle of his long, thin nose, like Carlos, they were still practically twins. Jacoby also didn't have Carlos's pink lips, with the bottom one fuller than the top, or his wide smile. And no one in the world had Carlos's muscled thighs, thick calves, or his high, round ass.

Burke cleared his throat and returned his attention to Jacoby. He nodded. "Yeah." He cleared his throat when he heard how husky his voice sounded and tried again. "Yeah, man. I'll be there."

"Cool, man! And bring Hercules! I swear the two of you are joined at the hip. Like an old married couple," Jacoby laughed boisterously and turned to conduct another interview, completely unaware of how much he'd flipped Burke's world on its head. Could it be possible that Carlos felt something for him? That he was gay too? Should Burke try... no. No. He couldn't, because if

he was wrong he wouldn't only make things uncomfortable for them on the team, he would lose the greatest relationship in his life. He would lose his best friend.

No, he wouldn't tempt fate and risk it. He would just continue to yearn for Carlos from afar.

Even if doing so was making it harder and harder for him to breathe.

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## Chapter Two

When Carlos was a little boy there were two things that he'd known to be true. He wanted to be a professional baseball player like Babe Ruth, Satchel Page, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Ty Cobb. The other fact of his young life was that while his older brothers, Ramon, Pedro, Jorge, Angel, and Miguel were all attracted to girls, damn near obsessed with them, he didn't like girls. Oh, he thought girls were pretty. His best friends were girls actually, a fact his brothers loved because whenever Carlos brought his girlfriends over his brothers descended on them like vultures, circling and picking the girls off one by one until Carlos was left sitting alone in the corner, watching as they all flirted and giggled with each other. But while Carlos liked to sit around with the girls and talk about *Beverly Hills 90210*, and debate about why Dylan and Kelly were a much better couple than Dylan and Brenda could ever hope to be, he never once looked at Brenda and Kelly with an eye toward sleeping with either one of them.

He wanted to sleep with Dylan. Dylan was hot.

Which made for a very confusing childhood. Especially growing up in a Catholic household with a very strict, very religious, very manly father. His father was all about being a man. Being "machismo" or *hombruno*. The very first time Cesar Herrera had walked in to find Carlos wearing his mother's heels and the tiara she'd won for being Miss Puerto Rico, his padre's face turned the darkest shade of red before he'd raged. He'd yanked the crown out of Carlos's long brown hair, that had grown to below his shoulders at the time, and pulled him until he'd tripped out of the shoes, out of the bedroom and down the hallway. Carlos had been too afraid to cry at first, until he found himself standing outside in front of his brothers with his father pointing at him and declaring that no son of his would be a *maricón*.

Carlos hadn't known what the word truly meant. Hadn't known how bad it was until he saw his mother's face. She'd burst into tears and began making the sign of the cross. Carlos's older brothers had gotten angry and told his father that they would straighten him out, and his father had nodded. He'd told them to start with his hair, before turning to walk away. He hadn't looked back, not even when Carlos yelled his name. Carlos's mother had taken his two sisters inside, tears rolling down her cheeks, rapid prayers in Spanish falling from her lips, as she refused to look at him as well.

Carlos's older brothers surrounded him, Jorge going to get a pair of scissors from the house. Carlos turned to run but was unable to do so. He was the youngest. The smallest, and they used their height and bigger bodies to hold him down while they cut his hair short, until only an inch remained. And when that was over, they took him into the backyard and beat him black-and-blue.

Carlos never wore his mother's shoes or her tiara again.

But the desire for men never went away. No matter how hard he tried to ignore it. No matter how afraid of his brothers and his father he was, the need for a hard body to be pressed against his own filled him. To love and be loved by a man. He dreamt of touching another man's cock and having his own cock wrapped in the firm grip of a strong-jawed, male member of the human race. He'd prayed about it. Gone to confession repeatedly and yet the desires never left him.

And then his senior year rolled around and his father died. As if an oppressive cloud had been lifted from the family, they moved from Miami, Florida to Cambridge, Massachusetts, to stay with his *Tía* Constanza, his mother's sister. Carlos was floored by the beauty of the city when he got his first view of it, and then rocked down to his core when he saw two men, walking down the street, holding hands. His eyes followed them. When he heard his older brother, Pedro, curse them beneath his breath, Carlos's face had flamed, and he held his bag in front of his groin where his erection pressed obscenely.

Tía Constanza's slap against the back of Pedro's head startled him. "Your estúpido father is muerto. If you want to join him, you just continue to have an attitude such as that in my house," she said.

Pedro's eyes widened, as did everyone else's, but Constanza merely smiled and walked into the house. It was at that moment that Carlos knew that she would become his favorite person in the entire world. Oh, he loved his mother and his siblings, but Constanza was his touchstone. When he kissed his first boy, the quarterback of the football team, it was his Tía that he went and told. When he and that same quarterback, Billy, had sex for the first time, without a condom, it was Constanza he'd gone to, and she was the one who'd taken him to have his first HIV test. When he finally decided to come out to the rest of his family, Constanza had held his hand, offering silent support. She'd also been the one to comfort him when he'd sobbed for hours after his brothers had cursed him and stormed out of the house, and his mother had asked him why he didn't want to spend eternity with her in Heaven.

When Constanza introduced him to her “partner”, Amy, Carlos finally understood why she’d been so sympathetic to his own plight, and the two of them had grown closer. And even though her job as a journalist prevented her from coming to every last one of his games, he was glad she was at this one. Even if she did have to sit in the Skybox with his mother and stepfather, the Conservative Republican lawyer his mother had married two years after they’d moved to Cambridge.

“Hercules!” Jason Varitek’s boisterous voice pulled him out of his walk down memory lane, and Carlos turned away from the crowd of well-wishers to grin at the broad-shouldered bear of a man as he came barreling toward him. Carlos braced himself for impact, Varitek or “Tek” as he was known to those who knew him well, did not know how to hug anyone lightly. Carlos let out an oomph as Tek slammed into him and Carlos wrapped his arms around the man’s broad shoulders. He laughed as Tek tossed him over a shoulder and jumped up and down before setting him back on his feet. Carlos shook his head to clear it of the dizziness and punched Tek in the stomach.

“Asshole,” he yelled.

Tek shook his head. “I’m not saying I lost faith in you, Herc, but there was a moment there where you seemed a little unfocused. I’m glad you got your shit together. I knew you could do it, Little Man!”

Carlos growled. He was really sick of everyone calling him “Little Man.” He knew he was a little shorter than everyone else. Varitek was six feet two and Big Papi was six feet four so of course anyone was shorter than them. Carlos, at five feet eleven was shorter than most of the guys on the team and they never let him forget it. Not even Burke, who was only six feet one.

“I am not your Little Man,” Carlos grouched.

“Awww,” Tek mocked him, pinching Carlos’s cheeks. “Is the baby cranky?”

Carlos shoved him away laughing. “Shut up, jerk!”

“Hey. What’s going on over here?” Burke’s voice interrupted Carlos and Tek’s conversation, and although to the outside observer Burke’s tone sounded pleasant, Carlos could hear the tension wrapped thickly inside of it. Carlos quirked an eyebrow as he stared at his friend, wondering what was wrong with him, and shook his head.

“Oh nothing. Tek’s just teasing me about being short again,” Carlos said, shoving at Tek’s shoulder.

Varitek chuckled and wrapped his arm around Carlos's neck, rubbing his knuckles over his head. "You're just so cute."

Carlos let out a yell as he felt the burn and friction against his skull. "Hey, bitch! Let me go!"

"Alright, you two," Burke laughed. "Hercules needs to go and accept the MVP award."

Carlos stood up, his eyes wide. "I'm getting the MVP?" he gasped.

Burke nodded. "Of course you are. You are the Most Valuable Player, Hercules. Trust me. There's no one more valuable than you."

Carlos took a few steps forward before Burke's words sank in and he froze. Turning, he stared at his friend. Was Burke only talking about being important to the team or was he talking about something more? Could he be talking about being precious to him? Could Burke be curious about the two of them? Would Carlos be okay with that?

"And now your most valuable player, Carlos Herrera!" the announcer called.

"Go, Hercules," Burke said, gesturing with a nod.

"But," Carlos said, shaking his head, wanting to ask Burke about the look on his face, wanting to talk to him about what he'd said.

"Go."

Feeling as if he'd missed an opportunity, Carlos turned and headed for the podium placed at the pitcher's mound. The applause of the crowd was deafening, and yet it wasn't loud enough to drown out Burke's words as they replayed in his mind.

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## Chapter Three

“So, when do you plan on telling Hercules that you’re in love with him?” Veritek’s voice was low and speculative, and even though it was soft, it might as well have been shouted because of the way it shocked Burke. He jumped, his heart pounding so hard it almost burst through his sternum, and he turned to face Jason.

“W-what?” he stammered.

Veritek held up his hands. “It doesn’t mean a fucking thing to me. I mean, except that you are one less man trying to bone my wife you know? But if I were gay and in love with a man like Hercules, and looking at him the way you just were, I damn sure would tell him. Especially with us all about to go on break. Anything can happen on break, man, and you don’t want to come back for Spring Training and find out that you missed your shot, you know?” Veritek shrugged. “And that’s all I have to say on the matter. I ain’t fucking Doctor Phil.”

