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The Edge

J.J. Massa

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By

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Dedication:

Thank you to my husband, Jimmy, and my editor, Tracey, for all your help and support

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Prologue

Numb to the bone, Tyler Baker sat in the shallow surf and carefully cradled Daryl Jones in his arms as he waited for something, but he wasn't sure what. The heat and bright sunlight of the afternoon had gone, proving that bad things could happen on beautiful sunny days.

Finally, darkness settled like a cool velvet curtain over the sand and no longer could he see the outline of the spray of foam standing out against the darker water. Along the shoreline driftwood and debris lost substance in the twilight. The endless night would soon take over.

"I need you, Ty," Daryl's beloved voice cajoled, "You need me. We're partners. I need you with me."

"I know, Dare," he agreed, and although the words were little more than agonized grunts from his partially crushed throat, Daryl rewarded him with a sweet smile.

"Assholes really worked us over, huh, Ty?" Daryl's voice sounded strong even though his coffee colored skin was as cold as the ebbing and surging saltwater they sat in.

"Yeah, they did," Tyler agreed, pushing an errant strand of sea grass off of Daryl's dusky face.

Daryl's voice tugged him from his stupor. "So you coming with me, or what?" he repeated anxiously.

Tyler sighed and stared over the misty water. "Just waiting a little."

"Oh," Daryl said, his eyes confused. "For what?"

"It's getting dark now," he commented. He had no answer for his partner.

Daryl nodded, gusting a heavy sigh. "Don't like the idea of being found naked," he whispered sadly. "My mom's gonna be really upset."

Tyler flinched and nodded. "Assholes."

"Ty?" Daryl whispered, his voice was oddly hesitant.

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"Yeah, Dare?" Tyler encouraged.

"I just wanted to let you know," Daryl gave him a half smile. "I always loved you, Ty."

Tyler nodded painfully. "You, too," he croaked. "I love you, too."

Daryl wasn't finished. "And, you know, it means a lot, what you did."

A frown of uncertainty formed between Tyler's eyebrows. "Wh— I don't know what you mean?" he asked, "What I did?"

"Um, thanks for--for getting me out of the water. At least this way my folks can find me, you know?" They shared a sad smile.

"Yeah, I guess I do know," Tyler admitted, his throat tight.

"Are you coming soon?" Daryl persisted.

Tyler smiled affectionately at his impatient partner, brushing a kiss across his damp forehead. "Soon," he assured him. "I'm pretty sure I'll be along soon, Daryl."

A long way off still, he could hear the search party, peppered occasionally by the sounds of dogs barking. He considered trying to call out but he knew they'd never hear him. He wondered how long he'd last at night in the water as the warmth of the day faded away.

It was better this way, he decided. What would he tell Daryl's family? What could he say to his Grandfather? He knew they should have called for backup. Instead of praise and glory, he and his partner had blundered into something they couldn't handle and now Daryl's neck was broken and he, himself, had three fresh new holes in his body. Tyler knew that he was hypothermic and shock-y. He couldn't even feel the pain anymore. He'd been sitting here talking to his partner's ghost—his lover's ghost.

Daryl, his partner, his best friend and closest confidant was right. For all intents and purposes, Tyler was dead, too. He was a pale and chilled ghost simply guarding the body of his partner, hoping vaguely that death would find him before anyone else did.

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Chapter One

Before he left his apartment, Paytah stepped in front of his bathroom mirror and straightened his tie. He stopped and slowly met his own eyes looking out of the tall, reasonably attractive American Indian who stared back at him.

Most people saw his bronzed colored skin, tinted with red. The reddish tint had earned him the nickname *Redskin* in elementary school. By high school he was regaled with such witticisms as “How!” and “Dance for us, Geronimo! We need rain!”

In college, the insults were much more subtle but far more scarring. Most of his classmates were sure he’d gotten into the highly rated university due to his ethnicity and not because he had worked hard.

Anytime he walked into a bar, he was warned about the evils of firewater. There were countless stinging references to his affiliations to casinos in the area. In short, he had battled incessantly to become the decorated detective he saw gazing back at him from his bathroom mirror.

His arduous uphill climb was the reason he was staring at himself in his bathroom this morning. That and the new partner he’d promised his lieutenant he would take on. He was to be paired with a white-bread elitist who’d been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and a champagne glass in his hand.

He’d promised he would take on this new challenge and he would. He would saddle himself with a man who represented everything that had made his life so difficult. He would do this thing with as much grace as he could muster, but he didn’t have to like it. No, he thought with a nod to his reflection, he didn’t have to like it at all.

* * *

Tasteful gold and green accents made the hotel bar elegant and inviting. The dignity of its imposing columns and its spacious wrap-around bar seemed unmarred by the grating sound of the demanding voices of its customers, who were long spoiled by the expectation of immediate pacification.

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Lewis Douglas felt out of place among the smooth, flawless lines of the room. Perhaps he'd fit in better if he were more fit, not as heavy, and taller. He was, at thirty-eight years old, near-sighted and obese. He was sadly lacking in social graces, a whiz kid his entire life, his short stature and lack of appeal to the opposite sex usually didn't bother him. Sometimes, however, he wished that women would pay less attention to the ample bulge in his wallet and notice the one barely concealed in his pants.

It was ironic that the genetic *mélange* that had deprived him of height had chosen to apportion him with size and substance in other areas. Sadly, the only beneficiaries to enjoy this most sizable endowment had been those engaged in the oldest profession. He had no illusions about the elegant redhead therefore when she eased onto the tall bar chair beside him and subtly looked him over.

He appreciated the understated mastery of her presentation. The hotel was upscale and she fit right in. She gave in to his diffident offers to buy her a drink after a brief but obvious demur. The trim leather attaché case that perched on her lap ensured that, to the untrained, she would appear a chic businesswoman, perhaps in town for an important meeting.

Everything about her screamed discretion, perfection, and ultimately - satiation. Her seduction was as slow and studied as her arrival and dress had been. In no hurry, she nursed one drink and casually accepted another. At some point, he realized that her intention was to find one client who could afford her expensive charms without regard to price.

It pleased him to know that she would spend the entire night with him. He could fantasize that she had chosen him for more than his expensive clothes, perfect hair cut, and exclusive temporary address.

What he really wanted in a woman, what he paid for, what he begged for when allowed—the type of woman he craved expected men like him to come to her. She certainly would never go looking for his attentions--she wouldn't need to.

Tonight's unexpected bonus proved herself too discreet even to define the parameters of their deal in public. Even as he quickly swallowed the last mouthful of his drink and opened his mouth to speak, she pressed a finger to his lips to stop him.

"Let's find somewhere more private, shall we?" she said, shaking her head slowly from side to side reproachfully.

"I have a suite upstairs," he babbled in a rush. "Would you like another drink?"

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"I think you've had plenty," she said, an edge to her voice as she rose from the barstool and glared down at him. "In fact, I think you've been quite a bad boy this evening, don't you?" How did she know?

* * *

Philadelphia - the city of brotherly love. Yeah, I feel the love. Tyler winced and slung his backpack over his aching shoulder. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself off the teeming sidewalk and up the battered stairs of the old red-bricked precinct house.

The inside foyer was even more chaotic than the busy street he'd just left. The room he found himself in was peopled with glowering teens, screaming whores, a few stumbling drunks, and a plethora of independent chemists and their staff.

Tyler dropped his backpack onto the desk letting the noise of its landing grab the attention of a surly seeming officer who'd been flicking through a magazine.

"You want something?" he growled, "Just get in line."

Tyler eyed him coldly, nodding his head at the motley mass of human chaos assembled. "I'm not here to sightsee. My name's Tyler Baker."

The cop's lip curled in an outright sneer of contempt. He looked Tyler up and down rudely. "You're late. Lieu expected you a couple hours ago."

"My plane was delayed. I've only been in the city an hour," he began to explain patiently.

"Look deep into my eyes, Baker," he said scornfully. "See any give-a-shit in there?"

Tyler folded his arms across his chest. "You got a problem with me, officer?" he demanded icily.

"Me? Hell, no," the officer said innocently. "I love it when the West Coast's castoffs show up on my doorstep. "

Tyler took a deep breath and refused to allow his desolation to show. His clean slate didn't appear all that spotless after all. *Bad news does indeed travel fast.* He felt defeated but not really surprised. His grandfather had guaranteed him that moving across the country would allow him to start fresh. Now he realized that the Governor just wanted to get him out of sight before the next election.

Shaking his head internally, he focused on the desk sergeant once again. "Why don't you just buzz me in and I'll get out of your face, hmm?" he offered blandly.

Although his eyes narrowed in suspicion, the man apparently felt that was a stellar idea. He pressed the button and Tyler heard the buzzing sound of the security lock being

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disabled. He quickly grabbed his bag and strode through with his usual air of confidence and self-possession, artificial though it was.

The precinct room he entered was every bit as hectic as the room he'd just left. He wound his way through the scattered desks, taking no notice of any unfriendly looks. His calm demeanor was little more than camouflage at this point so he ignored the other officers and focused on a short, recessed hallway that led to a closed door. A guess, more hopeful than educated, suggested that it led to his new Lieutenant's office.

He checked the nameplate and knocked quietly, waiting for permission to enter.

"You're late," a rough voice announced without preamble.

Tyler braced and prepared to defend himself against a haranguing.

"I was looking for Lieutenant Elliot," he offered cautiously to the slight, silver haired man behind the desk.

"Yeah, that's me," the older man's eyes narrowed on him. "First day and you're already late? I expect my men to be on time, young man," he barked.

"Yes, sir," he hurried to explain, "I apologize. My connecting flight was delayed at..."

Elliot cut his explanation short with an impatient wave of the hand. "Close the door, Detective and have a seat," he ordered neutrally.

Tyler slipped into the seat opposite the desk and dropped his bag to the floor. He flushed slightly under Elliot's inclusive inspection, but sat calmly waiting for him to finish.

"I hate politics," Elliot began abruptly. "I spend more time fending the political ambitions of the Mayor and the DA and every two-cent minority group around here than I spend keeping the city's streets clean and safe," he barked, rising from behind the desk. "Most of my days are filled with kissing the shiny posteriors of this city's politicians just to keep enough money in my budget so my people can do their jobs." He squinted at Tyler. "My operational budget got slashed this year. I can't afford stakeouts, I can't afford overtime."

Tyler nodded respectfully, just waiting. Lieutenant Elliot moved to stand in front of him.

"Suddenly, my phone rings. My budget's been approved and even increased. All the money I need, right here, at my fingertips," he stated, holding up a wide hand and wriggling said fingertips. "There's just one little thing," he went on holding up one finger

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to demonstrate. "I just have to accept the transfer of a certain Detective Tyler Baker into my department. A Detective that the San Jose Police Department is so eager to unload, they're prepared to bribe the Philadelphia PD to take him."

Tyler felt cold all over. "I-No," he choked, the betrayal tasting like metal in his mouth. With difficulty, he stood though he felt distinctly unsteady. "I'll, um, I'll just..."

"Sit!" Elliot barked, glaring until Tyler lowered himself back into the uncomfortable chair.

"It's the blackmail aspect that pisses me off," he growled. "Just so you know, I didn't accept you because of your grandfather."

He opened a buff colored folder on his desk. "Although you're cocky and a little too sure of yourself for some, overall, your record is that of a good detective. Yeah, you have a reputation for shooting from the hip and ignoring inconvenient rules," he looked directly into Tyler's eyes now. "You didn't deserve what happened to you in San Jose. Unfortunately, because of your reputation, people automatically assume that when things don't go right, it's because of your cowboy attitude." Tyler looked at him but didn't respond.

"I read the reports. I don't think you and your partner were entirely responsible for what happened that day. Sure, you should have called for back up before entering, but mostly you went by the book. Internal Affairs says you were clean," the Lieutenant gave him a half nod of what could have been a question or encouragement. Tyler chose to answer the unspoken question.

"My partner and I were sitting on a small-time drug smuggler," Tyler explained, remembering. "We saw the boat pull up to the dock and we thought he'd be unloading his stash. I know we should have called it in but..." his voice cracked a little.

He'd been over this again and again, but the memory of those events still had the power to disturb him even after more than a year. Elliot's steel colored brow arched, encouraging him to continue. He swallowed and went on.

"We knew this guy was skittish. He was always so careful. If we spooked him, we thought he'd probably get the stuff from the boat and disappear into the city. We should have just called it in and tailed him," Tyler shrugged a shoulder and made a rueful face.

"So?" He narrowed his eyes at Tyler, "why didn't you?"

"We were sure he'd get away and we knew we could handle him," Tyler began.

"And you wanted to be heroes, huh?" Elliot finished.

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"Yeah," Tyler admitted miserably. "You're right, we wanted the glory, Lieutenant. That's all it was. We wanted to do it—just us."

"It wasn't your small-time dealer in there that night, though," the Lieutenant picked up the story.

"No, and it just doesn't make sense," Tyler murmured, frowning and shaking his head, still puzzling over it. "We'd been watching that building for hours. Nobody went in and nobody came out. We didn't even go to the bathroom, Lieutenant," he offered, mystified after all this time. "The place looked like even the rats hadn't been there in weeks." His brow furrowed tightly as he continued to explain. "That was our guy's boat, sir. I know it was him!"

"But according to the M.E., your guy got dead many hours before you and your partner believe you saw him arrive in that boat," Elliot quizzed him.

"It was a set-up," Tyler answered. "No doubt about it. When we entered the building, those guys were already sitting there waiting for us."

"You still think a half dozen or more men sat in the dark for hours waiting for the two of you to come in?"

Tyler knew how it sounded. "I know," he groaned. "I've heard it all already, sir. There's nothing I can say. That's what happened."

He straightened from his negligent stance against the desk. "Right now what matters is that you made a mistake. As it happens, I agree with the IA report."

Tyler started slightly but kept himself still and waited patiently for the Lieutenant to continue. He knew this wasn't all there was to it—there was always more.

After long moments of silence while the two men sized each other up, Elliot went on. "You have a clean slate here, son," he stated, oddly echoing what the Governor had said to his grandson. "You can start fresh here where nobody knows about this."

"I wish that were possible, sir," Tyler replied, trying to keep any emotion from his voice. He nodded over his shoulder toward the crowded precinct room. "It seems that tales of my exploits arrived before I did."

The Lieutenant stared thoughtfully at him for a moment, weighing and assessing, before shrugging slightly. "Maybe they don't want you here," he agreed scooping up the folder on his desk. "But you've got to be somewhere and you're here now, aren't you?" He leafed through the file. "At one point there was some concern that you were suicidal.

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Obviously that isn't the case," he gave a wry grin at his own humor. "It also says in here that you're a risk-taker with authority issues. I'll assume you've overcome that."

"I have, Lieutenant," Tyler assured him quietly.

"Well, just in case, I'm partnering you with a guy who'll keep you in line or kill you and bury your body in a deep hole. If you earn his respect, everyone else will come online."

"And if that doesn't happen?" Tyler questioned, trying to avoid a direct challenge.

Lieutenant Elliot shrugged again. "The terms of the deal are simple, Baker. I give you a chance and I get my money. You fuck it up... Hey, I did my part. Thing is," He gave Tyler an impenetrable look, "I really need a good detective." He pressed the intercom on his desk. "Tell Detective Paytah I want him, please."

A few moments later, Tyler heard the door open and deliberately fixed his expression into neutrality before turning his head to get his first look at his new partner.

He heard a deep, husky voice purr, "You called for me, Lieu?" Tyler felt his stomach drop.

