



Wintergreen Jane Davitt

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Wintergreen

TOP SHELF

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Chapter One

"It's snowing."

Tyler opened his eyes a crack and studied the pale light seeping into the bedroom through the curtains that Dan was holding open. Yeah, it was snowing, but he didn't know why Dan sounded excited about it. It was January. Snow happened.

Dan was naked, his bare feet shifting on the spot to avoid prolonged contact with the wooden floor, which meant that when he got back into bed, he'd be pressing cold skin against Tyler. Finding out that it was snowing didn't seem worth the discomfort to come and the present lack of Dan beside him. Tyler decided that he was getting soft. Six months of sleeping with someone who squirmed close at the first sign that Tyler was awake, arms and legs wrapping around him with flattering enthusiasm, did that to a man.

On the other hand, while Tyler was currently missing out on sleepy kisses and wandering hands, he had a good view of Dan's ass and the long line of his back, winter-pale skin covered in goose bumps. He hummed appreciatively, and Dan turned, still holding the curtain, blue eyes narrowed in pretended exasperation. Not that Tyler was really looking much at Dan's face...

"Did you hear me? Snow!"

"Yeah, I heard you. Not sure why you're surprised; the storm's been forecast for a few days now." Tyler ran his tongue across his teeth and felt the fur from one beer too many the night before. "And it's snowed already this winter. On Christmas Day, the ground was white."

"That was just frost. It's *really* snowing," Dan said. He let the curtain drop back and rubbed his hands briskly over his arms. "I can't see the trees, and it's about four, maybe five inches deep."

Tyler grunted and fought off a feeling of claustrophobia. He wasn't trapped, pinned down, or helpless, no matter how much it felt that way. His truck might not be able to make it down the long lane to the road, but he sure as hell could if he had to. He reminded himself, as he did at least once most days, that as far as he knew, no one was looking for him, and if they were, the storm would slow them down -- and found himself staring at the computer desk drawer where he kept one of his spare guns.

Enough.

Dan wasn't seeing the storm as anything but pure fun, and Tyler didn't want to ruin it for him. Dan grinning and lit up was like espresso on legs, the energy and enthusiasm contagious, and if Tyler could only take small sips before he had to walk away and find some peace, well, he knew ways to harness that energy and make it work for him.

They didn't all involve Dan being naked, either; when the storm blew out, there was shoveling to be done, and it was going to be a nice change to have help with that.

Right now, though... "Get your ass over here," he said. "You're shivering."

"I'm freezing," Dan said without sounding too concerned about it. "It's cold in here. Want me to go and build up the fire?"

"No," Tyler said, and threw back the covers, shuddering as the frosty air struck at him with a spiteful slap. "I want you back where you belong."

Dan didn't keep him waiting, landing on the bed with a thud a moment later. It reminded Tyler of his mother's cat, who'd woken him up like that every day one summer vacation after discovering how to open doors with his paw. Tyler had always suspected that Fluffy had had some help from his mother with the finer details of that little trick, but it hadn't been worth arguing over. Fluffy had usually just curled up next to him, purring and lulling Tyler back to sleep, anyway.

The cat had been a furry version of a hot water bottle, though; Dan was more like a Popsicle. Tyler gasped and tried not to flinch when Dan snuggled up to him, stealing his warmth.

"I'm buying you PJs," he said darkly. "The flannel ones with feet."

Dan snorted and nuzzled his face into the crook of Tyler's neck. "You'd only get pissed when they took me too long to take off."

"True," Tyler allowed, rubbing his hands over Dan to warm him, a less than altruistic gesture. Dan felt good this close, his arms working their way around Tyler, one leg pushed between Tyler's thighs. "Maybe I'll just get you some bed socks."

"Sexy," Dan said. "Maybe I'll buy you thermal long johns. Red ones."

"Maybe I'll--"

Dan rolled them so that he was astride Tyler, the covers pulled up around his neck. He rocked his hips slowly, kindling a flame of arousal deep in Tyler's gut and the words Tyler had intended to say melted away. Silent now, his eyes half closed, Dan used Tyler's skin to get hard, the soft swell of his cock stiffening as it rubbed and brushed against Tyler's stomach.

Tyler put his hands on Dan's hips, his thumbs fitting into the hollow of bone and his fingers spread over the curve of Dan's ass. His hands knew this hold now; knew where to press lightly, where to dig in. He used his hands to urge Dan to speed up the languid shift back and forth and turned just enough to make Dan's next slow, teasing thrust meet his own growing erection.

Dan held still at the first touch of Tyler's cock, and his eyes went blank for a moment, then he let himself fall forward, his mouth greedy on Tyler's, the careful, measured rhythm lost as he bucked and writhed.

"Easy, boy," Tyler murmured, his hands making soothing passes over Dan's back. "We're not going anywhere today."

Dan choked out something incoherent, his dark hair, still shoulder-length, tickling Tyler's arm as he bit down on Tyler's neck, and Tyler allowed himself to be swept along with him. Tyler couldn't move much with Dan's weight bearing down on him, but he got his cock lined up with Dan's and clamped his hands on the meat of Dan's ass, guiding Dan's wild thrusts.

He came before Dan, surprising them both, a feeling of well-being surviving even the discovery that, between them, they'd left the bed dotted with spunk-scented damp patches.

It was time to get up anyway. The path to the woodshed wasn't going to shovel itself.

"No snow blower?" Dan looked as if he wasn't quite sure if he was being teased or not. The storm had blown itself out, and the afternoon sky was a pale blue shimmer dusted with leftover wisps of cloud. "Come on, you've got to have one."

"Yeah, I keep it in the top drawer in the kitchen. Why don't you run and get it?" Tyler shook his head. "Think, boy; if I'd had one, you'd have seen it. Of course, you'd have to use your eyes and brain at the same time, and I can see how that'd be tricky."

"Did I ever tell you how much I hate it when you channel my dad?" Dan said with a tight smile that didn't convey any amusement at all. "Don't."

Tyler didn't want to be linked with Dan's father in any sense, so he gave Dan a vaguely apologetic grimace and explained, "It doesn't snow that much out here most years, and they're noisy." Tyler liked being able to hear if there was someone coming. His lawn mower was powered by his muscles. "Besides, the exercise will do you good. Your ass has been pretty much welded to the couch recently."

"No job," Dan said succinctly. He'd taken odd jobs around town and on some of the local farms in late summer and fall, heading out early and coming home late, which hadn't pleased Tyler much. He approved of Dan's independence, but the hours alone in the cabin had passed slowly. They probably had before Dan showed up in his life, too, but he hadn't noticed it as much. Work had dried up once the tourists left and the crops were safely harvested. Tyler had gotten Dan back underfoot then, but he'd seen Dan's restlessness grow until it matched his own.

When spring came, they'd pack up and go, but Dan had wanted these months together before they set off on their travels, and Tyler had to admit that it'd been a good idea. The way he felt about Dan had mellowed and deepened after living with him. It hadn't all been smiles and sex.

He'd discovered some habits of Dan's that irritated him -- and been informed of his own shortcomings a few times, too -- and they'd had some spectacular fights. Dan, mindful of his promise not to run away again, had stood his ground with the tenacity of a bulldog, all snap and bite, and Tyler, for the first time in his life, had found himself backing down, reconsidering his position -- hell, even apologizing once or twice.

He'd begun to suspect that he was getting a back ache, not from too much sex in weird places, but from being wrapped around Dan's little finger. Filling three bowls with Halloween candy at Dan's insistence, even though no one ever came trick or treating and Tyler liked it that way, had kind of rubbed that truth in.

Dan, buzzed on sugar, had been a sweet treat all by himself, impish and tempting, sprawled out on their bed, one hand stroking his cock, the other tied -- by Dan -- to a bed post with one of Tyler's best silk ties. Tyler had leaned in the doorway, watching the show until Dan was close to coming. Then he'd tied up Dan's other wrist, sacrificing a second strip of expensive silk, and sat at the end of the bed, fully clothed. It'd taken Dan a surprisingly long time to realize that Tyler wasn't planning to touch him or to release him until after he'd come, and when he had, he'd gone from cajoling to creative as he fought for his release in every sense of the word. Tyler had looked his fill, smiling, ready to untie Dan at the first genuine sign of discomfort or panic.

In the end, Dan had relaxed, limp everywhere but his cock. "I can't do it. No one could. You've got to touch me. Hell, just breathe on me, but give me something."

"All I needed was to look at you," Tyler told him, and let Dan see the damp stain where spunk had soaked into the front of Tyler's jeans. He grinned. "I never knew I had a kink for you tied up, doing an impression of a hooked fish."

Dan's foot lashed out, and Tyler chuckled, unrepentant, then stood and stripped off his clothes. "You want touching? Or do you want me to untie--"

"Stay like that," Dan ordered, his voice husky, his eyes wide. "Just like that, oh God, look at you, just look at you--"

And Tyler had glanced down, puzzled, and missed the first spit and jerk of come as Dan's frustration ended.

He'd saved the ties. They were no good for their original purpose, twisted and creased as they were -- and not ideal for the use Dan had put them to -- but Tyler could get hard just from running them through his hands, silk-cool and light.

"No job," Dan repeated, "and no garden to look after." He shrugged. "My ass hasn't got anything better to do than to sit."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Tyler told him with a smirk.

"You think about sex more than I do," Dan said, pursing his lips in what Tyler assumed was an attempt to look disapproving. It failed to convince. "I'm going to ask Anne to prescribe you whatever the opposite of Viagra is."

"Brat." Tyler tossed a pair of gloves at him. "Here. And find a hat; I don't want you catching a cold again. I'm not sure I'd survive it."

Dan with a raw nose and a croak for a voice had been plaintively endearing for the first day. Tyler had given him chicken broth, aspirin, and a certain amount of sympathy. By day two, Dan had been fretful and demanding; by day three, dictatorial and whiny.

On the fourth day, Tyler had driven into town and stayed there until he was reasonably sure that he wasn't going to ram the thermometer Dan was insisting on using every hour into a place it had never been designed to go.

"You're going out there, too, right?" Dan asked suspiciously.

Tyler was looking forward to it. He wanted to feel his muscles ache and see something visible come of that ache. Exercise gave him the first, but not the second. "Yeah. You clear the doors and a path to the woodshed, and I'll dig out the truck. Bring some more wood into the lean-to while you're out there."

Tyler had given himself the more difficult task. The woodshed was, sensibly, close to the house, but in winter he stored his truck in a deceptively rickety shed twenty or thirty yards away, and it was going to take an hour to shovel a path to its doors and from there to the start of the narrow lane connecting Tyler's cabin to the main road.

Clearing the lane wasn't on Tyler's to-do list -- spring would come before he finished that task -- but knowing that his truck was accessible would make him feel better, even if he couldn't drive it far before the snow stopped him. His insecurities weren't logical, but he'd never asked that of them, so he didn't care.

Still grumbling about people who failed to take advantage of technological advances being un-American -- the closest Dan had ever come to expressing a political opinion in Tyler's presence - - Dan picked up a snow shovel from the nail on the lean-to wall and stomped out into the white hush that had followed the storm.

Close on Dan's heels, with his own snow shovel in hand, Tyler took a moment to breath in the crisp air. Not cold enough to turn the inside of his nose into a crackle of frozen hair and snot the way it had been on that job in Alaska, but cold enough that each inhalation left him conscious of the air funneling into his lungs. Air that bit and snapped, but playfully, given the blue skies overhead and the haven of the house behind him.

Dan was already sending snow flying up into the air, his shovel scooping the soft, powdery fluff with brisk effectiveness, his complaints ending once he started work. Tyler wondered if Peter Seaton missed Dan as a son as much as he was sure to be missing Dan as a worker. Maybe,

maybe not. It didn't matter. Dan had turned his back on the farm he'd grown up on and showed no interest in attempting a reconciliation that was doomed to failure in the long run, since Dan wasn't going to wake up straight one day, and his father, from what Dan had told Tyler, wouldn't accept him any other way.

He worked behind Dan, widening and neatening the narrow path that Dan had made, and then branched off toward the shed. A handful of snow smacked into his arm after a few minutes, and he turned to meet innocent, amused eyes.

"Must have blown off a tree," Dan said.

"I'm going to blow some down your neck if you do that again," Tyler threatened, and hid a grin. When Dan began to shovel again, he delivered a snowball of his own, tightly packed and thrown fast, that hit Dan's ass squarely, and made Dan jump and yelp.

Honors even, they worked in amicable silence, their diverging paths soon separating them past the point where conversation was easy. Drifts caused by a westerly wind had left the snow over eight inches deep in places, and Tyler was starting to get tired. Soft in body as well as mind...

He took a break, leaning on his shovel and studying what he'd accomplished and what he had left to do. His fingers were numb with cold, even inside his gloves, but sweat was trickling down his back. He was thirsty, longing not for a hot drink, or an icy cold one, but a tall glass of water from the tap, water he could gulp down steadily until he had to stop to breathe.

He went back to digging, head down, his mind soon empty of anything but the slide of the wide shovel blade into the snow and the heave, twist, throw that emptied it, ready for the next assault on the drift. The tap on his arm came as a shock, more for Dan than Tyler, since it seemed that his body wasn't as out of shape as he'd thought. He spun around, operating not on reflex but ingrained training, and flipped the shovel so that the handle was pointing forward. That brought him face to face with a startled Dan. Luckily, Dan had reflexes, too, and they were fast enough to take him out of harm's way, even if he ended up flat on his back in the snow, the water bottle he held flying out of his hand.

Shit. Tyler threw the shovel away and took a long, deep breath. Dan was glaring up at him now, surprise wiped away by anger. Mute with annoyance aimed solely at himself, Tyler stepped forward and held out his hand. He half-expected Dan to take it and pull him down into the snow, but Dan ignored both the offer of help and the chance for revenge and struggled to his feet unaided.

They stood in an awkward silence for a moment. Dan brushed his clothes free of the dry snowflakes that individually weighed nothing and collectively had placed an ache across Tyler's shoulders, his eyes not meeting Tyler's. Tyler waited for him to speak, knowing that an apology would have to be given -- Dan wouldn't need an explanation -- but needing to know Dan's frame of mind first.

"The alphabet soup guys you worked for, they trained you to do more than shoot bullets, right?" Dan said, his voice level enough to worry Tyler. Dan's emotions were always there, visible, tangible. Hidden under a thick layer of icy calm, they were so much harder to read.

"They didn't need to train me to do that," Tyler told him. "I was born knowing how."

"Yeah, knowing you, that's an actual fact, not just a figure of speech," Dan said bleakly.

"But, yes, they trained me." In a windowless room that didn't contain a blackboard and yet still smelled faintly of chalk, and on a firing range where the targets weren't paper -- dummies so real, they bled red and jerked as the bullets drilled into them. Hollywood magic commissioned by Washington suits to teach men like him not to care about killing.

"Then where the hell were you the day they taught you to tell the difference between a friend and a target?" Dan yelled, his calm shattered, for which Tyler was profoundly grateful. "Shit, Tyler, look around you! We're in the middle of the fucking woods, miles from the nearest house, and we've just had a blizzard, so I don't think anyone's going to be dropping by to say hi. And before you get on my case about creeping up behind you, I called your name. Twice." He squatted down and scabbled through the snow where the water bottle had fallen. When he found it, he stood and threw it at Tyler, who automatically put up a gloved hand to catch it. Dusted with snow, it was slippery, and he ended up cradling it to his chest as if it was something precious.

"Thought you might be thirsty," Dan said, and turned to walk away. He took two steps before pausing and glancing back. "This sucks, you know that? The way you're so fucking jumpy. There's no one out there, Tyler. Your boss wanted you back, and you said no; it's *over*. It's not like you were working for the Mob. The government doesn't kill you for retiring." He waved his hand at the trees around them, every branch outlined in white, pristine, undisturbed. "There's no one out there. No one. Just you and me, and if you don't trust me enough to turn your back on, then--"

"Stop it. Please." Tyler didn't beg, ever, because there'd never been anything he wanted more than self-respect, but he was close to wishing that he'd learned how to do it. The desolation in Dan's eyes was hurting Tyler more than the increasingly likely prospect of Dan walking away -- not running, just leaving -- as soon as the roads were clear, his patience with Tyler's issues exhausted. "I trust you, okay? And they didn't have that lesson, because we didn't have friends, any of us. Besides you, Anne's the first person I've thought of that way in, well, in years, and even she doesn't know what I used to do. There's only one person who knows all my secrets, that I trust enough to sleep next to, and that's you." He looked at the bottle he held. The top had been twisted off, and an inch or two of water was missing. He held it up. "You drank from this."

Dan shrugged. "I was thirsty, too. I finished my bottle and took a swallow from yours when I walked over here. What's the big deal? My spit has cooties now? It didn't this morning."

"The big deal? With you, nothing." Tyler uncapped the bottle and drank from it, swallowing with a throat that ached from tension. "In the field, I'd have poured this on the ground, certain that it'd

been tampered with, no matter how much I needed a drink, no matter who'd given it to me. I didn't -- couldn't -- trust anyone."

"Your life sucked back then," Dan said. "Do I tell you that often enough? Because it did. It makes me feel tired just thinking about how careful you had to be, every single fucking minute."

"Yes," Tyler said. "Every single minute. It's hard to stop. I try, and then something like this happens and I realize I'm still being careful." He capped the bottle and slid it into one of the deep pockets of his jacket. "You want me to say I'm sorry, don't you? Well, I'm sorry for scaring you - _"

"I wasn't scared." Dan met his eyes. "I've never been scared of you. Ever."

That wasn't even close to being true. The day they'd met, Tyler knew that he'd frightened the shit out of Dan, by holding a rifle on him. The boy hadn't reacted well to finding out that Tyler's old job involved killing people, either. To be fair, though, Dan had kept his chin up at that first meeting and sassed Tyler as if his heart hadn't been pounding loud enough to be heard when Tyler had gotten close. Not that Tyler planned to point any of that out to Dan. He was in enough trouble as it was.

"Then I'm sorry for getting snow down the back of your neck."

"I didn't." Dan wriggled his shoulders and winced. "Much."

Tyler spread his hands. "So what do you want an apology for?"

"I never said I wanted one at all."

"Oh, but you do." Tyler could feel frustration sharpening his words. "You want me to get better because you're around. You want to feel you've made a difference in my life. Well, yeah, you have." He looked not at Dan, but at the woods. Something was glittering in the trees, low down, about the height of a man. Sunlight glinting off the barrel of a rifle? Binoculars? He felt vulnerable, the unobtrusive dark green of his jacket that hid him in the woods making him a target against the white snow. He stared harder, his eyes watering in the breeze that was stirring the air, and decided it was nothing to worry about; a scrap of litter caught in a branch.

He knew that he'd still have to check it out before dark, just to make sure.

"Yeah," Dan said with a cynicism that he couldn't quite pull off. "You get laid regularly now. Big deal."

"That wasn't what I had in mind, but it's a nice bonus." Tyler looked at Dan, his dark hair mostly covered by a black woolen hat that made his eyes look bluer. Pretty eyes, though Dan wouldn't thank him for saying so. Time to show some teeth. "If it's become a chore since this morning, boy, feel free to go back to sleeping on the couch."

"Maybe I will," Dan said, snapping back. "But you won't like it when you wake up sweating and moaning and there's no one to grab hold of--"

"Enough," Tyler said. Dan was getting close to saying something nasty enough that Tyler would have trouble digging it out of his memory, and Dan would feel guilty about it once they'd finished fighting. "Go back inside and hate me where it's warm. I'll be done soon."

"We're done now," Dan said. "Soon as the snow's gone, so am I. And it's not running away, because I'm telling you about it in advance."

"God, you can be such a fucking brat sometimes, you know that?" Tyler shook his head. "Fine. Whatever. Go. Be nice to get some peace again."

He picked up the shovel and -- very deliberately -- turned his back on Dan and went back to work. Slide, lift, toss...

Dan slammed into his back with all the strength anger could lend a man, and Tyler fell forward, releasing the handle of the shovel and gasping as the snow met his face in a smothering, burning kiss. He turned his head so that he could breathe, but refused to fight back. Tyler had invited this attack, knowing that Dan needed the release it would give him. Cruel, bitter words... oh, yeah, they worked as an outlet, but they weren't really a weapon Dan was comfortable with, as Tyler had learned. Dan had had too much experience of how deeply they could wound when his father called him a stranger, unwanted. His fists, though, yeah; Dan didn't mind using them.

When the rain of blows started to hurt -- his left ear was hot and swollen, though Dan was mostly pummeling Tyler's back -- Tyler heaved up and rolled far enough to the side to dislodge Dan, who slid off him in a tangle of flailing arms and legs. The boy had clearly never been taught to fight; a gut full of anger only took you so far.

Dan was practically melting the snow bank at his back with his temper, his face flushed hot, his eyes sparking. All that raw, vital emotion on display... Dan didn't know how appealing that was to a man who'd spent his adult life hiding every feeling behind a carefully constructed wall.

And this wasn't a stranger, a casual pick-up. This was a man he'd fucked into blissful oblivion more than once and who returned the favor regularly. This was his personal stray cat, sickly and starved, brought into the warmth to be fed and petted. This was Dan, who was as far from understanding what Tyler was capable of as a real kitten would be, but who still, on one level at least, got it completely and only cared because the memories made Tyler a moody, brooding son of a bitch.

He captured Dan's fist when it came at his face, his hand locked around Dan's wrist. The thick gloves they both wore made his hold less secure than he'd like, but it did the job. Dan choked out a curse and threw a handful of snow into Tyler's face with his other hand, loose and soft, floating in the sunlit air like a cloud of diamond dust.

"Easy, boy," Tyler said through the siren song in his ears, the beat of his blood. Sex and violence. Peanut butter and chocolate for some, and he was starting to see why when it was like this. Dan's mouth... chapped lips, half open on an angry pant as he caught his breath, and there, right there, the pass of tongue across them, painting them shiny. Dan did that lick and pout a lot. It usually got him kissed, and he knew it.

"Don't call me that," Dan said. He jerked his hand free and stabbed Tyler's chest with a blunt, bulky fingertip. "You want me to go? Huh? You asshole! I say I'm leaving and you say 'whatever'? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

If he didn't get his mouth on Dan's skin soon, he was going to break down and tell Dan things he wasn't ready to say just yet. Too soon to spill sentiment over them like sticky syrup binding them together: I love you, stay with me, don't go.

"You're what's wrong with me. You've changed me so I don't recognize myself." It sounded like a continuation of the fight, but it wasn't. It was the truth; it was Tyler as close as he was ever going to come to flirting. "Like knowing that, do you?" he said quietly, Dan's face so close that he didn't need to do more than shape the words in this empty, white silence. Tyler wasn't worried about being seen. The narrow trail was sheltered by snow banks on either side, with rough, unbroken snow ahead; walls to hide them from view. "Like having that much power to hurt me?"

"Don't want to hurt you." Dan tugged his gloves off and slid a warm hand against Tyler's neck, working it between skin and collar. "But, yeah, it's kind of cool knowing you care, seeing as how you never fucking tell me that, either."

"Didn't say I cared. Maybe I don't. Maybe I'm just--"

"An asshole," Dan said, and ran his other hand along Tyler's thigh and then shoved it up, finding a way through layers of clothing to the bare flesh of Tyler's belly. On Tyler's neck, Dan's hand had felt warm; against his stomach, not so much. He grunted and felt his muscles tighten in anticipation of that hand moving. "You're just lucky I always seem to fall for bastards. Or attract them."

"I'm not like them," Tyler said, real anger stirring as he thought of Luke, who'd up and left Dan at the first sign of trouble, and the assholes who'd made Dan pay for rides with his mouth as he hitched across the state. "Don't you ever fucking compare me to--"

Dan's mouth twisted sourly, but Tyler guessed it was more because of the memories than because Dan was still pissed at him. "Like I ever would. You're in a class of your own."

Good to know. "You got your hands on me for a reason, boy?"

"What do you think?" Dan slid the zipper of Tyler's jeans down. "Got to be quick; my ass is numb, and the snow's soaking through my jeans."

"You want to screw around out here?" Tyler sighed, pretending a reluctance he didn't feel. "We can go back inside, you know."

"I'm still mad at you," Dan said. "It's either go back to fighting, or this. You choose." His fingers wriggled inside the narrow opening he'd created. Tyler closed his eyes as he felt the rough, awkward scrabble of Dan's fingers. So tantalizing, that touch; a fraction too light, an inch away from where he wanted it to be.

His own jeans were heavy in patches with the wetness of melting snow, but he ignored the discomfort and freed his cock, exposing it to the icy air and the waiting haven of Dan's hand.

"God, you're so fucking hot," Dan told him. Tyler watched the anger fade from Dan's eyes, replaced by intensity as Dan bit his lip and looked at what his hand was doing. "You're so hard for me," Dan whispered, and threw an arm around Tyler's shoulders, pulling him closer to be kissed, Dan's tongue licking inside in time with the flick and rub of his thumb on the head of Tyler's cock.

It was supposed to be urgent, fast, their arousal fueled by the fight, but Tyler didn't want it to end, no matter how cold he was, and Dan wasn't rushing, either.

It was strange to feel so passive. Tyler's hands, still gloved, had nothing to do but hold on to Dan. His mouth was silenced by kisses that Dan seemed to give him every time he tried to ask if there was something Dan wanted, something he could do in return. The inability to touch Dan's skin meant that all of Tyler's attention was centered on what Dan's hand was doing to him as it moved with a surety Dan had learned over the months. Dan knew Tyler well enough to make this last or end it quickly, and he was using that knowledge to bring Tyler to the brink and back, over and over.