Burke stared after Veritek as the man shrugged and walked away, his mind reeling from the man’s words. He’d always thought he’d been much better about hiding his feelings for Carlos, but apparently he hadn’t been. Or maybe Veritek’s gaydar was just extremely honed. It didn’t make any difference. Burke may be gay, but Carlos certainly wasn’t. Was he? Burke shook his head mentally. While he’d never seen his friend with a woman, that didn’t necessarily mean that Carlos hadn’t had one. Burke, himself, had spent too much of his free time with Holly, keeping up the pretense of being a happily committed, straight man to worry about if Carlos was occupying his time with anyone else. It would have been too painful to see the man entering a hotel room with a woman, or a man for that matter.

While he knew there were many in the GLBTQI community who would be disappointed in him for not being out and open about his sexuality, they didn’t truly understand what it was like to be a professional athlete. Homophobia ran rampant within the locker room. Slurs against men who loved other men were the norm, falling from the lips of not only the players and the coaches, but the owners as well. And anyone who was perceived as being slightly gay, or even looked as though they were having a homosexual thought, was bullied and harassed until they inevitably quit, or were traded and learned to hide such things from everyone around them. It was something Burke had learned at a young age.

He was twelve years old the first time he'd gotten an erection looking at another boy in the locker room. It had been after a Little League game, where his team had beaten the Moline Falcons, and he and the rest of the Davenport Eagles had gone back to shower before heading out for their pizza party. Burke had been the last one to enter the showers, the coach having stopped him to give him some pointers on his game, and when he'd entered the open showering area, there had only been one open showerhead. Right next to Aaron Davis. Burke had gone over and turned on the shower and started to wash without paying much attention to the roughhousing the other boys were engaging in. He'd always been that way, usually taking a few moments after the game to go over every play to see where he could improve, where he'd made any mistakes, where he'd excelled, things like that. But this time he'd gotten distracted when Aaron had been shoved into him by one of their other teammates and Burke had been snapped out of his internal musings. When he'd looked over at Aaron he'd found himself growing aroused for the first time. That was the moment he'd realized he was different from everyone else.

He'd begged to get off attending the pizza party and gone home where his parents found him curled up in the back of his closet, clutching his baseball glove, tears streaming down his cheeks. When his mother tried to talk to him he'd only cried harder. His father had taken one look at him and sighed. He'd crawled into the closet with Burke and closed the door, trapping them in the darkness.

“What happened after the game, Burke?” he'd asked.

“I don't know, Pa,” Burke lied.

“Don't you lie to me, Burke,” his father said firmly. “You know I don't tolerate you lying to me.”

Burke sniffled. “I got a stiffy,” he whispered.

His father chuckled. “You got an erection. It happens to all of us, son. It just means you're growing up. It's nothing to be afraid of and certainly nothing to cry over. Were you thinking of one of the cheerleaders?”

Burke shook his head, though he knew his father couldn't see him. “No. I was looking at Aaron.”

His father had gotten silent then, and the silence in the closet had grown stifling, making Burke cry harder. When his father gathered him into his arms and patted the back of his head, Burke felt the tension and fear seep out of his

body. His father always knew how to make him feel better. "Well, Burke, I won't admit that I know how you feel, I can't say that I do. But your Ma and I? We love you anyway. There will be people who may not understand or really like the fact that you like boys that way, so you be careful, but just know that we are always here for you."

Burke nodded, not fully understanding why anyone would care who he liked, but just like that he'd felt better. When his father had suggested that they head over to the pizza parlor to join the rest of the team, Burke had agreed and was glad he had. It was the last time he'd hung out with the team.

The next time they had a game, they'd lost, and even though they were a bunch of preteens, tempers flared, all of them seeking someone to blame. Aaron hadn't been playing well, their pitcher, Terry, had hit a number of players, and Burke, their best hitter, hadn't delivered, striking out a number of times. Everyone was angry when they walked into the locker room, and perhaps that was why Ricky, who was already a bully, noticed the way Burke kept looking at Aaron.

"Yo, Thornton! You some kind of fag or something?" he shouted across the room.

Everyone grew still and turned to look at Burke, and his face grew hot as he spluttered at the question. "W-what?" he asked. "Why would you ask that?"

"My daddy says that if a man keeps looking at another man then he's a fag and he deserves to have his ass kicked. You keep looking at Aaron like you want to kiss him, so that makes you a fag." Ricky sneered at Burke as he walked toward him slamming his fist into his palm. "So that means you need to have your ass kicked."

"I'm not a fag!" Burke yelled looking around the room. He noticed that his other teammates seemed to be either too scared to get involved, confused about what was going on, or joining Ricky. Burke rose from the bench and turned to run, hearing Ricky and the rest of the guys chasing him out of the locker room. He ran directly to the coach's office, slamming the door behind him.

"Thornton! What's the problem?"

Burke pointed. "Ricky's calling me a fag and trying to kick my ass, Coach!"

Coach Eckhart blinked and his face grew dark red. He rose from behind his desk and walked around it, grabbing Burke's arm in a firm grip, he stepped out of the office, facing the rest of the team. He let go of Burke, crossed his arms and gave them all a no-nonsense glare.

“First of all, there will be no profanity or name calling in this locker room, Ricky, you know better. Let your parents know that you’ll be staying late after practice next week to run laps,” Coach Eckhart said.

Ricky’s mouth dropped open, then he nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Second of all,” Coach Eckhart said. “Let me let you all in on a secret. There is no way that anyone in this room is a gay. Gays can’t play sports. They’re too delicate. The good Lord made sports for men, and gays are not real men. Burke here is an excellent ball player, and a great athlete so there’s no way he is a gay. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” everyone chorused. Coach Eckhart nodded and patted Burke on the back. “Now. Go home. All of you and enjoy your week because practice next week is going to be brutal.”

Everyone groaned as they started to grab their bags and filed out. Burke watched Ricky and his friends turn around to head back to their lockers, his Coach’s words swirling around in his brain. Was the man right? He was a good athlete so if gays weren’t, then he couldn’t be a good athlete. Maybe him getting an erection while looking at Aaron was just a one-time thing.

But when he went outside to the car and told his parents what had happened, they pulled him off of the team and he soon found himself playing for the Moline Falcons, against the Davenport Eagles. Against Aaron and Ricky. He’d learned then to keep his mouth shut and all of his desires for other men as close to the vest as he could.

At least until he got to college and met Holly, then the rules changed completely.

“Thornton?” Carlos’s voice pulled him out of his memories and Burke blinked down at his friend, the shorter man staring up at him with concern, sweat glistening at his brow. “You okay?”

Burke nodded. “Yeah. Just caught up in a trip down memory lane.”

Carlos grinned. “Yeah that’s been happening to me a lot today too.” He jerked his head toward the direction of the locker room. “Come on. Let’s go get cleaned up. I hear there’s a party going on and we’re actually invited to this one.”

“We’re always invited to the parties. We just never go.” Burke laughed.

Carlos shrugged. “Yeah, well. Same thing.”

Burke shook his head and slung his arm over his friend's shoulder as he walked with him toward the locker room, waving toward the fans who were still cheering over their win. His stomach clenched as he thought about the fact that they were heading to the showers. Together. And the idea that they would be the last ones there.

No. Nothing was going to happen. He wouldn't let it. He'd spent years keeping the "fag" out of the locker room, and no matter how hot Carlos was and how much Burke wanted to sink his cock inside the man's hot ass, he refused to break that rule.

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## Chapter Four

Carlos could feel the way Burke suddenly stiffened next to him and he wondered what was going through his friend's mind. He wanted to ask him but at the same time he didn't want to call any attention to Burke's tension, he was too busy enjoying the way the man's arm felt wrapped around him. Call him selfish, but it was the truth. He pressed his left arm tighter against Burke's side shivering slightly at the brush of the man's uniform against his skin. He was playing with fire, he knew he was, but he couldn't help himself.

"Carlos! *Mijo!*" His mother's voice was like a bucket of ice-cold water being dumped on his head and Carlos groaned. Never in his life had he wanted to shout out at the heavens more than in that moment. He and Burke stopped and turned. He smiled at his mother to see her and the rest of his family rushing toward him, big grins stretched across their faces as they surrounded him, all speaking excitedly in rapid-fire Spanish.

Carlos nodded, not really paying them any attention, his eyes flickering back and forth from their faces to Burke's as his friend stood against the wall, an amused expression shining in his dark brown eyes. Carlos had a hard time not staring at Burke's broad shoulders and tall, lean, toned body with his thick biceps, trunk-like thighs and muscled calves. His short, dark blond hair that was styled in an elegant crew cut, perfectly accentuating his square jaw. Carlos's eyes moved over Burke's thin nose, the dimple in his chin and his high cheekbones. Burke looked as if he had been sculpted from marble and more than once Carlos had lain in bed fantasizing about licking every last inch of his friend's body. Sucking on his thin lips, especially the bottom one, which was fuller than the top. Whenever Burke wasn't smiling, there was still a slight tilt to the left side of his gorgeous lips. Carlos wanted to feel that wrapped around his cock. He wondered if it felt different from every other mouth out there.

"Carlos!" His mother snapped her fingers in front of his face, and Carlos blinked and cleared his throat, blushing as he realized that he'd been lusting over his best friend in front of his mother, stepfather, sisters, aunt, her partner, and the rest of his family. "Did you not hear me?"

"*Lo siento, Madre.* My mind was wandering," he apologized, leaning down to kiss his mother's cheek. His mother was only five feet three and though she was pushing sixty, she looked thirty and dressed like it as well. Her black hair was thick and currently flowed around her shoulders in waves, her makeup

flawless and she wore an elegant pink and grey skirt suit. She preened as soon as Carlos kissed her and reached up to pat his face. These were the moments when he thought that perhaps she actually was proud of him, but they were usually snatched away from him when she would inevitably say—

“Such a good boy. I don’t know why you can’t find a good Puerto Rican woman to marry. I will even accept *Gringo*. But you are getting so old, *Mijo*. It is time for you to settle down, get married and have babies. I want to be an *abuela*,” she said.