Mmmm. His fists clenched and his body tightened as the sound of the rich rumble stroked his nerve endings. Or it could have been the smooth bronzed skin, full, perfect lips and that tiny dimple flashing on the left side of the other man's mouth that did it. A bolt of desire shot thorough him strong enough to send a spark straight to his groin.

Black hair and deep brown eyes - God help me... Detective Paytah was everything that a fantasy should be and then some. That was all he needed—a hard-on for his new partner, a guy that Elliot had taken pains to describe as "Mr. By-The-Book". Tyler had no doubt that if Detective Paytah as much as suspected the lustful thoughts tumbling through his head, he'd already be booking a tour of the nearest emergency room.

"This is Tyler Baker, your new partner," Elliot announced, his easy tone making it clear that they had already discussed his imminent arrival.

Tyler rose to his feet and politely extended his hand with a small smile. Paytah hesitated slightly before accepting his handshake. There was just enough time for his smile to fade as he saw the dark eyes assessing him openly but then clouding opaque. Paytah wrapped his large meaty hand around his smaller and thinner one with almost bone-crushing force.

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Tyler swallowed his pain and pulled his hand back, his eyes paling to wintry gray in response to Paytah's show of machismo. Fine. He knew where he stood now. In the space of less than a half-minute, he'd been judged and rejected.

The tingling pain in his fingers faded as swiftly as his hardening cock deflated. As Elliot had pointed out, Tyler wasn't suicidal. Paytah might look like a wet dream on two legs but he was obviously an asshole and most likely a homophobic one. Tyler had come to Philadelphia to live down his reputation not get himself killed by his sexy new partner.

"Don't mean to be anti-social," Paytah intoned, his tone holding no hint of remorse. "We've got a sidewalk diver in Center City, Lieutenant. Took a header from the sixth floor at the," he consulted a scrap of paper in his hand, "Marriott Hotel, it says here."

"Another suicide?" Elliot said, groaning. "Must be a new sport."

"Amada says this poor bastard might be the lucky contestant we've been hoping for. Since he only fell six floors, there might be enough of him left to use as evidence."

"Go on, then," Lieutenant Elliot snapped.

"You coming with me Baker?" Paytah drawled.

Tyler frowned at the slightly sarcastic rise of Paytah's left eyebrow, forcing himself to ignore the way it curved into the soft sweep of a sable colored forelock that hung across Paytah's forehead. He concentrated instead on the condescending glint in the brown eyes.

Coming with you? Why not? For you? Not even in my fantasies, Tonto. Nice ass. Sucks about the attitude, though.

"Right behind you," Tyler answered blandly.

"Hope you didn't just eat," Paytah's rich voice chuckled sarcastically. "Gonna be bad enough already without adding to the mess on the sidewalk."

Tyler ignored the comment, snagging his backpack from the floor and glancing at his new partner coolly. "Can I stick this in a locker or something?"

Pytah nodded, heading up the short hall toward the cacophonous precinct room. "This is our desk," he announced, dropping into a dilapidated office chair and indicating a cluttered metal desk. "You get that side," he waved at the side without a chair or drawers. "I get this side," he indicated the nook where the chair rolled under it, "because I'm senior."

"Really?" he asked, struggling not to respond to the other man's baiting.

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Paytah shrugged. “We can share. You may not be here all that long.” His eyes challenged Tyler to argue that point. When Tyler didn’t respond, he continued, “Just leave your bag here for now. We’ll figure it out later.”

Oh yeah, this is a hell of a clean slate. I’ve got a precinct full of guys who don’t want me here, a Lieutenant who’s been bribed to take me and a new partner who is so sure I can’t go the distance, he hasn’t even bothered to give me any personal space.

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Chapter Two

At Paytah's greeting, Medical Examiner Lida Amada straightened up, pulled the bloodstained latex glove off her right hand with a resonating snap, and pushed her abundant hair off of her face.

Despite her frown of irritation, the M.E. was an attractive woman with dark brown hair and big brown eyes as fathomless and expressive as Paytah's. Always a sucker for brown eyes, Tyler gave her a slight smile and offered his hand.

"Tyler Baker," he introduced himself.

She blatantly ignored both his introduction and his outstretched hand, instead turning all her attention to his partner. "It's high time you showed up. He's starting to get all gamy." She glared at both men. "There's flies," she growled.

Paytah frowned and, just for a moment, Tyler imagined that he was going to comment on her rudeness. But all he said was, "You got anything for me, Amada?"

"I'd say it's definitely Douglas. No wallet but the height and weight fits. We got partials off the un-skinned part of his right hand and Bill's running those now. No dentals, of course," she drew his attention to the lumpy reddish stain on the sidewalk with a wave of her hand.

"Prints, anyway, this time," Paytah mused. "That'll help with the formal ID."

"This time?" Tyler asked, remembering the Lieutenant's comments about the new sport. "How many so far?"

"How did he come off the balcony?" Paytah asked, ignoring Tyler completely.

"Given the speed and arc of his fall, he couldn't have been standing on anything. Looks like he didn't try to stop himself going over at all. I'd almost say he ran at the balcony rail and hurtled right over it."

"Kinda like the other ones," Paytah muttered.

"What other ones?" Tyler asked.

They continued to ignore him.

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“You got a cause of death yet?” Paytah asked Amada.

Before she could answer, Tyler glanced at the splattered brain-matter on the pavement and chuckled under his breath. The sound earned him a couple of hostile glares but nothing else.

“Concrete overdose,” she deadpanned. Paytah’s lips twitched but he said nothing. “You mean, did he jump or was he pushed?” Paytah nodded and she shrugged. “It’s still too early to say. We know he wasn’t alone last night. At least one eyewitness has him in the bar with some redhead, probably a hooker, and there’s a used condom in the bathroom. Marks on his wrists and ankles that suggest restraints—not long term though,” she finished.

“He was tied up, then released and thrown off the balcony?” Paytah asked incredulous. “Or you think he took a running jump?”

“All I’ve got are WAGs for you right now, big guy.” She turned to Tyler. “Wild Ass Guesses,” she explained condescendingly.

He looked at her but didn’t respond, turning back to scan the area around the body.

“Are we talking bondage games or something else?” Paytah queried after a minute. She just shrugged.

“Was Douglas married?” Tyler asked, forgetting for the moment that he was being ignored.

Amada blinked, shrugged again and finally answered, “No.”

“Hmm, so it’s not guilt or blackmail. Could have been the sex game got out of hand, I guess. It’s possible that he died before he took up sidewalk swimming. Check for hemorrhages in his lungs,” Tyler suggested.

“Yeah, that woulda never occurred to me,” Amada snarled.

Tyler ignored her sarcasm, dropping to his knees next to the corpse and narrowing his eyes in thought. “Pretty hefty for such a little guy,” he mumbled, lost in thought as he looked over the body. “Doesn’t look much like he ever ran track. Not the hurdling type...”

“Yeah, three hundred, give or take a pound,” Amada agreed.

“You don’t like people with weight issues, Baker?” his partner growled angrily.

Tyler’s back stiffened at the censure in Paytah’s voice. “My mistake,” he corrected himself unable to hide his irritation completely. “He was probably just big boned, huh Tonto?”

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"Don't be an ass and *don't* call me Tonto," the other man growled, obviously affronted.

Tyler shrugged inwardly. He hadn't meant to offend but it really didn't matter, did it? His mere presence was offense enough.

"Would have taken a pretty healthy girl to pick him up and throw him over that balcony," he observed, muttering to himself and ignoring them now.

"Excuse me?" Amada drawled, apparently offended as well.

Tyler glanced at her and then turned back to the victim, dismissing her. She was no use to him right now.

He heard her angry voice addressed to Paytah, "Who the hell does he think he is?" she demanded.

"Meet my new partner, Tyler Baker," Paytah said. Tyler looked up at the humor in his voice to see his mouth twitching with contained amusement. "He can't help it, Amada, he's from California," he told her with a mocking jeer aimed at Tyler.

"Figures," she snarled.

* * *

"It's finished," the redhead announced quietly to her associate as she slid into the booth opposite him with a whisper of silk and a cloud of Calvin Klein.

"So I see," the bald man's nod indicated a television broadcasting overhead.

"Did we get paid?" she murmured calmly, her expression cool.

Reaching a hand into his suit jacket, he pulled out a thick envelope and placed it on the table between them. When she reached for it, he pulled it back slightly and tapping his fingers on the taut white packet gently.

"The client has need of one more service. It's worth quite a bit," he arched a dark brow at her, the light reflecting softly on his bald crown.

Giving the idea careful consideration, she shook her head decisively. "No, I don't think so. The final hit wasn't clean," she admitted, her tightening voice the only sign of irritation. "They must suspect murder this time."

He shrugged. "Now that four men have died in a similar fashion and all in such a public way, I'd be surprised if the police thought any of the deaths were suicide. It doesn't matter, without motive or forensic evidence, they can't prove anything."

"I still don't understand why the client wanted me to do it," she complained.

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“You don’t need to understand as long as you did what was asked. Four randomly selected victims and four comparable deaths. It turns out that fifth victim is what this whole thing is about. The client wants you to kill him the same way as the others and make his death look self-inflicted or accidental.”

Before she could speak, he lifted a hand. “I know how you feel,” he sympathized. “As I said, the police will obviously suspect murder. That seems to be the point. Apparently your next victim has been under some considerable stress. Someone wants him dead and out of the way.” He paused. “He’s a cop,” he said finally.

“So the other murders were window dressing?” she asked, surprised.

“Exactly,” he nodded.

“Then why make it look like suicide at all?” she still didn’t understand. “Why not make it look like a drug bust or hold up?”

“Because they tried that first and someone botched the hit on this guy,” he explained patiently. “Normally, killing him would reopen the investigation into the other attempt on his life.” He shook his head in amazement, “They messed it up so badly that they can’t risk a similar mistake. And, of course, we can’t have an unwelcome spotlight on our client’s activities.” He shrugged carelessly, “This way, at worst the investigation will be here in Philadelphia and everyone will assume his death is related to that of the other victims. Since those deaths will not be solved, this one won’t either.”

Her brow wrinkled for a minute and then she shrugged. The man lifted his hand off of the envelope and she pulled it from him. Tacit agreement for the last hit was implied and understood.

* * *

Paytah was silent until he’d pulled the car into his department assigned parking space and cut the engine.

Both men stepped out of the car simultaneously, slamming doors with a dual thud. As his partner rounded the nose of the car he stepped in front of him.

“Are you always such a little asshole, Baker?” he demanded.

Tyler stopped short, crossing his arms across his chest. He leaned one slim hip against the side of the car lounging negligently and looking up at Paytah.

“What’s *your* problem? Either you’ve been ragging on me or you’ve been ignoring me all morning. At least I was trying to work out what happened to that poor bastard,” he straightened to stand upright, continuing. “Maybe you guys here sit back and let forensics

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pull everything together for you with a nice little bow, but everywhere else, Detectives actually ask questions and do their own legwork.”

For a half second, Paytah conceded the other man’s point. Then he mentally shook himself and remembered exactly who his partner was.

“Yeah, your record speaks for itself, Baker. Personally I prefer to have the bad guys on ice sporting a toe tag, not my partners.” He’d moved to stand in front of the car, planting both hands wide and flat on the hood.

The other man sucked in a deep breath, “Screw you,” he gritted through clenched teeth.

“As I matter of fact, I don’t screw my partners either, what about you?” Paytah drawled casually.

Tyler gasped and recoiled as if absorbing an unexpected but forceful blow. Any color his skin had held bled completely away leaving him white-faced.

“God you’re great. What a prince,” Tyler choked, his good-looking, boyish features contorting with a combination of grief and profound mortification. “Yeah, a real clean slate I got here,” he muttered angrily to himself.

Paytah looked over at him, at first confused. Suddenly he felt a flush of heat stain his cheeks as he began to realize what was wrong. Yeah, there’d been talk about Daryl Jones’ sexual orientation but he’d just blown it off.

It wouldn’t have been the first time the victim had taken the blame for a crime. It happened far too often. He’d had no idea that this gossip was actually true. No matter how pissed he was at getting saddled with Baker as a partner, he would never hit him with such a low blow on purpose.

“I didn’t realize it was for real,” he apologized. “I...I mean, well shit...Damn, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. I was kidding, man,” he stammered, mortified.

“I’m not laughing, Tonto,” Tyler said, his denim-colored eyes a flat gray now.

“Don’t call me that,” Paytah replied automatically. He was completely stunned by his blunder. He knew he had asshole tendencies but he was never deliberately mean.

“Don’t worry. Your virtue is safe, big guy. Even though I’m a fag, I can control myself. Hell, I’ll even go in first so you don’t have to worry about me checking out your ass,” Tyler rasped with a fleeting, lip-bitten twitch of his mouth.

He levered himself away from the car without another word and strode away, his spine stiff with anger.

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“I'd never... I didn't mean... Shit!” Paytah slammed his open palm onto the hood leaving a dent in his department issue vehicle as he watched the younger man disappear into the maze of other parked cars.

He honestly hadn't taken the gossip seriously. He'd thought the accusations of homosexuality stemmed from the events of his partner's downfall in San Jose and not from any relationship he might have had with Daryl Jones. Tyler Baker was an attractive young man with his thin, fit form and downy, curly white-blond hair, but he was in no way effeminate. *He doesn't look gay at all, does he?*

Maybe Baker acted cold and superior but that didn't excuse what Paytah had said to him. Mentioning Baker's dead partner had been a cheap shot anyway. The other detective's reaction to his tasteless joke, though, implied that the gossip was true. Maybe Baker really had lost more than just a partner with the death of Detective Daryl Jones. He was more than a little surprised at how off balance he felt at knowing his new partner was gay.

It wasn't that he couldn't handle the idea itself. He really didn't have a problem with alternate lifestyles-- live and let live and all that. It explained a lot about the way Baker interacted with other people, though. A gay man wouldn't be given a warm welcome in any police force. Over time he'd probably learned to keep everything and everybody at a distance.

His talking down to the Medical Examiner was possibly just an inbuilt self-defense mechanism. There was no way Baker would have known that Lida Amada was just a naturally abrasive person. He had probably misconstrued her aggression as a personal slight and accepted it as such.

Up until now, Paytah had believed all the rumors and insults about the younger man. He had assumed that Detective Tyler Baker had sailed through the Academy, quickly waltzed through his time in uniform and been made a plain-clothes detective by riding the family name.

He'd just taken it as given that he'd used his grandfather's considerable influence to buy him a new position in Philadelphia because he'd fucked up so royally at home. Now, almost against his will, Paytah was forced to reconsider his new partner from top to bottom. Maybe he wasn't spoiled, “holier than thou”, or playing at a career. Police work was a dangerous job for a gay man to undertake.

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Chapter Three

Sipping a beer after work, Paytah's deep introspection was interrupted when two people slid into the booth across from him. He looked up in time to see partners Patrick O'Toole and Estéban Guerra accepting a beer from the waitress who had spotted their entrance.

"What's eating at you, Payt?" Patrick asked him, reaching across to squeeze his shoulder.

"Just..." he hesitated but Patrick was one of his oldest friends. "Just worried about my new partner," he sighed.

"Admit it! You're just worried he'll try to kiss ya, right?" chortled Estéban

The two men were affectionately titled "the Mick and the Spic" by their friends.

"What the fuck you talking about, Geurra?" Paytah's eyes narrowed and he glared at the other man.

"My cousin Jeffie," he pronounced it heffAy, "You know! In San Jose? He said..."