If it was meant to teach Tyler a lesson, Dan was going to have to explain it to him later, because right now Tyler wasn't thinking about anything but the ache in his balls and a tingle that he sure as hell hoped wasn't impending frostbite.

Chapter Two

Dan waited for the sound of water hissing in the shower that told him he had a few minutes alone, and then put the book he'd been pretending to read down and allowed himself the luxury of a long, heartfelt sigh. Okay, that had been a weird afternoon. Sex outside wasn't something they did often, but on the few occasions that they'd given into temptation, it'd been warm and dark, the woods wrapping around them like green curtains.

In the middle of a snowdrift in broad daylight just wasn't like Tyler. Dan had expected Tyler to drag their asses back to the cabin and a nice warm bed, but he hadn't. He'd just let Dan jerk him off, and if the cold emptiness in his eyes when he'd swung around, holding that fucking shovel like a weapon, had thawed and brightened when he came, it wasn't enough to make Dan think that things were okay between them.

Sometimes, he was reminded of just how high maintenance Tyler was. It wasn't like it mattered, set against the way he felt about the man, but sometimes it all just got a little too fucking much.

It didn't help that there was no one he could bitch to. Anne was Tyler's friend, not his, and though Dan liked her and felt that the feeling was returned, he always had a feeling that she thought Tyler could do better than a scrawny runaway, barely out of his teens. If he'd told Tyler that, he'd have gotten a blank stare and a headshake, followed by Tyler telling him he was being an idiot. Reassuring in a way, but not all that useful.

And if Anne knew that Tyler was an ex-sniper with nerves as shot to pieces as his targets, convinced that the department he'd worked for was trying to get him back, she'd probably still think that Dan wasn't the right man for him.

There were times that Dan would have agreed with her, but not many. Tyler's gray eyes might stare through Dan as if he weren't there when Tyler woke from one of his nightmares, but at the first touch of Dan's hand, Tyler would snap out of it. Tyler was broken, but Dan, who had more than a few cracks in him, didn't mind that.

He picked up his book when the bathroom door opened and stared blindly at black squiggles of ink.

"You're reading it upside down," Tyler said as he walked past, a towel around his hips and another in his hand, rubbing his hair dry. Wet, the gray at the temples disappeared, making it all look dark, but it didn't make Tyler look younger in Dan's eyes. It took a grin to do that. "You young kids nowadays... always with the new ideas."

Busted. Dan tossed the book aside and blurted out a question he'd wanted to ask for a while now, ever since he'd asked Tyler if he had any photographs of himself and Tyler had -- eventually --

caved and dug out a creased, dog-eared envelope. Dan had expected the usual blurry photos of people smiling self-consciously into the camera, but the black and white images were crisp, even professional. Not artistic; Tyler hadn't taken hazy sunsets or a flower growing on a bomb site, but they were well-framed and in focus.

A training camp, soldiers like ants on an obstacle course, swarming over muddy ground or climbing ropes; a young man, his dark skin sweat-sheened, cradling his rifle, his shoulders slumped with exhaustion. Dan had leafed through them, picking up enough clues to guess that Tyler had taken them early on in his training. He was starting to wonder if Tyler had ever stepped out from behind the camera when he came across a less polished shot of the man, skinnier, with a buzz cut, looking serious, but with a lightness of expression that Dan had rarely seen on Tyler's face. Beside him was another soldier, blond, with broad shoulders and a blazing smile, his arm flung around Tyler's neck, his good-looking face smeared with what might have been mud, could have been blood.

He'd held it out mutely, and Tyler had shrugged. "Johnny Wilson. He's dead, like most of the men in the photographs. You've seen what you wanted to see; put them back where they came from."

It'd left him wondering, not so much about the smiling soldier from Tyler's past, who looked like a guy Dan would have gotten on well with, but about someone who was never going to say cheese for a pointing lens: a man he pictured as a faceless suit, sitting behind a desk and signing death warrants from nine to five. The man whose e-mail had left Tyler panicked and running in the summer. He swallowed and asked his question.

"Cole -- your boss -- what was he, is he, I mean -- what's he *like*?"

Tyler paused in the doorway to their bedroom for long enough that Dan didn't think he was going to get an answer. If Tyler turned away, that would end it as far as Dan was concerned. He'd learned when pushing Tyler to spill was a good idea and when it really wasn't; the subject of Cole felt about as safe as a ticking bomb.

"What brought that on?"

"Just curious, I guess." Of course, Tyler probably wouldn't get that as a motivation; Tyler never asked Dan anything about his past. Or maybe it was because he'd investigated and already knew all that there was to know?

"I could tell you," Tyler said, with just a trace of a knowing smile, "or you could find out for yourself on Tuesday. He's coming to see me."

The door closed behind Tyler before Dan could gather his thoughts enough to answer coherently. Tyler only closed that door when he wanted some alone time; Tyler needed space around him now and then after years of living by himself, and Dan respected that. He never intruded, always waited for Tyler to emerge, ready for company again.

Today, he shoved the bedroom door open with an angry slap of his hand and went face to face with a startled Tyler, already starting to cloud up.

"What the hell was that?" Dan didn't care that they'd only just gotten over one fight. He was ready to go another round or two, even knowing that more sex to paper over the cracks wasn't really an option. "You think you can just drop something like that and walk away, all Mr. Fucking Cool? Cole's coming here in two days? Since when? How long have you known?" Dan shook his head and tried to stop yelling, to achieve something more like Tyler's own icy calm when he was angry. "Guess I know why you've been so fucking jumpy now."

Tyler tossed both towels on the bed and gave Dan a nice view of a tight ass and long legs, a sight that after six months still made his mouth water, but was familiar enough that it didn't distract him for long. "Guess you think you do, but I didn't get the e-mail until an hour ago, so you'd be wrong." He picked up a clean black T-shirt from the bed and slanted a look at Dan before pulling it over his head. "Read it if you like."

Dan hesitated, and then, his pique at being put in the wrong when it was Tyler who was acting like an asshole giving way to curiosity, walked over to the computer. The message appeared on the screen after he jiggled the mouse, and he frowned as he read it.

"I don't get it."

"Yeah, you do." Tyler sounded tired, but confident in Dan's ability to make the jumble of numbers make sense. After a minute or two of staring and chewing on his lip, they did, in part, at least.

"Tuesday at four in the afternoon."

"Yep."

"16:00 hours."

"Look at you; you decoded it without a ring. Well done."

"I don't get this end bit," Dan said, pointing at it.

"Day, time, location. It's the GPS coordinates for just about where you're standing."

Dan felt his body jerk with the need to leap aside, as if a laser beam were about to bore through the roof and nail him. Stupid, but he felt targeted and vulnerable. If this was how Tyler felt all the time, his jumpiness was more understandable.

He stepped back slowly and turned to look at Tyler, who'd finished dressing, wearing thick black socks and loose navy sweats that still managed to cling to his ass. "So when do you think he'll get here? Tonight? Tomorrow?"

The corner of Tyler's mouth quirked in reluctant amusement. "Now you're thinking like me." He shrugged. "I don't know. Could be that he's already here, or he might show at four on the dot this Tuesday just because I wouldn't expect that. No way to know. We just make sure we're ready."

Apprehension curled through Dan's gut like wire, sharp and painful. "We can't take off? The truck can make it to the road... maybe."

"He always knows where I am," Tyler said flatly. "He'd find me."

"You're not--" Dan wetted his lips, not liking the way it was suddenly 'me,' not 'us.' "You're not going to--"

"Kill him?" Tyler looked tempted for a moment, Dan was sure of it, but then Tyler grinned, and he knew that he'd been had. "That would be a little drastic, don't you think -- and besides, there's no point. They'll fill his shoes before the body's cold and I'll have pissed them off for nothing." He shrugged and said more seriously, "Plus, I like Cole -- most of the time. He's not a villain, Dan; he's one of the good guys."

"You and he didn't ever -- you weren't --" Tyler didn't fill in the gaps for him this time, and Dan was forced to spell it out. "Did you ever sleep with him? I mean, the two of you, were you... together?"

"Hell, no," Tyler said, his eyes widening. "Cole's straight, as far as I know, and devoted to his wife. Even if he was inclined to play around, he'd never sleep with anyone working for him. Not his style."

"Oh." Dan rubbed his hands against his jeans, feeling unsure of just about everything right then. "Fine."

"Did you think he wanted me back because he *missed* me or something?" Tyler asked incredulously.

Dan felt his face flush with heat, because, yeah, he'd been wondering why Cole was so determined to end Tyler's retirement, and the idea that they'd been more than work buddies had occurred to him. "No, of course I fucking didn't."

Tyler gave him an appraising look and then crooked his finger. "Come here."

It was close to impossible for Dan to disobey Tyler when he used that calm, serious voice. The first time Tyler had, the day they'd met, Dan had gotten a blow job out of it, and the two events had become twisted around each other in his head. Before he'd taken his second step, Tyler's arm was outstretched and curving to gather him in for a rare hug.

"Boy, you look like someone told you Christmas was canceled and you had to give your presents back."

"Do not," Dan said into Tyler's shoulder, his words muffled by Tyler's soft cotton T-shirt. "And anyone who tries to take my laptop had better bring friends. Big ones."

The laptop had left him speechless and then achingly conscious that his own gifts for Tyler were as pathetic as could be expected on what he'd saved from minimum wage jobs. Not that Tyler had seemed to mind, turning each clumsily wrapped present -- Dan had discovered that Scotch tape was both sentient and malevolent -- over in his hands before opening it carefully and saying a few appreciative words that seemed sincere.

Well, apart from the neon green boxer shorts with the frogs on; that present had gotten Dan tickled until he was sobbing with laughter, weakly batting at Tyler's merciless fingers, and he hadn't even gotten to see Tyler in them. Tyler had buried the shorts in a drawer and refused to wear them.

"That laptop's saved my sanity, so they'd have to go through me first," Tyler assured him, as he placed his hand on the back of Dan's neck and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Don't get all big-eyed and scared. Cole's not going to drag me off in an unmarked van."

Dan disentangled himself from what was left of Tyler's hug. "First," he said coldly, "my eyes look just like they always do--"

"No, you save the Bambi look for special occasions, trust me."

"Second," Dan said after thumping Tyler's arm hard, "I hadn't even thought about him doing that, and now I am, and -- shit."

He sat down on the bed, avoiding the damp towels because he'd had enough of sitting around in soaked jeans for one day, and tried to think instead of panicking. It wasn't easy.

"He knows me," Tyler said. "He knows if he tries to take me, people will get hurt. I don't think he'll risk it. What would be the point? Plenty of people out there he can recruit; a whole army of them."

"So it's just a social call?" Dan demanded. "He wants to wish you Happy New Year, and oh, by the way, come and kill someone for us to start it off with a bang isn't on his agenda?"

"Maybe he wants me for a job," Tyler said carefully. "That's possible. But he'll just ask me, if that's the case."

Dan shuddered, creeped out by the idea of it. Snipers might save lives, looked at one way, the government wielding a scalpel and not a battle axe, but he'd seen too many movies with a cold-eyed killer blowing someone's head off from the top of a building. Snipers didn't get parades for them with crowds cheering a hero; they lived in the shadows. Tyler had been awarded a medal, sure -- Dan had seen it -- but it'd been passed to him over a desk in private, because what he did wasn't meant to be public.

"You're not going to do it, though, right?"

"You know I'm not." Tyler sat down next to him, leaving a space between them. "For one thing, if I did, I'd come back to find you gone."

Dan wanted to tell Tyler that, no, he'd stick around, but he wasn't sure that he could make it convincing when he wasn't certain that he would. On the other hand, leaving Tyler -- never seeing him again, because Dan knew if he took off, Tyler would, too -- that thought wasn't appealing at all.

"Yeah," Tyler said flatly into the dense silence. "Thought so."

"Look, if you did, I'd get it," Dan said. "National security, doing it for your country -- I know you wouldn't be doing it for the -- for the wrong reasons, but it's still a lot to wrap my head around, you know?" He pictured Tyler coming back after the mission. "Hi, honey, how was your day?" just wouldn't cut it as a greeting.

"I'm not going to do it," Tyler said. "And we don't know what Cole wants yet, so maybe we should both stop borrowing trouble. But it's something I have done, and you know it and you're still here, so I don't see why one more would matter." He held up his right hand and curled it into a tight fist before spreading his fingers wide again, flexing them slowly. "What is it, Dan? Can't face the thought of fresh blood on my hands, but you don't mind about the old kills?"

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Dan said evenly, refusing to back down.

"At least you're honest about being a hypocrite." Tyler stood and walked away, leaving Dan to stare after him, stung by his parting shot, but unable to deny that the label fit.

Sunday night brought heavy rain and high winds that soon reduced the snow on the ground, though enough remained the next morning to make the view from the cabin windows one of white and gray under a pale blue, scoured clean sky. With nowhere they had to be, and too much that they couldn't -- or Tyler wouldn't -- talk about, Dan retreated to a corner of the living room with his laptop.

Tyler had spent way too long cleaning every gun in the house with meticulous attention to detail and then hiding them again, showing Dan where each one was. Dan appreciated the trust that showed, even if he had a feeling that Tyler had other weapons that Dan didn't know about, outside, maybe, or in Tyler's truck.

After that, Tyler had holed up in the kitchen. Dan suspected that what Tyler really wanted to do was to get drunk, but that would have put him at a disadvantage if Cole showed up early, so Tyler stayed sober and morose. The same need to be a Boy Scout meant that sex was on the 'not a chance in hell' list, but that didn't matter because Dan wasn't in the right frame of mind for it anyway. Not when even mentioning it would lead to an argument. Dan pretty much always

wanted to jump Tyler, but he didn't need Oprah to tell him that make-up sex two days in a row wasn't a sign of a healthy relationship.

Instead, he researched the trip they were supposed be taking in the spring. Tyler had told Dan to make a list of everywhere he'd ever wanted to go and promised to take him to as many as possible. Dan clicked through pages without the usual fizz of excitement as he looked at places he'd only seen in movies. Some of the locations on his list were too remote or far-flung to be practical. Tyler said he had money stashed away, but he wasn't a millionaire. Not on a government salary. It didn't matter. Planning the trip was almost as much fun as doing it would be, and if it got reduced to a week on a beach somewhere, well, it would still be better than every vacation Dan had taken, because he'd never had one.

Dan stared at a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge without really seeing it and thought about Tyler's other offer -- to put him through college. That wasn't as tempting as traveling, and not only because it would split them up. Dan hadn't hated school, but when his father had told him that college was out of the question because Dan was needed on the farm, he hadn't minded or fought to be allowed to go. Farming suited him well enough. Ambitions weren't something that troubled him much, though he couldn't settle for hanging out with nothing to do.

He liked working. Liked earning. Dan's dad might have been an intolerant asshole when he'd found out that Dan was gay, but laziness wasn't one of his faults, and he'd passed that work ethic on to Dan. The past months without a job, unable to pay Tyler anything toward food or the other bills, had hurt his pride, even if Tyler hadn't wanted to take money off him in the first place.

A rich, complex smell was drifting over from the kitchen as Tyler cooked. One of the presents Dan had given Tyler was a curry cookbook he'd found in a used bookstore in Carlyle, its pages clean enough, though the cover was missing. Tyler had gone out and bought a big sack of basmati rice and herbs and spices, their bottles glowing like traffic signals, yellow, red, and green, in the kitchen cupboard. Some of his culinary experiments had left Dan's eyes streaming and the kitchen filled with an oily, smoky reek, but Tyler was getting better at producing food with enough flavor to satisfy him, yet mild enough that Dan could eat more than three bites without needing a tall glass of water.

Cooking was Tyler's way of calming down as much as a means to an end; Dan didn't have a similar outlet. When he was on edge, he yelled or stormed off, but neither of those worked well with Tyler. He usually stayed infuriatingly calm, refusing to join in the discussion once it got heated, and letting Dan's temper burn until it had nothing left to feed on and flickered out. Dan had pointed out that Tyler being mature just made him want to channel his inner five-year old that much more, but Tyler had grinned and said, "That's why I do it, boy. I thought you would've figured that out by now."

Yelling didn't seem like a good idea today, not with both of them tense, and it was too wet to walk in the woods -- assuming Tyler would have let Dan out of his sight.

Dan sighed, put his laptop down, and went into the kitchen.

He leaned against the table for a while, just watching Tyler work, deft hands chopping, stirring. Tyler looked good in a kitchen, a man who knew what he was doing. A damp, cold breeze from an open window kept the air from getting too thick, but it smelled good enough to make Dan's stomach rumble. Chicken was sizzling in a pan, and a pile of chopped onions was growing under the snick and slice of a wickedly sharp knife.

Maybe the tools were what attracted Tyler to cooking. Some of them looked lethal, including one that had been left behind by the cabin's previous owner. Neither of them had known what it was when Tyler found it wedged at the back of a kitchen drawer. They'd spent an hour inventing uses for it, ranging from the obscene to the gruesome, only for Anne to take one look at it and inform them that it was for making curls of butter and they were barbarians. She'd kept her face straight for about ten seconds after that and then burst out laughing.

When she'd gone, Tyler had picked up the twisted hook, one edge serrated, ending in a sharp point, and shaken his head. "You could do some serious damage with this and they use it to make those fancy curls of butter?"

"When it's perfect for gouging eyeballs out," Dan said, secretly glad that their game hadn't been ruined.

"Or for a sadistic manicurist."

"Or--"

Word games and gadgets weren't important today, though. All that Dan could think about was how snugly the knife fitted in Tyler's hand, an extension of it, as if he wasn't put off by the fact that it could chop through a finger without much difficulty.

"Did you always use a gun when you worked?" Dan asked, regretting the question as soon as he asked it. *Nice one*, he told himself. *Why not ask him how he got the bloodstains out of his clothes while you're at it?*

"Rifle," Tyler said, correcting him without turning. "Mostly, anyway, but let's just say if I ran out of bullets, I could improvise." He glanced over his shoulder. "Why?"

"The way you hold a knife," Dan said frankly, once he'd decided that Tyler didn't seem to mind the subject under discussion. "I never noticed it before."

"Yeah, I like knives." Tyler flipped the paring knife up high in the air, watched it twist and turn and fall, then caught it neatly by the hilt. "But I prefer a rifle."

Dan choked on a yelp. "God, Tyler, don't do that! I like you with ten fingers, thanks."

"I'm not planning on doing a Frodo impersonation, don't worry," Tyler said, using the knife to scrape the onions from the chopping board into the pot. They hit the pan with a sharp, fierce sizzle, adding another layer to the scent-drenched air.

"Frodo?" Dan frowned and then got the reference. "Oh, right, Gollum bit his finger off in the movie, didn't he?"

"In the book as well," Tyler said mildly.

"I couldn't finish it," Dan said, knowing just where this was going. Tyler's refusal to have a TV had lasted for about one month of Dan's persistent nagging. Tyler had taught him to like reading for fun, but Dan missed a TV to watch. They couldn't pick up many channels, but the built-in DVD player meant that they could watch movies, which helped to keep Dan sane. "Too long. No special effects. Aragorn wasn't as hot on the page."

"You have to use this thing called imagination," Tyler said.

"Hey, I've got imagination." Dan walked over to Tyler and ran his hand down Tyler's spine, tracing each bump slowly. "Right now, I'm imagining you naked, and if I try real hard, I could probably put me in the picture along with some, uh, some..." Dan paused, pretending to be out of ideas, and Tyler chuckled softly as he glanced back. Dan widened his eyes in exaggerated shock. "God, maybe I *don't* have any imagination." He kissed the side of Tyler's neck. "Or maybe the thought of you naked just fries my brain."

Tyler turned, his hands empty, and folded his arms across his chest. "What do you want?"

"Huh?"

"Compliments and romance... they're not really your style, boy." Tyler leaned in and kissed him, only their mouths touching, a lingering kiss that ended with a nip at Dan's lip, like chocolate flavored with chili: sweet, powerful heat in a single package. "Makes me suspicious."

"I don't want anything." Dan nudged at Tyler's folded arms until they opened and he could get closer to all those muscles and all that body heat. What had seemed too risky to ask for a few minutes ago was starting to look like it was his for the taking. "Just this."

"Again with the hearts and flowers," Tyler murmured into Dan's hair, the words tickling. Tyler moved his mouth to Dan's, and Dan closed his eyes and let the kiss melt away his worries, for a little while at least. Tyler always tasted good, but sometimes Dan couldn't get enough of kissing him, holding Tyler in place, demanding more, until Tyler either gave in and fucked him or chuckled and walked away if he wasn't in the mood.

Today, Dan just wanted a moment when Tyler's attention was on him, only him, but even though the kiss was thorough and left his lips tingling, he could tell that Tyler wasn't concentrating.

"Do you think he'll come today?" Dan said, stepping back to give Tyler space when the unsatisfactory kiss died a natural death.

Tyler cocked his head to one side, his eyebrows pulling together in a frown. "I think he's here now."

"What?" Dan felt his heart thump painfully in his chest. "Here in the house? Shit!"

"You can't hear the car?" Tyler waited for Dan to focus past the rush of blood in his ears and nod as the muffled sound of an engine registered. "It's him. Has to be."

"So what do we do?" Dan licked his lips nervously. "I could take one of your guns and stand somewhere he can't see me. Jump out at him."

"You touch one of my guns and I'll use it to beat you bloody," Tyler said without heat. "You'd shoot your foot off or put a hole in me. Plus, trying to sneak up on Cole would get you hurt, the same as it would if you did it to anyone trained, and I don't want that to happen, you hear me?" Tyler's hand cupped Dan's chin and tilted his face up for a single swift kiss. "You're not part of this fight. If it is one."

"No, but I'm connected to you." Dan jerked his chin to the side. "And if you think I'm gonna let him take you away--" He didn't finish, because "from me" was hovering in the air, waiting to drop into the conversation like a lead weight into water, disturbing it and making ripples.

The car stopped outside, and Tyler turned off the burners on the stove and walked into the front room, with Dan a few steps behind him. A gun Dan hadn't seen or felt when he'd been hugging Tyler had appeared in Tyler's hand, and he looked... different. Not scary, exactly, just a world away from the man who'd bitched him out about crunching his burned toast too loudly at breakfast and then made him a fresh stack, honey-pale the way Dan liked it, but he'd been brought up not to waste food, so he'd done his best with the carbonized slices.

Footsteps, one set of them, came up onto the porch, and there was a tap at the door. It was a soft, polite knock, and somehow that calmed Dan's nerves. Bad guys kicked doors in or hammered on them hard. He conjured up an image of a short, skinny, meek little mouse waiting on the other side, watery eyes blinking rapidly, and hung onto it in the face of logic that told him that a man like that wouldn't have been likely to be Tyler's boss.

Tyler stepped to the side and took one look through the window at the porch, a quick, assessing glance, before murmuring "Cole" and opening the door. Dan moved over to the couch, with a vague idea of giving Cole two separate targets if the man tried anything. The way he'd been standing in Tyler's shadow, one bullet would've taken care of both of them.

Cole walked in and pushed the door closed behind him, his gaze sweeping the room, a comprehensive glance that was familiar to Dan because Tyler did it all the time. Without looking directly at Tyler, he said, "John," his voice deep and calm. Dan knew that Tyler had used many different names, but he'd always assumed that Tyler was his real one. He bit back a protest and a question that could both wait until later.

Cole's voice matched the rest of him. He was an inch or two taller than Tyler, who was over six feet, his eyes dark brown like his skin, his black hair military short and silvered at the temples. If Dan had to pick a word to describe him, it would have been 'elegant.' The man breathed class, from the long camelhair coat he wore to the thin leather gloves he was stripping off his hands. He looked like a diplomat, not the head of a secret government agency dealing in assassinations.

"Tyler. Tyler Edwards." There was amusement, not reproof, in Tyler's voice, and Cole responded to it with a courteous inclination of his head and the glimmer of a shared joke in his eyes.

"Of course. How are you, Tyler?" There wasn't even the slightest stress on the final word, as if Cole was used to calling people by names that weren't theirs.

"Very well, thank you. And you?"

Dan rolled his eyes. God, anyone would think this was a social call. The brittle, eggshell-fragile politeness was shattered a moment later, not with angry words, but a deep, rich chuckle from Cole, as a handshake became a hug between the two men, brief but friendly.

"It's been a while," Tyler said, taking a step back, smiling, his eyes bright. "Come on in and have a drink."

"A glass of water would be nice. Thank you." Cole glanced inquiringly at Dan, who took a deep breath and pasted on a polite smile of his own.

"How do you do, sir?"

He might have been brought up on a small farm, but he'd been taught his manners, so there was no need for the two of them to look at him as if he was a dancing pig.

"I'm very well, thank you, young man," Cole said after a pause. He turned to Tyler. "Perhaps you'd care to introduce me?"

"I think you know more about him than he does," Tyler said dryly, "but if you want to make it official, sure. Dan, this is my ex-boss, Cole Stevens, and Cole, this is my partner, Dan Seaton. I'll get you that water."

Partner. That was the first time that Tyler had described him that way. Of course, it didn't usually come up in conversation. Tyler didn't socialize with many people, and although Dan had met a few people his age in the town over the summer, he'd never done more than shoot some pool with them after work, idling away the time until Tyler came to pick him up. He'd made no secret of the fact that he was gay if he was asked about his love life, and -- mostly -- people had been okay about it. They didn't really care; he was a stranger. Tyler was a relative newcomer, too, and they just weren't important in the scheme of things to the inhabitants of Carlyle.