Carlos chuckled. “*Madre*, you already are an *abuela*. You have *trece* grandchildren already. Why do you need more?”

His mother huffed and waved her hand. “I do not have any from *you*. I must have grandchildren from all *mis hijos* before *Dios* takes me away from you all.”

Carlos just shook his head again and lifted his mother’s hand to kiss the back of her fingers. It was an old argument between the two of them. She refused to accept that he was gay and he refused to marry a woman just to satisfy her and give her beautiful Latino, or half-Latino, babies. While he could use a surrogate and had considered it more than once, he didn’t want to be a single father. He wanted to have a partner, someone to share the burden of changing dirty diapers, and four a.m. feedings, and paying for college, and paying for the wedding, and one day, becoming grandparents, themselves.

He wanted a marriage. A family. And he wanted it with the one person he couldn’t have. So, until that feeling passed, he wouldn’t be having it with anyone.

Refusing to look over at Burke to see what he thought about the conversation going on between him and his mother, Carlos stood to his full height and stepped back. “*Madre*, I told you when I meet the right person, *person*, then I will give you as many grandchildren as you can stand. But not a moment before. Now. Burke and I have to go and shower so we can go out and celebrate with the rest of the team.” He emphasized the word for her twice, not giving his future partner a gender so as to not mar their happy moment, but the slight dimming of her hazel eyes let him know that she knew he meant when he met the right *man*.

His mother gasped. “You are not going to come and celebrate your win with your family?”

Carlos winced as he looked at the disappointment and the sadness on his mother’s face. How she managed to display both expressions on her face at the

same time, he would never know. He looked over at Burke and scowled when he heard his friend choke on a laugh. Feeling a thread of evil revenge pulse through him Carlos looked at his mom and grinned sweetly.

“Okay, *Madre*. Burke and I will go to the party for a little while. Just to say hi, because you know we have to celebrate with the team, but then we will come and meet you at the house and have dinner with the family,” he said. He could see Burke’s mouth drop open out of the side of his eye and had to bite his lower lip to stop himself from bursting into laughter.

His mother pouted. “You cannot come for the whole time, *mijo*?”

“Alma,” his stepfather, Thiago Perez interrupted with an indulgent grin. “Leave the boy alone. Let him go and have fun with his friends. He had a hard day and played a good game. He will come over after a while and we can talk to him then.”

His mother nodded and smiled up at Thiago, patting his chest, though confusion and dread filled Carlos. Talk to him? Talk to him about what? And why did his stepfather insist on calling his career “having fun with his friends”? It irritated Carlos to no end. Carlos cut his gaze over to his *Tía* to see if she knew what was going on but the small shrug she gave let him know that she was just as in the dark as he was.

“Okay. Well, I’ll see you later, *Madre. Padre*.” Carlos was the only one of his mother’s children who called Thiago father instead of by his name. Perhaps it was because of the way his own father had treated him after that fateful day with the heels and the tiara, but Cesar had ceased to be his “*padre*” after that. When his mother and Thiago had married, Carlos and Thiago had gotten close. It had been Thiago who had practiced with Carlos all hours of the day and night when he’d told the man that he wanted to be a professional baseball player. And it was Thiago who had discouraged him from blowing all of his money from his first signed contract on cars, houses and lavish gifts. Carlos had invested wisely and tripled his money. Something he was extremely grateful for.

Thiago may not have agreed with Carlos being gay but he was more of a father to him than Carlos’s own father had ever been.

“Si, *mijo*. You will come to the house, soon, *jes*?” His mother’s accent always got really thick whenever she was excited or upset. Carlos’s eyebrows lowered. He couldn’t figure out which one she was, so he merely nodded.

“Sí, *Mamá*.”



“*Enhorabuena, hermano,*” his sisters, Camila and Fabiana said simultaneously as they leaned over to kiss his cheeks.

“*Gracias,*” Carlos thanked them with a smile, waving at his brothers-in-law, Adam and Marco, as they led his sisters away. He watched as his family, his loud, boisterous family, walked back the way they’d come and turned his head toward Burke when the man walked up to him.

“Man, I’d kill for your family,” Burke sighed.

“You want ’em?” Carlos deadpanned. “I’ll sell ’em to you for fifty cents. All of them except my *Tía*. She’s priceless, man.”

“Sold.”

Carlos shook his head and sighed. Spinning around, he headed back toward the showers, his arm brushing against Burke’s, missing the feel of the taller man’s arm wrapped around him. Damn his family for interrupting them. It didn’t matter. He had enough stroke material to last him for a while. And besides, his family stopping them had, hopefully, delayed Carlos and Burke enough that by the time they finally stepped into the locker room, the rest of the team would be gone and they would be able to shower alone. Then Carlos would *really* have something to masturbate to. Burke. Naked. Wet. With his cock covered in soap.

And there went Carlos’s cock. Plumping up in his pants. Fuck.

Carlos bit his lower lip and swallowed the moan that tried to bubble up out of his chest.

“Man, you joke, but I swear, your family is awesome.”

Carlos laughed. “No, man. Your parents? They sound like they were the coolest people in the world.” He looked over at his friend and saw the way the blond smiled softly. The expression was so full of love and care. What Carlos wouldn’t give, sacrifice and *bleed* to have Burke look at him that way, or to know that the expression on his face meant that the man was thinking of him. Just once. All he needed was just one time. He could die happy if Burke looked at him like that just once.

“Yeah. They were. But, the problem with having parents who love you like that, is when you lose them at such a young age, like I did? You spend the rest of your life looking for someone to love you like that. Or looking to love someone that way. And the sad fact is, a lot of people just aren’t worth it.”

Burke sounded so disappointed and sad by this statement that Carlos couldn't take it.

Without thinking, Carlos reached out and grabbed Burke's hand. The two of them stopped right in front of the locker room, turning to face each other. Carlos found himself staring up into his best friend's expressive gaze, his heart pounding and his mouth going dry. *Kiss me, Burke. Please, kiss me. I can't kiss you. I don't want to ruin this, but if you kiss me then I'll know it's okay.*

He couldn't say those words out loud though, so instead he said, "I think it's just a matter of finding the *right* person to love that way, who will love you back just as much. It's not so hard when it's right, you know what I mean? You'll just sort of fall into place with each other. It's effortless. Like breathing. And then you don't have to look anymore."

*Kiss me, Burke. I want to breathe again. I stopped breathing the second I saw you. Please, kiss me so I can breathe again.*

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## Chapter Five

*Please kiss me, Carlos. I need you to keep me breathing. I'm drowning without you. If you kiss me I'll know that it's okay. I'll know that you're thinking and feeling what I am, but I won't act first. Please kiss me. Help me to breathe again.*

Burke stared at Carlos, the air still around them as if all of nature was waiting for one of them to do something. Was it him? Carlos? What was he supposed to do? Was he supposed to do anything? His palm grew sweaty where it lay pressed against Carlos's and Burke had the urge to squeeze his friend's hand. Could he do that? Was that allowed? Would Carlos know then? Would that be such a bad thing?

Carlos's eyes darkened and his lips parted as if he were preparing for something. A kiss, maybe? Or maybe he was getting ready to say something. No. He looked like he was getting ready to kiss someone. Who? Burke? Wait. Was he leaning forward? Why? Burke's mind was swirling with the implications of his friend's actions when he realized that he was leaning forward himself.

Holy. Shit. Was he really going to do this? Right here? In front of the locker room? Where anyone could see them? What the fuck was wrong with him?

Loud laughter caused both Carlos and him to jump and back away from each other. Burke rubbed the back of his neck. Embarrassment sweeping through him and for the first time in over a decade... shame crawling through his veins like sludge. He didn't understand why he felt such an emotion, though. Why should he feel ashamed about such a thing? Plenty of men hid their sexuality in the majors. He wasn't the only one. Not only that, he had to think of Holly. He couldn't do anything that would look bad on his relationship with Holly.

*"Don't you dare try to blame your sorry state of singlehood on me, Burke."* His last conversation with Holly played in his head like a parrot mocking him. *"If you're single, it's because you want to be. I'm sure you can find some gorgeous guy who needs to be in the closet just like you, who would love to be in love with you. Or more than that. I just know that there's a guy worth you coming out for. That's what I want for you. A guy you love so much that you throw yourself head first out of the closet for, hangers, shoes, boxes, skeletons, costumes, tuxedos and all."*

Burke snorted. His best friend was colorful in her descriptions but she always got her point across. He needed someone he wanted, no *needed* to come out for. Was Carlos that guy? Could he be that man? Burke opened his mouth to say something to Carlos. Maybe to apologize for pulling away, he didn't know, but the door to the locker room opened and some of their teammates started to walk out, laughing, shoving each other, celebrating their big win.

"Yo! Herrera and Thornton! Man, you guys better get in there! The party is getting crazy," Mike Napoli, laughed drunkenly as he stumbled, his arm wrapped tightly around Ellsbury's neck as the two men made their way from the locker room.

Burke's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Napoli, you sure got slammed fast."

Ellsbury shook his head and chuckled. "Napoli here didn't tell anyone that he was on pain meds before he decided to be set up for *Sox Race*."

Burke winced. That particular drinking game could drop a man even if he wasn't on prescription medication. He reached out to pat Napoli on the shoulder. "Go home and sleep it off. Roli-Poli."

