

Mike and Olivia: Lockdown

By Kate Simon

Mike Hughes flipped pages on his tablet, reviewing his notes. He'd been in this tiny Pennsylvania town for a week. It was a week more than he wanted. The New York Knights sent him to negotiate a deal for their new baseball stadium in Boyertown. It was only two hours from New York City and the perfect place for a state-of-the-art training facility for their triple A team. That is, if he could ever get their county attorney and resident pain in the ass, Olivia Clark, to stop being so pig headed. He'd made deals for the land but building the stadium was another story. He needed tax breaks and building variances. Most of all, he needed help with the few holdouts on land purchases. If the city didn't exercise eminent domain on those properties, they wouldn't be able to build the access roads they needed.

He looked at his watch. He always arrived twenty minutes early to meetings. It gave him a chance to prepare and it kept the opposing side off balance. They inevitably checked their watches to see if they were late. It had been a long weekend in a crappy hotel. He didn't drink or pick up women, so all he had for company was cable and reruns of Terminator movies. Olivia Clark entered the conference room and sat down opposite him. She never checked her watch. She was always on time.

"Mr. Hughes," she nodded.

"Ms. Clark," he acknowledged.

So much for small talk. Now they had to wait for their third party, John Jordan, the mayor of Boyertown. He glanced at his watch again. The mayor was late. The door opened again and a tall man he didn't recognize, wearing a N9 respirator mask entered.

"What's going on?" asked Mike.

"Mr. Hughes, Ms. Clark. I'm Jeremy Lind, the chief of the county department of health. Mayor Jordan was hospitalized last night with the new, virulent strain of Covid. He's in very serious condition."

"Oh, God," said Olivia. "That's awful."

"What's with the mask?" asked Mike.

“It’s a precaution. I saw John earlier this morning. We are fortunate that you two were the only people having extended contact with the mayor this week. His wife was out of town.” He put a large cloth bag on the table. He reached in and pulled out two of the same masks he was wearing. “The two of you will have to lockdown for the next two weeks until the incubation period has passed.”

Mike stood. “That’s ridiculous. I have,” he paused and looked at Olivia, “We have work to do. Besides, I’ve had all my shots. I should be wearing an orange tag, like a dog.”

“First, I’m glad you’ve been vaccinated. That’s a layer of protection. However, this is a very dangerous strain and we can’t risk you spreading it to others.”

“I’m fully vaccinated, too,” said Olivia. “You said first. What’s second?” she asked.

“Second, this is not a request.”

“What the hell! You can’t make me stay in that crappy hotel for the next two weeks.”

“Actually, I can, but the hotel is not an option. You could have contact with too many people. You will have to be in a secluded environment.”

Mike picked up a mask. He felt like throwing at this guy. “What are you going to do? Lock me up?”

“We’re setting up a quarantine facility at the hospital.”

“No way!”

“No choice,” said Lind.

“You can stay at my house,” said Olivia.

“Excuse me?” asked Mike.

“I have a house in Summit. I have extra bedrooms and Wi-Fi. You can work there.”

“That’s where you live? That’s where we’ve bought the land for the stadium. Is this why you’ve been dragging your feet?”

Olivia snapped her briefcase closed. "You can have him, Dr. Lind. I suggest a janitor's closet for his new accommodations."

"Wait! I'm sorry."

She got a smile Mike thought was slightly evil. "I'm sorry, Ms. Clark. I was out of line. I would love to accept your kind offer."

Mike sighed. "I'm sorry, Ms. Clark. I was out of line. I would love to accept your kind offer."

She picked up the other mask. "Are we good, Dr. Lind?"

"Wear the masks to your cars. When you get home, stay there." He handed her a business card. "Call me right away if you have any symptoms."

She put on her mask and looked at him. "Let's go, Slick."

Mike grabbed his mask and put it on. He picked up his briefcase and followed her out the door. This was going to be hell.

Olivia looked in her rear view and saw a nightmare following her. Mike Hughes had been a pain in the ass from the beginning of all this. He acted like the entire town should be grateful to him for being there. Yes, the stadium would bring jobs to the town but they would be temporary. The construction jobs only last until the stadium is built. The jobs in the stadium would be seasonal. Olivia would not give him everything he wanted until she was sure the benefits to Boyertown outweighed the tax breaks and two years of construction.

Now she'd invited this ass to move in with her for two weeks. She had to be out of her mind. She should be thinking about John. He was a good man and an honest mayor. He genuinely wanted what was best for Boyertown. He was fighting for his life and all she was thinking about was how much Mike Hughes was going to be an inconvenience.

So why did she invite him? She couldn't stand him. It was Mom, it had to be. It didn't matter that she'd been gone for decades. Mom had taught her to be kind and help those in need. It was instinct. Mike would have been stuck in the hospital for two weeks in isolation. She'd spent enough time in hospitals to know they were no fun.

"Ah, what the hell," she muttered as she turned up the mountain. She pulled in her driveway and parked the car. Mike pulled in behind her and followed her to her front door. She put a code into a keypad and opened the front door. She'd worked hard for this home and designed it just how she wanted. "Home sweet home for the next two weeks."

Mike looked around at the open concept family room. Just outside the French doors was a large deck and pool. He acknowledged her home with a brief, "Nice."

She looked at him and shook her head. "I'm so relieved you're pleased." She set down her briefcase and sighed. "I'll show you the guest room." He followed her upstairs and she opened the door to the largest guest room. It had its own en suite. "Get settled and come back downstairs. We can order some dinner and I'll figure out what groceries we need."

"We aren't allowed out. How do you expect to go to the supermarket?"

"We have no contact delivery services."

“Surprising.”

Olivia debated whether she should just knock him on the head and be done with him. “Yes, Mr. Hughes. We’s all kinda fancy in Boyertown.” She turned around and slammed the door behind her.

Mike tossed his briefcase on the bed and pulled off his tie. He hung it up with his suit jacket in the closet. It was a nice room, much nicer than his hotel. The bathroom was bigger than the one in his apartment. It could be worse. He could be stuck in the hospital for two weeks. He pulled out his phone and wondered how to tell his boss that he'd be stuck in Boyertown for two more weeks. He better get it over with.

"Mike, buddy. Tell me you got the deal done." Fred Cooper gave the impression of a friendly, good old boy but he was actually a savvy businessman.

"Fred, there's been an unforeseen hitch."

Fred's tone instantly changed. "I don't like unforeseen."

"Neither do I. I've been put in quarantine for two weeks."

"What?"

"The mayor came down with that new strain of Covid. He's in the hospital. The department of health guy came into the conference room wearing a mask and telling us we had to lockdown."

"We?"

"The county attorney, Olivia Clark. We're staying in her house."

"That's great! You can work on her. Get the woman to sign off on those access roads."

"I'll do my best." Mike looked in the mirror and sighed. Leave it to Fred to turn this into a business opportunity. He should apologize to Olivia. Even he knew he was being a prick, but she didn't understand the pressure he was under. Failure was not an option.

He went downstairs and found her sitting at her kitchen table. She had a mug of coffee and was flipping through her laptop.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"God, yes," he said. "Don't get up. I have the same machine. I know how to use it."

"Surprising," she said, suppressing a smile.

“I had that coming. Mugs?”

“Upper cabinet to the left.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been such an ass. This just comes at a really bad time for me.”

“It’s not a walk in the park for me, Hughes.”

“Of course, it’s not. Again, I’m sorry. Also, since we’ll be together for the foreseeable future, please call me Mike.”

“Olivia,” she said without looking up.

“My room is very nice.”

“Thank you. I’m glad the service is up to par.”

“Ah, come on. I apologized.”

She turned to him and nodded. “Yeah, you did. I accept your apology. Now, what kind of food do you want for dinner?”

“Chinese?”

“That’ll work.” She pulled a menu out of her briefcase. “Their food is pretty good. Decide what you want and I’ll call it in.”

He looked at the menu and thought about his favorite place around the block from his apartment in Manhattan. “I’ll go with your recommendation. I’m going to run back to the hotel and get my things.”