Anne was the only one they really knew well enough to call a friend, which sometimes made Dan feel lonely and sometimes blessedly free after living in a place where people had known

every detail of his life. Some of them had been able to winnow out facts from gossip and rumor in a way that would put the resources of Cole's organization to shame. Hiding the fact that he was gay for as long as he had growing up, well, that had been a minor miracle.

Dan got the feeling that Cole had a lot that he wanted to say about Tyler living with a twenty-year old man, but he contented himself with another nod and sat down on the couch, a glass of tap water in his hand that he did no more than raise to his lips from time to time. Tyler took the armchair, and Dan, feeling as if he was committing a faux pas equal to perching on the arm of a throne, sat next to Cole. His feet seemed too big, and his hands were sweating. Cole was freaking him out.

"So..." Tyler said. "You're a little early."

Cole nodded. "I found myself in the area. I hope that I'm not interrupting any plans you had?"

Tyler snorted. "Cut the crap, Cole. You thought you'd spooked me and I'd run, so you moved the meeting forward."

"It crossed my mind that I might find you missing." Cole shrugged. "But where would you go?"

As threats went, it packed a punch. Dan saw Tyler's lips tighten, but when he replied, his voice matched Cole's for calmness. "Anywhere I want to, Cole. I don't answer to you now, remember?"

"I would like it if you still did," Cole said. "Your talents are needed as much now as they ever were."

"You're being very careful," Tyler said, "but Dan knows what I did."

For the first time, Cole's equanimity was lost. He stiffened, the water in the glass he held coming close to spilling out. "You signed non-disclosure agreements. The work you did is top secret--"

"He knows my job," Tyler clarified. "You know I wouldn't tell him more than that."

The snap of anger in Cole's voice wasn't going away anytime soon. "That was more than you should have told him. I'm surprised at you, John."

"I'm sitting right here," Dan said tartly. He didn't like the way Cole was using what he assumed was Tyler's real name as a slap on the wrist. Time to do some damage control, since Tyler had fucked up big time. "Tyler's telling you the truth; all I know is that he was in the army and saw some action and it got too much for him. Nothing to be ashamed of. I had an uncle come back from Vietnam the same way."

"Frederick Seaton," Cole said quietly, turning his gaze onto Dan. "He took his own life when you were twelve. I'm sorry."

Dan stood, feeling sick, his heart beating uncomfortably fast, a bug under a microscope. He hated knowing that Cole had carefully, coolly gathered up every detail of his life this way, just in case it was useful as a weapon or a goad. It was too close to what Dan knew Tyler had done with his targets before he'd killed them. Creepy as hell. "Yeah, I bet you are. You know what, I'm just gonna, um, let you two catch up. I'll be--" He waved his hand vaguely at the bedroom.

"I couldn't possibly make you feel unwelcome in your own home," Cole said smoothly. He raised his eyebrows at Tyler. "Perhaps we could take a walk? Not too far, of course. It was a long drive, and I'd like to stretch my legs."

"Sure," Tyler said after a long moment of staring at Cole in silence, his face empty of expression. "A walk. Why not?"

Tyler touched Dan's arm as he walked past, a question in his eyes: *are you okay?*

Dan just shook his head, a bleak chill spreading over him as Tyler and Cole left.

This really wasn't going to end well.

Chapter Three

"So," Cole said as he walked slowly along a shoveled path to a bench Tyler liked to sit on in the summer, his polished shoes gathering a crust of snow. "Mr. Seaton."

Tyler tensed at the mention of Dan's name, as if Cole talking about him could put Dan in danger, which was ridiculous. Dan was one of the citizens Cole devoted his life to keeping safe, after all. "What about him?"

"He's an unexpected addition to your life."

Tyler had to admit that it was the perfect word to describe Dan, from Cole's point of view at least. "Yeah, it felt that way to me, too, but it's working out."

"A little young for you, perhaps?" Cole asked, clearing his throat.

Tyler smothered a grin. Cole could be diplomatic and tactful when the job required it, negotiating with smooth finesse, but when it came to something personal, like one of his former agents falling for a kid just out of his teens, that finesse began to look a little ragged.

Tyler didn't really want to watch Cole squirm, though. Cole was his boss, and Tyler trusted him. Not with his life; Cole would have signed that away if he thought that the nation needed it. If the man had a favorite saying, it was probably Jefferson's assertion that the tree of liberty needed the blood of patriots and tyrants to nourish it. Cole kept the tree well watered. The other stuff, though, like protecting his people from assholes in government and sometimes themselves, because agents had been known to crack spectacularly at times -- that, at least, Cole did well.

"He's twenty-one in the summer," Tyler said, and cursed the unexpected defensiveness he heard in his voice. He didn't have to explain his relationship with Dan to anyone, least of all his ex-boss.

"A little young for you," Cole repeated. "From what I recall of your previous, ah, partners, they were all your age and type, and they didn't last long enough for you to remember their names. Mr. Seaton is young in thought, body, and experience--"

"Old enough," Tyler said. "And not as innocent as you think, or as sheltered. When we met, he was starving and he'd been trading sex for rides."

"Innocent and stupid," Cole clarified. "And he's stuck around long enough to know all about you. Interesting. You don't find that in the least suspicious? Or are you as good in bed as you are with a rifle?" He smiled. "Please don't answer that; I'd rather not have to think of you as quite that deluded."

"You're a cold-hearted bastard at times, you know that?" Tyler kicked at a jagged lump of ice on the path and watched it splinter. "He's a survivor. He dealt with his father turning his back on him, and he got through a month alone on the road. And he stayed cool as a cucumber when I found him picking berries on my land and came close to shooting him."

"But you didn't," Cole pointed out as they reached the bench, skimmed white with snow and too wet to use.

Tyler gripped the back of the bench and felt the wood creak under his gloved hand. "You don't know how close I came. Listen, Cole, I was good at what I did, yes, but not now. My hands shake. I wake up sweating, screaming." He swallowed, the words difficult to say. He hated admitting a weakness, especially to Cole, hated seeing pity or sympathy in someone's eyes. Dan never looked at Tyler like that, which was one reason Tyler had kept him close. One. "I can't do it anymore. I'd get killed, and, more importantly as far as you're concerned, I wouldn't complete the mission." His voice cracked, shaming him, and he steadied it, growling out, "I'm a fucking liability; why can't you see that?"

"I know you are," Cole said with a killing kindness. "There's no question of you going back into the field, and I'm frankly astonished that you even -- well. You're not yourself."

"That's right," Tyler muttered. "Make allowances for me."

"Enough," Cole slammed his hand down on top of Tyler's, the force of the blow less of a shock than the action itself. Cole didn't touch people often. "Enough self pity. Enough hiding here in this nowhere place with your stray puppy. I need you. Your country needs you."

Only Cole could say something as corny as that without a flicker of self-consciousness.

"I've got nothing left my country wants," Tyler said, and tugged his hand free. "Killing was what I was good at, and I can't -- don't want to -- do that now."

"You had a brain as well as a trigger finger," Cole said. "You used to use it, and it showed in your results. You were painstaking, thorough, coupled with the capacity for intuitive, imaginative thought; do you know how rare that combination of qualities is? And you were completely trustworthy, though that seems to have changed." He stared back at the cabin and clicked his tongue impatiently. "I find it difficult to believe that you told that young man what you were. Foolhardy and reckless in the extreme."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Tyler said, defending himself with flippancy and knowing just how much it would irritate Cole.

"Endangering a man you have feelings for seemed like a good idea?" Cole said. "Really? Next time, send him flowers."

Guilt swamped Tyler. He'd thought vaguely from time to time that maybe it hadn't been the smartest of moves to share his secrets with Dan, but the reward of Dan's trust and acceptance had seemed worth it. "He's not in danger if he keeps his mouth shut, and he will."

"When he's offered money to betray you? Possibly, although your relationship is hardly all that -- never mind. Drugged? Under torture? I doubt it."

"Why would anyone bother?" Tyler said, made irritated and uneasy by Cole's scenarios. Dan and torture just didn't belong together. "It's been a few years, Cole; any secrets I knew are stone-cold now. I'm not a risk or a threat, and all I want is to be left alone. Christ, is that so hard to understand?" He took off his gloves, impatient, not grateful, at the way they muffled the feel of the cold air on his skin, and stuffed them into the pockets of his coat. "So you want me to help you with something that isn't a hit? Why me?"

"Because there's a leak in the department, and you're the only one I know can't be involved." Cole's lips were a straight, unforgiving line. "You left before it began, and I know that you've made no contact with anyone because I've made it my business to know."

"A leak?" Tyler grimaced. That was bad news. A target found out in advance that he or she was on the hit list, and the mission got that much harder and often fatal for the sniper involved. "Are you sure?"

"Sam DeLuca, Emily Rhodes, and Damian Street are sure," Cole said. "Three hits, three agents down, and three targets still breathing, all in the space of six months. Would you like to tell me that it was carelessness on their part? Do you want to talk about bad luck in a high-risk job?"

"Shit, no, of course not." Tyler closed his eyes until he could bear to look at Cole's face again, twisted with anger and grief as it was. The loss of the agents wouldn't have struck home as deeply as the knowledge that there was a traitor in the department. The first was regrettable, but expected from time to time; the second unforgivable, since it meant that Cole had screwed up and let his people down. "They were good," he said quietly. "One of them, hell, maybe even two, might have gotten sloppy, but not all three."

"They were confident and well-prepared," Cole said tightly, his control still ragged around the edges. "I wouldn't have green-lighted the missions if they weren't. The jobs were standard, as much as they ever can be. They met with failure because they were betrayed. They didn't just die; they were captured, killed, and their bodies left where they'd be found. Too many similarities there, too -- I suspect whoever warned the targets told them what to do with the bodies."

That was the conclusion Tyler would've come to as well. Shit.

"I'm sorry," he told Cole, aware of the inadequacy of the words, but needing to say them.

Cole gave him a sharp look, his customary calm restored, on the surface, at least. "Sorry for the loss of three people you once worked with and, as I recall, liked? Or sorry that you can't help me because you persist in the assertion that you're damaged beyond repair?"

"Both," Tyler said shortly. "If you want me to find your leak, well, I can't. You said it yourself; no one would believe that I'd come out of retirement, and I'd need to be involved, get to know the players... You'd just spook whoever it was, because it'd be obvious what I was doing. Use your own Internal Affairs. Hell, shoot 'em all up with babble juice or hook them to a lie detector."

Cole snorted. "You know how pointless that would be. No, what I had in mind was less hands on. I was hoping that if I gave you the names of the six people I suspect, and as much information as I have, you could find the person responsible. You wouldn't even have to leave this charmingly rustic retreat of yours if you didn't want to."

"As easy as that? I'll get onto it in the morning and discover a cure for the common cold after lunch," Tyler said dryly. "Cole, if it was possible to do it that way, you'd have done it yourself."

"No. I tried. I can't trust this to anyone else, and I don't have time--" Cole's face twisted with frustration again. "I can't make the connections the way that you do. I can't dig as deeply. And... these are people I work with. I look at them after reading their files, and I see them--"

"Through a glass darkly. Yeah, I know." Suspicion and mistrust were insidious emotions and easy for the traitor to identify. If the person selling information picked up on Cole's doubts, then the next hit, the next body, might be closer to home. Something told Tyler that Cole was making this sound simpler than it was, but refusing to help was impossible. He'd had no choice but to resign when his nerve had gone, but it didn't mean that he felt no guilt about walking away. Cole wasn't the only one driven by patriotism.

He took a deep breath and released it, letting it take away some of the nagging anxiety he'd been feeling. This wasn't a problem. Cole just wanted him to do research. It was even good to know that, for all that had happened between them, Cole still trusted him. Their relationship had been based on respect, and Tyler had felt more than one pang of regret at the thought that Cole would have seen his resignation as a kick in the teeth. "Okay. I'll take a look at what you have, but I can't promise anything."

"Thank you," Cole said. He cleared his throat. "Do I need to tell you that the details of this investigation cannot be shared with young Mr. Seaton, for his own safety as much as anything else?"

"I'll need to tell him something," Tyler said slowly, already framing suitably vague explanations in his head, "but I'll keep it non-specific."

"He could, perhaps, be relocated until your work is done?" Cole suggested. "Or you could find an alternative place to stay and leave him here? Failing that, I'd be more than willing to pay for him to go to somewhere that would appeal to a boy his age."

"Disney to shake hands with Mickey?" Tyler said. "Cole, he's twenty, and he's not going anywhere, and neither am I. I'll take care of it."

"Very well," Cole said, his reluctance plain. "If you change your mind..."

"I won't. Drop it and let's get down to business. You're going to need to reinstate my clearance so that I can access the databases I need." Tyler dug his cold hands into his pockets. "Can you do that without setting off any alarms?"

"No," Cole said without hesitation. "I can't."

"Cole--" Tyler protested. "You're tying my hands here."

"For some of them, I'll give you my passwords." Cole smiled thinly at Tyler's jerk of surprise. "I'll change them after this is over, of course. For the databases I'd have to access on site with biometric checks, you'll have to tell me what you need to know and I'll take it from there. For now, start with this."

Cole took something out of his pocket, small enough to fit in his hand, and passed it to Tyler.

"A flash drive?" Tyler turned it over in his hand, giving it a dubious look. "What's on it?"

"Everything I have," Cole said simply. "Files on the suspects, the three targets, the agents who died. It's encrypted; check your e-mail for the key. I'll send it tonight. Computer logs, security footage -- I have those in the car."

For a man who didn't let his right hand know that his left had put toothpaste on the brush, all this was a sign of trust so profound -- and an indicator of how seriously Cole was taking this -- that Tyler was left with nothing to say.

"Anything else you need?" Cole asked, his words dry, as well they might be given what Tyler was holding.

Habit kept Tyler from revealing too much of what he felt, although it would have been darkly amusing to see Cole's reaction to a sentimental outpouring from him. "I don't know yet. Maybe." Tyler shrugged. "I'll manage."

"You always did," Cole murmured. "Very well, if I recall."

They arranged the routine details about communication of any questions or results in short, guarded sentences, their voices low from habit, standing close enough that their lips couldn't have been read by anyone watching from a distance. It wasn't what he'd wanted, but part of Tyler was stirring awake after a long sleep, invigorated, eager. God, was he actually looking forward to working again? The thought of that scared him spitless.

They began to walk back to the cabin, the sparse remnants of the snow crunching under their feet. The sun was going down, and it was getting colder, the bare branches of the trees stark against a pale pink sky fading to blue.

"It's peaceful here," Cole said, as if he'd only just noticed and Tyler didn't know already. "Quiet. Restful."

"You'd hate it," Tyler said before Cole started to talk about coming out in the summer for some fishing and embarrassed himself. "You're a city mouse, Cole."

"True."

"You're welcome to stay the night, if you like." Tyler knew that Cole wouldn't want to spend the night away from his wife, Sonya, unless he was forced to, but the offer had to be made.

"It's a long trip to the nearest airport," Cole said, "and I can't be away overnight without questions being asked."

Tyler nodded and wondered what Cole had done to keep this trip secret -- if he had. "I have one question of my own."

"Oh?"

"Who do you think it is?"

Cole shook his head. "No. I don't want to influence your investigations."

"So there is someone at the top of your list."

"I have suspicions, yes. I need facts." Cole gripped Tyler's arm, bringing him to a halt in front of the cabin. "Find them for me, John."

Tyler didn't bother to correct Cole this time; he'd learned to answer to many names over the years and lost any attachment he might have had to the one his parents had given him. "And when I do?"

Cole just stared at him, face impassive.

"No."

"One last time. You don't need to use a bullet. There are plenty of other ways."

"No."

"Oh, very well," Cole snapped as Dan appeared in the cabin doorway, his glare at Cole telling Tyler that Dan had heard the last part of their conversation at least. "Let me get you what you'll

need from my car." He glanced at Dan and then back at Cole. "And remember what you promised," he said, pitching his voice low enough that Dan probably couldn't hear him.

"I didn't promise anything," Tyler said as Cole went to the car, and didn't bother to whisper it.

"Well, that was a flying visit," Dan said. Tyler looked like shit, the way he was after a bad dream, his face a washed-out color, shivering as if he was cold and wet and naked. He'd held it together until Cole had driven away, and now he was losing it as Dan watched.

"Cole doesn't m-mess around when he's got something to s-say," Tyler managed to say through the shuddering. Dan could hear his teeth chattering. "Good news: he doesn't want me to kill anyone."

"Good," Dan echoed as he sidled up close and put his arm around Tyler. "Bed."

"It's a little early, don't you think?" Tyler didn't put up much resistance as Dan guided him toward their bed, which was a worrying sign. "And if you planned to jump my bones, forget it."

"Yeah, you're irresistible when you're sweaty and look like you're about to throw up. I can't keep my hands off you. *Bed.*"

He got Tyler tucked in and then filled a hot water bottle and used the kettle he'd boiled to make a hot toddy, heavy on the whiskey and honey. His grandmother had shown him how to make them as a kid, when he was way too young to drink them. Amber whiskey and a translucent drizzle of honey, topped with a splash of lemon juice, the whiff of citrus tart enough to make his mouth water, and a dash of ginger. She swore her toddies had kept his grandfather alive one winter when he had bronchitis, and she could have been right, given their pungency. If he could get a few swallows of toddy into Tyler, Dan was pretty sure the shaking would stop.

"Don't want anything," Tyler said when Dan walked into the bedroom. His eyebrows shot up incredulously and then came together in a frown. "A *hot water bottle?*"

"It's *your* hot water bottle," Dan pointed out. He flipped the sheets back and tossed the bottle next to Tyler, who glared at him and then reluctantly dragged it against his stomach. "Drink this."

Tyler sniffed suspiciously, but must have approved of old-fashioned remedies, because he sat up and held out his hand for the heavy earthenware mug, sturdy enough to have survived months of Dan's rough and ready washing up without a chip. Dan liked the smooth glaze on it and the deep blue color, patterned with swirling shapes his brain kept trying to make into objects and failing.

Dan sat on the bed, put the mug into Tyler's hand, and helped him raise it to his lips, steadying it.

"Do you mind?" Tyler snarled, batting at Dan's hand. "I'm not an invalid, and last time I looked, I wasn't a baby, either."

"Fine. Spill it and sleep in a swamp, because I'm not changing the sheets."

"Boy, you get any bossier and I'll--" Tyler broke off to gasp as the first swallow hit him. "Shit, that's strong."

"Yeah," Dan said. "Pass it over. I could use some, too."

He took a healthy gulp and felt sweat break out on his forehead. Granny would approve. "Whoo-hoo, that's good."

"Yeah, it hits the spot," Tyler said grudgingly. "Give it back to me. It's going to get you drunk."

"I can hold it," Dan protested.

"Two beers and you're slopping all over me; three and you're close to passing out," Tyler said, which was an exaggeration Dan intended to take issue with when he'd gotten Tyler back to normal.

Dan handed the mug back and watched Tyler sip at the hot liquid, his eyes heavy with tiredness, some color coming back to his cheeks.

"So why did he come if he didn't want you to go back to... you know?"

Tyler gave him a sidelong look. "Would it work if I said I didn't want to talk about it?"

"About as well as it worked when you said you didn't want to go to bed and you didn't want a hot water bottle." Sometimes, Tyler just walked right into it.

"Thought so." Tyler tapped the side of the mug with a finger. "Mind if I finish this first?"

"Nope."

Dan settled down next to Tyler, close enough that their arms touched, so that he'd know when Tyler began to relax, tight muscles loosening. He'd learned not to push at times like this, and sometimes to just walk away and let Tyler battle the demons alone. Mostly, though, he just got close and held on, and that worked well enough.

When the mug was empty, Tyler sighed, put it down on the bedside table, and turned to Dan, pulling him in for a hug. The quilt and the lump of the hot water bottle were barriers, but Dan ignored them, nuzzling into Tyler's neck and enjoying, as always, the comfort to be had in Tyler's muscular solidity. Tyler felt good to hug; it was simple as that.

"He's got a, uh, a research job for me," Tyler murmured sleepily into Dan's hair. "That's all. Going to need the computer and some privacy, but after that, suppose we take off, huh? Find a sunny beach and get smashed out of our skulls on drinks with paper umbrellas in them. Live the tourist cliché for a while."

"I like beaches, and I'll go anywhere you want to," Dan said, choosing his words carefully as he processed the shreds of information Tyler had given him. "What kind of research?"

Tyler sighed. "Can't say."

"Why choose you to do it?"

"Ditto."

"Are they paying you? I mean, is it official?"

"That never came up," Tyler admitted. "Probably not, no. It doesn't matter. It's not the kind of work I want to be paid for."

"That's not reassuring, you know." Dan fell silent for a moment and then asked one final question. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Tyler stroked his hair and then moved a hand down to the back of Dan's neck, fingers finding places to touch that make Dan do some shuddering of his own. Tyler knew him too well now. "You can bring me coffee and ignore me when I get bad-tempered."

"Same old, same old."

"Yeah." Tyler yawned. "Okay, I'm going to sleep off that drink." Dan's stomach grumbled loudly, making him grin, and Tyler gave him an apologetic look. "Shit, I was cooking, wasn't I?"

"I can follow a recipe," Dan said, "and you'd done most of the hard work before company showed up early. I'll save you some if I'm feeling in a generous mood or you've put in too much of whatever it is that makes it hot."

"Don't burn the house down," Tyler said, the words sleep-slurred. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it, John-boy," Dan said, and rolled off the bed before Tyler's hand, reaching out with surprising speed for a man half-asleep, could grab him and exact a penalty for the nickname.

Chapter Four

Tyler woke the next day with an odd combination of relief and stress battling it out inside him. The visit from Cole had gone better than he'd expected, but the problem that Cole had given him to solve was a tangled mess that made his head ache. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away...

In the past, when he'd been given an assignment, he'd deliberately taken a day off before starting his research into his target. The few times that urgency had dictated a less leisurely approach, he'd felt off-balance and vaguely resentful, as if something had been taken from him. The day hadn't involved any esoteric rituals. In the morning, he would clear his schedule and deal with the mundane tasks: paying bills, answering e-mails, cleaning his apartment, and stocking up on food.

In the afternoon, he would hit the gym and wear himself out, then shower, get into clothes that showed off his muscles and an ass he knew looked good in tight jeans, and go from bar to bar until he found someone he wanted to fuck him.

Nothing like sitting down at his computer the next day with that pleasurable, deep-down throb to remind him that his life held more than death and danger. Not much more, maybe, but you took what you could.

He was going to need to take that preparation day again, after so long away from his job. He was rusty as hell and just not in the game mentally.

Tyler rolled to his side and gave a sleeping Dan a considering look, idly comparing him to those carefully chosen one-night stands. The only similarity was that Dan was male. The men Tyler slept with had usually been carbon copies of himself: tall, built, around his age. Tough enough to take whatever Tyler felt like dishing out and give it back to him without qualms.

He was going to need to make some changes in his routine, that was for sure, but that was okay. He was adaptable.

Dan squirmed, muttered something unintelligible, then groped blindly in Tyler's direction. Amused, Tyler captured Dan's hand in his and brought it up to his mouth. The bite to Dan's middle fingertip was gentle, but it still made Dan's eyes fly open.

"Hey!"

"That didn't hurt," Tyler told him.

Dan yawned and freed his hand. "Still not how I want to be woken up."

"No?" Tyler raised his eyebrows. "Want to give me a detailed description and I'll see what I can do to make your dreams come true?"

Dan frowned. "Did you wake up with amnesia or something? Last night you were freaked as hell."

"And this morning, I'm fine," Tyler said, striving for patience. "Jesus, can't I be nice to you without an inquisition?"

That got him a repentant kiss that landed on his chin. "Sure. Sorry. Uh...God, I don't know. I only just woke up."

"Take your time," Tyler said grandly. "Today, I'm all yours."

"Huh? Shouldn't you be leaping out of bed and doing stuff for Cole?"

"Tomorrow, I will. Today, I won't." Tyler sighed, hating the need to explain. "Look, it's a -- a thing I do, okay? Before I start a job, I always take a day to smell the roses. I always knew once I went under, I wouldn't be focused on anything but the job, and that's what it's going to be like from tomorrow. And you're going to hate it."

"So today's a chill-out day?" Dan pursed his lips. "Makes sense, even if I don't like the idea of you turning into a zombie tomorrow."

Something told Tyler that Dan hadn't taken his warning seriously, but he didn't push it. Maybe this wouldn't take long, and Dan would handle being ignored for a while with good grace.

And maybe it was raining beer outside, not more icy rain, pattering against the window.

Dan hummed thoughtfully. "So what did you do for fun back in the day?"

"Got sweaty. Got drunk. Had sex," Tyler said succinctly.

"Caveman." Dan drew his thumbnail over Tyler's nipple and back again, getting it to harden in seconds. "Is that what you want to do today?"

"Some of it," Tyler said, "but this is your show."

"Why is it?" Dan wasn't meeting Tyler's eyes now, his attention seemingly on the patterns he was tracing on Tyler's chest with his finger, random swirls and lines that left Tyler's skin tingling. "You're the one who needs to do whatever you like before you chain yourself to the keyboard."

"Before, there was only me to think about," Tyler said. He was still getting used to the novelty of having Dan's wants and needs to consider, but he didn't regret the change. "Trust me, this is

going to be harder on you than it is on me. I'll be busy; you'll be bored. So decide what you want to do today, and we'll do it. Go out, watch a movie, drive somewhere -- anything you like."