He cut him short, "I don't want to hear your garbage, Guerra!" Paytah growled. This is what scared him. Guerra was the type of homophobic asshole that would leave a fellow officer without backup.

"You don't care if you're new partner's a coward?" Guerra taunted.

Paytah was stunned. He'd expected "queer", "faggot", even "homo", but coward?

"What the hell are you talking about, man?" He shook his head from side to side in disbelief.

"You know Baker's partner was gang-raped before he got hanged?" Guerra asked him.

Almost against his own will, Paytah nodded. "I heard the rumor," Paytah admitted. The dead had no secrets even if they were dead cops. Every shocking detail of Detective Jones's murder had crisscrossed the country at record speed.

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“So you gotta wonder why they left Baker alive, don'tchya?” Guerra asked conspiratorially.

Paytah shook his head with tired disgust. “You're full of shit, Guerra. IA cleared him.”

“Course they did. His family owns the whole state. Long as his granddaddy's Governor it don't matter if he's some faggot cop who lets his partner get raped and killed,” Guerra's eyes narrowed in revulsion. “I guess they don't care what he does with his own ass or who he does it with.”

“Blow it out your ass, Guerra,” Paytah growled, flushing anger and self-loathing. He was angry that Guerra should say such ridiculous things out loud. He was ashamed to realize that the other man's comments were such an insidious echo of his own belief that Baker had used his family's prestige to get ahead.

Paytah decided that from now on he would at least give Baker the benefit of the doubt. “They tried to kill Baker too, fool. He was in ICU for almost a month you know,” he pointed out.

“Yeah,” O'Toole agreed. “I heard they hung 'em both and shot 'em several times.” He shook his head sadly. “Someone tied ropes around their necks and hung the two of them off the end of the pier. Baker only made it because his rope broke. Somehow he got Jones free and pulled his body to shore with three bullets in him. Maybe he didn't save Jones's life but, even half-dead, he managed to pull his body out of the water. That's not being a coward, Estéban.”

“Yeah?” he sneered. “Okay, so he was shot and beaten, how come *he* wasn't gang raped?”

“You think it'd be better if he was?” Paytah snarled, his eyes black with fury. “He was as much a victim as Jones, Guerra, so shut your fucking hole. It could happen to anyone. Even a stupid and ugly son of a bitch like you.”

“Fuck that. The only way some homo would ever get near my asshole is if he put a hole in my head first,” Guerra leaned forward in the booth, loathing clear in his every move, “No *real* man would let himself get touched like that.”

“You are such a complete and utter asshole, Guerra,” Paytah said. “He held it together today, when cops twice his age were puking their guts all over the sidewalk. Even you can't do that. He's got solid balls. What he chooses to do with them in his off-time is no-one else's concern.”

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“Shit, Payt, you wanna watch what you’re saying,” Guerra warned.

Paytah's temper finally gave out. He leaned forward, grabbed Guerra by the shirtfront and hauled him nose to nose. “Why, you think someone's gonna call me a faggot, too?”

Guerra's eyes bulged with terror. “Hey, man. Chill out. I was just messin’ with ya.”

“Baker’s my partner, Guerra, and that means when you give him shit, you can expect shit from me.”

“It was a joke. That's all. Just- just a joke,” Guerra gasped.

“I’m not laughing,” Paytah pointed out, releasing the smaller man to collapse back against the bench seat.

Once released, Guerra quickly slid from the booth and hurried to the men’s room.

“It’s not going to be easy, Peyt,” Patrick spoke up after a minute. “They’re going to give him trouble. You know that.”

“Just keep your boy on a leash, you got that?” Paytah snapped.

“Hey, I’m on your side, man, no matter what side that is, okay?” Patrick reached over and tapped the bronze cheek. “I’ll take the little shit outside and teach him a bit of respect,” he promised. “But he's not the only asshole in the Precinct.”

“Shit. I knew that boy was going to be trouble,” Paytah sighed. “I don't need this.”

“So tell Lieu you want a different partner,” O’Toole advised. “I’ll trade you, man.

Paytah chuckled ruefully. “Want to know what’s funny, Patrick? I only said I’d take him on in the first place because I was so sure he'd fuck up,” he shook his head and downed the rest of his now warm beer. “If he does, I’ll drive him to the airport myself.” He signaled to the waitress to bring another round of beer. Gusting a heavy sigh, he went on, “If he does his job the way he should, I got no problem with him. I’m damn sure not going to let anyone muscle him out because of who he sleeps with.”

It was too funny, Paytah thought. He'd automatically resented Baker because the young man stood for everything he’d always despised. His entire life he’d battled other people's stereotypical prejudices. He'd spent his entire career, first as an officer and then a detective, fighting the label of “token Indian”. He couldn't get through a day without some jerk making a crack about the “Great Spirit” or asking about his teepee.

Tyler Baker, though, had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. He was a handsome, blue-eyed blonde. He’d been born into a family who were practically California royalty. His grandfather was the state’s Governor. The young man would have

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been guaranteed a spot at the police academy no matter what. And even when he'd fucked up so badly that any other officer might have been dismissed from the force, he'd just been transferred to a new department in another city.

Now, though, Paytah's whole opinion of him as being the golden boy who could do no wrong fell apart if Baker was gay. What if his grandfather hadn't had him transferred to save his career? What if Baker's transfer was to protect the Governor and not his grandson? It might not look so good if the voting public found out that the Governor's only living relative was gay. It is an election year after all.

If that bastard Guerra was right, Baker hadn't only lost his lover and his partner that night in the warehouse. He'd also watched him be raped, viciously shot several times and hung by the neck. Baker had been beaten badly before he'd been hanged.

It hurt just to imagine someone that badly injured having a rope tied around his neck and being thrown off a pier. How had Baker felt when the rope snapped and he found himself, half-dead, in freezing salt water with the body of his partner—his lover -- dangling above him?

How the hell had Baker managed to cut Jones's body free and pull him against the tide far enough to crawl out of the water? What the hell had gone through Baker's head as he sat there on the shore, his dead partner in his arms, not knowing whether he'd be found before exposure killed him, too?

Four weeks fighting for his life in intensive care, only to then endure the intrusive Internal Affairs investigation into Jones's death. Paytah didn't need the sordid details to imagine Baker's horror at having his relationship with Daryl Jones dissected in public. Nor was it difficult to imagine how many vicious, bigoted Guerra-types had made Baker's life hell at his own precinct in the wake of the tragedy. How many people had told Baker to his face that he had asked for what had happened to him and his partner?

Paytah was impressed that Baker hadn't eaten a bullet already. Worse than all that, instead of standing by him, his only family member's response to the outrage had been to bundle him up and put him on a plane to Philadelphia promising a fresh start.

The irony of the situation wasn't lost on Paytah. The facts had stayed the same but his view of them had completely turned around. Governor Baker hadn't arranged Tyler's transfer to give him that much-touted "clean slate". Instead, Tyler had been banished from his home.

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Paytah had decided that he at least would honor the spirit of the clean slate. Unfortunately, Tyler Baker wasn't the most trusting of souls.

He reminded Paytah of a feral kitten he'd seen at his grandmother's house as a small boy. He was as skittish and nervous as a cat and wouldn't let anyone closer than the blandest of greetings. Every now and then, though, he caught a hint of longing in the usually chilly blue eyes, a faint memory of trust.

Those ephemeral glimpses were all that gave him hope as days passed that there was still a heart beating somewhere underneath Baker's icy exterior. Or maybe not, he sighed, as a file was tossed rudely in front of him.

"So we've got four unbelievably similar suicides or a female serial killer? Is that our theory?" Tyler's cool, superior sounding voice came from behind him.

Paytah took a deep breath, counted to ten, and then answered calmly as the younger man moved around the desk and sat down.

"The victims are all male. They were all in Philadelphia on business. They all stepped off the edge of something apparently of their own free will," he replied. "Besides that, none of the victims had anything in common. They work in different industries and come from different parts of the country. If it's murder, the only thing they have in common is the redhead..."

"So no drugs of any kind?" Tyler looked at him narrowly.

"Not even NyQuil™. Two of the victims had been drinking heavily but the other two tox reports don't even show aspirin," he shrugged, telling the other man what he knew already.

"Something's just not right," Tyler complained. "I just don't think a woman could throw a grown man off a balcony without leaving any signs of a struggle," he shook his head in negation, "Especially not this big guy." He tapped the top file.

"Not unless she's Popeye's sister," Paytah quipped.

"Which she isn't," Tyler pointed out, ignoring the other man's attempt at levity. "We already know that she's a class act," he reminded him. "She's killed four men—two in top class hotels and the only possible eyewitness describes her as an elegant redhead. That's not the way a guy describes your average whore/weight lifter."

"Still, Baker, we can't prove murder," Paytah made a wry face.

Tyler shook his head in disbelief. "It's got to be drugs," his forehead furrowed, teeth worrying his lower lip. "It's got to be something untraceable."

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Paytah found himself staring at his partner's face. He shook his head, hard. *I did not just think about how cute he looks when he does that!* "Not according to Amada," he replied decisively. "She says there's **noting** in the toxicology."

"That's how come they call it untraceable," Tyler patronized "Could it be... how about something like ketamine?"

"Ketamine would still be traceable," Paytah argued. "It still shows in the bloodstream for twenty-four hours after it's ingested or even injected."

"So maybe she gives it to them earlier. Maybe it's given topically or something. Damn," his voice was tight with frustration. "There's no way all these guys thought dropping from great heights to drown or splatter on the pavement, hell or a train, would just be a fun thing to do."

"Maybe she's a witch," Paytah waved his hand in Tyler's face. "Hypnosis, a magic spell, who knows?"

"What's wrong with you, Paytah?" he growled. "Why are you acting like such a jerk about this?"

"I'm a cop, Baker, guessing and "could be's" are for people who don't have to back up their ideas with facts. I need evidence, not crazy theories. You can sit there and spout wild fantasies until they come out of your ass, but until we have something solid we can't do shit, okay?"

"What? Are we supposed to just sit here and wait for the next victim?" Tyler demanded, anger becoming evident in his voice.

"Other than putting out an APB on every classy redhead, there's not much else we can do," Paytah said. He picked up a pile of files and shoved them at Tyler, into his personal space. "If you want to solve something, these were real murders."

Tyler glared at him coldly for several minutes. Finally he spoke "How come they didn't shoot themselves?" he asked

"Huh?" Paytah couldn't follow his train of thought.

"Avery, Reynolds and Degas—those guys all had registered guns. Why would they need travel to a strange city and step off a rooftop or a balcony? Or they could have found a place closer to home, and like I said, those three had guns. You know, statistically, it's a proven fact that women jump and men shoot."

Paytah closed his eyes tightly and took a deep fortifying breath. "Look, man, I'm not arguing with you here. You're probably right." He resisted the urge to reach out and

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touch the other man. "We just don't have the three things we need right now." He extended his wide palm and ticked the reasons off on his fingers. "We got no motive. We got no suspect. We're not even sure we have a single case. So quit wasting your time and mine and get to work on something you can do something about."

*

Angrily, Tyler snatched the proffered files and found an unoccupied desk. Noisily plopping down into a vacant chair, he spent a few minutes leafing through them. When he was sure Paytah wasn't watching him, he reached for the phone and put a call in to the Medical Examiner's office. When he learned that Amada was in court all day, he ordered a fresh set of toxicology reports on all four victims.

The phone rang several times before Paytah realized it was his telephone and not the one on TV. He'd been dozing.

Reaching for the receiver, he mumbled, "Paytah here."

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he heard growled across the line.

"Lida," he responded, smiling. "I'm snoozing. What're you doing?"

"Don't act like you didn't just cost me twenty or thirty extra man hours, *Detective Paytah!*" she barked. "You got some problem with the way we do our job, you think you need to make us do it twice?"

Paytah pulled back and looked at the receiver, confused. "What's the problem?"

"You don't know the problem?" Amada repeated incredulously. "I'll *tell* you the problem," she sneered. "I'm in court all day and then I finally get back to the lab only to be told that your partner had my team completely re-run the tox reports on those four jumpers."

"You're kidding," he groaned. "He brought that up earlier today and I told him to let it go."

"Well guess what?" she bit out sarcastically, "He didn't! Now I'm twice as backed up because *your* partner thinks we're his personal laboratory."

"Look Lida," he tried to smooth things over, "I'm really sorry."

"No, he's about to be really sorry," she snarled. "I filed an official complaint to Elliot about it."

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"Goddamn, Lida! Why didn't you just call me? I would've kicked him back into line with out a rash of shit," he lectured her, angry she went over his head and caused Baker even more trouble. "Damn it! He's only been here a week. That wasn't necessary."

Amada sighed and said nothing for a minute. Finally she conceded, "I know, Paytah. You're right I overreacted just a little. I do that sometimes."

Paytah snorted into the phone. "Yeah, just a little. Sometimes..."

"I already have so much to do, Payt," she moaned. "And I hate to be stuck in court all day, you know I hate it! Now I'm even more behind."

"Since you're so far behind anyway," he asked, trying to salvage something, "Any chance these other tox screens found something new?"

"No, they damn well didn't," Amada snarled into the phone, "There isn't going to be anything, ever."

"So... What? You don't think these victims were drugged? That they *were* suicides?" he asked her, sounding surprised.

"Of course they were drugged! There's no other way she could have gotten them off those balconies, edges or ledges! The problem is that there just isn't any evidence that they were drugged and there isn't going to be!"

"All right, all right," Paytah tried to placate her. "I did try to explain that to Baker. He just can't let it go."

"Maybe he's trying to make up for his last real case," she said blandly.

"What are you talking about?" he was guarded.

"Like you said earlier, he hasn't been back on the job that long. He's probably damned pissed that no one found the guys who killed his partner and no one's even looking anymore. He must be mad about how that case was put on inactive due to lack of evidence. I'm sure he doesn't want that to happen on his first case here."

"How do you know what happened to him?" Paytah queried carefully

"Hell, you think cops are gossips? Forensics people got no lives," she chuffed in derision. "Nothing but a bunch of old women. There was a copy of the crime scene report in my fax basket the day after they found him. Trust me on this, you don't want to read that file."

"Hell and damn," he observed quietly

"Yeah." She was silent for a few minutes. "Now I feel bad. I shouldn't have reported him."

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“Um, it’s okay. I’ll talk to Lieu,” Paytah offered. “Maybe... Hell, he’ll understand. He’s a good guy.”

“God, I hope so,” she groaned. “Now I *really* feel bad. Why’d I do that?”

“Come on, its okay,” he comforted her. “Besides, Baker’s a grownup. He expects to take responsibility for what he does, don’t worry. It’s not like he’s going to get fired or something.”

“Yeah? I guess you’re right,” she conceded. He could tell she was smiling now.

“Of course I’m right,” he smiled back. “Are we good now?” he asked her.

“Yeah, we’re good,” she assured him. “Thanks Payt. G’night.”

“G’night, Lida,” he responded, hanging up the phone.

Due to that timely interruption, he decided to move his dozing to the bedroom where he had more room to spread out. He woke up once in the middle of the night mumbling, “Tyler,” but he didn’t remember it the next morning.

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Chapter Four

Tyler was just about to walk out the door in search of supper when his phone rang. He hadn't gotten a new cell phone. It was one more thing he'd had to replace after Daryl's death and he still wasn't ready yet.

He thought about just ignoring it but it could be his partner. He wasn't sure if they were on the rotation that night or not. Finally, he gave in and closed the door. Snatching up the receiver, he plopped down on the rickety bed.

"Baker," he snapped.