Olivia snapped her laptop closed. “Absolutely not. You heard Dr. Lind. We have to stay put. I won’t be responsible for you infecting anyone.”

“I’m not your responsibility!”

“You are now. You get in that car and I’ll call Dr. Lind and have you picked up. You can spend the next two weeks in a quarantine ward.”

“I have nothing with me but the clothes on my back. What do you expect me to do?”



“You have your laptop and a credit card. The local Walmart delivers. You can order clothes and toiletries.”

“Walmart?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell your New York tailor that you’re cheating on him. Do you swim?”

“What?” He couldn’t believe this conversation.

“Do. You. Swim?”

“Yes.”

“You might want to order a swimsuit. My pool is very nice.”

Olivia finished her grocery list and was waiting for Mike to finish ordering his clothes. He was as much of a pain in the ass as she'd thought. She wasn't much better. This whole thing had thrown her. She'd avoided the first and second waves of Covid. She'd gotten all the vaccines and boosters as soon as they were available. She wore masks everywhere and avoided crowds. She needed to know just how bad this was. She grabbed Dr. Lind's card out of her briefcase and called.

"Dr. Lind, it's Olivia Clark."

"Are you showing symptoms?" No small talk. Right to business.

"No. Can you update me? How is John doing?"

"Since you're the county attorney, I can keep you in the loop. He's in critical condition. We're doing everything we can."

"Oh, God," she whispered.

"His admin, Tom Reilly, was just admitted. He's younger and his condition is not as severe. The mayor was working with you two almost exclusively this week, so we're hoping this was the last of it. The CDC is coming in tomorrow. They have more resources to track the virus than we do."

She tried not to let Lind hear her fear. "Let me know if you are facing any legal challenges. I may be able to smooth the way."

"I may need you to. Depending on the CDC reports, I may have to order schools and businesses closed. You know what a backlash we faced last time."

"I remember. Do you think it's going to get that bad?"

"I pray not but we can't take any chances. There is a hot spot in suburban Virginia. There are four fatalities so far."

Olivia tried to keep her voice level. "Let's hope we've caught it in time." She disconnected the call. She pasted on a smile as Mike came the stairs. "Are you all set?"

"Yeah. I've ordered enough to keep me clothed for the duration." He smiled at her. "I wouldn't want to shock you by running around in my skivvies."

She put her hand to her chest and chuckled. "I appreciate your concern for my delicate female sensibilities."

"My things should be here in a couple of hours. I even found a swimsuit."

"Good. We'll swim tonight. It's supposed to stay warm."

"That sounds good."

Olivia decided to keep her phone call to herself. "Look, Mike, I'm sorry I've been as big a pain as you have."

"Is this an apology?" he smiled.

"Sorry, I got off track. This is a very difficult situation. I shouldn't have taken my stress out on you."

"You do seem to enjoy pushing my buttons," he said.

"So do you," she smiled.

"Yeah, I guess I do. Okay, we've established we are both pains in the ass." he smiled. "Where's that Chinese food I was promised?"

Olivia laughed. "I'll call it in."

Mike tried to focus on his goal, talking to Olivia about the stadium. Not the fact that she looked so different since she'd changed from her suit. He could see a very fit frame in her t shirt and jeans. Her brown hair hung below her shoulders. Her dark brown eyes had a spark when she was giving him a hard time. He imagined she'd be an able opponent in the court room. She'd been giving him a run for his money this week. If this was New York he'd ask her out.

"Is there someone who will have an issue with me staying here?"

Olivia looked up from her General Tzo chicken. "No. What about you?"

"No. You know how it is. The work takes over."

"I know. Relationships take a backseat."

"So, you're a never been."

She gave him a death stare that scared him. "Excuse me?"

"Never married, no kids. Same as me."

"Okay, good recovery. I prefer to think of myself happily single. I like my life. I worked hard for what I have and I enjoy it."

Mike looked at the determination in her eyes. This was a formidable woman.

She stood and picked up her plate. "Let's clean this up and get changed. After today, I could use a good swim."

Mike changed into his new swimsuit and pulled on a t shirt. He looked at himself in the mirror. They weren't the quality he was used to but they would do. He looked at himself again. When did he get so pretentious? How did he get from the kid playing stick ball in Bensonhurst to the guy annoyed his t shirt didn't cost fifty bucks? He shook his head and opened the bedroom door. His focus had to be on getting Olivia to sign off on the stadium, not tripping down memory lane.

He went through the French doors and saw Olivia was already doing laps. She stopped when she noticed him standing there.

“Come on in.”

He pulled off his t shirt and walked down the stairs. “Jeez, it’s cold.”

“It’s not that cold, wimp. Do some laps and you’ll warm up.”

“Wimp?” He looked at her and smiled. She enjoyed pressing his buttons. He dove past her and swam up and back. He pulled up next to her and splashed her. “Who’s a wimp?” Instead of being mad, she splashed him back. They laughed and splashed each other like a couple of kids. Mike realized this was the first time he felt relaxed all week. Maybe longer. “This is really nice.”

“Thanks. Do you want to hit the hot tub?”

“Sure.”

Olivia walked out of the pool and turned on the jets. He watched as she slipped into the tub. He’d seen women in barely there bikinis that didn’t look as sexy as Olivia Clark in a one-piece swimsuit. He didn’t need any encouragement to join her.

“Ah, that’s good,” she sighed as she rested her head on the side of the tub.

“Yes, it does.” It was time for him to man up. “Olivia, I need to apologize. I know I’ve been a pain in the ass.”

“Giant,” she said without opening her eyes.

“Hey, I’m trying here,” he chuckled. “Humble is not normally in my wheelhouse.”

She looked at him and smiled. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“I’m not used to...hitting road blocks.”

“No, really?” she said with a barely restrained laugh. She waved her hand. “Go on.”

“Boyertown is a very different environment than New York city. I’m used to moving at a very fast pace. My boss was expecting me to have this wrapped up by now. Now, this quarantine has pushed it back two weeks. He is not a happy camper.”

“You couldn’t foresee a quarantine.”

“Or you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I admit I thought you were a country lawyer and you’d be easier to handle.”

“I’ve never been accused of being easy.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. I have a hard time figuring out how to convince you that this is a good deal. I don’t know why you can’t get the holdouts to sell their land. We’re offering twenty five percent over market value.”

Her smile faded. “Mike, it’s the one thing you may never understand.”

“And that would be?”

“There are some things more important than money. Like the history of a family who’s been farming the same land for five generations. Or the beauty of unspoiled forests.”

“What about feeding their families, paying their bills? The closing of the munitions factory hit Boyertown hard.”

Olivia pulled herself out of the hot tub and reached for a towel. “Not everyone wants a life like yours.” She grabbed another towel and threw it at him. She went back in the house and left him staring. What was he going to do now?

What was she thinking letting him stay with her? The next two weeks would be nothing but arguments and Mike trying to get his way. Olivia had more important things to worry about than Mike Hughes and his damn stadium.

She went upstairs to change out of her swimsuit. She turned her shower on hot and high while she hung up the wet suit. The hot shower washed off the chlorine and helped with breathing. The coughing started as she wrapped towels around her body. She went into her bedroom and searched for her emergency inhaler in her nightstand. A couple of puffs usually stopped it. If not, she'd have to get her nebulizer. This was the last thing she needed. She tried to focus on even breathing, but it wasn't working.

"Damn it," she swore in between coughs. She heard a knock on her door. "Could this get any worse?" she thought.

"Olivia?" Mike stuck his head in the door. "Are you okay?"

"No," she whispered. Her voice was disappearing.

"What's wrong?"

"Later. I need you to go to my car and get the leather bag in the trunk."

"What's in the bag?"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Just go. Now!" He came back just in time. She could feel herself getting lightheaded. She pulled out a small machine out of the bag and handed the cord to Mike. She pointed to a wall outlet. "There." She hooked up a long tube and a mouthpiece. She pulled out a small tube of liquid and poured it in the mouthpiece. She flipped a switch and the machine generated air, turning the medicine to mist. She put the mouthpiece between her lips and took as deep a breath as she could. Only then she saw the look on Mike's face. He was really concerned.