"I like the things you used to do," Dan said with disarming frankness. "I guess we can skip getting drunk right this minute, but the sweaty sex sounds like a good way to start the day."

"It does, does it?"

Dan nodded. "And I get to say what we do."

"And I go along with that because?"

Dan's hand dipped lower and stroked Tyler's stomach, a bare inch too high to touch anything more interesting. "Because it might make me cut you some slack when you go all growly and snarly on me and piss me off."

If only it was that simple. "Sounds like you've got it all planned out."

"Not really," Dan admitted, "but I can make it up as I go along, right?"

Tyler kissed him, feeling indulgent. "As long as it doesn't involve me dressing up, or you discovering a kink for spanking or something."

Dan snorted. "If I tried to spank you, you'd break my wrist in three places."

"I wouldn't do that," Tyler said, "and today, if I thought for a second that you wanted to, I'd let you. I wouldn't like it, but I'd let you."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" Dan put his hands on Tyler's shoulders, kneading them slowly. "I really get to call the shots, and you'll go along with it?"

"I'm having second thoughts even as I speak, but yeah. Just be gentle with me, okay?"

Dan flapped his hand dismissively. "Come on, Tyler, you know me; I don't have any kinks."

"Oh, yes, you do," Tyler said, "but they match mine well enough that they don't stand out."

"Name one," Dan challenged him.

"You really get off on me doing this," Tyler said, and pinned Dan to the bed in a single smooth movement that came easily, his hands tight around Dan's wrists. "It scares you a bit being held down, but you trust me enough to get a kick out of it, like a kid on a ride he's too young for. You're safe, but who knows if the ride will break and send you flying?"

Dan licked his lips. He was hard, his erection solid against Tyler's stomach. "Okay, maybe I do, but today's going to be different, so let go of me."

Surprised and a little intrigued, Tyler released Dan's wrists and leaned on his elbows to take his weight off the man beneath him. "Now what?"

"Suck me," Dan said bluntly. "And do it really well. Show me what you've got. Blow my mind as well as my dick."

The commanding voice, the certainty in Dan's expression, combined to make Tyler feel younger, a raw recruit blindly, hopefully obeying orders barked out by what at the time had seemed to be sadists in uniform. Looking back, he could see that the sadism had been a carefully calculated method of quickly weeding out the ones who'd never make the grade, but if it'd saved him running endless punishment laps in full kit and a heavy pack, he'd have blown every sergeant on base.

Or maybe not. He'd been just as stubborn back then as he was now, and the laps had toughened him up, something he'd been dimly aware of even as he joined his fellow recruits in cursing out the men in charge of them.

"I can do that," he told Dan, and allowed himself a smile, anticipatory, even predatory. He loved reducing Dan to incoherence and watching every inhibition Dan had shred away, leaving Dan open, needy.

Dan smiled back at him, a challenging smile that added spice to what wasn't an unusual way for them to start the day. "So use your mouth for more than talking."

Brat. Tyler slid off Dan and rummaged in the bedside table for the bottle of lube.

"I said suck me, not fuck me."

"I heard you," Tyler said, his voice mild. "I also heard you tell me to show you what I've got. I've got fingers. Want me to draw you a picture of where I plan to put one or two of them?"

"No, I think I can figure it out," Dan said. He settled himself against his pillow and spread his legs to give Tyler room to kneel in front of him. Without the covers, the room was cool, but Tyler's shiver wasn't solely due to goose bumps.

"You look good like that," he told Dan, surprising himself. He didn't go in for compliments or mush, but Dan, sprawled out and hard, dark hair sleep-tousled, was sexy as hell.

Dan didn't reply, unless the slow arch of his hips as he raised his ass off the bed for a moment was meant to say more than "get on with it".

Ignoring the throb of his cock, which would have appreciated a touch, Tyler trickled lube over his fingers and, holding Dan's gaze, ran them slowly over Dan's balls. Dan's breathing quickened slightly, but that was all the reaction Tyler got. He took his time playing, until Dan's balls were tight and high, and then drizzled cool lube directly onto them, not caring that it was running

down to soak into the sheet. He put his hand between Dan's legs, his palm cupping the slicked balls with their dusting of silky hair, his fingers crowded together, filling the tight space. Slippery, hot, the smooth skin leading back to Dan's hole invited a touch, and Tyler pressed in firmly with his middle finger, knowing how good that felt when it was done to him.

Dan's breath hissed out, and he arched again, his mouth set as he held back a whimper Tyler wanted to hear. As slicked up as Dan was, Tyler didn't have any difficulty in working his finger deep, but he didn't rush. He leaned over, the bob and point of Dan's cock close enough to kiss or lick, and set up a rhythm of thrust, pull back, steady as a heartbeat.

Tyler was expecting Dan to order him to get on with it in a voice that was close to shaky, but what he got was Dan reaching up to run a hand over Tyler's face, exploring it as if it was the face of a stranger. Eyebrows were traced, Tyler's cheek was cupped, and then Dan slid his finger into Tyler's mouth, fucking it in time with each thrust of Tyler's finger into his ass.

Tyler licked and sucked Dan's finger assiduously, as if it was what Dan really wanted him to be working on, his eyes promising to do even better when his mouth was filled with Dan's cock. It felt as if they had a whole silent conversation going on with the looks they were exchanging, proof of the intimacy their time together had fostered. They knew each other. Tyler wasn't sure anyone had ever gotten as close to him as Dan had, even if he still wasn't quite sure how the kid had managed it.

When he'd had enough, he thrust his finger into Dan's ass as far as it would go, a fast, hard shove that he wouldn't have done at the start of their game when Dan was tight and dry, and left it there. Dan made a sound deep in his throat and stilled the movement of his finger.

Tyler bit it, his teeth digging in with more force than Dan had expected, judging by the small gasp. The answering clench of Dan's ass around Tyler's finger made Tyler chuckle, though, allowing Dan to tug his spit-wet finger free, his lips twitching in a smile.

As eager to taste Dan as he'd ever been, Tyler settled himself comfortably and used his free hand to hold Dan's cock at just the right angle to be teased and tormented. After months of doing this, he knew what Dan liked, which was pretty much what every man Tyler had sucked off enjoyed. With arousal heating his blood and a stiff cock to motivate him, Tyler licked circles around the head of Dan's cock, his hand tight around its shaft, the musky, familiar taste heavy on his tongue. He bit lightly at it, then blew on the wet, taut skin, cooling it. Then, knowing from experience how much of a turn-on it could be, rubbed the swollen tip across his closed lips and then his cheeks, painting them with saliva and pre-come, and made sure that Dan could see what he was doing.

That got Tyler his first whimper from Dan, and he was so into what he was doing by then that the satisfaction he felt was based on pleasure that Dan was enjoying himself, not triumph at having made Dan break a self-imposed silence.

He took Dan's cock in as far as he could without gagging, sliding his hand down and out of the way, glutting himself on the sensation of being filled, owned, the ache in his jaw, the numbness of his lips well worth it.

When Dan was moaning, pumping his hips in a frantic attempt to reach a climax, Tyler worked a second finger into Dan's ass, and with a few short, swift strokes, pushed Dan over the edge.

Dan cried out Tyler's name and came, flooding Tyler's mouth. There was always more spunk than Tyler expected, somehow, and even as he gulped, more came, coating his mouth, choking him. He ended up with his head on Dan's thigh, swallowing hard and wiping at watering eyes and his messy, wet, but smiling mouth. Because, yeah, that had been fun.

"Mmm," Dan said appreciatively, after their breathing had slowed to normal. "Consider me blown away. Thanks."

"Welcome," Tyler said, stretching out his cramped legs. "Going to return the favor? Or how about I just suit up and--"

"No," Dan said before Tyler had even reached for the box of condoms by the side of the bed. "You don't get to come yet."

Tyler raised his eyebrows. "I don't?"

Dan licked his lips, a sure sign of nerves, but his voice was steady enough. "Not until later, no."

"Later meaning half an hour or so?"

"Tonight," Dan said. "Just before this day of yours ends."

"Bullshit," Tyler said flatly. "If you don't want me to fuck you, just say so."

"You can fuck me," Dan said. "I'll enjoy it. I always do. But I don't want you to come, so I'm not sure how much you'll get out of it."

Tyler sat up and ran his hand through his hair, trying to figure out what kind of a game this was. Not as much fun as the follow the leader one of a short while ago, that was for sure.

"Okay, I could guess, but I'm not going to. Why don't you want me to come? If you're pissed at me for taking this job and this is some kind of punishment, don't forget that I've gone months – years -- with just my hand for company. A day without sex won't kill me."

"But it won't be a day without sex," Dan said. "We can stay in bed all day if you like. It depends on how much of me being naked and snuggled up close you can take."

"No one died of blue balls, either," Tyler said. "I'm still not clear on where you're going with this, boy, but I've been tortured for real, and if you think you'll break me--"

"You think I want you begging?" Dan demanded, a flush rising in his face. "So desperate you're wriggling like a worm on a hook?"

There was something familiar about those last words, and Tyler frowned before realizing that he'd used them to describe Dan once, when Dan had been lying under him, hands clutching Tyler, eyes wide, unfocused, as Tyler fucked him with leisurely, maddeningly slow strokes.

"I'm starting to think that's exactly what you want."

Dan gave Tyler a crooked grin, but his eyes were shadowed, not amused. "Yeah, maybe, but do you know why? And no, it's not the way I get my kicks."

"Just tell me," Tyler said with a sigh. His erection was dwindling, but not by much; one touch from Dan, one kiss, and he'd be raring to go again. Months of plentiful sex had spoiled him; he was used to getting off, and he was used to Dan being the one inspiring him.

"You said after today, you won't know I exist. Okay, that's an exaggeration," Dan said as Tyler began to protest, "but not much of one. And that's going to fucking hurt. So I need -- I need you to hurt today. Not to make us even. Hurt with wanting me so much you can't stand it. I want you to know how that feels, because it's --" Dan swallowed audibly, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "It's how I feel about you all the fucking time, and you know it. You proved you did. You love making me beg you to nail me. You get off on seeing how desperate you make me."

"I-- Dan, no, I don't--" Tyler felt his throat close up, guilt choking him. Dan was exaggerating about this, too, but there was enough truth in his words to sting. "And it's mutual, you know," he offered.

Dan shook his head. "Not even close to it. You said it yourself, you can go without fucking me and it wouldn't bother you. Just like it won't bother you turning your back on me tomorrow."

"Oh, yes, it will," Tyler said forcefully. "Maybe I'm better at controlling myself than you; you show everything on your face, you just don't care who knows how you're feeling, but that's something that's been trained out of me. I'm not sure I was ever that open to start with. But don't you ever think you're the only one in this relationship who gives a damn, because you're not. I'm used to you now. I don't want you to go, and I don't recall ever waking up next to you without wanting to get my hands on you to pull you closer."

"Wow," Dan said quietly, and exhaled slowly. He gave Tyler a sidelong glance. "Took you long enough to say it."

"Yeah, well, I didn't know it needed saying," Tyler snapped.

Dan patted Tyler's arm and then slipped a hand down to take Tyler's, who allowed it, still feeling edgy and unsettled, his emotions as naked and bare as his body.

"So are you going to fuck me?" Dan asked when the silence had mellowed to peace.

Tyler eyed Dan. "Sure," he said. "And I'll play along if it'll make you happy and not come."

"I guess you don't really have to--" Dan began.

"Oh, no," Tyler assured him. "I'm starting to see the possibilities."

"What possibilities?" Dan asked, his expression uneasy.

Tyler smiled at Dan, showing all his teeth. "Ever been fucked by someone who pulls out just as you're about to come because someone's told him that he can't get off all day? I mean, sure, he could suck you, or jerk you off, but it won't be what you wanted, not really. Or maybe this someone's rubbing off on you, all hot skin and muscle, getting your skin tingling, and you're just getting into it, right in the groove, and he stops and backs away, leaves you high and dry again because he's under orders not to spill. Ever had that happen to you?"

"No," Dan said, edging away from Tyler. "I haven't."

"Let's change that," Tyler said pleasantly, and pounced on him.

When Tyler thought about that day later -- and he did, often -- it was less as a series of hours and the events they held, and more as flashpoints, sharply vivid against a haze of arousal.

He'd expected to get bored, frustrated; been prepared for the day to become routine, split up by meals, a bath, a heated discussion with Dan about what to watch on TV.

It didn't happen. They ate now and then when they got hungry, soup and sandwiches that took little time to prepare, and they shared a bath in the late afternoon. Dan, his skin flushed from the hot water, leaned back against Tyler, cradled in Tyler's arms, his head turned so that they could kiss languidly. Tyler ran a bar of soap over Dan's chest and down, then jerked him off with a slippery hand until Dan's come clouded the water and Tyler's cock, snug against Dan's ass, suffered.

Aching balls aside, apart from a few moments or irritation, more at himself for agreeing to do this, he'd been reasonably content with the situation. He didn't stay hard all day, but Dan could get him to the point where his hands formed tight fists and he was sweating without any problem at all. Staying in a pair of his ridiculously garish shorts and a sleeveless T-shirt helped; Tyler could see the shape of Dan's cock without needing to stare, outlined by the thin and clinging material, and he could smell Dan's skin, sweat-salted and musky. The bath had been worth losing that rich, musky smell, but only just.

If the day taught Tyler anything new, it was how much Dan turned him on without doing anything overtly sexual. Dan sprawled in a chair, his shorts pushed down, his hand working his

cock idly as Tyler watched, longing to go over, but knowing that if he put his hand or mouth on Dan right then, it'd be game over, was one thing. Dan sitting at the table reading a book Tyler had recommended, his lips shaping the words silently at times, a frown of concentration making him look vulnerable, shouldn't have all but brought Tyler to his knees, a baffled tenderness filling him even as he pictured Dan ass up over the table, the book abandoned as Tyler fucked the frown away.

By the time they were ready for bed, Tyler was exhausted, but in a good way, just as he'd always ended these days. He didn't even want the climax that he supposed he was allowed now, only the freedom to hold Dan without worrying that his body would betray him.

"Do you wish I'd asked for something different?" Dan murmured when they'd turned out the light. "Did I fuck it up for you?"

"No," Tyler said. "You did everything right."

Dan yawned and nuzzled Tyler's neck sleepily. "Has to be a first time for everything. What do you want to do now? I could--"

"Ssh." Tyler put an arm around Dan and pulled him even closer, Dan's leg slipping between his, Dan's thigh grazing Tyler's balls. He came without trying, just from that contact, came in a long, endless shiver of pleasure, his hand curved around the back of Dan's head, silky strands of hair soft against his face.

Chapter Five

The days developed a routine. The morning was for work, with Tyler holed up in his room, tapping away in silence and sometimes swearing loudly enough for Dan to hear him. The afternoons were more of the same, with a short break when Dan dragged Tyler out of their bedroom and into the fresh air for a walk, or, if he was very persuasive, into town for something mind-blowingly exciting like shopping for food.

The high point of the day was always the moment when Tyler sighed, turned off the computer, and joined Dan, his forehead creased with a frown, his eyes reddened from too long staring at a screen.

Dan tried to be supportive, understanding, and an all-around good sport about the whole set up, even the fact that Tyler had gone from being a man willing to have sex most times Dan wanted it, to someone who rolled over and went to sleep after a brief hug if Dan was lucky. He tried not to care that his life was suddenly missing someone who was interested in him, who enjoyed talking to him, being with him -- he missed that more than the sex, which was a sign of how things were with him and Tyler.

He tried, and it got more difficult to succeed with every passing day.

"How much longer is this going to take?" Dan asked Tyler over breakfast one morning, after cooking bacon and eggs, his glare daring Tyler to say that he didn't have time to eat it. Breakfast used to be one of his favorite meals. Tyler had a habit of dressing after he'd eaten, a habit Dan approved of since it meant he got to crunch toast and drink coffee staring at Tyler in shorts and an open robe, bare chest exposed, just asking to be touched.

Nowadays, Tyler showered and dressed as soon as he got up, before grabbing a mug of coffee and disappearing into what ceased to be their bedroom when the door closed and became Tyler's office and a no-go area, scattered with metaphorical landmines.

Tyler cut himself a neat piece of bacon, loaded some fluffy scrambled eggs on top of it, and filled his mouth, clearly buying time.

"Not sure," he said eventually. "I'm making progress."

"Well, that's good?" Dan offered, and got a shrug in reply. "Bad?"

"Dan..." Tyler said with a pained look on his face. "Drop it, okay? I'm not in the mood."

"Yeah, I noticed," Dan said. "And, no, I'm not talking about the fact that the last time I got laid was two weeks ago. You don't have the energy to fuck, that's fine, but it wouldn't kill you to talk to me."

Tyler walked over to the counter and refilled his mug. "You want an itch scratching, boy?"

"Just told you it wasn't that."

"I think it is." Tyler ruffled Dan's hair as he walked by. "Maybe tonight I'll scratch it for you."

"Fuck you," Dan said, the condescension he heard in Tyler's voice making him feel like a child handed a candy to stop it crying. He pushed his chair back and jerked away from Tyler's hand, his face burning and his temper fraying. "Keep your hands and your dick to yourself. I'm going into town and finding someone who gives a shit about me to spend the day with. Hell, maybe even the night, and no, I don't mean I'm going to fuck them, but there's probably a couch I can borrow." He took a deep breath. "I just -- I can't spend another day staring at the walls and being ignored. I feel like I've turned invisible or something."

"Grow up," Tyler said, his face twisted with impatience. "I've got a job to do here, and it's important--"

"More important than me?" Dan demanded, and didn't care that he sounded selfish. He thought he was entitled.

"I'm not doing this," Tyler said decisively. "This sort of crap is one reason I never minded being alone. Look, no one said you had to hang around here all day. You can take the truck and spend time in town every day if you want."

"Thanks for nothing," Dan said, and pushed past Tyler to get his jacket and snatch the truck keys off the hook that they hung on with a hand that wasn't entirely steady.

The light was already on in the bedroom as he drove off, the dismal, sleety day matching his mood to perfection.

When he got into town, after driving along the familiar road without paying much attention to the sparse traffic or the scenery, he didn't know what to do. Too early to hang out with anyone, really; it was barely nine o'clock. The small library didn't open until midday on Tuesday, and he'd read until his eyes started to cross during the last few weeks. The warm splash of light from the Sunnyside Café seemed to offer a refuge, even if it felt like the few bites of breakfast he'd eaten were stuck halfway down.

He went in and found a seat away from the icy breeze caused by the door opening, his head down because he really didn't want to talk to anyone, even if that was why he'd come into town. Logic didn't go well with being miserable.

"Dan! Over here."

Dan lifted his head and saw Anne Collins across the room, peering around the side of a booth and smiling at him. It was impossible to blow her off. Summoning an answering smile, he went over to join her, weaving his way across the mats on the floor designed to soak up the wetness being brought in by customers who hadn't bothered to wipe their shoes on the mat at the door. Dan had, but the mat had been so soggy he wasn't sure if it'd helped or just gotten his boots wetter.

"Well, this is nice," Anne said brightly as he sat down. "I thought I was going to eat breakfast staring at the wall, and instead I get to talk to a friend. Where's Tyler?"

"Back home, working. I only came in for a coffee," Dan said, not taking offense at the slight droop of Anne's mouth. "I'm, uh, really busy, too."

Anne gave him a look that said she wasn't buying it, and Dan sighed in surrender. Anne wasn't in the least bit scary, but she could be formidable, which came in handy for a doctor, he supposed. If Anne was to tell him that he needed a shot, he couldn't see himself arguing with her for long, even if he did hate needles. "I'll order something to eat if you like."

"My treat," Anne said, generous in victory. She gave a long, anticipatory sigh. "It's my day off -- did I mention how happy I am that we finally got the funds to hire another doctor?"

"Every time I see you," Dan said, feeling the cloud over his head lift a little because Anne in a bubbly mood was kind of cute.

"Sorry, sorry," Anne said, clearly not. She pushed the menu over to him and began to talk, her voice dreamy as she outlined her plans. "Here, choose something filling. You look tired." She didn't wait for his indignant rebuttal of her appraisal, but continued, "I'm going to have the special, which will mean that I won't need to eat again until about three in the afternoon, on past experience. After I eat, I'm getting a haircut -- I'm losing the long hair and getting highlights -- and a mani/pedi at the new spa in Bridge Falls. Then it's off to the mall for an afternoon of shopping with my mother -- and if you keep looking like that, you're going to turn the orange juice sour and spoil my indulge-myself day. What on earth is wrong with you?"

Dan picked up a packet of brown sugar to give himself an excuse to stare at his hands as he fiddled with it. "Nothing much. Just stuff, you know?"

Their waitress, Sheila, came over, her yellow dress and white apron already looking limp. The Sunnyside opened at six a.m., and it was impossible to get a table without waiting until a few hours later. They didn't have much competition in the small town, but that wasn't the reason; the food was really good. Given a choice, Dan would opt for the Sunnyside's chicken souvlaki platter over the most expensive entrée any other place had to offer. Which might be because he hadn't been to many classy restaurants, but Tyler, who had, agreed with him. Not that Tyler had eaten out in weeks...

Sheila looked them over with a briskly impersonal smile. "What can I get you folks?"

"Coffee, OJ, and your special," Anne said, smiling up at her like a woman prepared to forget that food came with calories attached. "Rye toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon."

"You got it, Doc." One penciled-in eyebrow lifted as Sheila turned to Dan. "How about you, honey?"

No way was he enduring the same breakfast twice in one hour. "I'll have pancakes and coffee, please."

Sheila nodded. "Coming right up."

The coffee arrived right away, in cheap but chip-free plain white mugs. Dan loaded his coffee with three of the small containers of creamer and the sugar he'd been playing with, and then took a sip. It was okay, but he'd gotten used to the way Tyler liked it, twice as strong as this. Tyler's coffee left him buzzed and wide awake.

"Stuff?" Anne asked, returning to their interrupted conversation without missing a beat. "What kind of stuff? If you're sick of the weather, you're not alone, but just hang in there. Spring's on its way according to the calendar, if not The Weather Channel."

"I am, but that's not it," Dan said. He was torn between the need to share and a loyalty Tyler might not deserve, but was still going to get. Anne was Tyler's friend first, too, and he didn't want to put her in the middle; it wouldn't be fair.

"Then it's relationship stuff," Anne said wisely. "Which makes it awkward because you and Tyler... I'm not going near that. Too easy to get you both mad at me."

Dan nodded, unsurprised that she'd clearly been thinking along the same lines that he had. "Yeah, I can see that."

"Which doesn't mean that I can't listen if you want to vent," Anne said. "Or is it more serious than that?" Her hazel eyes widened. "God, do you want to move on? Are you and Tyler through? Oh, Dan..."

"What? No!" Dan slammed his mug down, and sent a splatter of coffee over vintage yellow Formica. Anne's assumption was annoying; that option was one he always had in reserve if things didn't work out, but it didn't mean that he liked it being voiced. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Anne tossed him a paper napkin, her closed-off expression telling Dan that he'd hurt her feelings with his final words. "Here. And, no, I wouldn't like it at all, because it'd break Tyler's heart, but it wouldn't be unexpected. You're young, and this town doesn't have a lot to offer--"

"Tyler doesn't know I'm there anymore," Dan said harshly. "He's working on something and it's like I don't fu -- like I don't exist. And the town might not have much going for it, but like I care

about that. I grew up somewhere just like this; it's not like I'm not used to dead end and dull." He swiped the napkin over the spill and watched the liquid seep through the thin paper, staining it brown. "And it wasn't boring when things were okay between us," he muttered. "It was *fine*."

"I'm sorry," Anne said. "I -- look, Dan, I like you. I think you're intelligent, charming when you want to be, and you've got a lot going for you. But Tyler... He's older, and he's very... solitary. You've changed that to a certain extent, but people can only change so much. Force them past a certain point, and they break or snap back to where they were."

"You think he's snapped?" Dan said, putting air quotations around the last word and a sneer in his voice.

"Don't you?" Anne asked, too kindly for it to be bearable.

Dan shook his head. "No." He said it again, just to hear it spoken, and he still didn't know who was right.

The arrival of their food was a welcome distraction. Dan drenched a stack of pancakes with syrup, after slathering them with butter, and started to shovel them into his mouth, a sudden hunger hitting him at the sight and smell of food.

"What's this work he's doing?" Anne asked as she squeezed a dollop of ketchup next to her fried potatoes and dunked one crispy, salt-gritted cube into the red pool. Definitely an indulgence day; normally Anne ate the way she told her patients to -- low-fat, low-sodium, lots of fresh vegetables. "Could be it's just stress over that, and when it's finished he'll be back to normal -- for Tyler, anyway."

"Don't know exactly," Dan mumbled, using a mouthful of the strawberries that had come with his meal as an excuse for the brevity of his answer. He didn't want Anne to find out how in the dark he was about Tyler's project. "Research for an old friend."

"That doesn't seem like something--" Anne broke off and gave him a helpless, apologetic shrug. "Sorry. Look, Dan, I've seen him with you, and anyone can tell that he adores you." She frowned and corrected herself before Dan could do it for her. Adoration and Tyler went together the same way that ketchup and strawberries did, and Anne should have known that. "Okay, maybe that's not the right word. He cares about you. A lot. You matter to him, and my God, I wish I had someone in my life who was that caught up in me. Work or no work, I can't see that altering. Tyler's not the kind of man who changes his mind easily."