"Tyler." The sharply spoken word made Tyler cringe and wish he'd ignored the phone altogether.

"Hello, Grandfather," he replied formally, closing his eyes.

"I can't believe I already have to call you, young man," he rapped out with no prelude.

"Sir?" he questioned.

"You haven't even been there a week and you're already in trouble," his grandfather barked.

"No, sir, I'm not," he tried to interject.

"You can't keep yourself out of the line of fire for even a fortnight? What do I have to do, Tyler? Where do I need to send you - because if you can't make yourself useful in Philadelphia of all places," he knew his grandfather was winding up for a full-fledged blow.

"I don't know what the problem is, Grandfather," he interrupted. "Maybe if you tell me I can straighten it out."

"You can't straighten it out, boy!" he bellowed. "Did you or did you not demand that the Medical Examiner's office put your case ahead of any possibly critical work they had? And after they'd already run the tests on your evidence once?"

"I-sir, you don't know... Who called you?" he stammered.

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“Are you trying to tell me that you didn’t do that, young man?” his grandfather demanded.

Tyler swallowed, clearing his throat with difficulty. “No. No, sir, I’m not denying it.”

“Good. Now, you aren’t there to criticize the local M.E.’s office are you? You are *not* a forensic scientist, are you?” Governor Baker lectured.

“No, of course not, Grandfather, I know that. It’s just,” he forced himself to speak up. “She missed something sir. Her office missed something, I’m sure of it.”

“From what I’m told by Lieutenant Elliot, a longtime detective and your superior officer, you don’t have anything to indicate that any crimes have even been committed, now do you?” the older man came back with angrily.

Tyler tried to argue his point. “*I know* I’m right, Grandfather. Those four men didn’t just stumble off their balconies or whatever.” When he wasn’t interrupted, he went on. “Maybe it’s intuition but I prefer to think of it as informed speculation. I’m positive that...”

“Well, God help the next man that ends up depending on you’re being positive about something,” his grandfather drawled sarcastically, interrupting him. Tyler held the receiver out and looked at incredulously. Moving it back to his ear, he heard the old man still talking. “The last man who counted on the possibility that you were right about something was young Daryl Jones and look what happened to him. Gang-raped, hung and used for target practice, wasn’t he? You were lucky...”

Tyler calmly walked to the wall and gave the wall-cord a healthy tug. The sound of his grandfather’s voice stopped in the middle of his word.

“Tyler? Are you lis...” and he was heard no more.

Calmly, Tyler nodded and moved to his overflowing suitcase and rifled through the clothes until he found what he was looking for. He was a little surprised that his bag had made it through the flight from California without damage to the full, unopened bottle of excellent bourbon.

He didn’t even pause as he twisted the cap and broke the paper seal. “To you, Dare.” He plopped back on the bed and raised the bottle high in the air in salute.

The first mouthful went down hard, making him gag and choke. He took a deep breath and steadied himself, swallowing another mouthful and another until he felt warm inside. By the time the bottle was empty, he didn’t care much about anything.

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* * *

“Did you have a few drinks last night?” Paytah inquired sarcastically when Tyler stumbled out to the car, finally getting the door open and making his way into the passenger seat.

“What difference does it make?” Tyler mumbled, leaning back and closing his eyes with a groan.

Paytah stared at the other man for a few minutes before finally starting the car. “You gonna be okay to work?”

“Doesn’t really matter, Tonto,” the younger man murmured in reply. “Won’t be around much longer anyway.”

Paytah realized he couldn’t have a conversation with his partner until he did a little damage control. He decided to start with the physical damage first and pulled over at the nearest drugstore.

“Don’t move,” he ordered his partner. “And don’t call me “Tonto”,” he snapped, getting out of the car.

Tyler grunted but otherwise didn’t stir. A moment later, Paytah slid back behind the wheel, heading for his next destination without comment from his passenger.

A couple of minutes later, he parked the car again and leaned over the other man opening the bottle of eye drops he’d purchased at the store. Although Tyler lifted a white-gold brow, he didn’t open his eyes until Paytah quickly separated the surprised man’s right eyelid and released a few drops into the eye. Before Tyler could so much as open his mouth in surprise, Paytah reached over and treated his other eye.

“C’mon,” he directed Tyler, “I have Tylenol® in this bag and we’re going to get some strong coffee into you.”

Tyler opened his mouth and then closed it again, electing not to respond but to follow instead. Paytah took that as an indicator to how bad the young man really felt.

When the two men were ensconced in a hard plastic booth with a strong cup of coffee each, Paytah asked Tyler, “You want to tell me what happened last night?” Tyler threw him a hard look and swallowed a handful of the capsules, washing them down with the steaming coffee.

“Something to do with what happened in San Jose?” he tried again.

Tyler carefully placed his nearly full paper cup on the Formica table. “What’d you think was gonna happen when you went to the Lieutenant about me?” he asked icily.

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“Wha...?” Paytah’s brows furrowed in thought. *Shit! The complaint. Sorry, Lida.* “I didn’t go anywhere about you, Tyler,” he said, using the younger man’s first name purposely.

“*Reeaally?*” he drawled, sounding more than disbelieving, but like he knew Paytah was lying to him.

“Amada from the M.E.’s office called me last night,” he said reluctantly. “She was mad. She told me that she complained to Lieu.” He waited.

“Uh *huh!*” he said looking into Paytah’s eyes for a long moment. Finally the younger man collapsed against the hard plastic seat, expelling his breath in what could have been relief.

“You don’t mean Lieutenant Elliot called you to rip you a new asshole about that last night?” he asked in disbelief.

Tyler’s brow furrowed tightly and he shook his head. “Elliot?” Tyler barked a laugh. “Nah, he didn’t bother. A quick call to the California Governor’s office cleared it right up.”

“Nuh uh! No way?” Paytah was stunned.

“Yeah way,” Tyler contradicted, closing his eyes and leaning back. “You ever want to see how it’s done right, Grandfather can teach you how to put a man in his place without ever raising your voice.”

“So he was mad? He read you the riot act?” Paytah asked carefully, “Why does he care what you do over here?”

Tyler opened his eyes and met Paytah’s concerned brown gaze with an indulgently amused look in his slightly blood-shot eyes. “Anything I do, ever, for my entire life will reflect on the family name and ultimately the office of the Governor of California, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera,” he intoned with a sweeping flourish of his right hand, which ended in him clutching his forehead and groaning.

“Easy, partner,” Paytah cautiously reached out and squeezed Tyler’s shoulder, gratified when the younger man didn’t jerk away. He fought to ignore the urge to sink his fingers into the fluffy curly hair so soft looking and close to his hand, beckoning.

Tyler lifted his head, his lower lip tight between his teeth. With a deep breath, he forced a smile and reached for the paper coffee cup, taking a hefty swallow.

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“What... what happened, Tyler?” Paytah asked, continuing the use of his first name instead of his last. “What did he say to you that caused you to drink—what? Half a bottle of scotch?” he guessed.

“Um, a liter of bourbon,” Tyler dipped his head and took another generous gulp of his coffee. “He... raised a few ghosts...” Tyler shrugged. “A few of them aren’t quite dead yet.”

“Which one shared the bottle with you?” Paytah asked softly. “The living or the dead?”

Tyler studied the other man for many uncomfortable seconds. “What difference does it make?” he mumbled finally, his faded denim eyes going gray.

“I know it's hard losing a partner. It has to be with what you went through,” Paytah murmured, sipping his own coffee slowly. “I know what happened to Daryl Jones.”

Tyler’s expression twisted painfully through grief and into anger and then to ice. “You and everybody else, Tonto.”

“Don’t call me that,” he mumbled automatically. “So you and Detective Jones were lovers? Is that right?”

Tyler spluttered and choked on his coffee. “Say that again?” he rasped.

“I asked what your relationship was with Daryl Jones,” Paytah forced himself to say it outright. If ever they were going to really be partners it would start here. “I asked if you were lovers,” he repeated.

“I heard you, I guess,” he lifted his head and looked at Paytah warily. “You just surprised me, that’s all.”

Paytah flushed slightly and shrugged. “Tell me to mind my own damned business. I won’t blame you,”

“I guess its okay,” Tyler conceded, chewing on his lower lip again.

Shit that’s adorable. Paytah took another gulp of the too hot coffee. He swallowed causing his eyes to water as the scalding liquid burned all the way down.

“Um, yeah, we were lovers,” Tyler spoke up. “I mean, I’m not ashamed of it,” he tacked on.

“No?” Paytah asked in a quiet voice, glad Tyler was looking into his coffee instead of gnawing on that full pink lip.

“Yeah, well I admit I'd wish it wasn't public knowledge but only because of what happened.” He took another sip of his coffee. Paytah assumed that Tyler’s coffee was not

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as hot as his own. "I mean, it was really hard on our families when he died, you know—worse because of the rape and everything."

"That had to be damned hard seeing and hearing what happened to him," Paytah said, and smiled sadly at Tyler's look of bewilderment. "He meant a lot to you?" he asked, saddened that the young man was so confused by kind words and understanding.

"Yeah. A whole lot," Tyler's now slightly bloodshot eyes were moist.

"How long were you together?" Tyler's brow furrowed. Paytah qualified, "I mean, how long were you a couple? How'd that happen?" he wondered, curious also if anyone had ever even asked.

The younger man stared hard at him for a minute. Clearly trying to decide what, or how much of himself he would share.

"You don't have to answer, if you don't want to," Paytah spoke up.

"It's okay...No, really I don't mind," he added, at Paytah's dubious look. "Like I said it's not that I'm ashamed of Daryl or of being gay. It's just that I can't handle the idea of someone turning it into a huge joke."

"I wasn't..." Paytah began. "Look, Tyler, I don't care about that, I mean, the fact that you're gay.

"I know," Tyler agreed quietly. He took a couple of deep breaths, then sighed heavily. "I knew him for about five years or so. We were at the Academy together. Everybody else thought I was there because of my family. Thought I was just playing around and wouldn't make it. He took me at face value and I accepted him the same way. When we got out, we moved up together and were assigned as partners. We *did* work well together. It wasn't until much later that we became lovers," he explained, sliding toward the edge of the seat. "Um, be right back," he smiled sheepishly. "Bathroom," he clarified, turning a little red in the face and dipping his head.

Damn, that's fucking cute, too. Am I finding him attractive because he's gay? No, it's just that he's my partner and he's had a tough time. I feel affection toward him. Simple as that. Yeah.

Paytah got up and got them both another cup of coffee. There were pastries on display so he got two plain ones for Tyler and a blueberry muffin for himself.

"Hey," he said when the young detective sat back down. "I got us a little breakfast," he pointed at the pastries and muffin. "Wanna split or..." he let it trail off.

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"No, one of these is great. I appreciate it," he looked over at him through a sweep of blonde lashes and Paytah took a quick gulp of the cool coffee.

"So," he spoke up after Tyler had finished a croissant. "Were you worried about being outed as gay cops?"

Tyler laughed to himself. "That's a pretty good reason, you have to admit. Even in California, gay cops are not embraced with a warm welcome. That's not why, though," he paused and Paytah lifted a brow in question. "Daryl...well, Daryl was gay but I wasn't."

"I don't understand," Paytah admitted in confusion.

"He was always gay," Tyler took a little chunk of the muffin, crumbling it. "I was what they call a serial dater. Either way, I didn't do guys. Um, and guys didn't "do" me, either." He stopped for a drink of the strong brew.

"Well, don't leave me hanging, buddy! What happened?" Paytah's curiosity was aroused to say the least.

"Daryl happened, I guess," he sighed and shrugged. "I had had a particularly difficult time with my grandfather after the last gubernatorial elections and then that big police brutality thing in LA came up," he explained. Paytah nodded, he remembered the incident his partner was referring to.

"One night, after my grandfather gave me an especially hard time about having a gay partner and other things, I took off. I pretty much couldn't please the old man anyway. I just figured he'd get over it," he sighed, sipping at the coffee again.

"So what, you guys get drunk or something?" Paytah couldn't imagine what could make a straight man turn to another man for sex.

"Well, besides going on about Daryl, Grandfather had said some pretty hurtful things about my mother and such and I was pretty upset," he shrugged, his blue eyes fogged with memory. "I ended up at Daryl's apartment. Somehow, in the process of comforting me, he kissed me."

"And you didn't freak out about it?" Paytah asked incredulously. "I mean, most guys would, wouldn't they?"

"I don't know about most guys," Tyler chuckled, "but I knew Daryl. He was always pretty "touchy feely" with close friends. It didn't matter. I'd never felt closer to another person in my whole life. We... we made love," he raised his denim eyes to Paytah's defiantly. "We'd still be together if... If he'd lived, I could see growing old with him."

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“How long has it been since the attack?” Paytah asked, stunned. He’d never really had a relationship with anyone that he could imagine being with for years, especially working together as closely as partnered detectives did.

“It’s been fourteen months now, almost to the day,” Tyler told him quietly.

“Wow, I guess you really miss him a lot,” he shook his head in sorry for the other man.

“Yeah... I haven’t really looked at anyone else since,” Tyler rolled his eyes. “Even though some of the other cops act all worried when I go to the showers, like they’re afraid that if I so much as see their asses I won’t be able to control myself.” Both men chuckled at the idea.

“You ever think about going back to women? Or did Daryl ruin you for it?” Paytah really was interested in his answer.

“I’m ruined,” Tyler confirmed. “Now that I’ve had what I really needed, I realize I was searching before. I do miss Daryl, but if there’s ever anyone else, it’ll be a man. You remind me of him sometimes,” he confessed looking up through his lashes again.

Paytah looked sharply at him. “How so?” he asked warily.

“You both have bubble butts,” Tyler joked and then he went on, “Um, really, you’re nothing like him in personality,” he grinned impishly, “Don’t worry, I’m not going to fixate on you. It’s just that sometimes I’ll see you out of the corner of my eye and the color of your skin in the sun or something, those brown eyes...” he took a deep breath. “I have a special weakness for brown eyes, I guess,” he chuckled ruefully as Paytah’s cell phone rang.

Paytah reached over and patted his shoulder with one hand, flipping out his cell phone with the other. “Detective Paytah,” he clipped, winking at Tyler as he used his “official voice” to answer the phone. Tyler just grinned and shook his head.

* * *

“So... What’s up?” Tyler asked as Paytah slid from the seat across from him.

“Let me go to the head and then I’ll tell you all about it,” Paytah stood and explained, “We may have caught a break.”

Tyler watched the big man walk away and breathed a sigh of relief. He’d almost told the other detective about his little crush. The last thing Tyler needed was to alienate his new partner because of a little thing like having the hots for him.

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“Hey,” he said as the two men walked out to the car. Paytah unlocked Tyler’s door and looked at him, waiting. “Um, I just wanted to thank you for breakfast and, you know, me bending your ear and all...”

To his utter shock, Paytah slung an arm across his shoulder in a brief hug. “It’s the type of thing partners do,” he grinned. “At least, that’s what I hear...”

“Okay, so where are we going?” Tyler moved the conversation along to something that didn’t involve bodily contact.

“Right now, we’re headed to central booking,” Paytah told him. “We have a possible witness to one of the jumps or dives or whatever.”

“Yeah?” Tyler turned in the seat to face his partner, anxious to hear what he had to say.

“This guy, one Mr. Marty Enslow, small time drug dealer, says he sold our doer some meth and special k,” he turned his head toward Tyler and wiggled his eyebrows up and down. “He *also* says he followed her because she was so hot looking and was waiting outside the hotel when she left. But that’s not all...” he teased.