"I'll be fine," she said between puffs.

"What is all this?"

"Asthma."

“What can I do?”

“Tea?”

“Sure.”

“It’s in the cabinet above,” she gasped.

Mike held up his hand. “Don’t talk. I’ll find it.”

She spent a few minutes breathing in her medicine and trying to calm down. It was always scary when attacks went that bad that fast. The mouthpiece was empty of medicine so she turned off the machine. She tested her voice and found it was had returned, most of the way. She hung up her towels and pulled on a sleep shirt. She was running a comb through her wet hair when Mike returned.

“I made you green tea,” he said, handing her a mug.

“Perfect. Thank you.” The heat felt great on her irritated throat. She sat down on the edge of the bed.

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure. Normally, it’s cut grass or pollen. The worst triggers are strong colognes and perfumes. Sometimes it’s as simple as cold air.”

“I wasn’t wearing any cologne.”

Olivia managed a smile. “I know.” She picked up her nebulizer bag and set it next to her bed. “There’s allergic and non-allergic asthma. I have both.” She couldn’t believe she was telling him about her crappy health. “I don’t usually make a point of telling people about this.”

“You seem to handle it well. You know what to do with that machine.”

“I’ve been using one for years.”

Mike brushed his hand over her shoulder. “Are you going to be okay?”



She sat down on the edge of her bed. “Yeah. I just need to rest. They wipe me out.”

“I’ll let you rest. I’ll leave my door open. Leave yours open so I can hear if you need me.”

Olivia smiled. Mike was really a good guy when he wasn’t being a giant pain in the ass. She was tempted to point out he heard her coughing through the door, but she didn’t. “Sure. Thanks, Mike.”

“Good night,” he smiled and walked down the hall to his room.

Mike let Olivia sleep. He couldn't say he got much. The image of her struggling to breathe had haunted him. He thought he should have called an ambulance but she seemed to have it handled. He smiled. Of course, she did. She was Olivia Clark.

He moved around the kitchen, setting up coffee and pulled out eggs and bacon. He'd just started the bacon when a sleepy Olivia appeared in the doorway.

"I smell coffee." Her voice was still scratchy.

"Sit. I'll pour you a mug."

She sat down at the small kitchen table. "I had no idea you were so domestic."

He smiled as he handed her a fresh mug. "I have many hidden talents."

She gave him a strange look. "I bet you do."

"How are you feeling?"

"A little more tired than usual but it's not like I have to go to the office."

"You're not going to try and work from home, are you? You should rest."

"Thank you, Nurse Hughes," she smiled. "I intend to. I've learned the hard way not to push myself past the breaking point. I messaged my office that I'm off the grid for today. I have a great staff. They can handle things for a while."

"Good. Can you handle some scrambled eggs and bacon?"

"That sounds great. Thanks."

They were just finishing their breakfast when Olivia's phone rang. She pulled it from her pocket and answered.

"Dr. Lind."

"I wanted to give you an update."

"Let me put you on speaker. Mr. Hughes is part of this lockdown." She touched a button and set the phone on the table. "Have there been any more cases?"

"Yes, two more. They'd had contact with Tom Reilly. They are in the early stages."

“Oh God,” she whispered.

“We’ve also had our first fatality.”

“Oh no. I thought John was stable.”

Mike heard the pause in Lind’s voice. He reached out for her hand. This wasn’t good.

“It wasn’t John, Olivia. It was Tom Reilly.”

“What? He was young and in good health. You said so yourself.”

“You can’t predict who this virus will take. It hits the young just as hard as the elderly.”

Mike was scared for himself but he was worried about Olivia. She’d gone pale and was wiping tears from her eyes.

“How are the two of you doing?” asked Lind.

“We’re fine,” she said.

“That’s not exactly true,” said Mike.

“Mike, no.”

“What do you mean? Do you have symptoms.”

“No fevers.” He looked at Olivia’s now angry face. “You don’t, do you?” She shook her head. “Olivia had a bad asthma attack last night. She used a machine...”

“I have a portable nebulizer.”

“How are you now?”

“I’m fine, Dr. Lind.”

“She’s pale and tired. I told her she needs to rest today.”

“You’re correct, Mr. Hughes. Olivia, is it allergic or eosinophilic?”

“Both,” she sighed.

“You know this puts you at a very high risk.”

She pushed another tear from her cheek. “I know.”

“I want you to come in for testing. We have a quarantine center set up at Newbury Hospital.”

“No.”

Mike was surprised by the vehemence of her response. “Why not? It’s just testing.”

“Exactly,” said Lind.

“No. I’ve spent too much time in hospitals. We aren’t showing any signs of the virus.”

“I’m not going to argue because I have my hands full tracking where the new patients have been. Mr. Hughes, I am going to trust you to let me know if I am needed.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Excuse me?” she said.

“Olivia, I understand your reluctance. I think Mr. Hughes will be more likely to report a possible problem. For now, you’re stable and quarantined at home. Let’s do our best to keep it that way.

“Yes, doctor.” Olivia disconnected the call and leaned back in her chair. She closed her eyes as she wiped another tear from her cheek. “Damn,” she whispered.

Mike wasn’t sure why but he followed his instinct. He stood and took her hands in his. “Come here,” he whispered.

“What?”

“Come here,” he repeated and pulled her to her feet. He wrapped his arms around her. “It’s going to be okay. We have everything we need here. We’ll take care of each other.” He expected her to protest. Instead, Olivia Clark, tough as nails attorney, buried her head in his chest and wept.

Olivia curled up on the couch with her tablet. There was a book she'd been wanting to read for ages. She tried to focus but all she could think about was Mike. He showed her a side of himself she would have never believed possible. Ever since last night, the snarky Mike was gone. This version of him was kind and caring. He was also pretty good looking. She'd noticed his bright blue eyes when they were in negotiations. Then they were flashing with annoyance and frustration. Now, they were softer, kind. She shook her head and tried to focus on her book. Mike was here because he had to be. He was a business associate, not a romantic possibility. Damn it.

Mike came downstairs with an unhappy look. He'd taken a call from his boss.

"Tough call?"

"Yeah," he sighed and sat down next to her. "He doesn't understand why I can't wrap things up. He thinks my staying here should..."

"Should what?"

"Should give me an advantage."

Olivia chuckled. "Does he expect me to succumb to your manly charms?"

Mike blushed. "Basically." He stared at her when she laughed. "You don't have to be so amused."

"I'm sorry. I'm constantly amazed at the number of men who think I can be so easily swayed."

"I don't, believe me. I sat in that conference room with you for a week. There were times I thought I was going three rounds with Muhammed Ali."

"Thank you," she smiled.

"I had a lot of time to think last night. I understand most of the jobs will be temporary or seasonal. The stadium will add to the county's tax revenues."

"Not as much as I'd like."

"We both have the same goals."

“How do you mean?”

“You want what’s best for your county. I want what’s best for my team. You are not seeing the same degree of benefits that I am.”

“That is an accurate analysis of our situation.”

“I have a proposal I’d like you to consider.”

“I’m listening.”

“When I came to town, I noticed your high school stadium is, shall we say, lacking.”

“It’s ancient. It was built before I went to school there.”

“I propose the county’s high school teams be allowed to use the stadium facilities for practices and games, barring any conflicts with the Knights schedule. This will provide more work for the grounds keeping staff we would locally hire.”

“I’m intrigued. Let me think it over and we’ll discuss it. Besides, you were the one who said I shouldn’t be working today.”

He touched her tablet. “You aren’t, are you?”

She flipped the screen around. “It’s a romance novel. *‘One Step from Heaven’*”

“I wouldn’t take you for someone who reads bodice rippers.”

“That’s an old notion. They are about real people.”

“So, what’s it about?”

“The heroine comes home to be with her dying grandmother. She discovers the grandmother’s lawyer is from the family they’ve had a generational feud.”