"Yeah, go take a nap, Napoli," Carlos laughed.

Burke and Ellsbury both groaned while Napoli swung out feebly at Carlos, who danced away. Burke laughed at the two men and shook his head. He loved his teammates and was seriously going to miss them during the off-season. Would they all be back on the team next year? He knew that many times players were traded after great seasons, which made no sense to him whatsoever, but it was a part of life. He just hoped that it wouldn't be one of his buddies.

He could only hope it wouldn't be him or Carlos.

His eyes drifted over to Carlos, and he watched as his friend continued to tease Napoli, mocking the man, and he felt a lump rise in his throat. What would he do if he and Carlos were separated next season? He knew that his game would be affected. There was no way he'd be effective as a ballplayer if he had to play *against* Carlos. Besides, he was used to looking over and seeing Carlos's grin, feeling the man's shoulder against his own, looking at his bubble butt encased in the pants of the Boston Red Sox uniform. There was no way Burke would be able to continue to play under different circumstances.

He shook his head mentally. He was borrowing trouble. He knew he was. God, why was he suddenly so morose? He hadn't been drinking anything so he

couldn't be drunk. There was absolutely no reason for his thoughts to suddenly have taken a turn in such a direction.

"Come on, Thornton. Let's let Ellsbury and NAPoli go on home. We've got a celebration to go to. I want to get inside and see if Coach is drinking," Carlos said with a wide grin splitting his caramel face.

Burke nodded and looked back over at Ellsbury and Napoli, and he lifted his hand to them. "We'll see you guys later," he said.

"So you guys are coming to the party then?" Ellsbury said.

"Yep," Carlos answered. "We can't stay for too long though. My mom guilted me into coming over to her place to have dinner. Apparently, her and my dad want to talk to me about something, and I'm dragging Thornton with me for backup just in case I need an excuse to leave. But we'll be back over if the party's still going."

Ellsbury nodded. "Excellent. We'll see you guys later." He walked away with Napoli draped over him, his face pressed against Ellsbury's neck and Burke tilted his head to the side.

"Kinda makes you wonder," Carlos muttered beneath his breath. Or at least that's what Burke thought he said.

"What?" he asked.

Carlos shook his head. "Nothing. C'mon." He turned and led the way into the locker room. Burke followed behind him, his mind split on the final image of Ellsbury and Napoli, and the sight of Carlos's ass moving in his uniform pants.

*Damn.*

When they stepped into the locker room, Burke had to rub his eyes to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. The room was filled with the players of the Boston Red Sox team, in various state of undress, all of them soaked in—water or liquor, Burke wasn't sure what it was—all of them hanging on each other, laughing, singing at the tops of their lungs.

"What the fuck are they singing?" Carlos whispered next to him.

Burke chuckled. "Danny Boy. It's an old Irish song."

Carlos shook his head. "Isn't that a song you sing when someone dies?"

"Yep."

“Crazies.”

“You got that right.” Burke nodded. No sooner had Burke agreed than the song abruptly changed to an Irish jig and everyone instantly picked up the words. Even the more *ethnic* members of the team. He watched as champagne was sprayed on various team members, drunk straight from the bottle by some, or poured into the pants of others.

“It’s like a weird Dionysus party in here,” Carlos mused. “I wonder if they acted like this when they won back in ’04.”

“We were worse then. We had Pedro and Manny, and they are worse than everyone here put together,” Ortiz said loudly from next to them and Burke jumped. He turned to look at the large black man standing at his left. “Now, come. You join the party.” Ortiz slapped Burke on the back and Burke stumbled forward right into the middle of the crowd. He turned to find Carlos, but lost sight of him as his teammates surrounded him. A champagne bottle was shoved into one hand and a cup filled with... yeah, that was scotch... was put into his other. He swallowed the scotch and laughed as he celebrated with his team. He didn’t need to worry about Carlos. They were friends. Teammates. They weren’t lovers, or partners. They were buddies. Pals. That was it. They would never be anything more.

Yeah. Maybe if he kept saying that to himself he might actually start to believe it.

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## Chapter Six

Carlos stood in the corner, barefoot, dressed in only his undershirt and his uniform pants, soaked in champagne, Gatorade, and water, and watched Burke as he sang drunkenly with the other teammates. They were singing “Firework” by Katy Perry at the top of their lungs. It sounded like a bunch of cats being tortured. Brutally. If Katy heard them she would probably sue them all for butchering her song. Even in the locker room where no one could hear them.

He took a shuddering breath as he lifted the bottle of champagne to his lips and took another deep gulp. He was well and truly plastered. He knew that he was. He also knew that he was going to have to sober up if he had any plans of going to see his mother in a few hours. There was no way she would allow him to come stumbling into her home intoxicated. And Burke was much worse than he was. He snorted as he imagined his mother’s litany of Spanish expletives if he and Burke walked into her home smelling of liquor.

*I do not want to experience that. Not again.*

The sound of a male shout caused him to look up in shock. He let out a harsh laugh as he watched Burke spray their rookie center fielder, a dry, clean, Ellsbury, who was obviously returning from escorting Napoli home. Carlos shook his head. The man should have stayed away. Why he would change and come back was a fool’s errand, everyone knew that.

“Goddammit, Thornton! I just took a fuckin’ shower!” Ellsbury shouted.

“Well ’at was a ’tupid t’ing to do now wann’t it?” Burke slurred. The rest of the team laughed and Carlos merely shook his head. His friend was beyond sloshed. It was time to call a halt to the drinking. Maybe. Or maybe this was the perfect time for Carlos to make his move. When Burke was this drunk he let down his guard, lowered his inhibitions, and tended to forget things the next day. Carlos could tell the man that he loved him. Find out why Burke had been looking at him so intently all day. See if maybe there was the possibility for something more and if so, he could try again when they were both sober, but if not, then never try again and keep their friendship intact.

It was a brilliant fucking idea.

Carlos nodded his head and pushed away from the corner, stumbling slightly as the room tilted. *Holy fuck. Who was moving the room and why were they shaking it when he was trying to walk? That wasn’t cool. Not cool at all.*

He rested his hand against the wall of the shower where he'd been hiding from everyone and waited for the world to stop spinning, closing his eyes, just for a minute, and when he opened them again, everyone was gone. How had he ended up sitting on the floor of the showers? He looked around dazedly, before glancing down at his legs that were spread wide, his arms hanging limply at his sides. Putting two-and-two together he realized that he must have passed out and sank to the floor and been left to sleep it off by the rest of the team. *Nice. Everyone abandoned me.*

Well, not everyone. Burke was still there. But everyone else was gone.

Music was playing in the background. Someone had turned on the radio that they kept in the locker room and it currently played the classic rock station, which served to heighten the tension that was currently tightening Carlos's belly. He looked at Burke, who suddenly seemed a whole lot more sober than he had just a minute before—it had only been a minute, right?—as he pulled off his shirt and walked toward the showers.

“Glad to see you're not dead, Herrera. We thought maybe you'd died in the showers and we were gonna have to find ourselves a new third baseman,” Burke said, his eyes never leaving Carlos's face as he dropped his hands to his waist and started to unbutton his pants. He pushed himself to his feet shakily as he watched his friend with an intense gaze.

“Uh... N-no... O-of course n-not. I was j-just um... r-resting before the um... p-party tonight. Yeah.” He nodded and stammered, lifting his hand to wipe the drool that he could feel rolling down his chin at the sight of Burke's rock hard pecs and corrugated stomach, as well as that deep vee that led down to what Carlos could only imagine was a long, thick cock. *Dios, please, I don't come to you and ask for much, and it's probably sacrilege for me to be praying to you and asking for such a thing, but please let Burke be gay and let him have a big dick. Please, please, please... SCORE!*

Carlos's eyes widened and he wondered how he and Burke had gone so many years without ever seeing each other naked. Oh yeah, he'd been diligent about never being around the other man naked just in case he'd sprung a boner. But why was Burke practically putting on a strip tease for him now? What had happened? What changed?

“Th-Thornton?”

“Did you know you talk in your sleep, Herrera?” Burke asked nonchalantly, as he bent over to pull off his pants and boxer briefs, ignoring his hard cock that was leaking pre-cum, making Carlos's mouth water.



“I-I do?”

Burke nodded. “Yes. You do. As the guys were leaving to head out to the party and I was walking over to wake you up, I heard you say the most interesting thing. Well. You didn’t say it so much as moan it.”

“M-moan it?” Carlos watched as Burke stalked toward him as a lion would its prey, his steps slow and measured, a slow grin spreading across his face, his eyes twinkling in the overhead light.

“Oh yes. You moaned it as if it were giving you immense pleasure and I almost called the guys over to hear, until I heard what you were saying. Then I knew that I had to hurry up and get them out of the room so that you and I could talk about it... alone.”

“A-alone?”

Burke nodded and lifted a hand to place it beside Carlos’s head, against the wall. “Do you want to know what you said?”

All of the air in the room seemed to have escaped and Carlos suddenly couldn’t breathe. He struggled for air, but all he could smell was Burke, all he could see was the taller, broader man. Burke was his priority. Burke’s words, his scent, his taste, his body, his touch, his pleasure. For Carlos in that moment, it was Burke, then breathing.

He nodded in response to Burke’s question and watched as the man grinned wolfishly down at him.

“Breathe, Carlos.”