“There’s more? There’s more?” Tyler panted breathlessly, playing along.

“Oh *so* much more! The vic jumped off the balcony within a minute of her leaving the hotel. Mr. Enslow was watching her cross the street when Mr. Douglas stained the sidewalk,” he explained with relish.

“*Really?*” Tyler drawled, stroking his chin with the thumb and finger of one hand. “Well, *that* has definite possibilities.” He smiled slightly to himself. For a day that had started out so completely bad, it was definitely turning out to be pretty decent after all.

He tried to remind himself of how good a day it really was as he followed Paytah out of the cavernous central booking station in downtown Philadelphia. Their witness had been released and the best anyone could do was to give them his hangouts.

Tyler’s good humor faded still more when they arrived at the dilapidated old building that housed Mr. Enslow’s business and few close personal friends. The six-story building was clearly marked CONDEMNED in red spray paint and with several red notices stapled prominently all over the outside. Apparently the price was just right for Marty and it was said that he liked to conduct business from the top floor.

“You go in the front, I’ll go in the back,” Paytah decided as he parked the car.

“What about backup?” Tyler asked cautiously. He’d learned the hard way to appreciate the merits of having a group with him when he approached the unknown.

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“There they are now, coming in quiet,” Paytah swept his hand broadly to indicate a black and white cruiser with two uniformed policemen climbing out.

“They’ll follow us up, huh?” Tyler inclined his head at the men.

Paytah nodded as they entered the building quietly, intimating to the others that they should wait and then bring up the rear.

By the time he heard the two men murmuring on the sixth floor, Tyler’s eyes were watering and he’d had to hold his breath since entering the building. The dilapidated structure reeked of urine and was literally crumbling around him.

He released his breath as he entered the door-less apartment and shouted the obligatory “Freeze! Police!”, with gun drawn.

One man shouted, “Gimme the shit, Marty!” and ran for the window.

Marty headed deeper into the apartment. Easing around a corner, Tyler spied Paytah from the other direction as he all but collided with Marty. Although he was aware of shouts in the background from the other policemen, Tyler was most aware of echoing groan that suddenly reverberated throughout the building.

“Shit!” screamed Marty as the floor disappeared beneath him.

“Fuck!” roared Paytah as his arms flew up and he disappeared from view.

“Paytah!” Tyler yelled. “Tonto!” he bellowed. “Shit! Not another one!” He rushed toward the hole in the floor, stopping when he heard a creaking groan.

“Not. Dead. Yet,” Paytah’s strained voice floated up from the hole.

Tyler dropped to his knees and then his stomach and edged forward until he could peer into the gaping chasm. Paytah hung from a plumbing pipe that was so far supporting his not insubstantial weight.

“Take my hand,” he ordered, reaching into the hole.

“Too heavy,” the other man grunted back.

“Hey! Uniform guys,” Tyler shouted over his shoulder. “Grab my legs!” he dictated, turning back to the hole as they did so. A piercing screech sounded around them. “Hurry, Tonto! It’s gonna give!”

“Don’t. Call. Me. That,” the big Indian gasped, reaching out.

Just as Paytah jerked one hand off the pipe and wrapped it around Tyler’s forearm, the relatively thin pipe gave way and he dropped heavily, taking the smaller man with him. He’d barely reached forward to grab Paytah with his right hand when disaster hit.

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Tyler twisted toward the left and slid forward several feet, scraping his ribs as his arm popped from the socket. “Holy shit! HELL!” he screamed in pain, trying to dig his knees in and stop the forward momentum.

The two men holding his legs gripped tightly and scrambled backward using his body as a rope for Paytah to hold onto.

“Can’t pull,” Tyler panted, “Have to climb up me,” he insisted with difficulty.

He howled out his pain as Paytah slowly grabbed his right shoulder with his left hand and made his tortuous way up. It was slow and painful going and Tyler was sweating, bleeding and swearing by the time the two uniformed policemen were each able to grab an arm and haul him to his feet.

“You okay, Baker?” Paytah gasped. “Shit, I hurt you,” he said in alarm, pulling the blood soaked shirt from Tyler’s scraped ribs.

“You’re breathing and I’m breathing. Everybody wins!” Tyler wheezed. He heard a muffled moan from the hole. “Cept maybe Marty,” he amended.

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Chapter Five

Arriving at his small townhouse after many hours in the emergency room, Paytah parked his car and moved around to the other side to help his injured and now doped-up partner out of it. Tyler was stumbling under his own steam but barely. Paytah leaned him up against the wall by the door so that he could unlock it. Turning quickly, he slid an arm behind the younger man's back and wrestled him through the door.

"Gonna make it, partner?" Paytah chuckled as he steered Tyler to the couch.

"Mblmm," Tyler mumbled, his knees seemed to give out.

Easing him down onto the plush cushions of his sofa, Paytah turned and placed his keys on a small stand and removed his gun. He managed to flick on a table lamp at the same time. When he turned back to his partner, Tyler had fallen sideways on the couch with his feet still planted on the floor and legs apart in a sitting up position.

With a smile, Paytah sat him up and knelt in front of Tyler and pulled his shoes and socks off. Tucking the socks into the shoes, he placed them aside and stood. Leaning over him, Paytah removed Tyler's gun and put it on the end table by the couch, the holster had been wrapped tightly around the and shoved into a pocket in the jacket.

He carefully removed the other man's suit jacket first and then began to unbutton his shirt. Thankfully, Tyler's right arm was not threaded into the sleeves so that made the task of removing those garments much easier. He carefully draped the shirt and jacket over a nearby chair knowing that Tyler might have to wear them again the next day, even though they were torn and blood encrusted. It was likely that nothing he had would fit his smaller partner.

Turning back to finish the job, he stopped. Tyler's head was leaning forward, a little to the side and his hands were clasped primly in his lap. No doubt about it, the young man was completely insensible.

Without even realizing he was going to do it, Paytah reached forward and carded his fingers through the white-gold curls that had intrigued him so. *Soft. It's so soft.* A cross

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between dandelion petals and kitten fur he decided, shaking his head ruefully at his own foolishness.

Still, right in front of him was a half naked man who's rosy pink skin gilded with white gold—he was right there, Paytah could touch him, quench his curiosity, and the other man would never know. He drew one finger over the smooth cheek down to his jaw and felt the light rasp of new stubble that he couldn't see.

Slowly, he drew his hand down to Tyler's clavicle and felt the velvety hair lightly furring his pectoral muscles. Carefully, he drew his splayed fingers down to a flat male nipple.

As he skimmed it with the pad of one finger, it peaked and grew rigid. He raked his fingers across to the other nipple and lightly caressed it watching it firm and tighten. To his surprise, he had to adjust himself. His cock had hardened at his new discovery and was becoming painful.

He glanced at the drugged man's face when Tyler groaned and licked his lips. Looking down again, Paytah skimmed Tyler's ribs with one hand, avoiding the bruises and scrapes. Continuing, he trailed the fingers of the other hand down over the young man's abdomen following the thin strip of soft hair down to his waist.

Gingerly, he unthreaded the thin leather strip from the buckle and pulled it from the belt loops, turning to lay it on top of his jacket and shirt. When he turned back, he saw that Tyler had slipped sideways again and while still seated, his torso was resting on the sofa seat cushions, with his face buried in the crook of an elbow.

Awkwardly, he turned the young man's hips and pulled his legs up so that he could stretch out full-length on the couch. Reaching under him with care, he deftly unbuttoned and unzipped Tyler's pants and eased them over his hips and off.

He hadn't really meant to remove his boxers, too, had he? Looking down at the banquet of pink and gold flesh, Paytah decided it didn't matter. Right now, he could touch all he wanted without fear of retribution.

He wouldn't *do* anything, he just wanted to see and maybe feel just a little. He eased to sit at the other man's waist and trailed his open hand down from Tyler's shoulder, over the creased pink dimple of a mostly-healed bullet wound and down to his waist to another one.

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The second wound was about three inches to the right of the young man's spine and he could tell that both shots had been small caliber and from many feet away. Tyler was lucky to be alive and walking.

Releasing his pent-up breath, Paytah scooted down and reached forward to cup the tight round globes of his partner's rear. Soft, smooth and tight-muscled they yielded slightly under the press of his grip. He trailed his fingers over the crease between thigh and butt-cheek. *So soft.* He trailed his fingertips over the cleft dividing the twin globes.

Tyler shifted on the sofa slightly but nothing more. Paytah stroked a finger over the cleft again, this time insinuating the finger between the cheeks a little. He found the skin warm and smooth. The contrast between his own dark bronze skin to Tyler's pale flesh was exciting all by itself.

"Mmm," Tyler moaned, shifting slightly, still very much out of it.

Paytah watched to make sure he wasn't going to stir anymore and then gave in to his need to see. Gently, he placed one palm on each rounded cheek and carefully pulled them apart to look.

Pink and puckered, the tiny rosette was... It was beautiful. He shook his head and kept looking. He placed his thumb on one cheek two fingers on the other, holding them apart with one hand.

His other hand was shaking as he slowly reached in and trailed it over the little bud, feeling it. Once, twice, he rested his index finger on it and pushed gently, pressing just the tip of his finger inside. The color disparity was even more erotic with his nut-brown finger sinking into Tyler's pink and white hole.

So warm. What little he could feel was warm and silky. And he'd never been this hard in his whole life. He gently but reluctantly removed his finger and then his hands from his partner.

Tyler gusted a sigh and shifted again, just barely pumping his hips against the cushion. Paytah wondered if he was hard in his drugged state. His nipples had hardened when he touched them, hadn't they?

As he rolled his partner over carefully, Paytah tried to ignore the little voice that accused him of taking advantage of the drugged man. Ruthlessly, he squashed that annoying buzz and allowed his eyes to rove over his attractive friend's body again.

Tyler certainly was strikingly put together. The lines and curves of his compact frame flowed in pleasing harmony. His gold-tinged ivory skin was smooth and satiny, yet

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firm over the foundation of hard muscle. He directed his gaze at the sleeping man's midsection. Tyler did, indeed have an erection and it looked every bit as hard and painful as his own.

The blonde man's respectable sized cock arched and curved back toward his flat, muscular abdomen. It was framed by tight silvery gold curls that thinned at his thighs. The small, taut sacks that hung below it invited the touch of a finger.

Restlessly, Tyler's head turned to the side as he pumped his hips up again in wanton, albeit unconscious entreaty. *I guess it would be cruel to leave him this way. I've never touched another man's cock, ever.*

Paytah planted one hand over Tyler's right thigh where a third bullet wound was all but healed. Taking a fortifying breath, he wrapped his right hand firmly around the rigid shaft before him, feeling the thick vein along the underside it. He slid a thumb over the circumcised bulb of the tip and was rewarded by a slick drop of pre-cum.

Shifting to press his left hand flat against his own aching, fabric-covered length, he gripped Tyler's rod with his right and began to pump. The rigid organ was velvety soft and the hair surrounding it silky as it grazed his wrist. The shaft throbbed and tightened as he worked it, clear liquid weeping freely from the reddened knob. Finally, it swelled even more in his hand and jerked.

"Unhh," he heard Tyler groan and flicked a glance at his face.

His full pink lips were parted and his face was tight with moon-gold brows drawn together over scrunched eyes. Paytah's own eyes moved back down in time to see the thick white cream begin to spurt from the cock he was holding. The whole image was so arousing. He felt his own body tighten and release. For the first time since puberty, he'd come in his pants.

* * *

The next morning went smoothly enough as Paytah banished any thoughts about his indiscretions the night before. That was especially difficult when Tyler came out of the bathroom wearing only pants and rubbing a towel through his hair.

"You took a shower?" Paytah demanded, irate. "Didn't the doctor say to wait a day before taking the bandages off your ribs?"

"They're just bruised and scraped," Tyler complained. "It isn't as if one's sticking out or something. Its fine," he attempted to placate him.

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Paytah scowled but didn't respond. Instead he waved a hand toward his bedroom. "I left you some running pants and a sweat shirt on the bed with socks and some old sneakers. They'll be too big for you but they'll get you back to the hotel so you can change."

"Thanks!" Tyler smiled, his blue eyes warming up and crinkling at the corners. Paytah gulped as heat flashed through him, stealing the breath from his lungs.

"No big deal," he responded, turning away to hide his flushed face. *What is with me today?* "You take the car and run to the hotel. You can meet me at the M.E.'s office," he called out as the other man left the room. "I just spoke to Lieu and O'Toole. Amada has some ideas and O'Toole's got a floater."

"Great!" he heard Tyler call out. "I mean, about Amada, not the floater," he clarified, coming back into the room.

"Well, I wasn't sure," Paytah teased, chuckling when he saw the younger man blush. "Here I made some coffee," he said handing him a cup. "You look about twelve in my clothes—they're so big on you," he laughed as Tyler abandoned trying to push the sleeves over his hands and began to roll them up.

"What can I say? I'm too tall to be short and too short to be tall. We can't all be you," he smiled, nodding his thanks and sipping at the coffee.

They finished their coffee in companionable silence, parting company a few minutes later when Patrick O'Toole showed up.

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Chapter Six

Tyler parked the car in a slot behind the Medical Examiner's Office. He had placed the clothes Paytah had loaned him in a neatly folded stack on the back seat. Now, he opened the door and slid out, walking around to the front of the building.

"Hey lady," he heard a familiar accented voice call out when he got close to the entrance. "This ain't your corner, girlfriend," Guerra taunted. "Nobody wants your business here!"

Tyler stopped and stared at the other man, affronted. "Some people have to work at being an asshole, Guerra, but talent like yours *has* to be natural."

"Yeah? Well, I may be an asshole but you're a faggot!" Guerra announced proudly.

Tyler's brow furrowed in confusion. "Yes, yes I am. I'm a faggot and you're an asshole. I think we're clear on this." He moved to walk past.

"You don't fool me, little girl," Guerra sneered. "Just cause you saved Paytah the other day doesn't make you one of the good guys all of the sudden," he grabbed Tyler by the shoulders and shoved him into the side of the building causing a yelp of pain.

"Get your paws off me, buddy," Tyler growled, struggling.

"What?" Guerra smirked, "I thought you liked guys? You don't like this?" he jeered, tightening his grip on Tyler's injured shoulder.

When Tyler winced, Guerra wrapped his free hand around Tyler's painfully bruised and battered ribs. Laughing at his pained gasp, the other detective rubbed himself along Tyler's side grinding his pelvis against Tyler's hip.

"Let. Go," Tyler gritted, struggling to reach for his gun and unable to throw Guerra off given his injuries.

Suddenly, he was free as Guerra was snatched away. Shaking his head to clear it, he looked up into his partner's blazing, nearly black eyes. It was a truly frightening sight. The large man held Estèban Guerra aloft in one meaty fist, dangling him at least two feet above the sidewalk.

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"I thought I told you to leave my partner the fuck alone?" he growled, his voice deep and ragged with rage.

"Aww, I was just funnin' him," Guerra squeaked. "I didn't mean any harm, Paytah, c'mon," he whined pitifully.

"You ever hear of sexual harassment, Detective Guerra?" he gritted, causing the frightened man to go even paler.

"I didn't do no sexual harassment!" Guerra screeched, appalled.

"No?" Paytah drawled, his deep, angry purr sending shivers up Tyler's spine. "I think humping another man's leg while groping him qualifies asshole. Look around," he advised turning the dangling man left and right so he *could* look around. Tyler turned to look, also. People were staring. "There are plenty of witnesses here besides your fellow officers," Paytah rumbled.

"Uhhh," the dangling man's voice was higher than Tyler would have believed possible.