“And they fall madly in love.”

“Of course, they do,” she smiled. She set the tablet down. “I’m really too tired to read. Do you want to watch a movie?”

“Yeah, sure.” He turned on the TV and pulled up the guide. “Here’s a good one. Dustin Hoffman and Rene Russo. I love her. She’s hot,” he smiled.

“What’s the movie?” She saw a glint in his eyes and the hint of a smile.

“Contagion.”

She gasped, then chuckled. Then she grabbed a throw pillow and defined its purpose. “You are twisted, Hughes.”

“Thank you,” he smiled.

They settled on ‘*San Andreas*’. It had lots of explosions and minimal story lime. She grabbed an afghan and tossed it over her lap. She looked over at Mike as he smiled at a tricky helicopter stunt. She leaned back against the couch. This was nice.

Mike enjoyed the movie. It was diverting from their current situation. Olivia had fallen asleep about the same time Duane Johnson crashed his chopper into a shopping mall. He thought she looked a little pale. She’d said those attacks left her worn out. He hoped it wasn’t more. She moved when he turned off the TV.

“Is it over?”

“Yeah. Did you have a good nap?”

“I guess.” She pulled the afghan tighter around herself. “It’s cold in here.”

“No, Livie, it’s not.”

She gave him a small smile. “No one’s called me that since I was a kid.”

“Well, we are having a sleepover. All we need is smores and parents telling us to keep it down.”

Olivia laughed until she started coughing. “Ugh, this sucks.”

“Come on. Let me get you settled upstairs.” He stood and reached for her hand.

“I’d like to argue...”

“Of course, you would,” he smiled.

She gave him a side glance. “I’d like to argue but I really need the sleep.”

Mike got her upstairs and tucked her in bed. He thought she was even more pale and she'd started shivering. He pulled the comforter tight around her. "Do you have extra blankets?"

"In my closet, top shelf."

He opened the door and found some blankets. He found a thick afghan and put it over her comforter. "How's that?"

"Better."

He went into her bathroom and rummaged through her medicine cabinet. He found a thermometer. "Open up."

"I'm fine. I'm just chilly."

"Livie, it's seventy degrees in here. You're not fine. Now open up," he said as he pushed the thermometer in her mouth. "Leave it there." He went back to the cabinet and got two aspirin and a glass of water. He set them on her nightstand and took the thermometer. He sighed and set it down. "Here, take these."

She took the aspirins then handed him the glass. "What did it say?"

"What?"

"Don't be obtuse. The thermometer."

"It wasn't bad."

"That's not what your face says."

He should know better than to try and get something past her. "It's one hundred and two."

"Shit," she muttered.

Mike picked up her phone from the nightstand. "Dr. Lind, it's Mike Hughes. We have a problem."



Mike stood outside the bedroom while Dr. Lind examined Olivia. Dr. Lind had arrived in full PPE gear. If her neighbors were watching, they'd have plenty of gossip for the mill. He'd given Mike a test before he'd gone in with Olivia. He wasn't worried about his test. He felt fine and he'd had all his shots. But he was really worried about her. Somehow, she'd become his focus. Not the stadium. Not his job. All he wanted was for Olivia to be okay. Dr. Lind came out of the bedroom and closed the door. "How is she?"

"Her test was positive. It's hit her hard because of the asthma." He pulled two bottles of medicine out of his bag. "I want you to make sure she takes her medicine and stays hydrated. If her breathing gets worse, let me know. The directions are on the are on the bottles."

"Two bottles?"

He started packing up his gear. He looked up at him and took a breath. "Mike, you tested positive too."

"Damn."

"You're not showing any symptoms and you're fully vaccinated. This is a preventative measure. Call me tomorrow with an update on her condition."

Mike extended a shaky hand. "Thank you" He closed the front door behind him and leaned against it. This thing was bad. He never considered being sick. His life didn't have time for it. He had a big job, a busy life. Now, he was a nursemaid in Walmart clothes. He hoped he could be as good at this job as he was at his real life.

He walked back into her bedroom and found her staring out the window. "What are you doing out of bed?"

"I was tired of lying down."

"What are you watching?"

She pointed to the dense tree line behind her yard. "There's a family of deer that live in the woods. They come out to munch on the berries on those bushes. They have a baby. Isn't it sweet?"

“Very sweet. I don’t get that view in Manhattan.” He walked over to her and put his hand on her forehead. “You still have a fever.”

“It’s not as high.” She looked him up and down. “When did you turn into a nurse.”

“When the doctor handed me your meds. Now, how about some lunch? I’m starving.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Excuse me?”

“All you had this morning was coffee. You need to eat. I saw a burger place on the way up here. Is it any good?”

“Yeah, it’s great.”

“I’ll call in an order. Now, get back to bed.”

“Stop telling me what to do!”

He took her hand. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay. I’ve avoided this damn virus for years and now I’ve got it. I feel like crap and I’ve got a pretentious New York suit ordering me around.”

“Sorry. I’m just following doctor’s orders. I’m supposed to keep an eye on you.” He pointed to a recliner next to the window. “Can you at least sit down? Please.”

“Fine.” She sat in the chair and pushed a button. The feet went up and the back went back. “This is usually where I read my ‘bodice rippers’.”

He grabbed her tablet from the nightstand and handed it to her. “Here. Enjoy.”

Olivia reached for his hand. “Thanks, Mike, for everything.”

Mike came back to her bedroom and found her asleep with the tablet in her lap. He picked up the tablet and the movement woke her. "Hey. Did you enjoy your book."

"I read one chapter and fell asleep."

"I've got our food. Mushroom cheeseburgers, fries and milkshakes. I didn't know what kind you liked so I got chocolate." It was the first time he'd seen her smile since yesterday.

"Chocolate of course! Chocolate is always the answer, no matter the question." She took a big sip. "Ah, that's good." Mike pulled the burgers out of the bag and looked for a place to set them down. "There's a lap desk on the other side of the bed," she said.

"That'll work." He grabbed the desk and set it on her lap. He laid out the burgers then grabbed the medicine bottles. He opened both and handed her a pill. She took it with her milkshake. So did he.

"What the hell?" she asked.

He tried to ignore her question. "Eat your burger."

"You took the same med." Her eyes welled. "Oh, God. You have it too."

"I don't have any symptoms and I feel fine. This is preventative. Remember, I've had all my shots, like a Chihuahua."

"A Chihuahua?" she chuckled.

"My mother had one. It didn't like me."

"I'm so sorry, Mike."

"The dog didn't like anyone but her."

"No, about you testing positive."

"You didn't give it to me."

"I'm still sorry."

He brushed his hand over her shoulder. "It's going to be okay. Now help me eat these fries."

Olivia woke to see Mike asleep in her recliner. She'd finally admitted that she was tired and got back in bed after lunch. She watched as Mike's breathing seemed even. He wasn't sick. She chuckled when he let out a snore. Mike was very confusing. She'd spent the last week negotiating, arguing and generally disliking the hell out of this high-powered New York lawyer. He was polished in his four figure suits, product styled hair and high shine shoes. Now, his hair was mussed and his clothes were wrinkled. He'd been taking care of her all day. He wasn't Florence Nightingale but he wasn't Nurse Ratchet. She liked this version of Mike Hughes better.

She still felt like crap, but at least her breathing was better. She pushed back the covers and tried to stand. Her legs had other ideas. "Whoa."

Mike startled awake. "What? Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'm still a little woozy." She tried to stand again but fell back down on the bed.

"Let me help you," he said as he took her arm. She stood and aimed for her bathroom. "Will you be okay in there?"

"I can handle it from here," she smiled. She closed the door behind her and smiled. She would have never imagined he could behave like this just a few days ago.

Fresh clothes felt better after a couple of hours of fever sweats. She washed up the best she could. She was still too shaky for a shower. She laid back on the bed and turned on her TV. A show about rehabbing houses in Detroit looked diverting. Mike came back into the room with a familiar look. "Talked to your boss again?"