"But you think I am?" Dan stabbed his fork into a wedge of pancake and refused to be comforted. At this point, Tyler knowing he existed would be enough to make him happy. "Thanks."

"No," Anne said patiently. "I just think you're young enough to have a few relationships to go before you meet someone to settle down with. You've never told me much about your life before

you arrived here, but you don't talk about past boyfriends. Have there been many? Serious ones, I mean?"

"Just one," Dan said, not really caring if Anne knew that much. He'd never asked, but he'd always assumed that Tyler had filled her in on most of it, from his fight with his father to the sex with truckers part. It would explain why she was so nice to him. "Luke. Not sure how serious he was, but at the time it felt that way. Apart from Luke, there wasn't anyone, not really."

"And you wonder why I worry about you moving on?"

"I guess I can see why you'd think that way," Dan said slowly, "but Tyler -- he's not someone you can just turn your back on. Maybe I just found my final partner early."

Anne spread raspberry jam lavishly across a triangle of toast and gave him a skeptical look. "Maybe you did."

"I'm not sixteen with a crush on someone in the football team," Dan said, feeling a familiar irritation. His father had acted this way when he'd discovered that Dan was gay. Just a phase. Too young to know what you want. You'll grow out of it.

Except he hadn't and wouldn't. Once he'd met Tyler, his life had changed -- *he'd* changed, and if he'd been clueless about what it really meant to love someone before, well, he wasn't now.

"No, but you don't have a lot of experience--" she began.

"Yeah, I do. A lot of experience with assholes who made me suck them before giving me a ride and then threw me out on the side of the road before their dicks were dry."

Anne dropped her fork onto her plate and leaned in close, her face flushed. "Keep your voice down," she hissed.

"Why?" Dan said, and felt a pleasant rush of blood to the head. He'd been quiet and well-behaved for far too long "Am I shocking you?"

"No. I've come across far worse in my job, and Tyler told me about it the day he met you. I've always known what happened to you, and it doesn't change anything for me, but if you think it won't reflect badly on you and Tyler to most people in this town, you're wrong." She picked up her fork again. "But you know that already, don't you?"

Shit. He kept forgetting that what he did and said affected more than just him these days.

"I guess I do." He glanced around, his spurt of anger dying away. No one was close enough to have heard him, and the background music from the radio was loud enough to make most conversations private. "Sorry."

"Forget it. My fault." Anne reached over and patted his hand forgivingly. "You know, if you wanted to talk that period of your life over with someone qualified..."

His reaction was immediate and heartfelt, though he managed to censor himself to a certain extent. His father had held strong opinions about swearing in front of women, and he'd passed them on to Dan, reinforcing the lesson with a hard swat to the back of Dan's head from time to time. "No way in hell."

"Just think about it," Anne urged him. "A sympathetic therapist might be helpful."

"I'm not freaking out over it," Dan told her. He did still have nightmares, sour breath in his face, greedy hands not letting go of him, running, running... They weren't pleasant, but they were just dreams, and he was settled enough to know, even in the middle of the worst of them, that he was dreaming. Tyler had made him feel safe.

He just wished he could do as much for Tyler.

"Sometimes, we can bury a traumatic experience deep, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't continue to have an effect."

"Anne, it's your day off," Dan said wearily. "Stop talking like a doctor and let's just change the subject, okay? Or I'm going to leave you with a wall to stare at."

She sighed. "Fine. Just remember that if you -- or Tyler -- need me, you know where I am."

It was his turn to pat her hand. "We know."

Anne pushed her plate aside, empty of everything but a smear of ketchup and a piece of toast that Dan guessed she'd left so that later, when the guilt set in, she could tell herself she hadn't eaten *everything*. She gave him a smile, all dimples and mischief. "Want to come to the spa with me?"

Dan snorted. "Yeah, I can just see me getting a seaweed wrap or a facial."

"You don't need either at your age, with your skin," Anne said and pulled a face. "No wrinkles, no gray hair... I hate you."

Dan speared one last slice of strawberry, translucent with syrup, and ate it. "No, you don't."

"I suppose I don't," Anne agreed. She tilted her head questioningly. "So what plans *do* you have for today if Tyler's busy?"

I'm going to go back home, cuff Tyler to the bed so he can't reach his computer, and blow him 'til he's forgotten how to spell his own name.

He shrugged and gave her back a grin as mischievous as her own could be at times. "I'll think of something."

Chapter Six

Tyler stabbed at the keyboard dispiritedly. God, even his fingers hurt. Long hours at the computer, day after day, were leaving him with a headache that never quit and muscle spasms in his back -- and his forearms were burning as if he'd been lifting weights, not pushing a mouse around.

When this was over, he was giving serious thought to joining a gym. He might not need to be in perfect shape now that he wasn't risking his life on assignments, but it didn't mean that he had to get sloppy. Though no amount of training would make sitting in one position this long a comfortable or healthy thing to do.

Five weeks of work and he'd eliminated four of Cole's six suspects -- or found out enough about them to make it unlikely that they'd betray their country for money or idealism. During that time, Cole had lost another agent. Sue Jennings' death might have been unconnected to the investigation, since she'd been the victim of a hit and run, but it could have been a camouflaged hit.

Cole was as close to losing his cool as Tyler had ever seen him, but every avenue of investigation on the final two possibilities -- Drew Sturgis and Allison Mayer -- led to a dead end.

No debts, no unusual political affiliations, no scandal. Sturgis and Mayer both dated casually, but digging had turned up no disgruntled exes or security risks. They looked clean, but one of them was dirty, and he couldn't work out which. Maybe Cole could bring them both in for questioning and see who cracked...

He leaned back in his chair and felt his spine protest the change of position, cramped muscles screaming.

The investigation was a priority, and with a single-mindedness that had once been ingrained habit, he'd pushed aside everything once he'd committed himself to it. 'Everything' included Dan, and Tyler was as unhappy about that necessity as Dan clearly was.

Tyler had tried at the start to balance work with some time off to recharge, but the pressure had mushroomed. With the news of Sue Jennings' death, a woman he'd met once or twice and had liked for her dry humor, any time spent away from his computer had seemed like a criminal indulgence.

If finding the mole cost him Dan, he supposed that it would all have been worth it, difficult to accept though it would be. If he lost Dan and failed in his search, he wasn't sure how he would react, and he didn't want to find out. Success in both areas was beginning to look like a fantasy.

It was scary how the possibility of losing Dan had become such a looming threat in such a short time. He'd thought that what they had was more solid than that, but Dan was so very young in some ways.

"Attention span of a grasshopper," Tyler muttered, and then sighed, recognizing that he was being unfair. Dan hadn't signed up to serve his country, and Dan didn't have a clue how important Tyler's work was. All he saw was a man who ignored him and shut him out, not for a few days, but week after week. Promising to make it up to him later wasn't cutting it anymore -- not that Tyler had offered that sop recently. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd really spoken to Dan.

The argument at breakfast didn't count.

Tyler glanced at the computer clock. Dan had been gone for two hours, and Tyler didn't have a clue where he was or who he was with after months of living in each other's pockets.

He stood and walked to the bedroom window. The sleet of the morning had melted under a watery sun that was now obscured by clouds. It was a March of storms and grayness, and Tyler felt like a fly trapped in a bottle, buzzing angrily at the glass. He wanted to take Dan and run, not from anything, except perhaps the lousy weather, but *to* something -- to the sun, to a space of time together, to a future.

They should have been planning their travels in these dreary, dismal months. Hell, given what the winter had turned into -- a slushy, icy mess instead of white snow, deep and crisp and even, like the carol -- they could have moved their departure date up and started with Australia, chasing the summer.

"I just had to let Cole push my buttons," he said aloud, his words echoing in the room, quiet except for the ever-present hum of the computer. "That persuasive, manipulative son of a bitch..."

He turned away from the window, intending to resume work even if the thought of sitting in the chair was deeply unappealing, and then froze as he heard an approaching vehicle, only relaxing when he recognized it. His truck; he'd know the sound of its engine anywhere. Dan was back a lot sooner than Tyler had expected him to be, far too soon for him to have gotten the mad out of his system, and Tyler braced himself for the argument that would probably begin as soon as Dan walked through the door.

Dan parked the truck and jumped out, showing no signs of the slouched apathy of past weeks. He'd had a haircut, Tyler noted with some surprise as Dan got closer to the house, the dark hair framing his face instead of obscuring it, and a lot shorter. He wasn't smiling, but he was carrying a take-out bag from the deli in town that looked too full for just one lunch. If it was a peace offering, Tyler was more than ready to accept it, as long as it didn't come with a side-order of nagging and recriminations.

He saved what he'd been working on with a click and turned the computer off with two more, deciding that he'd eat an early lunch with Dan at the table, instead of a solitary snack as he worked. That concession, that break in routine, might not match up to a hot sandwich from Howie's Grill, but it was all that he had to offer in the way of a truce.

Tyler left the bedroom as Dan walked into the cabin, shutting the cabin door behind him against a rain-speckled gust of wind at the same time that Tyler pulled the bedroom door closed.

Dan eyed Tyler thoughtfully, no sign of hostility on his face. "You're not working."

Tyler nodded at the bag Dan carried, his mouth watering as he got a whiff of its contents. Whatever had started out hot in there would be lukewarm after the ride from town, but it still smelled ambrosial, even if he couldn't pin down what it was. Roast beef subs with a side of Howie's homemade potato wedges, maybe. Or the veggie burger made with a thick, meaty slice of Portobello mushroom, not a dried-up attempt to mimic a real burger, topped with a generous dollop of guacamole, sharp and tangy red onion, a juicy piece of tomato... He was suddenly starving, with a fierce yearning for an ice-cold beer to wash it down with, and Dan for dessert. "I saw what you were carrying. Any of that for me?"

"Maybe." Dan didn't say it with a flirting, mischievous look up through his lashes, just a straightforward stare, but it still felt like foreplay to Tyler. "It's going to cost you, though."

"Oh, yeah?" Tyler moved closer. Dan had taught him how to flirt, up to a point, at least. Tyler didn't think that he'd ever do it naturally. Just not his style. "How much?"

Dan pursed his lips, which always looked like an invitation to kiss them to Tyler. "I was thinking that you'd need some persuading to eat lunch with me."

"I won't."

Tyler made a grab for the bag, and Dan tucked it behind his back swiftly. "Back off," he warned. "I had this plan if you turned me down."

"I just told you that you didn't need it," Tyler growled, enjoying the feeling of being playful for once, not deadly, icily serious. He was grateful that they seemed to have skipped over the tension of earlier without an inquest. "Forget the plan and hand over the food."

"It was a good plan," Dan said severely. "I liked it."

Tyler gave a long-suffering sigh. "Tell me what you were going to do, boy."

Dan gave him a narrow-eyed, speculative look with enough heat in it to make the sandwiches sizzle in their bag. "I was going to knock you out, strip you down, and tie you up."

The only way Dan could get the jump on him would be if Tyler was falling down drunk, already unconscious, or dead, but it didn't seem like the right time to point that out. Not when the smell of the food wasn't what was making Tyler's mouth water anymore.

"And what comes after that, when I wake up mad as hell with a headache?"

"You find me sucking your dick, nice and slow," Dan said, and now there was a glint of come-hither in his eyes. "Think you'd stay mad for long?"

Tyler had been woken that way by Dan more than once, and the memories slammed into him like fists, leaving him breathless. Dan never spoke -- barely even flicked him a glance -- just lapped and licked and sucked languidly, his eyes closed, until Tyler groaned and clutched at his hair or shoulders imploringly, needing more and not getting it until Dan was good and ready. "Not long," he admitted. "You know, I'm not all that hungry after all." Before the anticipatory sparkle in Dan's eyes could go out, he added, "But you can still get a tip for delivering it."

"A tip, huh?" Dan gave it some consideration, drawing out the suspense. "Okay."

Tyler reached out and slid his hand through Dan's hair, gathering it and letting the clean, silky strands slip over his fingers. "You got your hair cut."

Dan blinked, as if surprised by the change of subject. "Yeah. I wanted to kill some time and let my breakfast settle--"

"You didn't eat any." And he'd worried about that until he'd realized what he was doing and stopped.

"I had pancakes with Anne."

"Oh," Tyler said blankly. The idea of them socializing without him was disconcerting for some reason. "At her house?"

"No, the café. She was off work and planning this spa day." Dan chuckled. "She asked me to tag along, but it's not really my thing, you know? But my hair needed trimming, and there was nothing else to do, so I went into the Snip and Curl and told them to do their worst."

Tyler sniffed Dan's hair. It didn't smell the way it normally did, and he didn't like that. He flashed on Dan leaning back over a sink, hot water running down, drenching his hair dark and heavy, Dan's eyes closed as fingers massaged his head and made him sigh and arch into the touch... Fuck, he was jealous of a hairdresser now?

"What is it?"

Dan saw too much, sometimes. Tyler hesitated, feeling ridiculous, and then said gruffly, "I just -- someone touching you when I haven't -- I just -- shit, it's stupid. Ignore me."

His ears felt hot with embarrassment. He'd just about accepted that Dan meant a lot to him, but sometimes the depth of his feelings left him floundering, panicking as he lost his self-sufficiency. Dan made him vulnerable, and that was a scary situation for someone like him, who'd spent his life exploiting weaknesses

"You were jealous?" Dan shook his head, looking stunned rather than amused. "Oh, man. That's not stupid, it's insane. Jealous of *Maggie*?"

Maggie was in her late sixties, a livewire with hair as traffic-stopping red as she could get it. Short and skinny as she was, the effect was one of a lit matchstick.

"You might have put yourself into Steve -- sorry, *Stefan's* hands," Tyler said with as much dignity as he could summon. Stefan was a prodigal son who'd come back to Carlyle at Christmas after training as a stylist for a few years in New York. He had a superficial city gloss and hair that had left its original mousy brown several bleach jobs behind. His brown eyes tended to be speculative when they studied Dan, something that bugged the hell out of Tyler.

Dan buried his head in Tyler's shoulder, shaking with laughter now. "Oh, he tried to get me, but Maggie headed him off and made him trim this little girl's bangs instead. She was wriggling so much that it ended up looking like nothing on earth, so she burst into tears and her mom laid into Stefan. It was kinda funny."

"Screaming kids and yelling moms? It sounds like hell," Tyler said. He went to a barber shop to get his hair cut, a peaceful place with an all-male staff and clientele. There wasn't a glossy magazine in sight and no conversation unless the customer initiated it. Maggie, according to Anne, never stopped chatting, although she knew every scrap of gossip in the town, which meant that she had to listen to other people talk at least some of the time.

"So, do you like it?" Dan asked.

Tyler had never been asked to give an opinion on someone's haircut before, but he leaned back and gave Dan an appraising look. "More of your face, less of your hair." He shrugged. "It looks fine."

"I told Maggie to make me look so good I'd get jumped before I was through the door."

"Tell me you're joking," Tyler said with a groan that wasn't entirely put on. "Tell me you didn't discuss our sex life with Maggie Lawson and Stefan listening."

"I told her I was so desperate to get laid I'd have it shaved off if she thought it'd do the trick," Dan continued remorselessly. "And Stefan said that he'd be happy to help me out if it didn't. So I gave him my number and said--"

"Enough," Tyler growled, and shut Dan up with a kiss that he discovered he couldn't break away from, because God, how long had it been and what kind of a fool was he anyway?

"You want fucking against the wall?" he said, his lips on Dan's, brushing the words over Dan's mouth like paint onto canvas. "Want bending over the couch? You got me. I'm here."

"No," Dan said, tilting his head back, his chin rising -- and maybe they weren't done fighting yet, because the challenge in Dan's eyes and voice was as loud as swords clashing. "I want *you* bent over, begging me to do you. I want you showing me how very fucking sorry you are for being an asshole the last few weeks."

Giving in and groveling weren't habits Tyler ever intended to acquire, but he'd never seen getting fucked as being either of those things. Dan sliding home, control shredding, just about flying to pieces with every thrust, was something that Tyler loved watching if he was in a position to see it, and if he wasn't, well, he could hear Dan's gasped breaths and fervent babbling just fine.

"You can have that," Tyler said without hesitation, and nodded at the bedroom door. "In there?"

Dan shook his head. "You've spent enough time in there."

True enough. Tyler considered the options. There was a fire burning low in the grate, and the room was warm enough that he didn't mind stripping off, but the way his back felt, he didn't think that he'd really enjoy being bent in half over the couch. Leaning on the seat of it with Dan behind him would work okay, though.

"Get what you need," he said, and pulled his shirt over his head without bothering to undo more than a button or two.

It was good. It usually was, but this felt better, after the initial awkwardness of reconnecting physically and emotionally was over. The velvet of the couch rubbed against Tyler's arms and chest as Dan's lube-slick finger pushed slowly inside him, two different sensations, both equally vivid. His skin felt as if it was waking up after a long sleep, thawing after being chilled to numbness. Dan didn't hurry, though Tyler could feel the damp-tipped tap and nudge of Dan's cock against the back of his thigh now and then. Dan was hard, needy, but what he seemed to want was Tyler's presence, rather than a slam-bang fuck to bleed off built-up horniness.

Tyler had been naked and kneeling in front of the couch when Dan had returned from the bathroom, condom and lube bottle in his hand. Dan had paused, looked Tyler over, and nodded approval of both position and location, so Tyler had leaned forward and pillowed his head on his folded arms, legs spread, ass up, waiting. He owed Dan this acquiescence, and exhausted as he was from the stress he'd been under, it was a relief to be asked to do nothing more than respond to what Dan did to him. Not passive, no; he gave Dan as much as he could. Every moan, every murmur that rose to his lips was voiced, not stifled, but this was Dan's show; Tyler wasn't planning to initiate anything.

It wouldn't have been easy to do much anyway, positioned like this, but he kept his hands where they were instead of reaching back to caress Dan, and he didn't turn his head to kiss Dan until Dan's mouth found him, Dan's bare body fitting against his like a shadow.

"Missed you," Dan whispered into Tyler's hair as his finger slid and twisted; in and out, intrusive and welcome, too much and not enough. "Missed you so fucking much."

Tyler could have told Dan that he'd been right there, but it would have been an evasion at best. He'd slept next to Dan, and spent the hours of the day a few yards away, but they hadn't been together. Walking in parallel lines, out of arm's reach, wasn't what Dan wanted, and by now, neither did Tyler.

Keeping that single finger as deep as it would go, Dan kissed his way across Tyler's shoulders, butterfly-wing brushes of his lips changing to firm, emphatically stamped kisses that left a wet, burning sting on Tyler's skin, fading fast, only to be rekindled an inch lower. Tyler had been hard from the moment he'd stood, naked, and heard the click of the bathroom cabinet door as Dan opened it in search of supplies. The swift, dizzying rush of blood to his cock had brought him to his knees, needing to be ready for Dan, with an urge to submit that was as foreign to him as his earlier flash of jealousy had been. It brought home to him just how off-balance he was, but dealing with that would have to wait until later. He wasn't in the mood to talk or think beyond a husky "God -- please -- please, Dan," that brought him a choked groan and a tongue tracing a pattern down the curve of his spine.

The warmth of Dan's body close to his was replaced by cool, empty air, and it took an effort of will not to glance back, but he waited patiently and felt the licked skin on his spine prickle as it dried.

Dan's free hand came to rest on Tyler's ass, his fingers spread and sliding into the crease, then opening Tyler wider. Tyler thought about what Dan could see: his finger disappearing into the tight clench of Tyler's hole, the pale, exposed skin of the cleft, and the bunched sway of Tyler's balls. Not pretty, maybe, but he'd seen Dan like that, and it had left him breathless with the intimacy of it.

Dan sighed and shifted position on the worn rug cushioning their knees. Tyler wasn't sure what would come next; the brief, wrenching loss of Dan's finger, fucking him gently now, followed by the blunt, hard stab of Dan's cock, breaching him inch by inch, discomfort melting to a clamor for more from his body? Or would Dan use him, rub off on him, let Tyler suffer, hard and aching, through Dan's climax, come spilled over him in warm, thick splashes? The thought of Dan doing that to him brought a harsh whimper from him, his balls tight and his cock rigid, craving a touch.

"Shh," Dan said, his breath a tickle against Tyler's skin. "Let me do this."

"God, do it," Tyler begged. "Do anything you fucking want to."

Dan chuckled, the sound shaky and dazed. "Yeah? Anything?" Before Tyler could reply, Dan's tongue, soft and liquid, curled around his slowly moving finger and slid with it, just a little way, into Tyler's hole.

"Fuck!" Tyler's muscles clenched, and he forced himself to relax. "Fuck," he said again, helpless as Dan's tongue swirled and lapped and sometimes dipped inside him, the smooth, regular push of Dan's finger allied with the more unpredictable, less successful, infinitely more arousing flickers of his tongue.

Dan let his finger slide out, and Tyler, panting into the green velvet couch, eyes screwed closed, felt lube, cool and quick, drizzle over his cleft and down to the hot, hungry hole. Dan worked it in with his thumbs, pushing one, then both inside Tyler, holding him open and making space for Dan's tongue to plunge inside, once, twice. Tyler, words lost, gone, bit down on his forearm, needing something to fill his mouth.

It didn't last. It couldn't last. With an inarticulate moan, Dan pulled back and fumbled on a condom, the familiar sound of foil being ripped as welcome as any Tyler had heard.

Dan placed a kiss on Tyler's shoulder, sweet and slow, distracting Tyler from what was happening elsewhere so that the first raw burn no amount of lube could entirely douse seemed distant and all that mattered was Dan's mouth, moving to suck and nip at Tyler's earlobe, sending a cool shiver over him.

With an easy rhythm Dan had learned using Tyler as a textbook -- because Dan sure as hell hadn't had a clue the first time he'd fucked Tyler -- Dan took them both to the point where pausing would have been torture and stopping impossible. Tyler was sweating, grunting, braced against the couch and meeting every stroke eagerly.

From somewhere, Dan found words, hissing them into Tyler's ear. "Don't you ever fucking go 'way again, you hear me?"

Tyler wanted to tell Dan that he wouldn't; he had the words shaped and ready in his mind, but Dan chose that moment to reach around and grab Tyler's cock, working it with an expert hand since it was an angle he was familiar with, Tyler guessed.

Tyler didn't howl, but it was close. Couch, rug, his stomach; he marked them all with come, feeling it leave him in a climax that took away every ache and left him euphoric and drained. Dan's climax a few moments later sent an aftershock through him as over-stressed nerve endings sent up white flags, but when Dan began to ease out, one hand holding the condom in place, Tyler reached back to stop him, murmuring something plaintive.

"Sorry," Dan said, his voice soft and apologetic. "Got to."

Tyler sighed and rolled over as Dan went to dispose of the condom, the throb in his ass a pleasant reminder of being fucked, although later he might wish they'd been a little less enthusiastic. He stayed there, sprawled out and naked, trusting Dan to return with a wet cloth, or at least a handful of toilet paper, to deal with the mess.

"You look..." Dan chewed his lip thoughtfully as he sat down next to Tyler on the floor. He'd brought two washcloths, which Tyler appreciated. "Relaxed."

"Huh. I'd go for well-fucked," Tyler said, mopping the streaks of come off his belly and wondering why the stuff got everywhere. Dan dealt with the couch and rug, which would soon dry, and then tossed the cloth aside and squirmed closer inside the waiting circle of Tyler's arms.

Tyler sniffed. Mint. "You brushed your teeth?"

"Would you have kissed me if I hadn't?"

"Probably not," Tyler conceded. He gave Dan a long kiss, his tongue darting between Dan's lips and finding nothing to taste but more toothpaste. "Don't mind kissing you now."

"I can see that."

They sat on the floor, trading kisses and spit, until Dan shivered. "Okay, maybe we can save going nudist for the summer?"

"You ever had a sunburned dick?" Tyler shook his head and swatted Dan's ass playfully before standing. "It's not something I'd recommend."

"It's happened to you?" Dan asked as they dressed. He dragged on his jeans with a bounce to get them in place and yanked at his zipper with the careless confidence of a man who knew his dick was safely tucked away. "For real?"

Tyler winced, remembering a week of sheer agony. "Yeah. Want a life lesson? Never get drunk on a beach with people who get playful when you pass out. I never did find my shorts."

"Ouch." Dan stretched, his shirt riding up to show a flat stomach, the flash of skin enticing even though a few minutes earlier Tyler had seen everything Dan had to show. "So do you want to eat now?"

Saliva, warm and soft, flooded into Tyler's mouth, and he swallowed. "I'm starving."

Dan turned to go to the kitchen and then paused and came back, wrapping his arms around Tyler in a hard, fierce hug. "Don't make me do this again."

"Fuck me and feed me?" Tyler said, evading the issue and he knew it.

"Think about leaving."

"I don't want that to happen," Tyler said, and hoped that Dan could see he meant it. "I really, really don't."

"I don't either, but if you make me feel invisible, I just lose it. I can't stand it." Dan looked up at him. "I felt like that on the road. All these people driving by... they didn't even look at me, most

of them. Didn't look sorry, or wave... miles of empty road, and they had to have seen me there, this little dot getting bigger, but it was like I didn't exist to them."

Tyler sighed. "Dan, you're the only real, solid thing in my life right now. There's you and then there's a whole heap of confusion and fog. You, I'm sure of. The rest of it..."

"So let it go," Dan said. "Tell Cole that you can't do whatever the hell it is anymore."

Tyler broke away from Dan's arms. "I can't. I'll take the rest of the day off and we can do whatever you like, but I can't stop."