"Do something with this trash," Paytah barked, tossing the humiliated detective to the grassy ground behind his partner. "You okay?" he turned to Tyler.

Not trusting himself to speak, Tyler merely nodded. He didn't know what to make of the other man's vehement defense of him. Without a word, he turned and followed Paytah to their car.

* * *

It had taken Paytah until lunchtime before he could speak without wanting to kill someone. He wasn't exactly sure why he was so angry. He'd seen men harass one another before.

He didn't like it no matter what, but when he walked out of Amada's office and saw Guerra manhandling his partner and grinding his dick against him like a dog in heat, something had just snapped. It had taken every bit of his self-control not to just break the little jerk's neck.

Tyler, to his credit, seemed to understand that Paytah was wrestling with something and just stayed out of his way. They'd been partners for barely a week but the blonde man seemed to read his moods better than anyone ever had, even his longtime friends.

He'd dropped the younger man off at his hotel to pay for another week's lodging an hour or so ago. After that, he'd gone by the hospital to interview the recovering Marty, and now was waiting for Tyler at the M.E.'s office again.

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The minute Amada spotted him, she waved both arms in excitement. Paytah decided to go ahead and talk to her and fill Tyler in when he arrived. He was supposed to take a cab over and meet him here.

"Listen, it looks like your partner was on to something," she said excitedly when he walked up.

"What do you mean?" he asked, focusing intently on her.

"It's a damned miracle I even found this evidence," she crowed. "I've never seen anything like this. After finding out what your drug guy sold the redhead, I remembered that Baker thought it could be given some other way besides injection or whatever."

"Yeah? Well what is it? How's it administered? How'd you get it?" He took a deep breath and was about to ask another question when she silenced him with a hand over his mouth.

"First let's start with what. It's some kind of mixture of ketamine, LSD and a few other chemicals I'm still trying to figure out. Talk about your designer drugs, Paytah," she enthused.

"Okay, okay," he nodded eagerly, encouraging her. This could break the whole case open.

"From what we've found, it gets into the bloodstream and makes the victim a little high and completely suggestible for about half an hour, and then it's gone. It can be rubbed on the skin or even administered by scrape or anything. It just sweats itself right out of the pores within an hour," she went on in excitement. "We got it because the last guy didn't sweat or get wet and most of his skin was intact. I started looking for the questionable chemicals in the armpits and such."

Before she could say another word, his cell phone rang. "Detective Paytah!" he barked, annoyed to be interrupted.

"Payt, I just heard there was a guy on the edge of the roof at your partner's building and there's a call for backup over there," O'Toole's voice was rushed and serious.

"Shit!" Paytah spat.

"It gets worse," O'Toole went on. "Guerra left a message a while ago that he was answering a call from there."

"Son. Of. A. BITCH!" Paytah yelled. "Gotta go," he told Amada, already walking out the door.

J.J. Massa

He heard her shouts of, “Hey! What’s going on?” from a distance away. He barely slowed down to open the car door.

THE EDGE

Chapter Seven

“You Baker?” the uniformed policeman asked brusquely when Tyler arrived on the roof of the building.

He’d been in the manager’s office negotiating for a better deal at the residential hotel when someone burst in claiming that there was a man teetering on the edge of the roof. The police had already been called and Tyler had been talking to one of the uniformed officers on his way up when he was told it was another detective who had been asking for him all along.

Tyler felt the bottom drop out of his stomach, afraid that the beautiful redheaded murderess had somehow gotten her hands on Paytah. He immediately called for backup but knew that, should the other detective step off the edge of this rooftop, there’d be no saving him. The building was old and somewhat seedy but it was tall –twelve stories or so, he thought.

“Yeah, I’m Baker,” he answered the uniform, maintaining his aloof, uncaring façade. “What’ve we got?”

“Looks like your partner over there’s been asking for you,” the uniform supplied, waving a hand toward the edge of the roof. “Nobody can get close. He won’t talk to anyone but you.”

In dread, Tyler looked in the direction that the other man indicated and guiltily exhaled in relief. It wasn’t Paytah. It was... He stepped forward, squinting.

“Guerra?” he said aloud.

“Hey there, Queenie,” the other man slurred. “I had me a real woman tonight! I wanna tell you all about it.”

Tyler moved closer, slowly. “Is it okay if I come over there, Guerra? I can’t really hear you!” he called. He was about twenty-five feet from the other man now.

“Yeah, man, you just come right over here,” Guerra invited, surprising Tyler completely.

J.J. Massa

He stopped seven feet from the other detective and spoke again. "What's going on there, Guerra? What're you doing up here?"

"HEY! Nobody but this little girl right here!" bellowed Guerra, responding to some commotion behind Tyler. "Just you guys stay back," he screeched, teetering precariously on the edge of the building. He leaned forward enough to prevent his fall but not enough to allow Tyler to safely grab him. "Don't you go anywhere!" he squealed at Tyler.

Tyler glanced back and thought he saw Paytah and Detective O'Toole but he couldn't be sure and he couldn't move far enough to look without apparently spooking Guerra.

"I'm not going anywhere Guerra, I swear," he promised the nervous man. "You were about to tell me what's going on?"

"No, little lady, I was about to tell you that I *ain't* no queer! I proved it right on your very own bed," he said proudly. "Come a little closer and let me tell you all the details."

Tyler moved a step closer. He was six feet away now. "What do you mean, "you proved it in my bed"?" he asked.

"I got me some sweet, sweet pussy and I took her to your room. Fucked that classy piece of ass on your nice, clean sheets," he crowed. "She *wanted* me to."

Tyler edged just a little closer. "You mean you had sex with someone, just now, in my bed?"

"Sure did!" Guerra announced proudly.

"Eeeewwww," Tyler groaned, disgusted.

The other man laughed out loud. His guffaws peeling out across the roof were an oddly jarring echo among the night sounds of the city mingled with the serious low voiced conversations going on around them.

"What's amatter blondie?" Guerra sneered. "You mad it wasn't you and some hot cock in there? Maybe Patrick or Paytah? You like older men? How about the Lieutenant? Oh wait, Jones was black, huh? Well it's either me or Paytah cause there's no one else that dark in our section."

"Umm," Tyler floundered. "How about you come over here and tell me all about everything, huh?" He wasn't sure what else to say to Guerra's odd tirade.

"NO!" the other detective roared.

Tyler froze holding his hands out in front of himself. "Okay, Okay, calm down. Just tell me what you want, alright?"

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“That’s more like it, sweetmeat,” Guerra crooned. “I just need you to come over here with me. Just come and shake my hand so we can all live happily ever after.”

“Um, I don’t get it...” Tyler frowned.

“Keep taking!” he heard Paytah call out in a low voice.

“What? All your brains in your cock now, Baker?” Guerra sneered in derision. “I want you to come here and shake my hand. Is that so hard to understand?”

“Don’t do it, Tyler, just keep him talking,” Paytah commanded urgently from behind and to the left of him.

Tyler nodded in an effort to show that he understood.

“You want to shake my hand?” he asked the drugged man in confusion. “I’m a queer, Guerra. What if you get cooties?” It was all he could think to say.

“She said my life would only get better if I shook your hand on the edge over here,” he flopped an arm behind his back in a sweeping, drunken gesture.

“She? You mean your bed partner?” he asked, trying to do what Paytah told him.

“Yeah, her. She’s so pretty, and tall. Long red hair. She’s white,” he said smugly.

“Um, sure. Okay,” Tyler didn’t know why that last should matter but he’d go along, “Well, let’s just go on down and tell her you did it then. Is she still in my room? I’ll shake your hand on the way down, how about that?”

He heard frantic, low-voiced conversations taking place behind him now.

“NO!” Guerra roared and whipped out his gun, pointing it at Tyler. “You come over here right now or I’m gonna shoot your pussyfied ass!” he bellowed.

“GUN!” Tyler shouted. “Okay, Guerra, I’m there,” he promised, taking another step closer to the apparently drunk or drugged man.

“Tyler!” he heard Paytah’s warning voice closer to him now, but not close enough to help.

“Come on, Sweetie,” Guerra said in an odd, singsong voice. “Come on,” he called as if to a small child.

“How’s she gonna know if you shake my hand, Guerra?” Tyler was three feet away now.

“She’ll see,” he said as if that was obvious. “Don’t you want me to be happy, Baker?” he whined. “Just ‘cause your fairy friend got killed doesn’t mean nobody else should be loved.”

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“Sure I want you to be happy, man.” Tyler slid his right foot forward. “See? I’m nearly there. Um, could you just lose the gun, maybe?” he bargained hopefully.

“In a minute,” Guerra said suspicion evident in his voice. “As soon as you get to the edge and take my hand,” he insisted firmly.

Tyler planted both feet firmly and leaned forward, reaching out with his uninjured left hand. Guerra reached for him with his left hand and lowered his right, the hand holding the gun.

“Goodbye, baby,” Guerra growled, tugging on Tyler but dropping the gun at the same time.

The tug propelled the inebriated detective backward and he screamed as he looked out over his shoulder into empty air and the long drop to the sidewalk. Tyler locked both knees and threw himself backward, wrapping his right hand around Guerra’s wrist.

He felt two strong arms go around him from behind and it was over. Paytah had added his two hundred and fifty odd pounds of solid muscle to the equation and Tyler felt himself being whipped away from the edge. He hung on tight to Guerra and didn’t let go, even when he found himself in a heap on top of the other man with Paytah’s bulk on top of both of them.

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Chapter Eight

“You go on to bed,” Paytah told Tyler. “I’m still too wound up. Just close the bedroom door because I’ll be on the phone.”

“You sure? I can take the couch, no problem...” Tyler argued.

“Yeah, I may catch some TV or put on some music, have a beer, you know,” he answered, smiling at the other man.

Finally, Tyler shrugged and went into the bedroom and to bed. Paytah had insisted that he stay over since his hotel room was officially declared part of a crime scene. At one point he was afraid he’d have to knock Tyler out to keep him from renting a motel room somewhere.

Paytah had been so sure that it would be his partner on the edge of that roof tonight. He didn’t know if he’d ever be able to look at Guerra again. In fact, he really did need to call Patrick and console him about his own partner.

Although Guerra wasn’t dead, his career probably was. He wouldn’t be punished for anything that had happened while he was on the rooftop. He’d been drugged obviously. He had, however, harassed another officer by breaking into his domicile and having sex with a witness on his bed. Any one of those things was a no-no -- all of them together were a career ending disaster.

Paytah still felt the adrenaline rushing through him as he looked back on the eventful night that was now ending. He needed an outlet. He needed to do something life affirming -- like have sex. Who better to affirm his life with than his partner? Could he? No time like now to find out.

Tyler had been in bed and asleep for two hours when Paytah stripped down to his boxers and crawled in beside him. It felt perfectly natural to pull the warm and pliant body into his arms and nuzzle the soft, curly hair under his cheek.

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Tyler opened sleep befuddled eyes and looked up, fear and confusion clear on his face. Could he kiss another man? Paytah raked a thumb over Tyler's full lower lip, freeing it from the pearly teeth worrying it.

Yes, he could kiss Tyler's enticing pink mouth. He lowered his head, brushing the other man's lips with his own in the most feather-light of touches and remained there, just feeling. It was irresistible.

Tyler's mouth moved to tentatively return the tender offering. Paytah's lips opened on Tyler's and his tongue touched that full bottom lip, inviting the other man instead of forcing him.

His young partner opened his mouth to grant him entrance and moaned softly as Paytah hungrily accepted the invitation. He explored every nook and corner of the warm velvet cavern before he withdrew his tongue slowly, wordlessly inviting Tyler to taste his mouth in return.

Paytah eventually broke off the kiss, drawing back and nipping at Tyler's strong, smooth jaw then moving to nibble behind one delicate ear. Tyler moaned and arched against him. Paytah was harder than he'd ever been in his life and reveling in the taste and texture of another man. He was unbelievably turned on by his partner.

His big hands swept up the golden skin of Tyler's exposed sides, his mouth devoured the soft pink lips, his body pressing down, controlling, moving subtly to incite a response, his hands finding and tracing every hypersensitive nerve.

He let his hands wander with a will of their own, caressing nipples, counting ribs, enjoying the smooth skin and hard muscles. One traveling hand dipped into Tyler's cotton boxers and that seemed to release him from his frozen passivity.

Suddenly, the other man's mouth was everywhere -- pressed to his lips, nibbling on an ear, suckling one flat nipple Paytah would have sworn wasn't that sensitive.

Even with his superior strength, Paytah couldn't have fended Tyler off when he suddenly wriggled out of his partner's arms. Before he knew it, the younger man had scooted down the bed and stripped off Paytah's boxers, that incredible mouth sucking his hard cock into its moist heat.

Paytah fell back with a shouted groan bucking mindlessly until Tyler grabbed his hips, holding him still. He regained control of himself and reached down, pulling his erotic attacker atop his chest and into his arms, tasting his salty pre-cum on the other man's swollen mouth.

THE EDGE

* * *

Tyler had been shocked and disconcerted at first when he'd felt his partner pressed against him. He was a much larger man than Daryl had been. There was no mistaking who he was in bed with. By the time he might have come to his senses, his libido was in full control of the part of his brain that governed rational thought and decision-making.

Abruptly Paytah's solid chest was no longer under him. He fell the short space to the mattress and lay unmoving, his face against soft sheets, his mind spinning.

Paytah had left the bed and the room, leaving Tyler laying there facedown and confused. He was still trying to figure out what was going on when he felt the mattress dip and then strong hands were grazing over the curve of his ass.

Those large hands kneaded his cheeks hypnotically and then Paytah's thumbs began softly stroking the sensitive skin where thighs blended into rounded buttocks. They moved inward and upward, oh so slowly caressing him, teasing him.

Tyler instinctively held his breath, waiting as Paytah's thumbs inched toward the more sensitive flesh at an excruciating rate. When they brushed over his hungry cleft without dipping into it, he gasped explosively and struggled to push back against them.

He moaned out loud when he felt warm oil trickle onto the sensitive place at the top of his crack and slowly leak down between his cheeks. He moaned again, aching as it dribbled over his tiny opening.

Now he felt Paytah's fingers caressing only a little more noticeably than the oil had over the puckered flesh. Soon he felt the strong hands close over his cheeks, thumbs finally pushing between them to rub commandingly over the nerve rich skin and orifice.

Tyler cried out as one thumb breeched the tight barrier and sank into his body. He resisted Paytah's captivity and forced himself off his stomach and up onto his hands and knees. His body was open and vulnerable to the other man who maddeningly continued to rub his thumb gently just inside the opening.

Paytah's other hand reached between Tyler's parted legs and cradled his tight sacs, rolling the swollen balls between his fingers. Tyler nearly choked with need as he pushed back against Paytah's hands as much as he could, his injured shoulder making it difficult to support himself in such a position.

Paytah finally pulled his thumb out and replaced it with a finger, thrusting carefully in and out, spreading the slick oil into his body. One finger was soon replaced by two,

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caressing the inside of Tyler's channel, stretching him, but not going deep enough to touch that place inside that would bring him such amazing pleasure.

"Tonto! Paytah, please..." Panting, gasping for breath, and more aroused than he could ever remember being, Tyler knew the only relief he could hope for would come from his partner. "Please, do it now!"

"You sure?" Paytah gritted, clearly as aroused and hungry for release as Tyler. Tyler nodded frantically.