"Yeah. He expects me to wrap this up despite the fact that you're sick."

"I have a thought about that."

"Yeah?" he smiled.

“I like your idea about letting the local high school football teams use the stadium. Our baseball teams could use help too. How about rehabbing their fields and supplying new equipment? Maybe run some clinics?”

“I could work with that. I can sell it to Fred as a great PR move. He’d be training the next generation of players.”

“Great,” she nodded.

“Now the only thing is the right of way through the Evans property.”

“That’s a non-starter. You’ll have to go with the alternate route.”

“That will cost an additional three million dollars.”

“The Knights made five hundred million last year. They can afford it.” She liked his smile. She knew she had him.

“I’ll talk to Fred.”

Mike liked Olivia's idea about how to settle their impasse. He researched the local baseball fields and ran some numbers. He estimated this part of the deal would cost less than one million dollars. Fred would be less happy about the three million for the longer access road but it was a make or break for the deal. He sat back in the chair and realized he'd been working for hours. He should have checked on Olivia. He went upstairs to her bedroom and found her awake. "Hey there."

"Hey."

"I'm sorry I took so long."

"Stop worrying, Mike. I'm fine."

He touched her forehead. "No, you're not." He took the thermometer off the nightstand and aimed it at her mouth. "Open."

"Geez, okay," she said.

"It's one hundred point five." He set it down and handed her a glass of water and her med. "Take this."

"You too," she said as she took the pill. "I'll take mine as soon as I get dinner together. What do you want?"

"Didn't we just eat?"

"That was lunch. It's almost six."

"Okay, but I'm not that hungry. I have some soup in the pantry." She tried to stand but sat back down. "Damn."

"Stay put. I'll find the soup." He pointed toward the TV. "Finishing watching...whatever that is."

"It's a British baking competition."

"You bake?"

"God, no," she chuckled. "I just like watching who wins." She pointed at a giant chocolate cake. "Now that is a thing of beauty."

Mike found a can of tomato soup and set it up on the stove. He looked in the fridge and smiled when he found American cheese. Tomato soup and grilled cheese was what his mother made for him when he was sick. The memory of his mom made him smile. She'd been gone too long, but he still smiled whenever he saw lilacs. They were her favorite. He used to cut them for her from a tree in the neighbor's yard. She always thanked him with a big hug and kiss, even though she knew he'd taken them from Mrs. Burns yard.

He found a tray and took the soup and sandwiches up to Livie's room. "Lunch is served."

"Grilled cheese and tomato soup?" she smiled. "My mother used to make this for me when I was sick."

"Everyone's did."

Fred wasn't happy. He was yelling, telling him he'd promised more than he was authorized to do. Mike was trying to remind him about their conversations and how he'd approved the deal but he wasn't listening. He left Fred's office and walked down the long hallway. It seemed longer. Where was the exit? He opened a door and found himself in a skybox.

"There you are, Michael. Thank you for the tickets."

"Mom?"

"Great seats, son. I think the Knights are going all the way this season."

"Dad? What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean, dear?" asked his mom. "You invited us. Come sit with us." She patted a seat and he sat down between his parents."

"This is nice," he smiled. He reached out for their hands but they were fading away. "Mom, Dad," he called.

"Mike, Mike."



He heard a voice. A touch on his shoulder took him further away from his parents. "No, not yet," he whispered.

"Mike, wake up."

His eyes blinked open. It was Livie. "What?" he whispered.

"You were calling for your parents. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, even though he wasn't. His parents had been gone for years. It was disconcerting to see them as they were in his youth. He tried to stand but she pushed him back down. "What the hell, Livie?"

"You're not fine." She touched his forehead. "Damn." She grabbed the thermometer off her nightstand and stuck it in his mouth.

He pulled it out and asked. "Since when is it okay to share?"

She stuck it back in. "I think that's the least of our worries." She waited for the thermometer to beep and then looked at it. "Shit."

"What?"

"It's one hundred and three." She pulled back the bedspread. "Get in. I'll get your med."

He tried to smile. "Am I still dreaming?"

"Easy, Romeo. You need to rest. I'm not well enough to run back and forth to your room to check on you. It's a king size bed. There's plenty of room. Now get in."

He hated to admit she was right. He didn't think he had the strength to walk down the hall to his room. He climbed into the bed and Livie tucked him in.

"I'm going to go get us some drinks."

Mike watched as Livie walked out of the room. He didn't want her waiting on him, but he didn't think he was up to arguing. It seemed like just a moment later before Livie handed him a bottle of water and a pill.

“Take your med. I called Dr. Lind. He said there is nothing more he could do for us at the hospital. He’ll be here tomorrow to check on us. In the meantime, take our meds, stay hydrated and rest.”

He patted the bed and smiled. “Hop in, Livie.”

She smiled and tucked herself in. “Close your eyes and get some rest.”

He closed his eyes and sighed.

“Mike.”

“Huh,” he whispered.

“I like it when you call me Livie.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Sweet dreams.”

Olivia felt herself waking from a pleasant dream she didn't want to leave. She felt warm and safe in his arms. She didn't know who he was but she didn't care. All she wanted was to stay like this forever. She stirred and dared to open her eyes. "Oh, God. What am I doing?" She tried to pull away but Mike pulled her close. "Mike, I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking."

"I do," he smiled through closed eyes and kissed her forehead. "Your fever's down."

She reached her hand to his forehead. "Yours isn't." She tried to pull away again but he held her tight.

"Don't. This is nice." He sounded still half asleep.

"Mike, I didn't mean to take advantage. I must have been dreaming."

He opened his eyes and smiled. "Livie, you've been like this for hours. I didn't mind. I don't mind. It's very nice."

"For hours?"

"Yeah. I woke up about two a.m. and you were curled up next to me like a kitten. I put my arm around you and you seemed to like it."

"I did," she smiled.

"So did I." He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss on her lips.

"Mike," she whispered. "You're sick. We're sick."

"Not that sick," he grinned.

She laughed and pushed on his chest. "I'm feeling a little better. I'm going to get our medicine and find some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"We have to eat something. I'll get some juice and some power bars."

"Sounds good. I'm going to close my eyes for a minute."

Mike was asleep before she got to the bedroom door.

Olivia led Dr. Lind to her bedroom. He looked twice at Mike in her bed. “He spiked a fever last night and this was easier than running between rooms.” She blushed a bit. “It’s a big bed.”

“So, I see,” he said before moving to Mike’s side of the bed. “How are you feeling, Mr. Hughes?”

“It’s Mike, and I’m okay.”

Olivia crossed her arms and sat down on the bed. “Mike.”

“Okay, I feel like shit. I had my vaccine. Why is this so bad?”

“The vaccine gave you some protection. It would be worse without it.” He took Mike’s temperature and listened to his lungs. “Your temperature is still elevated. Keep taking your meds and stay hydrated. Now, Ms. Clark, how are you feeling?”

“Olivia, please. I’m a little better.”

Dr. Lind took her temperature and listen to her lungs. “I beg to differ. Your temperature is higher than Mike’s. I don’t like the sound of your lungs. I’m going to bring you a portable oxygen unit. I want you to keep it on at all times.”

“What?”

“Olivia, your lungs are damaged and this is a nasty virus. You need the extra support until you’re through this. It’s either that or the hospital.”

“Damn it,” she said. “Okay.”

“I’m going to get you a home care nurse. You’ll both need it for the duration. Stay in bed, both of you. Rest and do as little as possible.” He packed his equipment and stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to the hospital.”

“How are the other patients?” asked Mike.

“Mayor Jordan is still critical, but stable. We had two more cases overnight. A total of seven so far. The CDC is handling the tracking. The rate of new cases is not as high as it is in Virginia. That gives me cause for optimism.”

Olivia had tried to finish her lunch but she couldn't manage soup and a whole sandwich. She looked over at Mike's tray and his wasn't much better. "Didn't like the sandwich?"

"No, it's fine. I just don't feel like eating."

"Neither do I."

"Angela won't be pleased."