"Well, that just fucking sucks," Dan said flatly.

"Not really," Tyler said. God, he wished he could just tell Dan what he was doing, but Cole was right; it was too dangerous for Dan to know, and the boy didn't really need to, not in the true sense of 'need to know.' "I don't mind doing it. I just don't like the fact that it's taking so long for me to finish it. I thought it would be over in a week or two, but I just keep hitting dead ends... The delay's hurting more people than you, believe me."

Dan shrugged, his disapproval evident, but let it drop until the food -- roast beef and potato wedges -- had been reduced to crumbs on their plates, and Tyler, full and mellow, was halfway down his second beer.

"Isn't there anything you can tell me about what Cole's gotten you into?"

The beer lost its flavor. "No."

"Why not?" Dan persisted. He didn't sound argumentative, but he did sound stubborn. "You say you can't, but is it just habit? A dumb rule?"

"It's top secret, my eyes only shit," Tyler said. "You know."

"You're not James fucking Bond," Dan said, clearly unimpressed. "And I'm an American citizen with the right to know what's going on."

"Oh, very nice," Tyler said approvingly. "Now tell me you want to know how your tax dollars are spent. Oh, wait; you've never paid any."

"Are you researching a target?" Dan demanded, ignoring the gibe. "That's what you used to do, right? That's what you were good at, besides the actual shooting."

"No and yes." Tyler felt a familiar twist in his gut at the reminder of what he'd been and what he'd done. "This is nothing to do with getting anyone killed."

That wasn't entirely true. Whoever was responsible for the leak could well end up dead, one way or another, but Tyler knew what Dan was worried about.

"Then it's not that secret," Dan said.

"It doesn't matter," Tyler said, impatience bubbling up and ruining his improved mood. "You don't have the necessary clearance, and this is between Cole and me. End of story."

"Then clear me and ask Cole if you can tell me."

"Jesus, Dan, will you just let it fucking go?" It wasn't the first time that he'd really yelled at Dan, and it probably wouldn't be the last, but he hated the lost, hurt look he saw before Dan's expression shut down. "I talk to you and you're at risk. You say something -- no, I know that you wouldn't mean to, but you might -- and God knows what might happen."

"You don't trust me," Dan said, his voice cold with disillusionment and disappointment.

"I do, I just--"

"You trust yourself not to talk."

"Well, of course I do. Dan, I'm trained--"

That got him a disdainful sniff. "Doesn't take training to keep a secret. I've never told anyone what you used to do, and yeah, people have asked me."

"It takes training not to spill your guts if you're being tortured."

Dan gave him a scornful look to go with the sniff. "Tyler, even I know that they'd just shoot me full of something and I'd start babbling. There's nothing you can do about that."

"Yeah, there is." Tyler stood. "I can make damn sure an untrained, wet behind the ears civilian doesn't know anything."

"Do you really think being ignorant would save me if I got captured?" Dan said, the words spoken so quietly that Tyler had to strain to hear them. His voice rose. "Do you seriously think they'd believe me when I said you kept me in the dark and I didn't know anything, so could you let me go now, please, and I swear I won't get you into trouble for kidnapping me?"

Dan got to his feet and faced Tyler across the cluttered table. "You're spinning your wheels. Whatever it is that you're supposed to do, you're not doing."

"Yeah." Tyler nodded. "That, at least, you're right about."

"Do you need--" Dan's voice faltered. "Do you need to go somewhere? Do something? Is staying here making it harder?"

"Probably, but that carries risks, which is why I've been working from here, online. If I'm seen where I shouldn't be, it could set off alarms," Tyler said, picking his words carefully. "This is... it's sensitive. I spook someone--" He ground to a halt. "I'm saying too much. Dan, please -- don't ask me any more questions."

Dan scrubbed at his face with his hands and then ran his fingers through his hair, ruffling it wildly and destroying whatever look Maggie had been going for. Not that there'd been much of it left after all the kissing; Tyler always found his hands in Dan's hair when they kissed for some reason. "Okay. *Okay*. No more questions, no more getting on your back for shutting me out--"

"No, you can do that," Tyler said. "I was being stupid. Working without a break is okay sometimes, but it can be counterproductive long-term. I'd gone stale. Feel free to go along with the hitting me over the head plan if I do this again."

"I could probably find less painful ways of distracting you."

"I'm sure you could," Tyler said, already anticipating them.

"So, do one thing for me?"

"What?" Tyler said warily. Dan was being reasonable, and that was enough to worry him, even as he felt a wave of relief that they weren't headed straight for another argument.

"Finish this fast." Dan began to clear the table, stacking plates neatly and quickly, the way he always worked. "Cole wouldn't have asked you to do it if he didn't think you could hack it -- and that wasn't a pun. Stop getting hung up on stuff and just do the fucking job." He gave Tyler a wry look. "Whatever it is."

"What do you think I've been doing?" Tyler demanded, the weight of the weeks of work he'd done making him snappish.

"Failing." Dan let a handful of cutlery slide with a clatter into the sink. "Hiding in a small room, the way you've been hiding in a small cabin in a small town these past few years. Cole's opened the door to that big scary world you ran away from, and you're doing everything you can to keep from stepping through it, but where you are, there's only room for one person. Has to be lonely." He started water running into the sink, his hand under the stream to test its temperature. It took a while for the icy well water to warm up. "God, listen to me channel Oprah. You want to wash or dry?"

Tyler took a clean towel out of a drawer. "Dry," he said. He wasn't going near what Dan had said. It didn't lack for insight, but he was doing more than hiding; he was healing. If he'd had a broken leg, Dan would have expected him to be running a marathon a week later, he reflected a little sourly.

They worked side by side in silence and then, the chore finished, Dan raised his eyebrows. "So? You want to pretend we're back to normal some more, or do you want to take another crack at your job?"

There wasn't really much choice involved. "I'm going back into that small room for the rest of the afternoon," Tyler said. "All alone, yes, but I'll leave the door open, okay?"

"Okay with me," Dan said. "Supper's at -- well, whenever I get around to defrosting something you cooked."

"Thanks, Martha. And give the couch another scrub," Tyler said over his shoulder as he went back to work. "If I'm going to sit on it tonight and watch a movie or something, I want it clean."

Chapter Seven

"Oh, you son of a *bitch*, I've got you now."

Dan, reduced to working on a jigsaw puzzle so old that the colors on the pieces had faded and the backs were fuzzy, looked up, startled.

"What?" he called out. "Tyler?"

Tyler emerged from the bedroom and walked over to the kitchen table with long strides, his gray eyes bright with anger and grim satisfaction. "I've got him," he repeated, and slammed his hand down on the table, jarring it so that a few puzzle pieces, muted browns that Dan had shoved to the side to work on later, fell to the floor. "I don't know how I missed it, but it doesn't matter. I've got him now."

"Uh..." Dan was lost for the right words. Congratulations didn't seem appropriate when Tyler looked in the mood for murder, his hands clenching into fists and then relaxing, over and over, as Tyler's emotions looked for an outlet. "That's good."

Tyler's eyes met Dan's, blank and vague for a moment, as if he wasn't sure who Dan was. Okay, that could just stop any time now. In the three days since he'd jolted Tyler out of his self-imposed solitary confinement, Tyler had been almost back to normal, working fewer hours, eating without an abstracted frown on his face, sleeping without restless twitches that woke Dan every single time. Dan had been on the radar again, and he didn't plan to let Tyler slide back into treating him like wallpaper.

"Good?" Tyler echoed. "Yeah, it's good." A muscle in his jaw tensed. "God, this is going to kill Cole, though. He's the one who hired him."

Dan groaned, the sound piteous enough to get him Tyler's full attention. "Look, make your mind up; are we cracking open a beer to celebrate, or do you need a hug? I'm lost here."

"It's complicated," Tyler began.

Dan rolled his eyes and stood with an ill-tempered shove of his chair. Complicated. Where had he heard *that* before? Complicated, secret, need to fucking know... he was sick to death of all the bullshit Tyler and the distant Cole kept dishing out. It all seemed to land on him. "Just tell me."

Tyler calmed down the way he usually did when Dan was worked up. "Sorry. I'm just -- all this time. Jesus, I never thought I'd--"

"Just tell me," Dan said, close to snarling it.

"Right." Tyler glanced down at the table, frowned, picked up a jigsaw piece and slotted it into place, even though for him the puzzle was upside down.

Dan closed his eyes and kept them closed. He'd been looking for that piece for ages. "I'm trying to remember that I usually like you," he said. "It's getting difficult."

"Cole wanted me to find someone who's been warning targets and getting agents killed," Tyler said, his voice echoing against the darkness Dan stood in. "I was getting nowhere. Six possibilities and I'd narrowed it to two, but that wasn't good enough. We had to be certain."

Darkness wasn't that exciting -- or calming. Dan opened his eyes again. Tyler looked slightly less manic, his hands loosely clasping the back of a chair. Agents killed didn't sound good, even if part of him wasn't all that sorry that their targets had escaped. They might have been evil, but a bullet out of the blue splitting your skull open... that wasn't a good way to go. There had to be better, less final, ways to deal with people like that. He'd said as much to Tyler one night and gotten a cold glare for his trouble.

"And now you are?" Dan raised his eyebrows. "Certain, I mean?"

"Yeah," Tyler said heavily. "I made the connection between him and the first hit that went wrong, and after that it all just fitted together like your puzzle here." He looked at the pitiful amount of pieces that Dan had managed to connect and grinned unexpectedly. "Except better."

"There are pieces missing, and the box top is torn, so half the picture is missing, too," Dan said with a haughty tilt of his chin. "I'm working under a handicap here."

"So was I," Tyler said.

Hurt, Dan blurted out, "If you mean me being around--"

Tyler shook his head and reached across the table to take Dan's hand for a moment, his thumb brushing back and forth over Dan's palm in a silent reassurance or maybe an apology. It was a gesture that Tyler wouldn't have made in the early weeks of their relationship, when sex was about the only time that Dan felt he was allowed inside Tyler's space. Whenever Dan noticed a sign that Tyler was finding it easier to show affection, he wondered how many he'd missed that were just as sincere but less obvious. "No. Nothing to do with you. It was just that, given who the six were, all agents, there was never going to be a happy ending. An agent turning on his own like that, betraying his country and getting people he knew killed--"

"Killed? What happened to them?" Dan shivered. "No, don't tell me." He'd cheerfully snacked on popcorn and chips through some gory slasher movies in his time, but that was different; when you saw someone getting ripped up on those, you knew it wasn't real.

"I wasn't planning to," Tyler said. "One of us with nightmares is enough."

"But you've found him?" Dan said, caught up in Tyler's subdued elation now that he understood - finally -- what had been going on. "You're going to nail that scum, right? He's not on the run or heading for a Caribbean island with the money he made from selling people out, is he?"

"No. Cole's watching all of them, and if one dropped out of sight, he'd have told me."

Tyler sounded positive about that, but Dan couldn't see himself sleeping well until whoever it was that Tyler had identified was locked up somewhere. He didn't let himself dwell on the very real possibility that a man like that would disappear quietly into a grave somewhere, not a cell.

"How come you're telling me about it now?" He walked over to the coffee pot with his mug and sloshed in liquid that had been kept warm far too long. "Want some?"

"Only if you're making fresh."

Dan sniffed his mug. Paint stripper grade. "Yeah, I think I will." He glanced back at Tyler as he began to rinse out the jug. "So?"

Tyler shrugged and got the coffee beans out of the fridge, the two of them falling easily back into a rhythm that had been lost over the last few weeks. "So now it's over and it doesn't matter about keeping you out of the loop. It's still not something I want you even thinking about when you're with anyone but me, but there's no reason not to tell you the basics, I guess."

"I won't mention it, I swear," Dan said over the rush of water as he rinsed out the pot and then filled it. "Got to tell you, though -- you could've told me this weeks ago and saved us both a lot of fighting."

Tyler used the time it took to grind the beans to think that over, the harsh clatter filling the kitchen with sound. "Maybe."

"Maybe," he says." Dan rolled his eyes and gave Tyler's ass an exasperated slap as he passed, getting a glare back with zero force behind it. "There's no fucking maybe about it. If I'd known what was happening, I'd have stayed off your back. Hell, I'd have been nagging you to work more, not less, and if you'd used me to bounce ideas off, I could've been--"

"My Watson?" Tyler grinned as Dan gave him a baffled look. "Sherlock Holmes' sidekick."

"What I was going to say is that I could've helped."

The amusement left Tyler's face. "It's not the way I'm used to working, Dan, and to be honest..."

"You don't think I'd have been much use," Dan said, filling in the gap accurately judging by the defensive expression on Tyler's face. "Thanks. You know, I get tired of being good enough to fuck, but that's about it."

"Stop using your insecurities as a way to make me feel bad," Tyler said evenly. "You weren't cleared to know what was going on, you had zero background on the situation and the people involved, your computer skills are limited to finding free porn, and bringing you up to speed in the hope that you could analyze the data and make a logical leap that took me way too long -- well, it was risky, and I'm not sure it would've paid off."

Dan opened his mouth to reply to Tyler's comprehensive list of his inadequacies and found himself floundering between indignation and a grudging acceptance of some of what Tyler had said. "Yeah, well, maybe it would have."

The lameness of his response gave Tyler the perfect opportunity to score, but Tyler just said, "If there's a next time, and I hope to God there isn't, it's going to still be like this; you in the dark and me being an obsessive asshole. Cole's never going to okay you being told anything, and I'm not sure he's wrong about that."

"I just -- I want to be part of your life," Dan said haltingly. "Sex is about the only time we connect, and there's got to be more than that to us."

"You've got to be kidding me," Tyler said, and yeah, he did look genuinely baffled. "There's plenty between us or I'd have kicked you out a long time ago. The sex isn't *that* good."

"Very funny."

"I mean it," Tyler said. "No, not about the sex. We get along and you know it. The problem right now is that even before Cole showed up, you were bored out of your mind. You don't take to being idle very well. It's going to be interesting to see how soon you get tired of traveling, even though you think it's what you want more than anything else."

"I *do* want to go places," Dan said. He gave Tyler a suspicious stare. "Is this your way of canceling the trip?"

"No fucking way," Tyler said succinctly. "We're heading out as soon as Cole's wrapped this one up, and that's a promise. I just want you to think about what happens when it's time to settle down again. You need a job."

"So do you." Before Dan had shown up, Tyler, as far as Dan had been able to work out, had lived on food from his garden and spent his spare time reading. The man had plenty of money saved up; most of it was invested and doing okay, but it didn't mean that retirement in his mid-thirties would suit him.

"True enough. So we both think about it." Tyler eyed the slowly rising level of coffee in the pot and then walked away. "I'm going to start the process of telling Cole what I found out."

Dan wasn't sure what that involved -- a simple phone call or e-mail was probably out of the question for security reasons -- but he didn't bother asking for details he wouldn't get.

See? He was learning.

Telling Cole who his mole was in a way that couldn't be tracked or understood if it was, well, that wasn't difficult. Each of the six possibilities had been assigned a random number -- Drew Sturgis' was 26 -- and Tyler just went to a random page online, discarding a few until he found one that was suitable, counted until he reached the 26th word in the sixth paragraph, and sent Cole an e-mail with the URL and the word.

It was a method they'd used before, and since the assigning of numbers had been done in a snowy field, in whispers, the six numbers memorized, never written down, it was safe enough. Even if Sturgis was somehow monitoring the e-mail account that Cole had set up anonymously from a public computer -- not likely -- the e-mail that Tyler had sent equally anonymously wouldn't be much help. The page was an earnest plea for people to compost more, and the word was 'earthworms.'

Now, he had to wait for Cole to see the message, do some counting, and -- well, Tyler wasn't sure what Cole would do after that. Cole would want to talk to him, ask him questions, ask him if he was sure... but Cole would also want to move swiftly to take Sturgis in for questioning.

If Tyler had gotten it wrong, pulling in Sturgis would alert the real traitor and blow the whole investigation, but Tyler knew that he was right.

Sturgis. Young, late twenties, six-two, with a thick shock of strawberry blond hair and bright blue eyes, handsome enough to turn heads, well-dressed and well-spoken. Being noticeable like that wasn't ideal in their job, but Sturgis used it to his advantage. Then, when it was time to work, contacts and dye, subtly shapeless clothes and a slouch blurred his attractiveness, muted it until he could slip by, part of any crowd. If you knew how, and all of them did, changing your appearance rarely involved anything major in the way of props. It was all in the attitude.

Tyler wondered how much of Sturgis' confidence would survive being arrested and questioned, the consequences of discovery only too well-known, even if arrogance and over-confidence would have made Sturgis certain that he'd never be caught.

You could dress it up poetically by talking about numbered hours and sand trickling through hourglasses, but the cold facts were pure prose; when Sturgis had been wrung dry, he'd die. No judge would grant clemency for this -- though Tyler doubted it would ever get as far as a court case.

"But it won't be me pulling the trigger," he muttered as he moved away from the computer to stare out of the window, driven by a need to monitor his surroundings that was too ingrained to ignore. "Not this time."

"Tyler? Do you still want that coffee?"

He turned his head. Dan was in the doorway, hovering as if he was unsure of his welcome. Tyler smiled at him, and Dan smiled back, an uncomplicated happiness shining from his eyes.

It wasn't over; the fallout from this would cloud the air for months with repercussions and security threats, but it wasn't Dan's problem and, Tyler realized, it wasn't his, either.

With a momentary flash of sympathy for a distant Cole -- because it was most certainly *his* problem -- Tyler walked over to Dan and into the hug waiting for him.

"Hi," Dan whispered into his neck, arms tight around Tyler. "Welcome back."

It took two days for Cole to call, after Tyler had followed up his e-mail with a succinct summary of his proof, by which time Tyler was on the verge of driving to D.C. to throttle his former boss. He didn't dare risk making direct contact himself; he could think of a dozen possible complications when it came to taking Sturgis, and that was without even trying.

He waited, kept a gun within reach when he slept, and during the day wore one in a shoulder holster that Dan eyed with appreciation tinged with wariness, telling Tyler that he looked scary but hot. Tyler wasn't sure which adjective he found most incomprehensible. It was a gun; he wasn't planning on shooting Dan, so there was no reason for him to look frightening, and as for the supposed hotness of the leather holster, it made him sweat, chafed his ribs, and was as much a part of his outfit as his shoes. Hotness, in the sexual sense at least, just didn't come into it.

Tyler suffered through six calls from people trying to sell him items he didn't want, one from Anne, who wanted to speak to Dan first, before, finally, late in the afternoon, he heard Cole's voice in his ear, saying his name in a weary rasp.

"Cole. Thank fuck you called back. What took you so long?"

"I've been busy. And I miss the days when you used to call me 'sir' and treat me with some respect."

"Yeah, I miss them, too," Tyler said insincerely. Dan scrambled for the remote and paused the DVD they'd been watching, leaving Bruce Willis frozen, flying through the air as a car blew up behind him, the screen filled with flames and pieces of flying metal. Tyler nodded a thank you and then felt real gratitude as Dan patted Tyler's knee and left him alone, taking his iPod into their bedroom and closing the door. Tyler wasn't sure that Dan would actually turn the iPod on, but he appreciated the gesture.

"I'm alone now, sir," he said, interrupting Cole's lecture on manners, which didn't have much bite to it. "Did you get him?"

Cole sighed. "He's dead."

"Mm," Tyler said noncommittally. "Is that right."

"He shot himself when the team sent to pick him up at his house told him that I wanted to see him. As an admission of guilt went, it was... convenient, although it's regrettable that I had no chance to discuss his actions with him. The team leader has assured me that there was no chance to prevent what happened." There was a pause, and then Cole added reflectively, "I find myself disagreeing with that belief, which is why that team now has a new leader."

Shot himself. Tyler considered that for a moment and found himself on Cole's side when it came to condemning the team, who had undoubtedly reacted instinctively when Sturgis pulled a gun. Which may or may not have been aimed at Sturgis' head.

"How many did you send?"

"Three in the house, four more on the grounds."

"Idiots," Tyler said without heat.

"You would have brought him to me alive."

"It's not the way I usually operate," Tyler pointed out dryly, thinking that it'd maybe been too long since Cole was in the field. Things got messy.

Cole cleared his throat, ignoring Tyler's comment. "I want to see you. Immediately. There are loose ends to clear up--"

"Now that I've heard from you, I was planning to take off," Tyler said before Cole planned his life out for him. "Disappear with Dan for a while."

The silence from Cole that followed was eloquently disapproving, and Tyler sighed. "I came close to losing him over this, Cole. I did what you wanted; I gave you your traitor. We're done."

"You know that it's not that simple."

Frustration, dark and bitter, boiled up inside him. "I'm making it simple, Cole. I don't work for you anymore. You managed without me for two years--"

"You call what happened managing?" Cole demanded. "If you'd still been working for me--"

"My job was killing people," Tyler interrupted. This had to end here. "I was a weapon you pointed and fired. I wasn't involved with internal security, and if you're deluded enough to think that I'd have picked up on Sturgis turning when I had my hands full with my own assignments--"

"I think you underrate your survival instincts," Cole told him. "The first agent killed would have set alarm bells ringing for you as a potential target yourself, and you would have acted to protect yourself and found out who was to blame. I know you."

"Yeah, well, you don't know me now," Tyler said, tiredness swamping his relief that it was all over. "I'm not interested in coming back to my old job--"

"No one is asking you to do that. I accept that your usefulness as a sniper is over."

"And I'm not interested in becoming your sniffer dog."

"Now, that's a pity, because you'd be very good at it and it wouldn't carry with it the risks or responsibilities of your former position."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Tyler said incredulously. "I'd be a target from day one, and if I screwed up--"

"You wouldn't."

"I'm sweating just thinking about it," Tyler said, which wasn't a lie. He could feel his throat tighten and his hands shake. Fuck. "I don't want that life. Office work, field work, secrets and lies-- And Dan would hate it."

"Mr. Seaton. Yes." Cole hummed thoughtfully. "Well, let's be realistic here; I'm sure he's been pleasant company, but he's hardly likely to be a permanent fixture in your life, is he? Take a few weeks' vacation together -- a month, even -- and after that we can send him on his way with a little cash in his pocket, or find him a job somewhere." Cole sounded kind but firm, an indulgent parent admonishing a wayward son. "It's time to get back to work, John, and although Mr. Seaton's background contains nothing to his detriment, I can't really see him fitting into your life once you leave your rustic retreat."

"You're right," Tyler said evenly. "He'd be bored out of his mind and so would I. For the last time, Cole, no. You call me again and I'll hang up. You show up here and I'll--"

"Shoot me?" Cole suggested.

"Don't tempt me."

He ended the call and leaned his head against the back of the couch, staring up at the dusty rafters, his heart hammering. Stressed out and panicking after one phone call, and Cole wanted him back in a life where every minute would be either mind-numbingly dull or life and death intense and days off and public holidays didn't exist.

He wouldn't last a month.

Time to follow Dan's example and run, taking Dan with him.

Chapter Eight

"I'm forgetting something."

Dan kept hold of his patience. "Tyler, you've got lists. With check marks all over them. You're organized. If you've forgotten something, it's something not worth remembering."

Maybe you could be too organized. Dan's packing hadn't taken long. He'd arrived on Tyler's land with nothing but the clothes on his back and a few dollars, and he hadn't gone on many shopping sprees since then. Tyler had given him a suitcase and told him that anything that didn't fit in would be left behind, because they were traveling light. Dan had responded by packing everything into a backpack instead and then surreptitiously tucking his laptop into Tyler's suitcase when he'd found that it wouldn't fit into the backpack.

Tyler's packing had been equally rapid, which hadn't surprised Dan at all, but their departure had been spread over days, not hours, which did. Tyler was all about the need to leave, but something seemed to be making him drag his feet, and Dan didn't know what it was.

Now, though, they were practically out of the door, and yet Tyler was frowning, chewing the inside of his cheek pensively. Dan wanted to *go*; there was a big world out there waiting, the sun was finally shining with some warmth behind it, and they were going to drive off like the end of a movie, with nothing to worry about but his suspicion that Tyler's taste in road trip music wasn't going to match his own and Tyler would get snappy as hell if Dan's map reading got them lost.

"Just leave it--" Dan began, but Tyler snapped his fingers, a look of relief spreading over his face as he pulled a key out of his pocket. "Is that the spare key to the cabin?" Dan asked evenly. "The one you were supposed to leave with Anne when you said goodbye to her yesterday?"

Tyler nodded, looking as close to sheepish as he got. "I was so busy promising to send her postcards that I walked away with it."

"Well, that's not a problem," Dan said. "Go and drop it off now, and I'll do one last look around here."

"Come with me," Tyler suggested. "We can grab an early lunch before we--"

"No," Dan said firmly. "We're going, okay? No lunches, no long goodbyes, no final trip to put something else into storage -- we are *out* of here. When you get back, I'll be waiting on the porch, door locked behind me, and you'll pull up, I'll get in, and off we go."

"If you think I could drive away without checking for myself that the place is locked up tight, forget it."

"Fine, you can see for yourself that I've mastered the art of turning a key," Dan said, "but that's it. Now get your ass into town and give Anne a hug from me."

"I'll give her a kiss instead," Tyler said, goosing Dan as he walked by. "We both know she likes you best because you remembered to say you liked her new hair and I didn't even notice she'd cut it."