And just like that, as if his lungs had been waiting for permission, Carlos took in a sweet lungful of life-saving air. He inhaled deeply, feeling lightheaded and reached up unconsciously for Burke’s shoulders to steady himself, shivering at the deliciously hot but hard, silky feeling of Burke’s muscled, broad skin beneath his fingertips. He jerked his fingers away at the sound of Burke’s groan, breathing harshly, before looking back up at his best friend.

“You were moaning my name, Carlos. Whimpering, whining, groaning and begging for me to fuck you harder and faster. Pleading for me to give it to you,” Burke told him, his voice harsh.

Carlos jerked at his friend’s tone and blushed, the dream he’d had while passed out flashing across his mind in Technicolor quickly.

“Oh, God,” he breathed out.

“So is that what you want, Herrera? You want me to give it to you hard and fast?” Burke leaned down and pressed his mouth against Carlos’s ear causing him to groan, and his half-hard dick to thicken swiftly in his uniform pants and release a spurt of pre-cum, wetting the fabric. “Because I will. I’ll fuck you so hard and so fast that you’ll be walking funny and feeling me for days.”

Carlos let out a shuddering breath and ignoring the voice that told him that he was putting his friendship on the line, that things may not work out between them, that he could possibly ruin his career, he said the only thing he *could* say:

“Yes.”

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## Chapter Seven

Burke released a sigh of relief and lowered his head to take Carlos's lips in a hard kiss. He lifted his other hand to press it against the tiled shower wall on the other side of Carlos's head, not trusting himself to touch his friend just yet. He was sure that if any part of his body touched Carlos beyond his lips, he wouldn't be able to be gentle, and he had to be gentle this first time. He *needed* to be gentle this first time because he was certain they would do this again, he would make sure of it, and he in no way wanted Carlos to think he was some kind of animal.

But when Carlos bit his lower lip and tugged on it, Burke felt his thinly held control snap. Lowering his hands to Carlos's undershirt, he grabbed the collar and pulled it down and apart, pulling it off completely. He flung the torn pieces aside, all while pressing his mouth against Carlos's harder, licking inside, dueling with his teammate's tongue. The sound of the fabric ripping set off a fire inside of Burke, lighting him up inside and he growled, hearing Carlos's echoing groan as the man wrapped his arms up around Burke's neck tighter, burying his fingers in Burke's hair and tugging on the strands.

Burke pulled his mouth away from Carlos's lips, grinning at the sight of them red and swollen from his kisses, and at the sound of Carlos whimpering and begging Burke to kiss him again. Instead, Burke turned his attention to Carlos's naked torso. Licking his lips, he started kissing Carlos's chin, tasting the champagne, Gatorade, water, and the unmistakable, yet extremely intoxicating bouquet that made up Carlos's chemical DNA. Burke moaned as the different tastes rolled around on his tongue and sticking out the muscle, he trailed it down over Carlos's neck until he got to his Adam's apple. He sucked on the lump, nipping on the skin there for a moment, before trailing the tip of the organ down to Carlos's clavicle, squatting as he did so.

He settled his hands on Carlos's waist, his fingers lightly tracing the top of his uniform pants as Burke set about licking and sucking on Carlos's skin.

"B-Burke. P-please," Carlos pleaded.

Burke lifted his head and stared at Carlos. "Please what?" he asked.

"Stop teasing me," Carlos said.

Burke shook his head. "I'm not teasing you, Herrera. I plan to deliver. Trust me. I'm just making you wait. Don't you know by now that waiting for the

right pitch always makes the homerun that much sweeter? Hell, sometimes you get. A. Grand. Slam,” he said, punctuating the words with a small bite and a lick along Carlos’s torso. When he was finished, Carlos was panting, whimpering, and trembling. Burke wanted to grin. His friend seemed as if he were on the verge of having his first orgasm.

*Not without his cock in my mouth, he’s not.*

With that thought in mind, Burke lowered his hands to Carlos’s uniform pants and unfastened them, keeping his gaze locked on Carlos. He was glad that Carlos had thought to remove his shoes and socks before going off to the showers to sulk, otherwise Burke would have had to stop to remove them and that would have just slowed him down, something that he really didn’t want to have to do right then.

He shoved Carlos’s pants down to his knees and pulled out the waistband of his boxer briefs with one hand, far enough for his other hand to slip down inside. He moaned at the feeling of the silk-covered, steel pipe that his friend was carrying in his pants, and stroked his hand up and down Carlos’s shaft slowly, watching Carlos as pleasure swamped his face. Pre-cum slid down Carlos’s shaft, sliding between Burke’s fingers, making his stroking easier, turning him on more and he bit his lower lip as his own cock gave a twitch in the open air of the locker room.

“B-Burke,” Carlos stammered.

“I know, Carlos. I’ve got you,” Burke promised. *I’ll always have you.*

Shoving down Carlos’s underwear he lowered himself to his knees before his friend, his teammate... his lover, and licked around the base of his shaft before licking up the length of his erection to the head. His eyes rolled as the taste of Carlos burst on his tongue, and he listened to the symphony of Carlos’s moans and whispered pleas for more. Giving in to Carlos’s prayers, especially because it was something he wanted just as much, Burke opened his mouth and sucked the head of Carlos’s cock into his mouth and licked beneath, his hand stroking simultaneously.

“*Oh, Dios mío,*” Carlos prayed.

Burke tried not to snort in laughter as his friend began to babble incessantly in what had been coined “Spanglish,” a mixture of Spanish and English words and phrases, and focused on what he was doing, driving the man crazy. He tugged on Carlos’s balls, sucked on his dick and choked and gagged which made the man groan loudly. He collected the excess saliva that dripped from his

mouth and rubbed on Carlos's tight pucker, loosening his hole and slowly pressing his finger inside. The guardian muscle of Carlos's hole gripped Burke's digit and his dick twitched in blissful agony, desperately wanting to be inside.

*Patience, my friend, all in due time.*

He lifted his mouth off Carlos's shaft, flicking his tongue over the bundle of nerves beneath the mushroom head that appeared almost purple in color. He pulled his finger out of Carlos's hole until only the tip remained lodged inside before pushing it back in. Twisting his forefinger slightly, he sought out his lover's prostate, grazing it.

The harsh groan that escaped Carlos's throat as he shoved his hips forward, let Burke know that he'd found it. Burke wanted to let out a howl of triumph, but instead he doubled his efforts on pegging that gland, thrusting his finger faster and harder within Carlos's body, sucking harder on the man's cock.

After a moment, he pulled his mouth off Carlos's dick, ignoring Carlos's protests, especially when he removed his digit from the tight passage. Burke rose until he loomed over Carlos and stared down into his friend's eyes. His chest rose and fell rapidly as he tried to pull air into his lungs, adrenaline pumping through his veins at what he was about to do. At what was about to happen between them. Reason tried to worm its way into his mind. Its elbows sharp and bruising as it shoved aside passion, lust, and the haze of desire, to remind him that he was putting his career on the line, his friendship, all for a stolen moment in time. All for an orgasm.

And just when Burke might have opened his mouth to change his mind—might have asked Carlos if he was really sure that he wanted to do this—Carlos lifted his head and kissed him. Burke had been kissed plenty of times before. Hell, Holly kissed him in front of the cameras often enough, but this was different. This wasn't a meeting of the mouths. This wasn't the fiery conflagration of passion that they'd had earlier. This wasn't the explosion of passion and lust. This wasn't the atomic bomb of desire between them. Though the current of attraction was still there, blazing strong between them, it was being held back by something much more powerful.

*Love.*

Holy shit.

This was a kiss with emotion behind it.

When Carlos's hands came up to bury themselves in his hair, Burke's arms wrapped around Carlos's waist and he pulled the other man tight against him. He tried to pull Carlos inside of him so they would never be separated. He wanted to breathe him in. He never wanted to inhale or exhale without knowing that his lungs would be filled with Carlos, that his mouth would be tasting his lover. His tongue dueled lazily with that of the gorgeous, amazing man's. This man who had been hiding his feelings for Burke just as Burke had been hiding his feelings for him.

Burke trailed his hands down Carlos's back to the tight, round globes of his ass and palmed them, squeezing them. He kissed his way back down Carlos's neck but stopped when Carlos grabbed his hair and jerked his head back.

"Enough of the fucking foreplay, Thornton. I'm ready, okay? My goddamn pussy is wet. The flower has bloomed. The hole is open. The fields are ready for planting. Get to it already."

Burke chuckled but stopped abruptly at the sight of Carlos's narrow-eyed glare. He nodded. "Yes, dear."

"And cut out all that bullshit. You better have lube and a condom, because you are not going in raw and bare." And with that Carlos turned and presented his ass to Burke.

Burke took a moment to admire his friend's glorious-looking posterior before he remembered what he was supposed to be doing. *Condoms. Lube. Right!* He turned away from the delectable sight of Carlos's naked body and hurried to his locker, glad that he'd opened it ahead of time. Reaching in, he grabbed his wallet and fumbled inside for his trusty condoms. *Never leave home without the Magnums.* With the condoms in hand, he hurried back to the showers and came to a halt, his mouth falling open. If he had been a cartoon character, his tongue would have rolled out of his mouth and his eyes would have been bugging out.

Carlos was bent over, his face pressed against the tiles of the shower. His right hand was stretched up pressed against the wall as well, though the fingers were curled in as if he were clawing at the tiles. Carlos's legs were spread, his hairless testicles pressed obscenely against Carlos's left arm, which was between his legs. Three fingers of his left hand pushing and pulling in and out of his hole. Burke stood at the edge of the shower area and watched as the guardian muscle stretched and retracted around Carlos's fingers. He reached down and gripped the base of his own erection to stave off his orgasm, the sight

so erotic, so dirty and so *goddamn fucking hot* that he was having a hard time holding off the jizz that ached to shoot out from the head of his cock.