One hand moved to his hip and then he felt the uncircumcised head of his partner's rod pressed against his stretched hole. He bit his lip as Paytah entered him. Slowly but constantly, the thick shaft pushed its way into his center, any discomfort quickly drowned in pleasure. The thickness of it was stretching him more and more, filling him up, making him feel complete.

Finally, soft pubic hair brushed his cheeks and the heavy weight of Paytah's balls nudged lightly against his own. He knew the other man was buried to the hilt. He stopped a moment and Tyler finally nodded. He'd never felt so full.

Paytah's arms came around him then. One hand splayed against his chest with the other snaking around his thus far neglected erection. He pulled Tyler upright so that he was impaled by him and resting on his lap.

Paytah pulled out and thrust to the hilt in one long stroke causing Tyler to cry out. The pleasure was so intense he almost blacked out, overwhelmed by the stimulation to his prostate. And then Paytah did it again, and again. He thrust hard and fast, each stroke almost pulling him out of Tyler's body, and then burying himself as far as he could, his free hand working Tyler's aching length in counterpoint.

Tyler shuddered under the sensual onslaught, pleasure rocketing through him with every powerful stroke. All he could do was moan and cling tight to the strong arms holding him firm against that solid chest.

He felt open mouth kisses on his neck and shoulder as he reveled in the sensation of Paytah's cock pumping up into and out of his body. Paytah moaned breathlessly when Tyler deliberately tightened the muscles surrounding him. They reached flashpoint within moments, shouting their climax almost simultaneously. Tyler felt the hot seed fill him as his own spurted over Paytah's hand.

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Head thrown back against a broad shoulder, he closed his eyes and rested there. He luxuriated in the rare secure feeling as Paytah's cheek and jaw rubbed against his hair, the strong arms still supporting him.

Tyler moaned softly as Paytah's now limp member slipped out of him. Exhausted, he sank boneless against his lover's chest as Paytah shifted them to lie down on the bed. He was vaguely aware of a blanket being pulled up and over him as he let sleep claim him.

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Chapter Nine

The next morning, Tyler awoke to an odd, metallic chirping noise. Suddenly, the feeling of warmth and safety he'd felt was ripped away. A minute later the chirping stopped and, as his senses checked in, he heard Paytah's deep, resonant purr, talking on the phone.

His mouth curved in a smile as he rolled toward the edge of the bed and made his way to the bathroom. Who would have thought that his partner, the man he'd first thought was probably a homophobic asshole, would have made love so beautifully, so thoroughly—to him?

He felt so good. He'd loved Daryl. He'd really, truly loved the man who'd been his partner and his friend for so many years. Never though, never had Daryl made him feel the way he did right now.

He'd never dared dream that Paytah would give him a chance romantically. Now that he had, he would enjoy every second of it. His relationship with Daryl had been great. It had taken him fourteen long months to let go but he knew it was time to move on.

He never thought he'd love again and he had been sure nobody would ever love him. With Paytah, though, things would be so good. He'd been so careful and so reticent with his heart but now it was well and truly lost. He was soul-deep in love.

When he emerged from the bathroom, teeth brushed and face washed, Paytah was hanging up his cell phone. "I'll just put the coffee on," he called out. Still naked, he headed for the kitchen.

Paytah wandered into the kitchen talking. "That was Lieu. He wants us in pretty soon to finish our reports. They have some leads on the redhead."

"Um, that's great," Tyler answered, dipping his head to hide the hated blush. "Um, thank you for... y'know, last night..." he stammered, turning away ostensibly to fill up the coffee pot.

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Two strong bronze arms came around him and he felt warm, plush lips on his naked shoulder. His heart raced.

“God, that was incredible. It was easily the best sexual experience of my life,” Paytah rumbled. “We’ll have to do it again sometime,” he said, running his hands down Tyler’s arms and dropping them. “You care if I take the first shower?” the big Indian called over his shoulder as he headed out of the room.

“Uh, uh,” Tyler managed somehow. He was so glad he’d been leaning against the counter.

He felt like icy cold molasses had replaced the blood in his veins. His heart felt like a sledgehammer in his chest, beating slowly and heavily. He couldn’t swallow around the boulder lodged in his throat.

He was such a giant fool. For so long he’d guarded his heart, kept his emotions under lock and key. Now look! He’d thrown his heart and soul away on a whim -- a whim that hadn’t even been his own. God, he hoped he could stuff that genie back into its bottle.

Tyler fought as hard as he could against the tears that threatened to fall. He looked to the heavens and swore to himself and any other entity that might be listening that he’d never risk his heart again if he could just make it through the day ahead without falling apart.

Nonchalant was out of the question but Tyler thought he managed something approaching normal as he handed Paytah his coffee with what he hoped passed for a smile.

When Paytah asked if he was okay, he murmured, “I just need a shower.” He quickly brushed past the other man and rummaged in his bag, pulling out clothes for the day.

His partner shrugged and turned to the kitchen. “You hungry?” he called out.

“No,” Tyler answered, closing the bathroom door and locking it before anything else could be said.

During his shower, Tyler made some decisions. Chief among them was that he wouldn’t be staying in Philadelphia. He couldn’t think of one good reason to torture himself by hanging around the man he loved that saw him as just an afterthought. He didn’t want to be someone’s sexual adventure.

Washing his hair, he decided that he’d find some little “Podunk town” in the south or maybe even see what was going on around the southern islands. He could be an officer or a sheriff down south. He didn’t need the money. He had enough of that.

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Brushing his teeth again he determined that he didn't have to decide anything right now. All he really had to do was get the hell out of "Dodge". As long as he laid low and stayed out of the Governor's way, he could raise chinchilla's in Australia and nobody would even care.

When he emerged dressed and ready to go, he felt bruised and battered but he could face the day. Yes, he did want to help solve the case he'd been working on with Paytah but he just didn't think he would be functional enough to stick around. He decided to play it by ear. He'd give his notice quietly to Lieutenant Elliot at the first available opportunity.

It turned out that his prayers were answered for him when the perfect solution presented itself not long after he arrived at the station with Paytah.

* * *

Paytah hadn't been sure of the correct morning-after protocol for having had sex with your partner who was a man. He'd been a little nervous when he hung up the phone after talking to the Lieu.

Thank God that Tyler had been cool. Yeah, the whole thing had been a great experience but that didn't mean he was GAY... did it? At worst he was bi. *Nothing wrong with that, right?*

Tyler had been in the office with the Lieu for nearly an hour. In the meantime, Paytah had been busy assembling tips. He felt certain they'd have the woman who'd drugged and killed four men and nearly killed six very soon.

Finally, Tyler emerged from the Lieu's office looking strained and distracted. Lieutenant Elliot followed him to their desk.

"I've got to go," Tyler said to Paytah, white-faced. "Um, bye," he nodded to him exuding tension.

"Good luck, Detective Baker," Lieutenant Elliot's gruff voice seemed tight. Paytah looked from one man to the other. "I hope the next time we meet... Shit," the older man breathed deeply. "Just good luck, son. I'll be in touch."

Tyler nodded and turned away but not before Paytah could step in front of him and stop him. "What was that about?" he asked, trying for relaxed but falling far short.

"Nothing." He asserted. "I have to go." Tyler snagged his ever-present backpack and headed for the door.

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Paytah followed him out to the front of the building and down the old brick steps grabbing him by the arm and pulling him short.

"Where are you going, Tyler?" he growled. "What's going on?"

Tyler gusted a deep sigh and turned to him, his eyes like faded denim that had been left on a winter clothesline. "There's a break in the case—my last case with Daryl. They want my input." He closed his eyes tight and exhaled heavily. Opening them again, he looked up at Paytah. "I won't be coming back. I've resigned."

"What?" Paytah yelled, ignoring curious and worried looks from passersby. "You weren't even going to tell me, were you?" he demanded in an angry husk.

"I told you -- right now," he sighed. "Anyway, what difference does it make?" he asked trying for his erstwhile aloof façade.

"I thought we were partners?" Paytah asked, his voice raspy now.

"We were," Tyler shrugged, turning toward the street. A cab had just pulled to the curb.

"What about last night?" Paytah demanded, not releasing him. "I thought we..." Tyler cut him off.

"You thought we'd do it again sometime," he said, his voice breaking just a little.

"Yeah," Paytah avowed, still not letting go of his arm. "So? It was great -- it was incredible. I thought it meant something."

"It did mean something, Paytah," Tyler affirmed, looking devastated. "It meant one thing to you and something else entirely to me."

"What are you talking about?" Paytah snapped, upset and feeling threatened, he shook the arm in his grasp.

"I can't be fuck-buddies with you, Paytah," Tyler choked out. Paytah could see moisture gathering in those light blue eyes now. "I'm in love with you. 'Doing it again sometime' isn't enough for me. I can't walk the edge with you. I have to fall off or walk away." Paytah was stunned to see a tear drip down the smooth alabaster cheek. "If I fall anymore, I'll break. Maybe I have already. I have to walk away."

"Tyler..." he didn't know what to do, what to say. "Tyler..." he tried again.

"It's okay, I know," Tyler tugged at the restraining hand.

He loosened his grip and Tyler took his large hand in both his smaller, fine-boned hands. He pulled it to his mouth and kissed it quickly, dripping a tear onto it. Without another word, the blonde man turned and walked to the waiting cab. Frozen in place,

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Paytah stood there on the sidewalk and watched as his partner got in and the bright yellow taxi drove away.

* * *

“Looks like you fucked up pretty good,” he heard from behind him.

Paytah turned and found Patrick O’Toole leaning on the wall beside the old brick and cement stairs. The other man pushed off the wall with his hips and moved forward. He held a folded newspaper in his hands.

He whipped it behind his back before Paytah could do more than reach for it. “How do you really feel about that young man?” Patrick asked.

“I care about him,” Paytah defended, reaching once more for the folded newspaper.

“Ehhhhhtttt! Not good enough,” Patrick declared, whirling away and jogging toward the stairs.

“What do you know, Patrick?” he barked, “Don’t bullshit me!”

“I like that young man just fine,” O’Toole responded, looking back over his shoulder, his left foot on the first stair. “I didn’t fuck him, but I damn-sure won’t fuck him over. Seems to me like you’ve done both.”

“Shit, Patrick,” Paytah moaned, dropping to sit on one of the lower stairs. “I didn’t mean to hurt him.” He looked at the other man, begging him to understand even though he, himself couldn’t. “I never wanted him to leave me.”

“What does that mean, Payt?” Patrick demanded, sinking down next to him, still keeping the newspaper away from him.

“What?” Paytah asked, confused.

“You don’t want him to leave *you*! You *care* about him! Shit, Payt. I *care* about you!” Patrick spat, more intense than Payton had ever seen his sanguine friend. “I hope you live forever but I damn-sure don’t want to wake up next to you. That boy deserves a future with someone who gives a shit. If it ain’t you, back off. He’ll get over it in time.” Payton looked hard at his friend, brow furrowed, thinking about how he felt about someone else—anyone else waking up next to Tyler.

“Yeah...” Paytah mumbled, turning it over in his mind.

“So you don’t care if it’s me then?” Patrick looked hard at him.

“What?” Paytah yelled, grabbing Patrick by the shirtfront and hauling him closer.

“Hell, he’s a good-looking kid and he’s rich. I’ll treat him right.” He jerked away from Paytah and stood. “All I gotta do is make him forget I’m your friend...”

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Paytah jumped up and hauled him off the stairs, ignoring the drunk who offered to call the cops for Patrick. "You lay one finger on him and ..."

"Bullshit, Payt, you just sent him off to get fucked by anyone who wants it. -- Anyone who can take it from him or sweet-talk him." He jerked away from Paytah a second time. "Hell, he's only human. He'll get lonely. Anyway, what do you care?" Patrick pretended to dust himself off. "At least you know I'll be good to him." He turned, walking away from his old friend and placing a foot on the first stair once again.

"You don't like men, Patrick," Payton pointed out, following him.

"I'm not attracted to *you*," he agreed looking back at him. "You're one big ugly Indian. Maybe I *do* like curly-headed, blue-eyed blondes that just need a kind word and a sweet smile." He smiled blandly at his longtime friend. "What do *you* care?"

"Shit, fuck, and damnation," Paytah growled. "I love the little son of a bitch, okay? I just..." he closed his eyes and breathed deeply. "It's an adjustment, okay? I guess it doesn't matter what gender someone is if you love them and they love you, huh?"

"It doesn't matter so much about gender but, in this case, longevity could be a problem," Patrick added conversationally.

"Don't be coy, asshole," Paytah snapped, sure Patrick was hiding something important.

Patrick offered the folded newspaper to his friend. Taking it, Paytah looked at the colored picture of two men on the front who were walking out of a restaurant. Several feet behind them, a tall red-haired woman had been caught at the edge of the frame.

"Well?" Patrick asked after a few seconds.

"What am I looking at here, Pat?" he squinted at the picture again and read the caption. "That's Governor Baker and I see the redhead," he murmured. "Who's the bald guy? Is Governor Baker the next target?"

"No, Payt," Patrick sighed and explained patiently. "It seems that the Governor is the client--the guy who hired the killer. The redhead works for the bald guy. They picked her up in Allentown just a couple hours ago. She had the paper in her car." He sighed, rubbing his face tiredly. "She said there was just one target. Everyone else was random. Apparently, this target has been very hard to kill. This is the second time he's managed to live through an attempt on his life."

Paytah's eyes widened as understanding dawned. "That old son of a bitch is trying to kill Tyler!"

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“Got it in one, buddy,” Patrick nodded, following his suddenly frantic friend up the stairs, through the always-crowded and chaotic foyer, across the precinct room and into the Lieutenant’s office.

Once inside, Paytah wasted no time on niceties. “Lieu, I have to get to San Jose, right away.”

The older man arched a wintry brow at him and crossed his arms on his chest. “I don’t think so, Detective,” he answered coldly.

“Sir,” Paytah tried not to sound as desperate as he felt. “Detective Baker is in danger.”

The Lieutenant’s lips twitched. “A bit melodramatic, aren’t you, Detective Paytah?”

Pytah blew out a sharp breath in frustration. He slapped the folded newspaper on the other man’s desk, walking around to stand beside the Lieutenant.

“That’s our killer,” he pointed at the redhead at the edge of the picture. “That’s her handler,” his finger tapped the chest of the bald man. “This,” he thumped Governor Baker’s face sharply, “This is their client.”

Lieutenant Elliot was no longer amused. “Who told you that the Governor hired these people?” he barked.

Patrick stepped forward. “A highway patrolman picked her up early this morning, sir, just inside of Bucks County. I was on as the guy to call for the APB so I went down there. She indicated that Detective Baker has been the target all along.”

“Sir, I’ll pay for the flight myself,” Paytah took in the furrowing brow of his superior. “If we’re right, maybe I can save him. I don’t think we’ll be able to convince the San Jose PD that their Governor is trying to kill his grandson over the phone, do you?”

The lieutenant looked at Paytah for a long moment, considering. Paytah resisted the urge to shift from foot to foot like an anxious schoolboy.

“And if you’re wrong, Detective?” he demanded with a hint of challenge in his voice.

“If we’re wrong, I’m taking a few days leave to visit sunny California and maybe I can convince a good detective that we want him here,” Paytah waited with baited breath, feeling like both his fate and Tyler’s depended on the outcome.

“Go, Detective Paytah. I’ll call the Deputy Chief of the Bureau of Investigations over there and let them know you’re on your way.” Paytah released his pent up breath. “Just

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you!” he emphasized, looking over at Patrick. “You do what you can to get that murderer back over here and let’s try to get her locked up for the long haul, Detective O’Toole.”