Grinning, Dan watched Tyler walk over to his truck, admiring the view when Tyler broke into a jog, his long legs moving smoothly. Dan was already anticipating pulling over for the night and curling up next to Tyler in a bed they didn't have to make the next day. Motel rooms could be on the skuzzy side, but he'd slept in worse places, after all. A night under a tree in the woods sounded romantic, but the worst motel mattress was still softer than stone-embedded dirt that stole the heat from your bones and gave back nothing but a damp, spreading chill. Dan watched the truck drive away and then began a thorough, if redundant, check of each room.

In a day that had begun at dawn and ended long after dusk, they'd packed up most of the cabin and put the contents into storage in a facility one town over. Tyler had told Anne that they were leaving, but no one else. Advertising that the cabin, remote as it was, was going to be standing empty would have been risky, and since there was no one else in town that Dan really wanted to say goodbye to, he'd shrugged and gone along with it.

Walking from room to room didn't take long, and apart from a quarter wedged between two floorboards that Dan pried out for something to do, there was nothing that should have been packed that wasn't. The cupboards were empty of food, the bedding had all been washed and tidied away, and they'd slept in sleeping bags, which had then been tossed into the truck.

Dan had wanted to fly, not drive, something that was at the top of his to-do list, but Tyler had pointed out how much there was to see if they drove across country to their first destination, a small town in the Florida Keys with a restaurant claiming to serve the best Key Lime pie in the world. According to Tyler, every restaurant down there said they did that, but this time it was true. They weren't in a rush, so Dan had gone along with that, too, even though getting onto a plane in the gray, thin light of March and stepping off a few hours later into sunlight with green ocean waves lapping up against a white dazzle of sand sounded pretty good, and miles of wet road, well, not so much.

He was agreeing a lot with Tyler recently, not because he didn't have a mind of his own, but because Tyler looked like a man on the edge and Dan didn't want to push him over. If it didn't matter too much, he just said 'yes' and nodded and watched the relief of no argument to deal with brighten Tyler's eyes.

The living room still had the long green couch and the table in it, so it wasn't completely empty, but the books had all gone into storage, with the exception of a few of Tyler's favorites that he'd packed for the journey, and that made the room look desolate.

Dan shook himself out of his melancholy. They'd be back. At least -- Well, he wasn't sure if they would or not, but as long as he was with Tyler, he didn't care where they lived. He would miss the cabin and the woods when spring truly arrived if they were in a city somewhere, but there was going to be so much to see -- God, he couldn't wait.

He locked the back door and shot the bolts, too. Knowing that Tyler would undo it all and relock the door himself didn't stop Dan making sure that he did it right. The front door, well, since Tyler was going to want to come in, there really wasn't any point in locking that. He'd just sit on the porch and wait for Tyler's truck to come bumping up the narrow lane.

Anticipation fizzed through him as he looked around, committing the scene to memory to be brought out when he was thousands of miles away and feeling homesick. Dan grinned at a squirrel, gray tail fluffed up as he scavenged for food he'd buried in the fall, and felt a pang at the thought of the weeds that would cluster thickly in the fertile soil of the garden with no one to keep them at bay.

He wondered if their route southeast would take them anywhere near his old home. It probably would. Tyler had asked if he wanted to see his dad, just to let the man know that he was alive, but when Dan had made it clear just what he thought of that idea, Tyler hadn't pushed it. Might be fun to go through town doing ninety, though, whistling out of the window as he stirred up the dust and let every single person watching just choke on it.

The mildly vengeful fantasy distracted him from his surroundings, so that when a woman stepped out of the trees, he jerked upright, startled into displaying a distinct lack of cool.

"Uh, hi?" he called out, and got a wave back. Curious, he walked down the porch steps and over to where she stood looking lost, a rueful smile on her face.

Hiker, clearly, though they didn't get many of them, since the woods belonged to Tyler in every direction for quite a ways. When hikers did show up, it was usually summer, not chilly spring with the trails all a mess of frozen mud. He assessed her automatically: mid-thirties, pretty, toting a backpack and wearing tailored dark brown pants and expensive walking shoes. She held a map in her hand, folded neatly, and a fleece hat that matched her pants and jacket was drawn down over fair hair, shoulder-length and shiny. Her eyes, when he got close enough to see them, were green, the color too vivid to be anything but contacts, and he wondered if they were originally brown.

"Would you believe it?" she said, and gave the map an impatient shake that made it rustle dryly. "I've got this and a compass and I'm still so turned around that until the sun decides to set, I won't know which way west is -- and then I'll be as much in the dark as I am now." The smile turned flirtatious. "And no, I don't have a GPS doodad; they're cheating, don't you think?"

"Depends on what you're doing," Dan said cautiously. She didn't belong here, in some indefinable way, and he strained his ears, hoping to hear the rumble of Tyler's truck.

"Hiking," she said promptly. "I'm supposed to be meeting my friends in Carlyle. We were all dropped at different points in the woods, and there's a bottle of wine for the woman who makes it to our hotel first."

"It's not all that safe in the woods by yourself," Dan said, with the authority of a man who'd slept rough and never seen anything bigger than a groundhog. "Suppose you twisted your ankle or something?"

"I've got a cell phone," she said, some of the charm dropping away. "Listen, I suppose getting directions from you is cheating, too, just a teensy bit, but frankly, I'm bored of playing Girl Scout, so..."

Dan pointed at the driveway. "Follow that track and you'll come to a road. Carlyle's to the left."

She flashed him another smile, this one warmly grateful and just a shade too appreciative for the little he'd done. "*Thank you.*" A nod, with some dimples showing, and she turned to walk away.

It took her three steps to stop and glance back, fumbling in a deep pocket of her jacket. "I don't suppose I could impose just a little more and ask for a refill for my water bottle? I'm *so* thirsty after all this tramping through the wilderness."

Dan shook his head and lied, just a little. "Sorry. The cabin's locked, and I don't have a key."

The water had been turned off, as it happened, but if he told her that, he'd also be giving away the fact that the cabin was about to be empty. Where the hell was Tyler?

She gave the cabin a sharp look. "Locked? How do you know? Do you live here?"

His time on the road had made him defensive; too many people saw a scruffy young man and assumed he was a thief at best, and Dan had never taken anything that wasn't his, ever. Except, maybe, for Tyler's raspberries the day they'd met, and he hadn't known they were Tyler's when he picked them.

"Yeah, I do, if it's any business of yours, but like I said, I don't have a key. The town isn't far, and there're some houses you'll pass that'll give you water if you're really all that thirsty."

It would be tap water, not Evian, or whatever she had in that pocket of hers, but if she was really parched, she wouldn't care.

It dawned on him belatedly that her hand was still in her pocket and that the bulge there wasn't really one that matched a plastic bottle, but when she pulled out a gun, black and small, and pointed it at him, the barrel unwavering, well, that explained that.

"You're going to join me in my hike, Daniel," she said, her voice cool and clipped. "Don't worry, we won't be going far."

He'd watched TV shows and movies and sneered when people said obvious, useless things like "Where am I?" or "You won't get away with this!" but he found that he had to bite back the impulse to ask her how she knew his name. Pointless question, as well as clichéd, because he knew the answer already. She knew his name because she wasn't a random hiker who'd wandered off trail; she'd come here on purpose. Since Dan had nothing anyone would want, and didn't have a past as a super-secret Black Ops sniper, it wasn't a wild leap of logic to assume she was after Tyler. It was amazing how a gun pointed at you sharpened your brain even as it froze you to the spot with terror.

"I'm bait," he said aloud, and watched her smile naturally for the first time, thin and fierce.

"Yes, you are. That's very clever of you, but try not to be *too* clever, hmm?"

His thoughts went from being flicker-fast as he put the pieces together to glacially slow as his mind finally wrapped itself around the fact that he had a gun pointed at him -- a fucking *gun* -- and that the bright beginning of his journey with Tyler was about to end in pain and blood.

God, he was never going to see Tyler again, was he? Loss tore through him, a slash of emotional agony that had his arms folding across his body reflexively as it spilled from mental into physical pain. As heroes went, he was a failure. He must have watched a hundred scenes of people distracting the bad guy with a joke and then sweeping the gun away with a chop of their hand or a kick, but it was all that he could do to stay on his feet. His legs felt as if he'd run for miles, and his chest and throat were burning as he fought for breath, the unthinking rhythm of his body disrupted by the panic brought on by knowing that he was about to die.

"Don't faint on me." The woman stepped close enough to slap his face, a double insult, since he guessed that she would never have risked getting that close to Tyler. It was a firm, stinging slap, but there was no real force behind it, and it did what she wanted it do: his head cleared, and if his gut felt liquid and his throat tight with grief, the world had come back into focus.

"I won't help you to hurt Tyler," he said, and was pleased by how steady his voice was. "Forget it."

"Tyler Edwards..." She pursed her lips and then shook her head dismissively. "I prefer John Bryson, but who gives a shit. They can bury him under any name they like."

He wasn't going to think about Tyler cold and still and six feet under. He *wasn't*. He had to do something soon; Tyler -- not John, *Tyler* -- would be back any minute now, and if the blood wasn't pounding in his ears, he'd probably be able to hear the truck, but it was and he couldn't. Maybe he could trust that she wanted him alive and make a run for it. Once in the woods, he could lose her, get to the road, and flag Tyler down.

"Try anything brave and I'll shoot you," she said, making 'brave' sound like a dirty word, which made him realize that all those times he'd played cards with Tyler and been told his poker face was as easy to read as large print maybe hadn't been Tyler's way of psyching him out, but the simple truth. "Your arm, I think; it'll hurt like hell, and you'll never be able to use it without

remembering what happened, but it won't stop you walking and you probably won't bleed for long."

"Why are you doing this?" It was another classic line, but he genuinely wanted to know. It had to be connected with the job that Tyler had done for Cole; too much of a coincidence otherwise.

She gave him a blank look. "Why on earth would I tell you that?" She jerked her head at the woods. "Move."

"No." He set his teeth and waited for the bright, hot pain of a bullet. It would come eventually; if she wanted Tyler dead and succeeded, getting rid of witnesses would be high on her to-do list.

"Why do you want to get shot?" she asked with what sounded like mild curiosity, no more than that. "It's not like the movies, you know; you'll be screaming, bleeding, bits of flesh and bone splattered everywhere--"

"Nice images. Thanks." He was feeling less terrified and more furious, which worked for him. Anger didn't make him feel as if he was about to pass out or throw up. "We both know you're going to kill me anyway, and at least this way, Tyler gets a chance to make it."

"Tyler's the kind of man who always makes it," she said. "That's why I need you."

Dan bared his teeth at her in something a world away from a smile, his lips curling back. "Then start working out how to drag me, because I'm not fucking moving."

"I have plans for Tyler," she said, her voice soft and dangerous. "I need him, which buys him some time, and who knows, maybe at the end of it all, he'll walk away. It's not ideal for me, but it's possible. But if you keep this up, I'll just wait for him to get back -- yes, I know where he is. I've been listening to you two for the last two days and, my God, it's pathetic what he's become--"

"Listening?" Dan gaped at her, and felt his ears burn with embarrassment and outrage. "You -- that's just -- that's illegal!"

She gave an amused gurgle, deep in her throat. "Where the hell did he find you? In a cabbage patch? Let me tell you what will happen if you don't do as I say. He'll drive up that track, and you'll run to him, arms waving, yelling about the nasty lady with the gun, and he'll stop the truck. He won't get out, but he'll have to stop, and I'll shoot him in the head when he does. Want me to prove that I can?" She took a silencer out of her other pocket and screwed it onto the gun, a move that dried the spit up in Dan's mouth, because it was so casually done. "See that robin on the branch over there?"

If the gun hadn't been silenced, he might have let her do it; use up a bullet, make some noise... but he didn't doubt her skill, and the bird was doing a twittering song that bugged the hell out of him at dawn, but right now sounded so chirpy and normal that the thought of it ending hurt him.

"Don't. I know you can."

"Oh, but you don't," she said. "I could be bluffing. And you don't -- not really, not deep down -- think that I'll kill something just because I can. I want you to know that, Daniel. I want you to be sure of it, so that when I tell you that Tyler will be dead if you don't do as I say, you'll know that you don't have any alternative."

Her hand moved up in a smooth arc, paused, and he watched, not the poor, doomed scrap of feathers and song, but her finger. As it squeezed the trigger, he flung himself at her, not enough space between them to really build up sufficient momentum for a proper tackle, but enough to send her staggering.

The birdsong in the woods stopped, and he heard a flurried beat of wings as every bird in earshot took off, warned, not by a muted, muffled click, but pure instinct, climbing high into the sky.

He grabbed for the gun, his fingers closing around her wrist and cool metal, and he thought that he could do it. She was shorter than him, lighter, and she was still off-balance--

Her fist struck him in the throat, a perfectly judged blow, robbing him of breath. Dan released her wrist, both hands coming to his throat as he fought for air, pain radiating out from where her fist had landed.

"That could have killed you," she said as she walked backward with quick, graceful steps, a parody of a dance. She aimed the gun at him again, a solid shape surrounded by a whirl of black dots as Dan's vision grayed out. "An inch higher, a little harder... Lucky for you, I'm a trained professional. Don't try that one at home."

Funny. Dan swiped at his watering eyes and managed to suck in some much-needed oxygen. The dots disappeared, and he concentrated on regaining his voice so that he could tell her what a crazy, fucked-up bitch she was.

"I really don't have time for this," she said, her voice sharp now, like glass splinters scraping at his ears.

That had to mean that Tyler was coming. Yeah, he could hear the truck in the distance approaching slowly, with Tyler in no hurry and the ground too uneven to race over. Dan blinked away the last of the tears and tried to straighten from his hunched-over position so that he could see what was going on.

"You," she continued, "are annoying me."

"Bite me," he managed to croak, and then the world exploded into shards and fragments of darkness and pain as she did a perfect spin and kick, just like the movies, her boot and his head connecting.

Chapter Nine

Tyler turned off Neil Young mid-warble, the song continuing in his head for a few beats. He didn't mind having the radio on when he drove, but mostly he liked to listen to the engine and the road. He'd gotten used to tuning out Dan's choice of music -- the iPod helped -- but he had a feeling that the journey would contain a lot of moments when no music was the only compromise they'd be able to reach.

The truck eased its way over the ruts that the seasons had dug into the ground, finding a path for itself. It was going to hurt leaving his truck behind, but once their travels took them abroad, it would have to languish in long-term parking, with all the risks that option entailed. Tyler was resigned to the necessity without being too happy about it. Maybe he could leave it in a storage facility instead.

He reached the end of the track and glanced casually over at the cabin as he swung the truck around in a circle, wanting to leave it pointed back the way he'd come. Dan lay on his back in the dirt, unmoving, still, a woman, vaguely familiar, standing over him, a gun aimed at Dan's head. Shock closed his throat, but habit made him complete the turn and put the truck into park, and it didn't take him more than a moment to start thinking again. He sat still, moving only his head as he scanned the woods for an accomplice. No one was visible, which meant nothing; the trees were too bare to provide much cover above ground, but there were plenty with trunks thick enough for a person to hide behind.

Who was she? Tyler was good at assimilating a lot of detail in a single quick glance, and he played back what he'd seen of her as he tried to fit the profile to a memory. He discounted the blonde hair; hair was the easiest to change. Without a name, he still had a vague sense of a past connection, but he needed more than that. Knowledge was power, always. Knowledge of a building's layout had gotten him safely to an exit with people chasing him; knowledge of a target's habits had guided him to the perfect time and place for a hit.

There was no time to cudgel his stunned, stupid brain into coughing up the data he needed. If she decided that he was taking too long to get out and that he was maybe calling for backup or arming himself, she might put a bullet into Dan to encourage him to move faster. Closing off all his emotions, he took out the gun he wore strapped to his ankle as unobtrusively as possible and slid it into the back of his pants. She'd find it, but she'd expect it; if he didn't have a weapon to surrender, it would make her suspicious.

"Over here," she called to him, sounding amused, an arrogant lilt to her voice that told him that she thought she was in control. "Turn off the engine and toss me the keys when you're close enough."

Tyler obeyed her instructions because he couldn't tell for certain if Dan was alive or not. Driving off fast was the best option if he wanted to keep himself alive, but he couldn't do it until he was sure that Dan was beyond help. It was also in Tyler's mind that, although Dan only worked as a hostage if he was alive, if Tyler left, the woman might decide to punish him for that decision by blowing a hole in Dan's head, and that wasn't something that Tyler could contemplate unmoved.

Even so, stepping out of the truck to disarm himself in front of an enemy took an effort of will.

The keys flew through the air in a glittering arc and fell at her feet. Too risky to throw them at her; to do it with any force would require telegraphing his move, and she could duck or pull a trigger faster than the flight of the keys. She didn't make the rookie mistake of glancing down at them, and now that he could see her face, he wasn't surprised. His brain finally provided him with the details it'd withheld.

Paula Ryan. Efficient, cold, and loyal to only herself, which made Tyler wonder just what the psychologists who'd declared her a patriot who could be trusted with a rifle and a kill order had been taking in the way of drugs. She'd gone rogue five years before, disappearing, presumed dead, in a car bomb.

He'd never known her well, and he hadn't mourned her death for a moment.

"Looking good for a corpse, Paula."

"Thank you." Her gaze raked over him. "Lose the gun."

He didn't bother to argue. Not with the safety off on her gun and her finger curled around the trigger. The small, unobtrusive weapon got tossed aside, with Tyler automatically noting its position on the ground, as close to Dan as he could make it without being too obvious about it.

Paula nodded. "One more thing and then we can talk."

Dan made a small, snuffling sound, distressed, pained, without opening his eyes, and Tyler quelled a surge of relief. Not yet. Too soon for it. Dan was alive, but it didn't mean that he was safe. None of them were, and that included Paula. Tyler wasn't feeling very merciful right then.

He kept his thoughts off his face when he replied, though. "And what would that be?"

"I want you to go over to the cabin and cuff yourself to the door handle," she said calmly.

Tyler spared the door a glance and saw the gleam of metal; two pairs of cuffs, each with an empty cuff dangling down, waiting for his wrists. Easy enough to get out of, with that much play between them, but unlocking them would slow him down.

"No. Talk to me now."

She fired, the bullet striking the ground a bare inch from Dan's head, sending grit and earth flying. Dan jerked, his head lolling to the side, a small smear of blood from a stone chip bright on his cheek, and Tyler swallowed dryly.

"He can live without ears," Paula said, "but he won't look as cute. Would that bother you? It wouldn't matter to me, but maybe you're fussier about your boys?"

Tyler walked over to the porch, pivoting as he passed her so that he never showed Paula his back. There were two ways to do what she wanted, but he went with the more awkward method of fastening the cuffs so that he ended up with his back to the door, not his face. With the cuffs shielded by his body from Paula's gaze, he managed to fasten them loosely. He felt vulnerable, staked-out prey, but logic told him that if she'd wanted him dead, he'd be bleeding out next to Dan.

Logic didn't stop his skin crawling as he stared at her, tugging hard once to prove that he was securely held, his hands just visible at his sides. As soon as he'd done that, he put his hands behind him and began to work on getting free of the cuffs, hoping that she was far enough away not to notice the small shifts of his muscles. He'd have given a lot for a paperclip, but he'd settle for losing skin as he tried to use sweat as lube.

"Good boy," she said. Textbook technique: belittle even as you praise, underline who's in charge. Stupid of her to think it'd work on him, but he doubted that she'd even noticed that she was doing it. She might have left the department, but she'd taken her training with her. "Now we talk. First, before you get all heroic on me, let's get one thing clear. I have no reason to kill your little pet. He's seen my face, but it won't matter in the long run."

Liar, Tyler thought. She was right, though; it didn't matter. He planned to kill her at the first opportunity, which would take care of the threat to Dan. She was rogue. Her supposed death was the only reason a kill order hadn't been issued on her. Three agents had died trying to capture her before she handed over a list of current operatives to the highest bidder, and who knew how many lives had been lost because undercover agents had been forced to abandon their posts, their missions incomplete.

"The same goes for you. If you perform well, I'll let you walk away, too. There's nothing to be gained from removing either of you -- unless you get creative, in which case, so will I. I'm not a fan of torture for fun, but if it becomes necessary I can do things to him that will make him beg you to put him out of his misery. And you know I will."

Yeah, he knew. Tyler thought not of what she could do to Dan, but what he'd been trained to do himself. He'd never had to reduce a human to a mewling, begging wreck, broken in mind and body, but he knew how. His line of work was mostly done at a distance with him unobtrusive, invisible, and he'd liked it that way. Dan, stubborn and resilient as he was, still wouldn't last long. God, did Tyler really want him to when it could only ever end one way?

He rolled his eyes, allowing himself to look vaguely bored. "Cut the theatrics. What do you want? Why are you even here? I never worked with you on a job; we have no history."

"That was true until very recently, and you've only got yourself to blame for all of this." She pointed at him, an accusatory stab of her finger, her face tight with annoyance. "You got my partner killed."

"Huh? You were working with Sturgis?" Disgust filled him, not at the way the two of them had hooked up -- like calls to like, and they were both scum as far as he was concerned -- but at his own stupidity. He'd found Drew Sturgis and stopped looking. There had been no hint that Sturgis was working with a partner, but he still should have looked for one, damn it.

"He was working for me," Paula corrected him. "He preferred to think of us as a team, though, and it wasn't like I cared about his delusions."

"You were in on his deal with the targets?" God, this effort to free himself was hurting his wrists, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but getting free before Dan came around and tried to do something heroic. Maybe for the second time; Tyler couldn't see any reason why Paula would have knocked Dan out unless her hand was forced. When they got out of this, he was going to instruct Dan on the error of annoying people with guns. At length.

Blood, sticky and warm, was welling up from abraded skin. Blood wasn't all that slippery.

"I came up with it," she said. "All those people... all so rich. It seemed like such a waste to just kill them, don't you agree?"

"You know I don't."

"Oh, yes, I forgot." She pulled a solemn face. "They were *evil*."

"Yeah," Tyler said without heat. Paula could push his buttons, but not like that. "By any definition, most of them were."

She shrugged. "Their money spends the same as anyone else's. And you can't really claim the moral high ground. I've seen your kill stats; you're a monster yourself to many people. How did you escape getting taken care of? Oh, wait; you were working for the good guys, and you were always Cole's favorite. That makes all the difference -- except to the corpses and their families."

"Spare me the philosophy and don't bother trying to convince me that what you did was justified. What do you want?" One hand was almost free. He relaxed his fingers and tried to make bones fold like a fan, with marginal success. Humanity just hadn't evolved that way. Pity.

"One more kill."

His rejection of that idea was automatic and sincere, but he combined it with a hard tug on a cuff and camouflaged it with an abortive lunge forward. It gave him a reason for his face to contort; he just hoped that from where she stood, pain looked like angry revulsion. "No!"

Paula sighed. "Your target is as destined for hell as any of your official ones, if that helps. In fact, once he hits his stride, he'll make the official better off dead list, so all that you'd be doing is anticipating that."

"No."

Her expression hardened, and she pointed the gun at Dan's hand. "Want to cut his food up for him for the rest of his life because he's down to three fingers on this hand?"

"Why do you think I retired?" Tyler said, keeping his voice level and calm as his left hand finally slipped free. He curled his fingers around the metal of the cuff to stop it from falling back with a noisy clatter and hoped that he wasn't dripping blood onto the porch. He didn't dare look down to check. "My nerve's gone. I hold a rifle and my hands shake. If you've read my file, you know it's true. I'm no use to you."

"Then you're both dead, right here, right now, so I suggest you get over your crisis of confidence," she snapped. "For fuck's sake, you were one of the best! You don't wake up one day and find that you can't hit the side of a barn from thirty feet away. You can still shoot if you want to."

"Paula--" God, he hated saying her name, talking to her as if they were friends. "You've got to give me more to work with here."

She threw back her head and stared up at the sky. "Why are men so stupid?"

"We're not stupid, just not mind readers," Tyler said dryly. The second cuff just didn't want to slide over his hand. Fuck. "Who do you want dead? Start there."

Paula smiled at him. "Better attitude. Good. You really don't like him being threatened, do you? That makes things so much easier for me."

She walked over to join him on the porch, keeping well out of reach of a kick from him and standing where the slightest of movements from Dan would be visible, just as Tyler would have. Amateurs were impulsive; pros weren't. He started thinking about how he could use that predictability against her.

"You know what Drew did, I guess. He told the targets when to expect the hit, they paid him, and I stayed with them and made sure killing the agents and disposing of the bodies went smoothly. By which I mean I did it myself." She was still smiling. Tyler wished she'd stop. "We offered a complete service to our clients. Okay, maybe we didn't send them a 'congratulations on escaping death' card afterward."

Bitch. It made sense of one thing he'd never understood -- the similarities between how the agents had died and the method of their disposal. No bullets had been left in the bodies, but from the autopsies, it had been assumed that the same type of gun had been used in each case. "I bet you got a kick out of it, too."

Paula pursed her lips reprovably. "I take a pride in my work, yes. If you think that's wrong of me, I know people who'd think what you do with your little boy over there is just as depraved."

Tyler didn't let himself get goaded into defending his relationship with Dan or pointing out Dan's age. She knew the latter and didn't care about the first.

"Unfortunately, one target... well, let's just say that the agent surprised me by being better than I'd expected and managed to complete her task and get clear. She didn't see me, but I caught up to her later, of course, just to make sure there were no loose ends."

"Sue Jennings," Tyler said, another puzzle piece slotting into place.