When he felt sufficiently in control, Burke walked over and noticed the body wash on the floor, smirking when he realized it was Ellsbury's. Jacoby was always leaving his body wash behind in the showers. Usually they bitched at him about not putting it away in his locker, but this time Burke and Carlos would reap the benefits from it.

Pouring some of the slick liquid on his fingers, Burke rubbed his fingers together and stepped up right behind Carlos, his cock resting against the man's arm.

"Need some help?" he asked huskily.

When Carlos started to withdraw his fingers, Burke stopped him. "Leave them." Carlos tensed for only a moment before his entire body seemed to melt. Burke rubbed his hand over Carlos's back before pressing one finger alongside Carlos's. The thin, but tight muscle of Carlos's anus resisted the intrusion at first, but he was patient, and he rubbed around the rim of Carlos's hole, loosening the muscles. He poured more body wash into Carlos's crease, groaning as he watched Carlos's slim fingers press the liquid into his tight channel. Feeling Carlos's pucker relax enough, Burke pushed first one, then two of his own fingers into Carlos's body alongside the man's fingers, shivering at the knowledge that they had the equivalent of an entire hand inside of Carlos's ass.

*Fuck.*

His balls tightened and he knew that if he didn't get inside of Carlos's body soon that he would blow his load against the wall, and that was *not* where he wanted it.

Slowly sliding his fingers out of Carlos's hole, the muscles trying to hold them deep within that tight, wet heat, Burke reached down and picked up the condoms he'd dropped onto the shower floor. His ears were ringing with the sounds of Carlos's moans and shouts of pleasure, and he was almost positive that one thrust was all it was going to take for Carlos to fall over the edge. Ripping open the golden packet with his teeth, Burke rolled the latex down his erection, hissing at the sensation and reached down to tap on Carlos's ass.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice rough, as if he'd been gargling rocks.

"I'm past fucking ready." Carlos's voice was just as harsh and he slid his fingers from his body.

Burke smacked his friend's ass again for his smartass remark before lining up the head of his dick with the hole in front of him. Sliding within the warm, welcoming depths of Carlos's body was like coming home, and Burke exhaled on a groan as he slid balls deep. His head tilted back and a shiver worked its way from the tips of his toes up to his head and back down before exploding throughout his body. *This* was what it was supposed to feel like to have sex and they hadn't even gotten to the good part yet. But already, *already*, Burke wanted to shout out to the heavens that he was right where he wanted to be. That he would never give this up.

He was finally breathing.

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## Chapter Eight

“If you don’t fucking move, I’m going to kick your ass, Burke,” Carlos growled. And he meant it too. He was *right there*. One thrust, maybe two, and he would have the orgasm of a lifetime. He wasn’t sure how Burke had known that Carlos liked to have his ass stuffed like that, but *holy shit*. Carlos shivered as Burke pulled his hips back slowly, his long, thick dick grazing and caressing all of the nerve endings in Carlos’s passage before he slammed his hips back forward.

“Yes! Goddammit! Yes!” Carlos yelled. He wanted rough. He *needed* rough. There was a time for soft and sweet, but this wasn’t it. He wanted bruises. He wanted to be walking funny. He wanted to be in fucking pleasurable pain when he sat down, but he wanted to be smiling because of it. He pushed his hips back as Burke pressed forward again, groaning as his balls pulled up toward his body, a tingling wrapping itself around his spine.

Burke’s hands on his hips tightened and Carlos knew, though he wasn’t exactly sure how, that the man was about to set up a punishing pace. He wrapped his left hand around his cock and stroked it in time with Burke’s thrusts, his mouth open as he yelled himself hoarse with shouts and prayers to the saints, to God, even to the Holy Mother. He pleaded with Burke to give it to him harder. When Burke’s hand came up and wrapped around the back of his neck, and he slammed his dick into Carlos’s body while groaning his name, that was all it took to send Carlos careening over the edge.

“Oh, God, I love you, Burke!” he shouted as his orgasm rushed over his body, squeezing the very breath from him, his white spunk splattering the tile in front of him as he shook violently. His ass squeezed Burke’s cock within him and he felt the moment Burke tensed behind him at his words, but he was too engrossed in the wondrous, blissful sensations coursing through him to apologize.

His right hand slid down the wall until it hung limply at his side, only his face pressed against the shower wall as Burke continued to ram his cock in and out. Burke’s rhythm was erratic as he chased his own orgasm and seconds later, he let out a roar, wrapping both of his arms around Carlos’s torso, squeezing tightly. He shook violently, babbling incoherent words, sweat making their bodies slick. Carlos’s legs were too weak to hold them up and he collapsed to the floor, Burke on top of him.

They panted for long moments, neither one of them speaking and Carlos studiously avoided looking at his friend... sweat and his orgasm making his inebriation fade away quickly. Rationale returned with sudden clarity. What the fuck had they just done? What had he just confessed to his best friend? His arm twitched at the touch of Burke's finger and he looked over his shoulder at his... lover? His teammate. His *friend*. Holy shit. His *straight* friend.

*Fuck. Goddammit to fucking hell.*

"We need to talk," Burke said.

Carlos nodded. "Yeah." He cleared his throat. "We... uh... probably should have done that before all of..." He gestured to their naked bodies, "this."

Burke chuckled and shrugged. "Probably." He sighed and rubbed a hand down his face and groaned when he smeared body wash into his eyes. Carlos choked on a laugh when he started to blink rapidly, his eyes no doubt burning. "Maybe we should shower and then talk?"

Carlos nodded. "Might be a good idea." He grinned mischievously. "Wanna use Ellsbury's wash?"

Burke smirked. "I think that's a good idea."

Minutes later they were clean and dressing in their street clothes. Neither one of them looking at the other. The air tense between them. Just as he'd wanted, Carlos's ass was sore. No. Not sore, it fucking hurt like hell.

God he loved it.

He bit his lip and groaned softly as he bent over to pull up his jeans, his hole twinging deliciously at the movement.

"Goddammit, Herrera, you've got to stop it with the noises over there if you want me to keep my head so we can talk," Burke grouched.

Carlos turned to look at him and quirked an eyebrow at him. Burke's eyes were trained on his ass. He looked down at Burke's groin and he was surprised to see the man's cock was hard again, pressing against the front of his zipper. Carlos smiled and rose, pulling the jeans up his legs slowly, turning and caressing his own burgeoning erection as he stared into Burke's gaze. He shivered at the desire he saw darkening his friend's eyes. God, how had he not noticed the man's attraction for him before?

Burke stepped over the bench and stalked toward him, pressing him roughly against the locker, thrusting his hand into Carlos's jeans. Carlos groaned as

Burke's hand gripped his balls and squeezed them before twisting them slightly. He hissed, lifting up on his toes.

"Stop playing with fire, Herrera. We need to talk," Burke warned, lowering his lips to Carlos's neck and licking the skin over his Adam's apple before biting it hard and sucking on it, marking the skin. Carlos whimpered and nodded his head as much as he could. Burke released him and stepped back, pulling his hand out of Carlos's pants, adjusting himself and crossing his arms over his broad chest. He cleared his throat, blushing slightly. "Holly is my beard," he blurted out suddenly.

Carlos blinked, his brain still muddled by passion and lust.

"Whut?" he asked. How the hell did they get on to Holly?

Burke smiled softly at him and lifted a hand to Carlos's cheek, caressing the side of his face. "Holly. I've known her for years. She's dating a black man that her family doesn't approve of. She's in love with him and he's a gardener. He's my gardener actually. He used to be a high school football coach and played college football." He took a deep breath and scratched the back of his head, shrugging his shoulders. "So she gets to be with him like she wants and in return she helps me out by pretending to be my girlfriend for the cameras."

Carlos's mouth dropped open. "So you're not straight?"

Burke shook his head. "No, Carlos. I'm gay."

Carlos glanced down as he zipped up and fastened his pants, anger surging through him. How could Burke lie to him all these years? Why wouldn't he tell him? He thought they were friends? Best friends at that. Why would he keep such a huge secret?

Carlos gasped when Burke shoved him against the lockers again, placing his hands on either side of his head against the steel of the locker doors.

"You don't get to be angry at me, Carlos," he said, his voice trembling with emotion. "You kept secrets from me too."

"I did not—"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up. You did too."

"Like what?"

"You didn't tell me you were gay either," Burke pointed out.

Carlos opened his mouth and then slammed it shut. While he hadn't been parading around with a girlfriend on his arm like Burke, he hadn't come out to anyone either. It was a lie by omission. He was just as guilty.

"And not only that. You never told me that you loved me." Burke shook his head. "Why not?"

"I thought you were straight! You're gay, you know that it's like an unwritten rule in the gay man's handbook to never fall in love with the straight guy!" Carlos tilted forward.

Burke leaned down and took Carlos's lips in a bruising kiss. It wasn't the sweet, gentle kiss they'd shared before. This was a kiss of possession. This was Burke owning Carlos, staking his claim. Marking him.

He fucking loved it.

When Burke lifted his head, Carlos was panting again and he had to blink a few times to clear his blurred vision. Wait. What had they been talking about?

"I'm not straight and fucking hell, Carlos. I love you too," Burke said, leaning his forehead against Carlos's.

Carlos inhaled sharply and looked up at Burke, his eyes burning.

"Really?"

Burke nodded. He stepped back and held out his hand. "Now. Let's go. We've got a party to get to."