It had been three days since their nurse, Angela, had arrived. She was a great nurse and an even better cook. She was staying in the guest room, so she checked on them during the night.

Olivia pushed her plate aside. "She doesn't like me."

"What are you talking about? Of course, she likes you."

"Well, she doesn't like me being in bed with you."

"You have to admit, it is a bit unusual."

"That's not what I'm saying. She'd rather have alone time with you."

"That's ridiculous. I've got twenty years on her."

"It's not ridiculous. You're a very handsome man. Those blue eyes of yours will make any woman weak in the knees."

"Oh, really," he smiled. He put his plate on the nightstand then rolled onto his shoulder. "Do they make you weak in the knees?"

She looked at him and chuckled. "Give me a break."

"Oh no, counselor. You said any woman weak in the knees. You're a woman, ergo, my eyes make you week in the knees."

"Ergo?" she laughed. "You're feeling better."

"A little, yes. You still didn't answer the question."

She sighed and rolled to face him. Time to own up. “Yes, your eyes make me weak in the knees. I am one of the legions of women who find you handsome. Are you happy now?”

“Delighted,” he smiled and reached his hand to her cheek

“I should go on the record to say I think you’re very beautiful.” He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss.

“Well, that’s great. We’re both attracted to each other, despite the fact we both look like crap. But we’re both way too sick to do anything about it.”

Mike fell back on his pillow with a sigh. “That’s for sure.”

“We’ve got at least another week before we’re out of lockdown.”

He reached for her hand. “Once we’re done with nurses,”

“And oxygen pumps,” she added, touching her cannula.

“We’ll figure this out.” He pressed her hand to his lips.

“That sounds like a great idea.”

Mike’s phone rang and he reached for it. “It’s Fred. Of course, it is. He has lousy timing.” He touched the screen and Fred’s face appeared. “Hi, Fred.”

“Jesus, Mike. You look like crap.”

“It’s a matched set. I feel like crap.”

“Look, the board isn’t happy. The three million for the longer road is ridiculous for a Podunk town like Boyertown. That Clark woman is just a country lawyer. You went to Columbia. You should run rings around her.”

Olivia turned the phone to face her. She resisted smiling at Fred’s shocked face. “Mr. Cooper. This country lawyer graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law. So, you can take your attitude and shove it. I’ve given Mr. Clark an excellent offer. He agrees. If you want your stadium, you will agree to my terms.”

“Ah, well,” he stammered. You can’t make this deal on your own. It has to approved by your city council.”

“That’s true. However, the council respects me and trusts my judgment. If you agree, they will sign off on the deal.”

Mike chuckled. “You see what I’ve been up against?”

“You seem to be up against her now,” he said with a leer.

“Fred, we’ve both had high fevers for the last five days. It’s easier for the nurse and us not to have to walk back and forth between rooms. This is thing is no joke. There’s already been one fatality.”

“What?” Fred gasped.

“The mayor’s assistant has died. The mayor is still critical.”

“Ah, shit.” He looked well chastened. “I’ll talk to the board.” Fred disconnected the call and Mike set down the phone.

“I’m sorry if I caused you a problem. I didn’t like his attitude.”

“Not at all,” he smiled. “You may have given him the kick in the ass he needed to get this deal done.”

“That’s good.” She laid back on her pillow and picked up the TV remote. “Let’s see what’s on. San Andreas is a good movie.”

“Sounds good,” he said because she’d fallen asleep the last time they tried to watch it.

They were both sound asleep before the Hoover Dam collapsed.

Mike stirred from what felt like his tenth nap of the day. It frustrated him that he couldn't stay awake longer than an hour at a time. He looked over at Livie and thought she how beautiful she was, even in her sleep. Even with breathing tube under her nose. The bedroom door opened and Angela came in. Livie stirred and sat up in bed.

"Hi Angela."

"Hello. Time for your vitals." She put her stethoscope in her ears and listened to Livie's heart and lungs. She took her blood pressure and temperature. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. Tired, but better."

"Your temp is down a bit." Angela looked over at Mike and smiled. "Your turn." He walked over to his side of the bed. He caught Livie rolling her eyes. Angela took his vitals and made notes of her findings. "How are you feeling, Mike?"

"The same as Olivia, better but tired."

Angela smiled. "Your body is going through a lot. You'll need time to recover, even after you test negative." She gathered up her things. "I'm making my chicken fettuccini tonight. It has a light sauce and it's delicious if I do say so myself. I expect you to clean your plate."

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked over at Livie, like she'd just remembered she was there. "You too."

"Yes, ma'am," she smiled. Livie restrained her laugh until Angela had closed the door behind her. "Oh my God. She would have climbed in with you if I hadn't been here."

"I don't think...yeah, no, I can't," he laughed. "She may have a thing for me."

"Oh, you think?!" she laughed.

"Hush. She'll hear you. She's really very nice."

"Yeah, she is. I can't fault her taste. I guess I'll have to try and finish my dinner."



Mike reached for her hand. "How are you feeling, really?"

"I'm tired." She pulled at the cannula. "And I'm sick of this."

He squeezed her hand. "The doctor says you need it."

"I know, but it still sucks. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay. I do have some good news. Fred texted me. The board accepted your terms."

"That's great. If I wasn't so tired, I'd give you a rousing 'Yoo Hoo'."

"It's implied," he smiled.

"Contracts will have to wait until we're better. We can't be writing contracts in this condition."

"Agreed. Livie, I need to ask you a question."

"Okay," she smiled and leaned back on her pillow. "You know, I like it when you call me Livie. No one has called me that since I was a kid, but it seems right when you do it."

"I'm glad. I wanted to ask you if you mind me still being in this bed? I'm well enough to go back to the guest room."

She sighed and he could tell she was ready to drift off to sleep. "That room doesn't have an en suite. You'd have to share a bathroom with Angela. While I'm sure she wouldn't mind, I'm not prepared to fight her for you."

Mike's blood pressure shot up. She would fight for him? He leaned over her and touched her cheek. "Livie, look at me."

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled. "Damn, you have the bluest eyes since Paul Newman."

"Thank you. Livie, I need you to know something. When you don't have a fever anymore, if you still feel the same way, you won't have to fight for me." He leaned close and kissed her forehead. He really hoped this wasn't the fever talking.

Mike flipped the channel and sighed. Hundreds of channels and he couldn't find anything to watch.

"Can you cool it with the channel surfing?" Livie sighed and rolled over.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you." He pointed at the screen. I never knew there were so many courtroom shows. Why do those people want to air their business in public?"

"Maybe because no one listened to them in private?"

He nodded and turned off the TV. "I'm listening."

She smiled as she rubbed her eyes. "I wasn't fishing."

"I know. Tell me anyway. What is something you'd want to tell someone but you'd never say in public?"

"So many things," she chuckled.

"Like what?"

"Oh, let's see. Frank, that toupee is awful. I want to snatch it right off your head."

"Frank?"

"City controller. It's so distracting. I have to stop myself from laughing out loud at meetings."

"That's good. Tell me more."

"I'm not bitchy, I'm focused."

"Whose butt do I need to kick for calling you that?"

"Marianne. She's one of the courthouse admins. She thinks I'm pushy."

"That's ridiculous."

"Thanks. I get it a lot from women. They aren't used to someone like me."

He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss. "There isn't anyone like you."

“Aww, that’s so nice. Thank you,” she said as she gave him another kiss.

“So, tell me about little Olivia. Were you carrying a baby briefcase to nursery school?”

“No. I wanted... I was a kid.”

“We were all kids. What did you want to be when you grew up?”

“You’ll think it’s silly.”

“I won’t. I promise. Tell me.”

“I wanted to be a movie star.”

“I don’t think it’s silly. You’re a very beautiful woman. I could see you on a big screen.”

“Thank you,” she all but whispered.

Mike thought she was adorable when she blushed. “What stopped you?”

“I did some school plays. I had to be practical. My father was a salesman and my mother was a teacher. I wanted to go to college. I studied hard and got a full scholarship.”