“Yes, sir!” Both officers barked in unison, backing out of the room.

Before they could part company, Paytah grabbed Patrick’s arm once again. “Thanks, buddy,” he said sheepishly.

“Don’t fuck up again, Payt,” Patrick said seriously. “I love ya man, but... Just don’t fuck this up.”

Payah nodded.

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Chapter Ten

Tyler spent the bulk of his nearly eight-hour flight slowly killing off his emotions and wrapping his heart back into the frozen ball it had been before he'd gone to Philadelphia. He spent the hour layover in Dallas/Fort Worth trying not to think at all.

He was met by two detectives from his old unit and managed to greet them casually enough. Not everyone hated gay cops in general and himself in particular. Out of consideration for those non-judgmental people and the fact that they didn't deserve censure for being nice, Tyler treated them coolly.

He felt less emotion now than ever before and really didn't think anything could rattle him anymore. He knew that he'd be going over the evidence from the attack on himself and Daryl and he'd see the pictures. While he wasn't looking forward to it, he'd seen them before and knew he could handle it.

"Sorry to get you back here under these circumstances, Detective Baker," said his prior lieutenant, Rae Spencer.

Moving around her desk, she stuck out her hand and he took it, shaking it firmly but not too hard. He'd spoken to her briefly right before he'd transferred to Pennsylvania and she'd always been reasonably supportive of him. Now she seemed genuinely sympathetic and even concerned.

"I'm here to do whatever I can to help close that case, ma'am. I know it would bring comfort to Daryl's family," he said neutrally.

"I'm afraid there's more to this than I shared with you on the phone, Detective. Please, have a seat. That will be all Detective Ryan," she said to the man who'd followed Tyler into her office. She tapped a button on her phone, "Lacy," she said into the intercom, "run out and get us some designer coffee and some kind of plain rolls, please."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Spencer but really, I'm fine," Tyler demurred.

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“You’re about to get a shock, Detective. You’re going to need the caffeine jolt and you’ll definitely need something to soak up some stomach acid. Now don’t argue with me! The Lieutenant always knows best,” she aimed a wan smile at him.

“Um, okay.” His half smile was self-mocking. “Today’s a good day for this then.”

She looked at him and arched a blonde brow in question. “Want to tell me about it?”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Opening them again he said, “It was great when I woke up this morning. Yet more proof that the higher you are, the further you have to fall.”

“Well, Tyler, I’m afraid you’re just about to hit the bottom,” she said wryly.

Her use of his first name took him by surprise and brought home to him the serious nature of whatever she was about to tell him. Daryl was already dead and she didn’t know Paytah, so he couldn’t imagine what was left.

“What’s going on, Lieutenant Spencer?” he asked leaning forward to the desk. She had reseated herself when she ordered the coffee.

Before she could answer him, Lacy arrived with the coffee and rolls. She settled them on the desk with a smile for her boss and an uncomfortable nod aimed at Tyler.

The door closed behind her and Lieutenant divided the coffee and rolls between them. Finally, she spoke.

“Through a series of arrests and plea bargains,” she began, her voice tight, “We’ve uncovered evidence that what happened to you and Detective Jones was part of a hit.”

Tyler’s brow furrowed and he tilted his head, looking hard at her. “A hit?” he asked cautiously. “Who was the target?”

She took a deep breath. “You,” she released it.

“I see,” he took a sip of the coffee. “And who ordered this hit?” he asked almost casually.

“Your grandfather,” she answered with obvious reluctance.

He reached for a roll.

* * *

Payah was a nervous wreck. It had been a little more than twenty-four hours since he’d watched Tyler climb into that taxi. He didn’t know how to reach the other man by telephone and realized that he would have no choice but to go through the local Homicide Lieutenant.

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“How may I help you, Detective Paytah?” Lieutenant Spencer asked him politely, waving him to a chair.

He pulled the newspaper from inside his suit and placed it on the desk. Pointing to the redheaded woman, he said, “This is the woman who has killed four men and then attempted to kill Ty—Detective Baker and another of our detectives two nights ago.” Pointing to the bald man he went on, “This man is her handler.”

“And that treacherous bastard,” Lieutenant Spencer tapped the Governor’s face with one white-tipped nail, “ordered the whole thing, right?”

“You know?” Paytah gaped in disbelief.

“We’ve learned that he ordered a previous hit on Detective Baker that resulted in his partner’s murder,” she leaned back in her chair.

“So that’s why you wanted Detective Baker here? To press charges?” he was a little confused.

“Detective Baker is here to help us prove the murder, well murders apparently, and attempted murder,” she clarified.

“How is he going to do that, Lieutenant?” he asked, bewildered.

“When you and I are done here, Detective Paytah, you will be driven to a little shack just outside of the Governor’s home here in San Jose. Detective Baker is currently at his family home waiting for his grandfather,” she held up a hand, silencing him when he would have spoken. “He’s wired, under video surveillance and has backup within a half mile. As a courtesy, you will be allowed to stay with the surveillance team. You will *not* be going in as backup,” she stated firmly, brooking no argument.

Paytah was certain that any objection to her orders would be futile so he nodded and said, “Thank you, Lieutenant,” and stood when she called for one of the detectives who’d met him at the airport.

He hadn’t been in the surveillance shack for long when a call came through that the Governor’s limousine had just driven through the gates. All eyes turned to the twenty-seven inch screen that showed Tyler wearing a pair of torn and faded jeans, and a loose tee shirt.

Paytah felt his body tighten in reaction to seeing his lover of a few days ago looking so good but so—Tyler looked remote. It made him nervous to know how vulnerable Tyler was waiting for his grandfather to show up so that he could get a confession from him.

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As he looked on, Tyler rose from the chair he'd been reclining on and poured himself a drink. The Governor walked into the room and stopped short on seeing Tyler.

Chapter Eleven

Tyler saw his grandfather straighten to rigid attention when he noticed him. “What are you doing here boy?” he barked.

“Having a drink, Grandfather, can I pour you anything?” Tyler answered nonchalantly.

“I’ll have a glass of scotch,” the old man gritted. “How badly did things go in Philadelphia? Did they fire you?”

“I nearly got thrown off a roof a couple of nights ago. I decided that enough was enough,” he handed the drink over and leaned against the bar, waiting.

“Tell the truth, Tyler, you’re quitting because your new partner wouldn’t fuck you like the old one did,” his grandfather sneered.

“As a matter of fact, he did. Thoroughly.” He refused to consider that others would be watching. What was important was to get the old man riled enough to admit his part in Daryl’s murder.

“What’s the matter, boy, didn’t you like it?” the Governor smirked.

“I liked it better than he did, I guess,” Tyler shrugged.

“I can’t believe any man with my blood would be a “Nancy Boy”,” he growled at Tyler. “It’s always been hard to accept that we share a gene pool but a faggot? A queer? From my loins?”

“Methinks thou doth protest too much, Grandfather,” Tyler misquoted Shakespeare to the old man.

“What do you mean by that boy?” he took a menacing step forward, anger clear on his face.

“What’s the matter, Grandfather? Do you find yourself glancing at your male intern’s asses when you don’t think they’re watching? Maybe stand a little too close?” he taunted the man.

THE EDGE

Tyler didn't bat an eyelash when he saw the gun in the old man's hand. He raised an eyebrow and turned to pour himself another drink. Turning back, he sipped and waited, knowing his grandfather wouldn't let him down once he got wound up. He truly hoped that his backup had moved into place.

"You weren't bad enough, prancing around the city, drawing attention to yourself by dating all those girls one after the other," he snarled, "but then you had to go to bed with a man. Not just any man, but an openly gay black man."

"I don't see the problem Grandfather," Tyler said coolly. "Gay men vote. Black men vote. Gay, black men vote. Besides, this is California. It's politically correct to be gay here."

"It's never politically correct, you little fool!" the old man bellowed. "People look at you and think I advocate that deviancy!"

"When you and I know that you don't advocate a damn thing when it comes to me, right?" Tyler asked softly.

"Your father just *had* to marry that little blonde gold-digger," Governor Baker spat. "She got herself pregnant with you and then they went off and got themselves killed. At least you were potty-trained when they died," his lip curled.

"Come on, Grandfather, they were well insured and the sympathy vote put you in the Governor's chair," Tyler observed, never taking his hooded gaze off the old man.

"The bulk of that money went into trust for you, boy," he grated. "I barely see enough for the occasional campaign add. With you out of the way, I'd have all of it. There's an election coming up soon."

"So you're going to kill me for the money?" Tyler shook his head. "I don't see that making you look good in the polls."

"Having my beloved grandson, the decorated detective, die in a drug bust would have made me look *very* good in the polls," he declared angrily. "But no, you couldn't even die right."

"Why kill Daryl then? He was nothing to you." Tyler fought to keep the anger from his voice and knew he was only partially successful.

"He was an abomination," the Governor hissed. "He made you into one. I told those men to do whatever they wanted to him, he deserved it. I wanted you to die knowing what happened to him."

"Instead I have to live with it," Tyler gritted.

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“You wouldn’t if you’d just cooperate. I was told you refused to go off the edge of that building. I guess it’s true that if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself,” he jeered. “The strain just got to be too much for you, didn’t it boy? The voters will be shocked and saddened that you snapped and attacked me. Don’t worry, though, I’ll make sure everyone knows what a good cop you were and how hard you always fought for justice,” he sniffed theatrically, “Look at me, getting misty-eyed already.”

Tyler took one step toward him, stunned when he heard the loud noise echo in his ears. He felt like he’d been kicked by a mule as he went flying backward against the bar.

He was slumped in a heap when he managed to look up and see his Grandfather standing over him. He realized that the old man was cocking his pistol for a closer shot. That was the last thing he knew.

* * *

Paytah flipped open his badge and gave the room service waiter a twenty-dollar bill to let him deliver the sandwich to Tyler’s hotel room. As he closed the door behind him, he heard the shower being turned off.

He was halfway to the bathroom when the door opened and Tyler emerged, a towel wrapped around his hips and another being rubbed vigorously on his hair. Suddenly the younger man froze.

“What are you doing here, Paytah?” Tyler asked, his icy armor firmly in place. He had a large pink and purple bruise on the center of his chest.

“I came for you, Tyler,” he tried, but Tyler merely arched a brow and tossed aside the towel he’d been using on his hair. “You don’t call me “Tonto” anymore?” Paytah heard the pleading note in his voice and tried to smile around it.

Tyler walked over to the sandwich Paytah had placed on the table and picked it up, putting it down again almost immediately. “Tonto is a Potawatomi word that means “wild one”. It was my way of teasing you.” He gave Paytah a chilly smile. “The Lieutenant told me you were very into rules and regulations.”

“Well, I guess now you know it’s even more appropriate, don’t you?” Paytah took a step closer. “I mean since you’ve seen my wild side.”

Tyler took a step back. “I don’t feel like teasing you anymore, Paytah. What do you want?”

“You, Tyler,” he took another step forward toward his prize.

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Paytah could see fear and confusion flare in the faded denim eyes. "Leave me alone," Tyler said, a hint of desperation in his voice. "I told you, I'm not going to do this with you, just go back to Philly. I'm going away for awhile."

"I know I said sometimes but I meant all the time," he continued his advance and Tyler was searching frantically for an escape.

"No!" Tyler was pinned in the corner now with no way around Paytah's imposing bulk. Hands flat against the wall, Tyler looked wildly left and right.

"Tyler, I *do* love you," Paytah's hands dropped to Tyler's shoulders, caressing over his biceps as he pressed his hips against the younger man's. "Step off the edge with me. Let's fall together."

Defeated, the fight seemed to drain out of him as his head dropped against Paytah's broad chest. "I can't do this," Tyler whispered brokenly. "I'm not going to make it if..."

"Shh," Paytah cut him off. He gathered the smaller man into his arms and rested his head against that fluffy damp mop. "I won't let you go. I'll catch you and you'll catch me. I promise," he cupped Tyler's chin in his thick fingers, tilting his face up to see his eyes.

The panic and desolation he saw broke his heart but he refused to look away. He deserved to face the hurt he'd brought about with his careless attitude. He'd been so unnerved by his feelings for this man that he'd ignored the possibility that he was causing damage.

He lowered his mouth to cover Tyler's and gently tugged and licked at the soft lips below his. He pulled back and looked into those blue, blue eyes again and thought he saw a spark of hope.

Leaning back down, he kissed him again, gently at first, tentatively. After a few seconds he felt that beautiful mouth softening against his own, opening, wet and welcoming.

With a tug and twist, he steered his young lover to the bed. "Are you sure you can do this?" Tyler asked. Paytah knew what he meant. Could he spend forever loving Tyler? It hurt in Paytah's chest, so badly did he want this.

"Yes, I can do this, with you. Only with you," he whispered, leaning down for another deep kiss.

He stretched up and quickly stripped of his suit jacket, holster and shirt grateful he wasn't wearing a tie today. Rocking up onto one knee, he kicked off his shoes and then

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skimmed off his pants, shorts and socks quickly and efficiently. Tyler's towel had slipped off when he'd landed on the bed.

Tyler curled forward and offered his hand, and Paytah took it, rolling them both on the bed until they were side by side facing each other. Paytah reached up and ran the fingers of one hand through Tyler's hair, letting the motion continue until his hand rested on his hip, and pulled his partner to him, wrapping his left leg around Tyler's right.

Tyler purred a little at the moist, hot contact. Paytah's hips rocked forward, pressing his erection against the smooth, hot length of Tyler's, loving the hardness and the softness of it. He felt the velvet skin of Tyler's balls brushing against his own as their bodies meshed together.

He loved the feel of his partner's mouth on his throat and the hands stroking his back, the strength and warmth, the sensation of Tyler's body in his arms and pressed against him. It was going to be all right.

He turned his head and bit Tyler's neck where it ran into the shoulder, hard enough to mark but not hard enough to break the skin, and Tyler shivered and let his head fall back as he surrendered, completely beautiful.

Paytah clasped Tyler tightly against him and began to slide against the other man. Soon Tyler began to arch and buck against him, their hot and throbbing erections burning satin striking sparks off of each other.

Soon he could barely control himself and Tyler was moving frantically, straining underneath him. Tyler groaned into his throat erupting, his hot semen flowing over Paytah's own overheated shaft. With a resounding roar, he too, exploded, painting the other man's abdomen with his pearly ejaculate.

They lay in each other's arms panting. After a minute, Paytah rolled to his back, settling Tyler against him, his head nestled on his chest.

"Um, we'd better clean up," he could hear in Tyler's voice that the fear was back. He was withdrawing. "If we don't, we'll be stuck together."

"I can live with that," Paytah rumbled, "I love you Tyler." He tilted Tyler's face up and propped his other arm under his head so he could look hard into those wary blue eyes. "I'm not letting you go. If that means keeping you glued to me, fine. It won't be a hardship. Not at all."

Tyler looked at him for several heartbeats as if he was trying to read something in his eyes, on his face. His expression became one of awe and grudging acceptance.

THE EDGE

“You really mean that,” he breathed. “You really do,” he stated.

“I really do,” Paytah agreed. “We’ve over the edge. Will you hold onto me?”

“Always, Tonto,” Tyler promised, his moist eyes shining, “I love you, too.”

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Author Bio

J.J. Massa lives on the Jersey Shore with her husband and children and yellow lab. For many years, she taught and wrote for various periodicals but never seriously considered writing books. When she was laid off at her last job she decided to finish writing a story she'd begun for her own entertainment. When it was finished, she took a chance and submitted it to one of her favorite Electronic Book publishers. She hasn't stopped writing since.

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