Carlos grinned. "Yeah. That's right. We did win the World Series after all."

Carlos gripped Burke's hand and followed him out of the locker room, both of them grabbing their sports bags, and his heart pounding in his chest at the possibility of anyone seeing them. At the door to the locker room, they released each other's grip by unspoken agreement and Carlos felt a vice squeeze his lungs, the air leaving him in one fell swoop.

They stepped out of the locker room, and Carlos pulled on his Ray-ban sunglasses, turning at the sound of a feminine squeal. He wanted to shove Holly away when she launched herself into Burke's arms, wrapping her slender, tanned ones around his neck. Her blonde hair was blowing in the Boston breeze and her white and yellow sundress flared out behind her, as her yellow heels rose in the air. God, they looked like an ad for the perfect American family. Carlos glanced over at the broad-shoulder African-American man, who wore a plain red T-shirt, stretched tight across his muscled torso and a pair of jeans. As

he held the woman he loved in his arms, his bald head shining in the fluorescent lighting of the hallway, Carlos wondered if the other man was wishing all manner of evil thoughts on Burke.

“Oh, Burkey! You played great today! I’m so proud of you. And I knew you guys would win!” Holly grinned as Burke set her down on her feet. She clapped and lifted her lips for a kiss, the epitome of the athlete’s fiancé.

“Holly, I told Carlos the truth about us. You can drop the act,” Burke told her, amusement tingeing his words.

Holly dropped her face and sighed. “Oh, thank fuck,” she said, rolling her eyes. She opened her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one and looked over at Carlos with a wink. “Hey, sexy. Glad you finally know the truth. Playing the besotted girlfriend to this queen is exhausting.”

Carlos’s mouth dropped open as he watched Holly walk over to the large black guy and cuddle up to him.

“You need to stop smoking,” the man said, his voice deep and powerful like thunder.

Holly sighed. “I know. I will. Just as soon as Burke comes out and doesn’t need me anymore. Playing beard is stressful and smoking keeps me calm.”

“I thought having sex with me keeps you calm?”

Holly laughed. “Having sex with you keeps me sane.”

Burke covered his ears. “Um, eww. No one wants to hear about your unnatural heterosexual relations. God did not intend for men and women to lay together.”

Carlos stood in stunned silence as they all laughed, still trying to process what he was seeing. He’d known that Holly was just pretending to be Burke’s girlfriend. The man had told him as much, but knowing it and seeing it was two totally different things.

Holly laughed. “Burkey? I think your friend’s in shock.” She pointed at Carlos.

Carlos jerked at Burke’s hands on his face. “Carlos? You okay?” Carlos looked at Burke and nodded. He inhaled, Burke’s scent wrapping around him. That was what he needed. Burke.

“Yeah. I think it’s all sort of sinking in now. You’re really gay.”

Burke chuckled. "Yeah. I really am." He wrapped an arm around Carlos's shoulder and faced Holly. "Holls? Carlos is more than a friend now."

Holly tossed up her hands. "It's about goddamn time! So what are you two going to do? Are you going to go public? Are you going to keep it under wraps? What?"

Carlos looked at Burke and then back at Holly, the questions floating around in his brain. What were they going to do?

"We haven't actually talked about that," Burke admitted.

Holly sighed. "Men." She shook her head. "Well you need to, because you know what? This is when everyone starts to get cut and traded, and you guys need to know what you're going to do. Where you're going. What you mean to each other. On your list of priorities, where do you rank the other? Because that will let you know how to handle the rest of it."

Burke grunted. "Thanks, Holls." He dropped his arm from around Carlos's shoulders and walked over to Holly to hug her. "I'll call you later. We're heading to a party and then to Carlos's mom's for a dinner."

"Have fun," Holly said. She waved at Carlos and he waved back, suddenly feeling bereft without Burke's arm around him, Holly's words rattling around in his brain.

In his life what were his priorities? There was his family, his career, his relationship with Burke, which up until about a few hours ago had been just a friendship, his friendships with other people, his goals for the future, a house, a family of his own, retirement, his beliefs, his values, his legacy, his philanthropic endeavors, and his business ventures. But how would he prioritize those things?

"Hey? You ready to go?" Burke asked, interrupting Carlos's thoughts.

Carlos blinked and looked at the other man, his eyes moving over his strong features, those lips that had brought him such pleasure earlier, but always gave him encouragement and wisdom as well, to those hands that had taken him to such soaring heights of bliss but were always there to help him with anything he needed. Burke was more than a lover. He was a friend. A teammate. A partner.

He was the total package.

Carlos nodded. "Yeah. I'm ready." He smiled at Burke and walked with him out to the team parking lot. They both chuckled at the sight of all the cars still there.

"I guess a lot of taxis and drivers had to be called," Burke noted.

Carlos snorted and gestured. "You think?" He shook his head. "I bet Coach had his hands full." A cold sense of dread flooded his body as he turned to look at Burke with wide eyes. "Was Coach in the locker room or his office when we... when we were um... during..." He gulped and his face grew hot under Burke's assessing gaze.

His body grew tense as Burke walked toward him with a predatory gait. "No. Do you really think I would do anything with you with Coach in the next room?"

Carlos swallowed and shook his head, his cock hardening at the rough growl in his lover's voice. He wanted to kneel at Burke's feet in that moment and suck his cock in apology, and wasn't that a new experience for him? What was it about the other man that made Carlos feel so damn trembly? So fucking submissive? He knew he was a bottom. He accepted that. Hell, he *gloried* in that knowledge. There was nothing better than the feeling of some big, thick cock pounding inside of his ass, but being around Burke, thinking about him, made Carlos want something more. Something naughtier. Almost more illicit. Carlos thought about being restrained, rough sex, public sex, Burke teasing him in public, cock rings, and having Burke manhandle him in every delicious way he could think of. Even more than that, he kept thinking of them in the locker room, his hole stretched wide open and wondering, imagining Burke's fist pushing in and out of his body. Filling him. Making him scream.

"Carlos?"

Carlos blinked and cleared his throat, snapping out of his fantasies to focus on the conversation. "S-sorry," he stammered out an apology.

Burke shook his head, a smirk on his lips. "It's no problem. Whatever you were thinking about seems to have made you really happy," he remarked with a nod toward Carlos's groin. Carlos glanced down and noticed his erection pressing obscenely against the front of his jeans and groaned.

"Yeah. Well. I bet you wish you knew what I was thinking about, don't you, *gringo*."

Burke laughed and led them to his car. "As I was saying." He pressed the key fob to unlock his grey 2014 Cadillac Escalade and waited for them both to be inside the vehicle with the doors closed before he continued talking. "I would have only approached you to have sex, with Coach in the next room, if you knew about it and were okay with it."

Carlos gasped and turned to look at Burke. "You would have let him watch?"

Burke shrugged. "Only if you were okay with it. I sort of have a little kink about putting on a show for people every so often. I haven't done it in a while. Actually, a long time, ever since I joined the Majors, but before then?" He grinned over at Carlos. "Yeah. It turns me on to know that people are watching me and wanting to be where I am. And if they were watching us together, I know that they would all want to be with you, but they wouldn't have the opportunity."

Carlos wanted to be horrified. His Catholic upbringing practically demanded it. All of the saints were glaring at him in that moment. The Holy Mother, Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, hell, his grandparents were all looking down at him from above and commanding him to condemn Burke to the lowest recesses of Purgatory, leap from the SUV and race off to the nearest cathedral to make confession. But he couldn't do that. He didn't *want* to do that. His hands were trembling, sure, but not from fear of hellfire and brimstone raining down on the car or from the ten plagues of Egypt being visited upon them in the parking lot of the Green Monster. No, they were trembling from... excitement.

Anticipation.

He could imagine him and Burke fucking in the middle of a nightclub and being watched by a crowd. He could even see them having sex in a car or the floor of an office being renovated. A thrill shot through him and he inhaled deeply, shivering slightly. It felt as if every nerve in his body was coming alive, as if his lungs had been breathing synthetic air for decades and were finally inhaling pure oxygen.

"That sounds. Hot," he admitted.

Burke grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that." He turned back to the steering wheel and turned the key in the ignition. "What do you say we get this party and dinner out of the way, and then see what other—mysteries—we can discover about each other?"

Carlos chuckled. "I can't wait."

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## Chapter Nine

By the time they got to the party, it was already in full-swing. Burke stepped into a room that was packed with Red Sox players, their wives, girlfriends, celebrities, coaches, the owner and his family, and other movers and shakers. He smiled and waved when he heard his name being shouted across the room. This was it. He and Carlos would see how they could handle being out in public with other people given the state of their new relationship, without giving anything away.

He looked over his shoulder at his lover and noticed Carlos's gaze wasn't on the crowd of people in front of them, instead it was trained on his shoes, his bottom lip clenched in between his teeth. Even though he had a look of worried concentration on his face, Burke's cock started to fill at the sight of Carlos's plump bottom lip. He thought of pressing his erection between those lips in front of everyone there and swallowed the groan that threatened to rise up out of his chest.

"You okay?" he whispered to Carlos instead of uttering the words that were rolling around in his head, *if you want something in your mouth I've got nine inches of a cream-filled treat for you in my pants.*

Carlos blinked and glanced up at him. "Whut? Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine." He nodded. "Just thinking." He rolled his shoulders. "I'm good. Let's do this."