“A full boat? To Harvard?”

“Yeah,” she smiled.

“Damn, girl. That’s impressive. Did you do any acting in college?”

“I was too busy studying. You know what it’s like. Pre law and extra circulars don’t mix.”

“I know.”

“I’ve told you this much. I guess I could tell you the rest.” She grabbed her tablet off the nightstand and opened a file. “I needed to make money for living expenses but I didn’t have time for a regular job.” She turned the screen toward him. “I modeled.”

“Holy crap! You were the Budweiser girl! I remember that campaign.” He looked at her and grinned. “Your poster was on more than one wall in my dorm.”

“Oh, God. Was I on your wall?”

He could feel himself turn red. “I wondered why you looked so familiar. I thought it was wishful thinking.”

Livie pointed to the screen. She was wearing a Harvard half shirt jersey and short shorts. “I don’t look like that anymore.”

He took the tablet from her hand. “No, you don’t. That’s a cute girl. You’re a beautiful woman.”

She shook her head and smiled. “Okay, Romeo. What about little Mikey? I can’t picture you toting a tiny briefcase in the school yard.”

“No, I wanted to be a ball player.”

“That’s why you’re working for the Knights.”

“Yeah. I was good, but I wasn’t major league material. Fortunately, I was smart enough to get into Columbia. My father was so pleased. He was a lawyer.”

“What about your mom?”

“She was a lawyer’s wife. She did the country club thing but she also did a lot of charity work. She founded a charity that helped mothers and children. It’s still functioning today.”

“That’s wonderful. You’re proud of her.”

“Very. She was a wonderful woman.”

“She’s passed?”

“Yeah. They’re both gone but they got to see me do well.”

“I’m sure they were proud of the man you’ve become.”

He sighed and thought about his life in Manhattan the last few years. “I don’t know. There’s so much of my life now that’s all flash. It’s stopped being about sports and more about entertainment and flash. There’s so much money involved. You can lose yourself.”

“Have you lost yourself?”

“I think a little bit. Being forced to step back like this has given me time to think about what I want moving forward. I have some ideas. I manage the Knight’s charitable work. I think want to expand that.”

“That sounds like a good plan.”

Mike didn’t know why, but he didn’t feel uncomfortable telling Livie about things he’d never told anyone.

Olivia felt good after a long shower. Spending ten days in bed was exhausting. She needed to get up and move around. Dr. Lind had cleared her to go without the damn oxygen machine. Both Mike and her had tested negative for the virus but they were still in lockdown for four more days. The virus may have run its course, but she still felt like she'd been run over by a bus.

She pulled a shirt and shorts out of her dresser. She didn't have to change in the bathroom anymore. Mike had moved back to the guest room. Angela moved out this morning so he wouldn't have to share a bathroom. The conversation they'd had a few days ago was playing in her head. She couldn't believe she'd told Mike she'd fight for him. She would, she just couldn't believe she'd said it out loud. He hadn't mentioned it, so she was hoping he'd been as feverish as she'd been.

It was near lunchtime so she was going to put something together for them. She opened the bedroom door and stopped dead. Mike had come out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. She knew he was fit from those times she's cuddled up against him. She'd done it once in her sleep. She never told him the other times were on purpose. Now, he was standing still, as surprised as she was. It gave her the opportunity to appreciate what she'd only imagined.

"Damn, dude," she said without thinking.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were up," he said blushing a bright red.

"That's not what I meant." She stepped closer. "We've been in bed together for ten days," she said quietly. "I thought, but I didn't really know."

Mike reached for her hand and smiled. "Does that mean you'd still fight Angela for me?"

"Oh, God. You remember that."

"Of course, I do. How about I get dressed and meet you downstairs?"

That lopsided smile was going to get her in deep. Who was she kidding? It already had.

Olivia put some tuna fish sandwiches on the table. Tomato soup was warming on the stove. She set out the bowls and tried not to think about seeing Mike in his towel. She couldn't blame what she'd said on a fever. Mike Hughes was one fine looking man.

"Hey there."

She looked to see Mike standing by the kitchen island. "Hey," she said without looking up from stirring the soup.

"Can I help?"

She poured the soup into the bowls. "You can put these on the table. I made tuna fish sandwiches."

"Sounds great," he said as he set the bowls down. She tried to walk around him to her chair, but he took her hand. "Livie, we need to talk about what happened, what is happening."

"I seem to have no filter around you. I'm sorry if I embarrassed you."

He didn't let go of her hand. "I wasn't embarrassed. We've spent the last ten days being very close. We talked and laughed and cursed this damn virus. We shared our fears. We were honest with each other. Why stop now?" He pulled her into his arms. She didn't protest. In his arms had become her favorite place to be. "I think it's time we see if this thing between us is more than just a few kisses. What do you think?" He smiled that lopsided smile that went straight to her heart.

"Well," she smiled. "I've always done my due diligence."

"Wise."

"Indeed." She slid her hands up around his neck as he leaned in for their first real kiss. In the history of first kisses, Olivia thought this had to be the best. At least it was her best first.

"Wow," he whispered.

"That's what I was thinking."

“Now what? he asked.

“We have our soup before it gets cold.” She sat down at table and tried to pick up her spoon without shaking. She was trying to buy some time to think of what to say.

Mike sat down and reached for her hand. “We can’t ignore this. We still have four more days together.”

She took a breath and tried to calm her racing heart. “We’re obviously very attracted to each other. But we shouldn’t start anything. You live in New York. I live here.”

“We’re a train ride apart. You’re looking for a reason.”

“We’re still working on this deal. We are representing opposing interests.”

“Now you’re reaching. We’ve agreed in principle on the broad strokes. We only need to work out the details. I don’t anticipate any problems. Do you?”

“Nothing we can’t work out,” she sighed.

“Then what is the real problem? The truth this time.”

“I’m scared.”

“What? Why?”

“I’ve never been the best at relationships. I’m too busy, too driven, too obsessed with work.”

“Says who?”

“Says every man I’ve ever dated.”

“You’ll never hear me say that. I’m the same way. I appreciate your devotion to your home town. I would never ask you to be any different.”

She looked into his eyes, trying to understand him. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” He took her hand and kissed her palm. “There’s something you should know. I never say anything I don’t mean.”



“I believe you.”

Olivia reviewed the last of the stadium contracts. Thanks to the internet, they were able to finalize just about everything they needed to move forward. Electronic signatures were fine for now. Hard copies would be signed in a few days, when their lives got back to normal. She looked over at Mike, engrossed in his laptop. Life wasn't ever going to be the same. Mike would go back to New York and she would go back to her office but she wouldn't have him to talk and laugh with and curl up next to in bed.

"Hey, I have an addendum I'd like you to review. Fred finally signed off on it," said Mike.

"Oh, come on. We've agreed to everything. No more changes."

"Just open your email and look."

She sighed and opened the link. She couldn't believe her eyes. "What is this?" she gasped. "The Thomas Reilly Memorial Scholarship?"

"I did a little research. From all reports, Tom Reilly was a good guy who loved his hometown. His family thought he would eventually run for mayor."

"You talked to his family?"

"I wanted permission to name the scholarship for him. Turns out he was also a baseball player. I convinced Fred it was part of training the next generation of players."

"Fifty thousand dollars? Oh my God."

"That will cover the first year at most schools or two years at a state school."

"This is incredibly generous."

"Like you said, the Knights can afford it."

She saw look in his eyes she didn't quite understand. "What is it?"

He closed his laptop and sighed. "Tom was only twenty-eight. Top of his class in law school. He had a bright future and this damn virus took it away."

She reached for his hand. "Thanks to you, his name will live on."

“I hope they remember the man, not just the money.”

“Maybe we could add an essay requirement to the scholarship application. They could write about what Tom did for Boyertown and what they would do for their town.”

“I like that.” He sat back against his chair. “I never thought about it before now.”

“About what?”

“Death. I’ve dealt with my parents’ death but that seemed in the natural order of things. I’ve never thought about my own death. I’m nearly sixty. I have more life behind me than I do ahead of me.”

“I’m right there with you.”

“This damn virus. Before it I had the luxury of ignorance. I went about my life as if it would go on forever. I can’t do that anymore.”

She smiled. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing. I’ve never had that luxury. I always knew that every bad attack could be my last. I think that’s why I don’t suffer fools.”

Mike smiled. “Are you saying I’m not a fool?”

She shook her head. “Not anymore. You’ve changed. Or maybe you’ve let me see a side of you that you don’t normally show.”

“You may be right. When I’m working, I’m always on. Tough in the conference room but always ready for a good time.”

“And you’re always working. It sounds exhausting.”

“It is. I don’t think I realized how exhausting.”

“You don’t have to keep living that way.”

“I don’t think I can.” A noise caught his attention. He stood and looked out the window. “Dr. Lind is here.”

Mike watched as Dr. Lind checked the results of their Covid tests. He hoped they were still clear. And he almost hoped they weren't. Getting the all clear from the doctor meant he would be going home. He was going to miss Olivia curling up against him in bed. She thought he didn't know she was doing it on purpose. God, he was going to miss her.

"Good news," said Lind. "You both remain testing negative. I am officially releasing you from quarantine."

"Thank you, doctor," said Livie, with a notable lack of enthusiasm.

"How are the other patients?" asked Mike.

"We had a total of nine. There have been no new cases in the last five days so the CDC believes we have a handle on it." He closed up his bag. "Tom Reilly was the only fatality."

Livie put her hand on Lind's shoulder. "I'm sure you did everything you could."

He gave her a wan smile. "I tell myself that. Tom went to school with my son. They were on their high school baseball team together." He looked at them with tears in his eyes. "They were good friends." There was a hitch in his voice. "I watched him grow up."

Livie gave the grieving man a hug. "He won't be forgotten. Mike and the Knights are establishing a scholarship in his name."

Lind blinked back his tears and extended his hand to Mike. "That's very nice of you. Thank you."

"Everyone said he was a good man."

"The best." He picked up his bag and squared his shoulders. "I have to get back to the hospital."

Livie closed the door behind the doctor. “Well, I guess that means you get to go home now.”

“Ready to get shed of me?”

“No...I didn’t mean... I just thought you’d want to get back to New York.”

He walked toward her and pulled her into a tight hug. “I’m not anxious to leave you.”

“I’m not anxious for you to leave.”

“Well, in that case,” he smiled and tipped her chin up to give her a kiss. “What’s next?”

“It’s nearly four. If you leave now, you’ll hit awful traffic.”

“True.”

“Why don’t we have some dinner?”

“We’ve earned a celebration. Where would you like to go?”

“How about we order in?” She pulled away. “I don’t think I’m ready for the public just yet.”

“Dr. Lind gave us the all clear. We aren’t contagious anymore.”

“No, we aren’t. I’m not ready to be around people. If we go out, I’ll run into people who know me. I don’t have the energy for glad handing.”

“How about we order? That Chinese place was very good.”

“Sounds perfect.”

An hour later they were finishing off the last of the lo Mein. “That was an excellent idea,” he smiled.

“It was your idea,” she laughed and tossed a napkin at him. He stood to help her clear the dishes.

“I am known for my excellent ideas.”

“Not too full of yourself, are you?”

“The Knights pay me an obscene amount of money for my excellent ideas,” he grinned. “Not as obscene as the player’s paychecks, but in the neighborhood.”

“Oh, please,” she said as she loaded the dishwasher.

He pulled her into a hug. “What now, Livie?”

“You’ll go home tomorrow and I’ll go into my office. I have tons of emails to go through.”

“You know what I mean,” he said softly. “I don’t want this to be the end. Do you?” He was surprised when she blushed a bright red.

“I have something for you.” She walked into the dining room and opened a drawer. She handed him a small box. “You really can get anything delivered.”

He opened the box and laughed. It was a bright orange dog tag on a silver chain.

“You said you’ve had so many vaccines; you should have a tag.”

“Very clever,” he said as he examined his tag. Mike was engraved on the front. He flipped it over and the engraving made his heart skip. “If found call 570... This isn’t my phone number.”

“No. It’s mine,” she said quietly. “You said you were feeling lost. I hoped if you needed finding, you’d call me.”

He smiled and put the chain around his neck. Livie looked him in the eyes and Mike knew he would do anything to keep her in his life.

Olivia was going through some paperwork at home. Mike was coming down for the weekend and she wanted to be caught up. She didn't need anyone calling her. They'd been seeing each other when they could for the last couple of months. They were still figuring their relationship out. Long distance was never easy but being with Mike was the most fun she'd ever had. She had to admit, watching a ball game from the owner's box was great. It also made her able to keep the groupies at bay. A handsome, successful man like Mike was a prime target. His age was irrelevant to them. They were annoyed Mike wasn't paying any attention to them so they'd upped their game. In response, Olivia had perfected what Mike called her death stare. It was an elevated version of what she'd used against Mike in negotiations. She'd frightened more than one woman with that stare and the occasional low growl.

She closed her laptop when she heard the car in the driveway. Mike came toward her with a big smile. She was ready with a tight hug and kiss. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," he said as he kissed her again.

"Come in. Would you like some coffee?"

"Later." He pointed toward the living room. "Let's have a seat."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing bad, at least I hope so."

"Okay, now you have me freaked."

"We talked about spending Christmas in New York."

"City lights, snow, Rockefeller Center. The whole New York thing," she said.

"Are you really sold on New York?"

"What I really want is to spend time with you. Anything else is a bonus. Travelling back and forth means our time together is precious."

"That's how I feel. Christmas in New York would also mean crowds, traffic and obligations. I'd have to make appearances at various events. The more I thought about it, I thought warm and peaceful sounded good."

“You have my attention,” she smiled.

He pulled a brochure out of his jacket. “What would you think about two weeks here?”

Olivia looked at the brochure and gasped. “Two weeks in the Maldives?”

He pointed to one of the pictures. “They have those cool cottages over the water.”

“Yes, they do. They’re also horribly expensive. I’ve checked.”

“So can I assume you would like that trip?”

“Like it?! I’ve always wanted to go there, which is why I know it’s ridiculously expensive.”

Mike smiled. “The Knights pay me well.”

Olivia’s heart pounded. This kind trip was taking their relationship to another level. “Mike, are you sure about this? You want to spend two full weeks together? I mean two weeks when we’re not sick as dogs.”

He took her hands and pressed them to his lips. “My darling Livie, I want to spend more than two weeks together.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box.

“Oh, God,” she gasped.

“I know I love you. You are smart and kind. You call me on my crap. I can’t get anything past you, and I like that. You’re also the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. I’ve been happier with you, even during that damn virus, than I’ve been with anyone ever. I told you I’m known for my excellent ideas. I don’t need you to say anything now.” He opened the box and revealed a magnificent oval diamond, bright enough to light the new stadium. “Maybe you could wear it while you’re considering my excellent idea.” He slipped it on her trembling hand.

Olivia could feel the tears welling in her eyes. “Mike, I know I love you. I’ve been happier with you than I’ve ever been. You are wonderful, kind,” she grinned “and smoking hot.” She looked at the ring in the sunlight. “Not to mention superior taste in jewelry.” She



looked back at him and grinned. "Holy crap, dude. This had to cost as much as the trip." She saw a look pass over his face. "More?"

He shrugged and smiled.

"You really are crazy."

"Quite possibly."

Olivia looked at Mike and wondered if she was ready for this. The thought came to her, "If not now, when?"

"Mr. Hughes," she smiled. "I will take your proposal under advisement. I'll need to complete my due diligence before signing any contracts."

"I would expect nothing less from you, Ms. Clark." He leaned in and gave her a tender kiss. "We have two weeks before we leave. What would you like to do in the meantime?"

She stood and took him by the hand. "I want to see how my ring looks in the sunshine, from my bedroom window. Part of my due diligence, of course," she grinned.

"Of course," he smiled. "Lead on, counselor."