Burke stared at Carlos for another moment before inclining his head and turning back to walk through the crowd. He had to fight the urge he had to take Carlos's hand, which was a new feeling for him since he always had Holly reminding him to take her hand whenever they went anywhere. Perhaps it was because he knew that Holly wasn't really his but Carlos was. And he was, wasn't he? They had established that, right? Burke looked back for the man but didn't see him. He turned in a small circle, surrounded on all sides by well-wishers and partiers who randomly shouted out "Red Sox Nation!" whenever the music got quiet. When had he and Carlos gotten separated?

"Hey, man," Dustin Pedroia, their second baseman, walked up to him, his steps a little unsteady. He had one arm around his wife, Kelli, the other around another woman. "Where's your shadow?"

Burke rolled his eyes. "He's not my fucking shadow, man. If anything, I'm his shadow." *Because I want to be a part of him whenever I can be.* "And I

have no idea where Herrera is. He was right behind me when we came in, but he disappeared on me.”

Pedroia turned to the unnamed woman and dropped his arm, shrugging sadly. “Sorry, Zoey. I’ll try to introduce you two later.”

Burke watched the statuesque brunette woman pout before spinning on her heel and walking away. He scowled at her retreating back then turned to Pedroia. “What the fuck was that about?” He asked throwing a thumb in her direction.

“Oh that? Me and the fellas decided that to commemorate our win and Herrera’s Grand Slam, what we’re calling the H.A.G.S., by the way, that we’re going to get him a girlfriend. We’re sick of him being alone all the time and always tagging along with you and Holly. He needs a broad of his own.” Pedroia nodded, grunting when his wife elbowed him in the side. “I mean, a woman to treasure and care for.” He looked at Burke and rolled his eyes.

Burke couldn’t find it in him to be amused by the interplay between Pedroia and Kelli like he usually did, he was too busy digesting the man’s words. What the fuck was up with everyone trying to set Carlos up with someone? Didn’t they know the man was taken? And gay?

*No they don’t, dumbass. He’s in the closet just like you because of your careers and remember? You have a “fiancée” named Holly, so who exactly is Carlos taken by?*

“Fuck,” he breathed. Should Carlos get a fake girlfriend too? Should Burke and Holly breakup? What was the right step forward?

He needed to find Carlos and talk to him as soon as possible.

“I’ll go find him for you,” he told Pedroia. He turned to walk away but stopped after a step. “Pedroia? H.A.G.S.?” He lifted his hands in a WTF motion and grinned when Pedroia started laughing.

“Yeah. Herrera’s Awesome Grand Slam.”

Burke shook his head and spun on his heel to find Carlos. They needed to figure out, seriously consider, what they were doing here, because if they decided to stay together and remain closeted, then they would have to be extremely careful. There were too many ways for their relationship to be destroyed—jealousy, exposure, miscommunication—and Carlos meant too much to Burke for him to let that happen. He needed Carlos. Needed him to stay sane.

Needed him to breathe.

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Carlos hadn't planned on escaping out onto the balcony when they'd showed up at the party. It had just happened that way. One minute he'd been behind Burke, saying hi to everyone, ribbing and teasing the other players, winking at some of the female celebrities, when he caught sight of one of the female roadies slipping her number into Burke's pocket. Burke probably didn't notice. He never did until he went to put something into his pocket later, but seeing that motion had startled Carlos.

He was trying to have a secret relationship with a teammate. His best friend who was also in the closet. It was career suicide. It was stupid. His family was going to be devastated. He could lose his sponsors. His teammates may feel uncomfortable playing with him. It was idiotic for them to continue. It would never work. It would never last.

It was the most thrilling thing he'd ever done in his life and he was going to ride it until the end.

It was that thought which had sent him out the nearest door, down the hallway and out onto the balcony of Ellsbury's home. He inhaled the sweet, slightly chilly winter wind, pulling the refreshing air into his lungs and exhaling. His body trembling as his skin prickled with goose bumps at the temperature. He braced his hands on the balustrade and lowered his head as he considered everything going on in his life. Once again, he thought of his priorities and tried to figure out where his relationship with Burke fit on that list.

While he loved his family, he knew that they didn't agree with his "lifestyle choice", not all of them, but most of them. Their love was important, their care was a priority, but it wasn't a big one. They all had their own jobs and he didn't support them.

He went through each of his priorities, turning them over in his mind, determining their importance and placing them on a mental list, until all that remained were his career and his relationship with Burke. As he knew it would. It always came down to playing baseball and now, the very real idea of being with Burke, the man he'd been in love with for years.

Just as he'd gone through each thought, point, line, issue and debated with himself the wisdom of being with Burke, the door to the balcony opened and he heard footsteps on the tile behind him.

"I should have known I'd find you outside, away from the party," Burke's voice was low, sexy, seductive and thoughtful.

Carlos didn't speak, he merely nodded. He wanted to know what Burke had to say first then he would know if he'd made the right choice.

"So, we need to talk," Burke said.

Carlos turned and watched as Burke walked over to join him at the railing. Once he was there, Carlos spun back around until he was facing Ellsbury's expansive backyard.

"Talk," he said after a while of silence.

Burke chuckled and sighed, running his fingers through his hair. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"*This?*" Carlos quirked an eyebrow at Burke.

Burke gestured back and forth between them. "This. You and me. Us. Are you sure? We'll have to keep our relationship hidden from your family, our team, our friends, except the ones we know can't be swayed by money, religion, or fame. We'll be sneaking around." He grunted and leaned on an elbow to face Carlos. "You'll have to watch me with Holly, pretending to be the loving, doting, devoted boyfriend, and not react or get angry."

Carlos grinned and faced Burke. "And if I get a girlfriend, you'll have to watch me do the same." He shrugged. "Or you know I could keep up my womanizer image and just keep bouncing from woman to woman. Bed to bed..." He let the rest of the sentence hang there and watched as Burke's eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. He lifted a hand and pointed laughing triumphantly. "Ha! See? Of the two of us it's you and your jealous, possessiveness that would be the biggest give-away. You need to work on that, Thornton."

He shook his head when Burke blushed, and glancing inside to make sure no one could see them, he placed a hand on Burke's stomach and leaned up to place a quick kiss on his lips, stepping back when Burke would have tried to deepen it.

"I want this. I want us. It's all I've been thinking about for what seems like forever, Burke. We can do this. It may take some getting used to and we may have some bumps in the road, but I know we can do this until we're both ready to come out."

Carlos's phone beeped, and he pulled it out to see he had a text message from his buddy Ashton:

*Dude! Did you hear the news?*

Ignoring the text for now, Carlos put his phone back into his pocket, noticing that Burke was putting his away as well, looking confused at it.

“Ashton?” Carlos asked.

Burke nodded. “He’s a weird little shit.”

Carlos laughed. Their friend was a strange bird but he always seemed to know everything that happened before everyone else. Carlos shook his head mentally. He would deal with Ashton later. He had to tell Burke how he felt and he had to tell him now before he lost his nerve.

“So, you were saying?” Burke asked with a small smile.

Carlos chuckled. “What it boils down to is this, Burke Thornton. I love you.” He watched as Burke’s eyes widened, and if the conversation hadn’t been so serious, he might have laughed. He would laugh later. Right now, he had to make sure they were on the same page. “I put all my priorities into order and while my career is important, it’s not the thing that makes me smile throughout the day or makes my bad day better. I didn’t hit that Grand Slam today for my career. I hit it for you. Because you believed in me.” He stepped closer to Burke and looked up into his eyes, hoping he could see the truth in his gaze. “If I didn’t need to breathe to live, Burke, my priorities would go like this: it’s you, *then breathing*, then baseball. In that order.”

Carlos was pulled into Burke’s arms and kissed fiercely, their lips bruising the other, tongues dueling, teeth nibbling, their breathing in sync and Carlos gloried in it. And while it felt like they’d been kissing for hours, he knew it had only been seconds before Burke pushed him away gently, caressing his cheek.

“I love you too, Carlos.”

Carlos’s heart expanded at Burke’s words and he grinned. He knew that things weren’t settled. They were professional baseball players who were gay and attempting to hide their relationship. They were asking for *TMZ* to find them. Then there was his family and whatever harebrained scheme his mother had cooked up, but Carlos wasn’t worried about any of that. Not when he had Burke, their love for each other...

And the ability to breathe.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Vicktor Alexander (everyone calls him “Vic”) is a southern gentleman by day, and a writer and purveyor of steamy, sticky, hot man on man (sometimes on man on man on man on man on man) sex by night. He started out writing about his sister destroying the world with her breath, went on to writing steamy, erotic interracial historical romances in the middle of his classes but noticed the guys seemed to enjoy each other’s company much more than being with the women. He now enjoys writing about shifters, humanoids, cowboys, firemen, rent boys, fairies, elves, dancers, doctors, Doms, subs, and anything else that catches his fancy, all sexy men falling in love with each other and having lots of naughty, dirty, man-on-man sex. He is a huge fan of the “happily-ever-after” ending, but while all his characters all ride off into the proverbial sunset, all sexually satisfied and in love (because it’s the least he can do), they all bear the scars of fighting for that love, just like in real life. Out and proud, he doesn’t believe that love only comes in one form, one race, one gender and that not only is gender fluid, but sexuality as well. He loves to make people laugh (and guys hot) and when he’s not writing, or rather, procrastinating in writing, he’s reading, playing the Sims 3, talking to his adopted daughter whom he calls Chipmunk, seeking the man or men who can handle his crazy, stressful, soap opera-esque life and being distracted from said writing by pictures of John Barrowman, Charlie David and Shemar Moore. All interested men in the role of “Future Husband(s)” may apply, auditions are being held every night... multiple times.*

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