"Mm-hmm." Paula gave him an approving nod. "With her target dead, his successor in the uh, family business, wasn't pleased. Mr. Drake was eloquent about our inefficiency in allowing his uncle to die after taking money to keep him alive. Now that Drew's history, I'm the only one left to answer his accusations. A little unfair of him to complain since his uncle's death was a dream come true for him, but I suppose he had to put up a front of grieving."

"He wants the money back, and you want me to kill him to avoid repaying him?" Tyler guessed.

"What a bloodthirsty little accountant you'd make." She shook her head. "No, I don't want him killed. In lieu of the money -- which I can't reach just yet and which he isn't really interested in -- he wants a rival to disappear. Gun-running is such a competitive industry."

"So what's the problem?" Tyler was honestly confused. "You kill the rival, take a bow, and exit stage left to spend the money all by yourself now that Sturgis is out of the picture. Why do you need me?"

Paula ran her tongue over her lips, the dry flicker of a snake's tongue, with nothing sexual about it. "It's a matter of timing. I need to be somewhere else on the day that his competitor is wide open for a hit. A prior engagement with another client in need of my help to stay alive. Another opportunity will come along, of course, but Drake wants this resolved right now. And besides," her eyes glittered coldly, "you owe me. Your investigation led to Drew's death and ruined a perfectly good deal. Without him feeding me data on targets and agent deployment dates, it's going to be almost impossible to continue with what we were doing."

"Tough," Tyler said. He sighed with a weary impatience that wasn't feigned. "Why the hell didn't you just solve this problem another way, Paula? All I wanted was to walk away from this shit, and you've dragged me back into it. Thanks for nothing."

Her face twisted in annoyance. "Are you trying to talk me into killing you both now?"

She could. Two bullets and she could end it for both of them. He supposed it would be no more than he deserved, but Dan -- oh God, Dan hadn't earned any of this.

With an indifferent shrug, he said, "I've been living on borrowed time for years, and at least this way he won't suffer."

"You're such a little ray of sunshine." She nodded her head, a sharp, decisive gesture. "Fine. I'll shoot you both and find someone else to kill Derry." Two steps back and then she turned and aimed her gun at Dan's head.

This time, his lunge forward was unthinking, instinctual, as he tried futilely to put himself between her gun and Dan. "No!"

"Sweet," she purred. "Or do I mean sickening?"

He'd had nightmares like this, where he'd been running uphill, legs like lead. He felt the same helpless frustration now. There was nothing he could do to save Dan if Paula decided to cut her losses and go with someone else to solve her problem. Nothing at all.

Grasping at anything to keep her from pulling the trigger on her gun twice and walking away, he said, "Wait -- Derry? *Liam Derry*?"

Paula's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You know him?"

Tyler took a deep breath and stopped fighting to break free. "Him, I'll kill for free."

"I don't recall offering to pay you, but I'll bite. Why?"

"You don't remember?" Tyler shook his head, drawing on a reservoir of strength he hadn't needed to tap into for a long time. "No, it was after you left, I guess. He sold a shipment of weapons to a religious cult and a month later they were all dead, down to babies too young to walk. His name didn't make the news, of course, but you're right; he's on a lot of lists. He's just not anywhere near the top."

"So you'll do it? Just like that?" Skepticism soured her voice. "Hmm."

Tyler kept his voice level. "No. Not just like that. I've got conditions. Lots of them." She raised her eyebrows, and he continued. "I keep Dan with me."

"Not a chance."

"Send someone you trust along with us," Tyler said, improvising desperately. He needed her to step closer again. "That way, they can report to you as soon as the hit goes down. They can keep Dan cuffed, hell, keep him drugged, unconscious -- but he stays where I can see him."

She frowned and, yes, shifted position just enough to bring her in range now that he had one hand free. He felt a moment of surprise that she'd even consider something as foolish as his proposal -- foolish from her perspective, at least. Dan stirred, moaning softly, and her head whipped around.

Now.

Tyler brought his fist up, clenched tightly enough to hurt, and struck her squarely on the temple. What followed blurred in his memory, though it was clear enough when he was doing it: his hand slashing down on her wrist in a hard chop that made her drop her gun, kicking it far away and calling Dan's name as he did it. Paula staggered, and he punched her again, this time in the throat. He meant to kill her, but the angle was off and he didn't have enough power behind the blow. Her hands flew up to her neck, odd, garbled sounds emerging from her mouth, and then she had the sense to back away from him, out of reach, and fuck, she was going for her gun--

Dan rolled over and began to scramble across the ground to where a gun lay, small, innocuous, overlooked; Tyler's gun, not Paula's. Oh, good boy, Tyler thought, willing him to succeed.

He'd thrown the gun close to Dan, and even weak and dizzy as Dan had to be, Dan was going to reach it before Paula, staggering, disoriented, could pick up hers.

Dan's hand closed on metal, and he got to his knees and pointed Tyler's gun at Paula. "Stay where you are!"

Dan's voice was rusty, rough, but if his hand was wavering, he was close enough to Paula that he couldn't miss. Tyler had never seen Dan fire a gun, but he was a country boy who'd probably grown up shooting tin cans off a fence and then graduated to hunting. At least, Tyler hoped so.

Paula gave Dan a contemptuous, dismissive look and ignored his command, making for her gun, which had landed in a bush beside the porch -- a bush that at this time of the year was a naked tangle of branches, the gun visible, caught in the twigs. Fuck. Tyler spun around and kicked at the door. If he couldn't get the second cuff off his wrist, maybe he could break the handle off the door... He slammed his boot against solid wood, pulling back as hard as he could at the same time, and got absolutely nowhere. Whoever had built the cabin had done a good job; the plate was screwed in firmly.

He glanced around for anything he could use to break the cuff and saw a piece of rock on the railing around the porch, a hand-sized lump that had been there all winter. Dan had brought it home with him, a keepsake from the first beach he'd walked on. It had gleamed like oil in the ocean and dried to an unremarkable dark gray, but Dan had clung to it stubbornly.

Tyler lunged for it, grabbed it, and used it as a hammer. That didn't work, either, and after three swift blows that dented the cuffs and gouged chunks out of the door, he gave up, keenly aware that Dan was on his feet but looking unsteady and that Paula was reaching into the bush.

"Don't do it," Dan said, and fired a warning shot that left Tyler's ears ringing and didn't come close to Paula.

Paula jerked, but didn't stop. She wouldn't, Tyler knew. Dan should have fired at her legs, should have wounded her, slowed her down.

Hell, Dan should have just shot her in the back.

Tyler didn't have the best of angles, but he weighed the stone in his hand and was preparing to throw it at Paula when she turned, her gun in her hand, armed again, which meant that they were both about to die.

"Dan! Shoot her!"

Dan looked anguished, panicked, but he raised the gun obediently, his finger on the trigger. Paula smiled and shook her head.

"I don't think so," she said thickly, and brought her hand up. Tyler threw the rock with everything he had and watched it smash into Paula's skull even as a shot rang out. Dan screamed, high and shocked, rocked back by a bullet that had struck him in the left arm, from what Tyler could see. He knew that Paula had been aiming for the heart; it was the target he would have chosen.

Paula raised her hand to her head, where blood was seeping through her hair, and gave Dan an uncomprehending glare.

"Dan! Shoot her!" Tyler said again. "Shoot her, damn it!"

Dan gave him a look of pure misery and raised the gun. Paula jerked as a bullet drove into her thigh, and crumpled to the ground, dropping her gun, thank God. She was writhing in pain, her hands clamped to her thigh, keening moans of agony spilling from her mouth.

"Okay, now grab her gun and come here," Tyler said, keeping the urgency in his voice but trying not to spook Dan by screaming at him. "Come and get this cuff off me, boy."

As Tyler had hoped, the nickname jolted Dan out of his daze. He walked over to Paula and picked up her gun after stuffing his own into his jacket pocket, and had the sense to back away right after. Paula, despite being wounded, wasn't safe, and Tyler was glad that even in shock Dan appreciated that she might have a backup weapon.

"Shouldn't we help her?" Dan asked, sounding uncertain, his voice shaking.

Tyler bit back an angry snarl and repeated, "My cuff, Dan. I need your gun to get it off." Paula would have the key, but there was no way, in the state he was in, that Dan would be able to take it from her without getting hurt.

"What? Oh... right."

Dan was moving too slowly, reacting in a blurred, distant way. Concussed? Maybe. Tyler didn't let himself think about that. Not yet. Time for that later.

Dan came close, his injured arm hanging loose at his side as if it didn't belong to his body, an involuntary moan accompanying each step as movement jarred it. Tyler reached up to cup Dan's ice-cold face. "Good boy," he said. He could smell Dan's blood, see it wet on Dan's sleeve, and it made him feel protective and ready to kill, the conflicting emotions difficult to deal with. "Give me her gun and go inside."

"I'm not leaving you," Dan said as he held out the gun in a hand that was trembling.

"Fine," Tyler said, and took it from him. He spoke slowly, using short sentences. "Your arm, Dan. Put some pressure on it with your hand. It'll help stop the bleeding."

Dan swallowed and pressed his hand against his arm, crying out softly, his teeth biting into his lip, but keeping his hand where it needed to be.

"Good. Now don't jump. I'm going to get this cuff off. Stand clear."

It took two bullets to free the cuff from the door, and it cost him some more blood and skin from a ricocheting sliver of wood, but being able to move, even with metal hanging from his wrists, was worth it.

He strode past Dan to where Paula lay, moaning softly now, her face gray with pain and blood loss. She'd tried to crawl to his truck and covered about a yard. Tyler never ceased to be amazed by the strength of the survival instinct. If she'd reached it, there was no way she'd have been able to get in, let alone drive away, but she'd still tried.

It didn't mean that he felt any admiration for her; he'd have done the same.

"Paula. What was your other job? Who was the hit?"

"Go to hell."

He couldn't just shoot her. Not if there was another agent about to walk into a trap. Dan had drifted over to stand a few yards away, looking as if a strong breeze would send him to his knees. Damn. Tyler really didn't want Dan to see this, but there didn't seem to be a way to get him to leave.

He kicked Paula's leg, driving the toe of his boot into blood-soaked fabric over shattered bone. Paula screamed, full-throated and raw.

"Tyler, God, no!" Dan ran over to him, horror lending what Tyler knew would be a fleeting strength at best, and grabbed at Tyler's arm with a bloody hand. "She's hurt. I -- I shot her."

Yeah, he knew. "What target?" Tyler repeated, shaking free of Dan's grip.

Paula smiled up at him, a twisted travesty of a smile. She'd bitten through her lip, and blood was trickling down her chin. "You're so good at investigating; find out yourself."

"You think I'm going to turn you in," Tyler said slowly. "Think you'll be in a nice hospital bed while your leg heals and then a prison you'll escape from after pulling some strings and calling in some favors. Maybe you think you'll buy a fancy lawyer who'll get you off -- hell, maybe you'll sue us for shooting you."

The gleam of mockery in her eyes told him he'd gotten most of that part right. People like Paula didn't go to prison, or if they did, it wasn't for long.

"Not going to happen," he told her. The world was sharp and clear around him, his breathing even and slow. Just like a hit, with his focus narrowing to his target, except he wasn't usually this close to them when he shot them. She'd put lipstick on when she'd dressed that morning, a soft rose, patches of it showing like smudges against her bone-pale lips. He watched her breathe, in and out, choppy, shallow gasps. She didn't have many of them left to take.

"You should have left me alone, Paula. And you really shouldn't have shot Dan. You're dead, remember? You don't exist. I can do whatever the hell I like to you and no one will ever know or care. Tell me who the target is, or I shoot you."

"Tyler, you can't," Dan said anxiously. "Cole -- he'll know what to do, he'll -- no!"

Dan was stronger than Tyler had expected him to be. Wounded, concussed, he still managed to pull Tyler's arm so that the bullet intended for Paula's other leg went into the ground, sending up a spurt of stone and dirt.

Tyler set his teeth, turned, and punched Dan hard, the metal cuff swinging up with his fist and gouging Dan's cheek open, scarlet blood welling up.

"Steven Langley," Paula said, and wasn't it ironic that it was hurting Dan that had convinced her Tyler was serious. "It's Langley, now get me some help, you sick little fuck, before I bleed out!"

"I'm sorry," Tyler said, and even if he was looking at Paula when he said it, the words weren't for her. He pulled the trigger, emptying the gun into her, and watched her die with a choke of disbelief, her eyes wide, a bubble of blood staining her lips. "I'm sorry."

Chapter Ten

"I need a clean-up crew, Cole," Tyler said. "Paula Ryan wasn't as dead as we thought she was, but she sure as hell is now. I've got a body, bullets fired, and Dan's hurt."

Dan saw the words as well as hearing them, floating in balloons as if Tyler was in a cartoon or something, the speech bubbles moving around the cabin slowly, bumping into things, the words getting confused. He stared up at the ceiling and watched the words shift and reform.

Clean-up-crew-Cole.

That wouldn't split up, and he found himself murmuring it to himself as he rubbed his cheek against the worn velvet couch. The blanket over him had been packed away in a box for a few days, that was all, but it already smelled musty.

Warm, though, and he did feel cold, so very shivery... He clutched the hot water bottle that Tyler had given him and whimpered as his arm reminded him how much it hurt.

Tyler had looked at his eyes, muttered a curse, and told him that he had a concussion. Dan had tried nodding to show that he understood, but that had hurt, too, and speaking was worst of all. His throat felt swollen, and he couldn't breathe, which scared him so much that his heart began to pound and that made his throat close up more. Tyler had held him, a cool hand on his bare skin, over his heart, and Tyler had told him that he was going to be fine and said it so quietly that Dan believed the assurance.

"So send in someone right the hell now, and a medic. Dan's been shot -- no, he's not. Christ, if he was, do you think-- It's not too bad. The bullet nicked his upper arm, took a chunk of muscle -- Me? I'm fine."

Dan imagined Cole's bubbles popping out, the question marks puncturing the balloons. Tyler sounded tired and angry; Cole wasn't calming him down.

"I want to get the local doctor to see him, but if I do, she'll need to be told -- Well, then, you'd better get that fucking medic here, you hear me? He's hurt and he's concussed; I can't give him anything for the pain, and he lost blood, too."

Blood wasn't something you could pick up and put back in. His blood had sprayed into the air, had soaked into his clothes and down into the earth he lay on. It was gone. Seemed like a waste, but it wasn't his fault it'd gotten lost. At least... He couldn't remember everything that had happened, not very well, but he wasn't trying very hard. Something told him that he didn't want to remember all of it.

"Debriefing? Oh, you better believe I'm up for that, Cole. I want answers. But *you* can come to *us*. Dan's not going to be fit to travel far for a few days, I don't plan to leave him, and you're going to want to speak to him, too. That's not negotiable. And before I forget, the Langley hit is compromised and God knows how many others. Bring your people in or get them to stand down."

Tyler sounded scary. His voice cold and remorseless. Dan closed his eyes and felt tears, hot and wet, seep out. He was remembering. God, it hurt to do that; hurt worse than all of the rest put together.

It took just over an hour for the crew to arrive, and by the time they did, Dan's headache was epic and his stomach churning. He lay on the couch, shivering despite the fire that Tyler had kindled in the swept-clean grate, and catalogued his injuries.

The headache. His throat, swollen and bruised. His cheek, cut and competing with his throat for best bruise. His arm... he didn't want to think about his arm.

Tyler had boiled water and lit a fire, undoing all the work he'd put into closing the cabin down, and produced a medical kit from his truck. What Tyler had done to Dan with its contents had hurt like hell, but after the raw agony of being touched had faded and Dan had stopped swallowing hard at the sight of so much blood, he felt a little better.

Seeing the mess Tyler's wrists were in hadn't helped, but Tyler had seemed genuinely indifferent to his own injuries.

Tyler left him on the couch and went outside, an old blanket in one hand and some black plastic trash bags flapping wildly, like wings. Dan heard the drag of something heavy and knew without being told that Paula's bagged-up body was being moved to somewhere less visible. The soft, thick sound a dragged body made almost had him using the bucket that Tyler had placed by the couch, just in case, but he held back the nausea. She'd been just about the nastiest, scariest person he'd ever met, ever, but the thought of her in a trash bag turned his stomach.

The body, the guns, the bullets... Dan had watched too many crime shows not to know that anything could be reconstructed, but you had to know that there was something to look for first, and something told him that Cole could give orders that would make people look the other way.

Tyler came back inside, not meeting Dan's accusing stare. He washed his hands in the kitchen, the water running for what seemed like a long time to Dan, and then sat down in the armchair he used most. "They'll be here soon."

"All the way from Washington?" That didn't seem possible unless he'd fallen asleep without noticing.

Tyler shook his head. "Cole has people stationed here and there, but for this, well, he can tap into the resources of other departments. The closest team available will come, by road or in a chopper, and they'll secure the scene, take care of the evidence, and we'll get you to a military hospital where no one will ask questions."

Tyler reached over and laid his hand against Dan's. It felt cold and damp from the water it'd been washed in, and Dan flinched. Tyler took his hand away and cleared his throat.

"Dan -- I'm sorry you're hurting. I would -- I would have gotten Anne here if it was serious, you know that, right?"

"Serious?" Anger swept through him, killing the assorted pains for a moment. "Tyler, I shot someone, and that bullet -- I felt it come for me, I thought I was dead -- and you, what you did -- That's not serious? Man, you have some fucked-up priorities."

"You're not dying," Tyler said with precision, each word clear and distinct. "You're not dead, or kidnapped, or at risk. You're wounded, in shock, and in a world of pain because it was a surface wound and they hurt like hell, but you'll live. I don't care about anything else."

"I'm supposed to say thank you?"

"No." Tyler sighed. "We've got a lot to talk about, I guess, but it can wait."

"Suppose I don't want to go off to this military hospital? Suppose I want to stay here?"

"You can't," Tyler said flatly. "I have to report to Cole, and you need to get examined. A gunshot wound needs reporting; we can't involve the local cops in this by going to Anne. We can't expect her to lie for us, and she'll know what did that to your arm as soon as she sees it."

"So *you're* kidnapping me instead?" Dan demanded. "Nice."

"I'm keeping you safe."

"Just don't murder any more women doing it," Dan muttered.

Tyler stood and then bent over so that his face was inches away from Dan's, his gray eyes ice cold. "I'll do what needs doing and don't ever interfere with me working again, boy. Ever. You hear me?"

Astonished, hurt, Dan glared up at him. "Go to hell," he said, and held Tyler's gaze for just long enough to show Tyler that he wasn't scared before he turned his head aside and stared at green velvet instead.

Two dark blue vans, nondescript, with tinted, bulletproof windows arrived just about when Tyler had expected them to. Tyler watched them churn up his drive and felt an unreasoning resentment that his haven had been invaded. He reminded himself that he'd told them to come, and made sure that he kept his open, empty hands in sight as he walked to within a few yards of the vans.

Two men got out of the first van, dressed in coveralls, as unremarkable as their vehicle. Tyler could have drawn a reasonable picture of them after one glance, but for most people their features would fade to fog within moments. Tweedledee and Tweedledum. Perfect for this line of work. One of them held a piece of paper that Tyler guessed was a description or photograph of him. The man glanced at it and then at Tyler, a frown on his face. "Mr. Edwards?"

"Yes."

"Director Stevens sent us."

Tyler nodded. "Where's the medic?"

A man got out of the second van, gray-haired and plump, a medical bag in his hand, leaving the driver to stare blankly out of the window. Tyler smiled at the driver, just to be annoying, and got an indifferent glance back. The doctor was friendlier.

"That would be me. Doctor Reeves, at your service. Are you my patient? You look remarkably well for a man with bullet holes in him." He got closer and glanced at Tyler's wrists, pursing his lips and tutting. "Oh, I see. Superficial, but painful, I'm sure."

"They're nothing," Tyler said impatiently. "The man you need to see is inside. He's been shot -- the bullet grazed his upper arm, but there aren't any broken bones -- he has a possible concussion, and --"

Reeves held up his hand, his fussy friendliness dropping away. "I prefer to make my own diagnosis, thank you, and when I've finished with my other patient, you and I will have a little chat about so-called trivial wounds and infection."

"Just go in and see to him," Tyler said. He turned to the cleaners. "Get busy. I want you finished by the time the man in there is ready to be moved."

The taller of the men rolled his eyes. "It takes as long as it takes."

Tyler took three strides and grabbed the man, the stiff cotton of the coverall the man wore harsh against his hands. "You keep him waiting and I'll stuff you into a body bag all of your own."

A click sounded, and he didn't need to turn his head to know that the driver had dropped the pretence of indifference and was aiming a gun at his head through the open window. Figured. "Pull that trigger and the paperwork will bury you."

"Let go of the nice man and I won't have to fill in a single form and we can all go home early."

Tyler released the man with exaggerated care and gave him a thin-lipped smile. "Sorry," he said insincerely. "It's been one hell of a day."

The man snorted. "Only one body? For you agents, that's practically a day off."

"I'm not an agent," Tyler said evenly. "Not anymore."

The second cleaner spoke up. "Mister, when you're standing over a woman you put a shitload of bullets into, you'd better hope you're still an agent. Now, where is she?"

Tyler pointed at the shed. "There."

"You moved her, didn't you?" the man said, staring at the marks left on the ground. "Well, that just doubled the clean-up time."

"You wanted me to leave her where you're standing?" Tyler demanded. "A little hard to explain away as a lawn ornament."

"Yeah, sure." The cleaners exchanged glances and pulled on their gloves in unison. "We'll take it from here. Just give us the guns that were fired and tell us where they were discharged."

"It's all in the shed," Tyler told them. "No bullets to dig out of trees; the only ones not already bagged are in her. You need to take care of the blood on the ground and fix the door, maybe." He hesitated. Dan wasn't going to want it back, was he? "There's a rock with the guns. That's got blood on it, too. Dispose of it."

"Thanks for making our job that much harder," the man said sourly. "We're supposed to take photographs, you know; preserve the chain of evidence."

"No, you're not," Tyler said coldly. "You're supposed to make this go away, like it never happened. Now do your job and get that murderous bitch's body off my fucking land."

Chapter Eleven

The hospital was all cool white walls and beeping machines. Dan tuned everything out: all the prodding, all the questions, all the pain. After an endless while, they gave him something to make the world go dim, and he began to relax.

Tyler was slumped in a chair in the corner of the room, his wrists neatly bandaged, staring at the open door as if he planned to shoot the first person who walked through it. Tyler stuck by Dan like a shadow on the journey in and would have throughout all of the examinations if Dan hadn't kicked up as much of a fuss as he was capable of. No way was he letting Tyler see him get into a backless gown, his ass hanging out. Tyler had retreated to just outside the door of whatever examination room Dan was in until Dan was finally settled in a private room.

Tyler had also made one of the cleaners drive his truck to the hospital, still packed full of stuff for a vacation that, as far as Dan was concerned, had been permanently cancelled. It was handy that his gear was close at hand in the hospital parking lot, though; they'd driven for ninety minutes to get here, and since he'd been on a stretcher in the back of a van, he hadn't seen much and didn't have a clue where he was. Maybe he could get Tyler to bring him his backpack and laptop.

There were a lot of men around the place who looked as if they belonged on the front lines, hair cropped short, hospital gowns and robes not hiding the fact that they were soldiers. Dan didn't belong here with men like that, but every time he tried to point that out, either Tyler scowled or a nurse shoved a thermometer into his mouth.

His arm itched, his face throbbed, and he was just plain miserable. He must've sighed, because Tyler's gaze flickered over to him. "Do you need anything?"

Tyler sounded studiously calm and remote, and Dan reminded himself that with an arm full of stitches, throwing something at that blank face wasn't a good idea. Last time he'd done that, Tyler had just caught it anyway.

"How about some privacy?"

"They won't let me sit outside the door," Tyler replied, as if that made perfect sense in his world, and maybe it did. "They're only letting me stay in here because this place doesn't really go for visiting hours with balloon and flowers and shit."

"And because you'd kick up a fuss if they tried to make you leave."

"Yes," Tyler said. "I would. I'm not leaving you when you can't defend yourself, and trust me, you want me here when Cole arrives."

"Suppose I don't want to talk to him?" Dan felt his lip push out in a stubborn pout that he thought he'd outgrown at the age of ten. Apparently not.

"He's flying across the country to see you, boy. I wouldn't mess him around." Tyler shrugged, something that Dan couldn't do without whimpering softly in agony, and added, "Easier to get it over with and then you can forget about it."

"You're really something, you know that?"

Tyler was staring at the doorway again, twitching whenever anyone walked by, a tiny shift in his seat, a slight flexing of his hand.

"Really something," Dan repeated.

"I get it," Tyler said. "When you're not pissy as hell, I'll apologize properly for saving your life. Until then, shut the hell up."

"Don't like what I have to say?"

Tyler sighed. "No. It hurts you to talk, and I don't like you hurting."

Dan opened his mouth, caught Tyler's eye and grim expression, and closed it again.

Cole arrived just as Dan had finally found a comfortable position on a bed that was far too high and narrow, with irritatingly crackly sheets. He looked as elegant as before, but older, infinitely weary. How much of a toll did a job like his take on a man? Dan had seen a faint echo of that look on his father's face when something had gone wrong on the farm or his dad had been up all night working to fix a tractor after getting up at dawn to harvest a crop, but Cole's shoulders looked weighted down with responsibilities.

Sympathy made Dan more polite than he'd planned to be. "Hello, sir."

Cold brown eyes, puffy with lack of sleep, stared at him, and then Cole nodded, a brisk jerk of the head. "Mr. Seaton. I was sorry to hear of your injuries." His gaze seemed to linger on the bruised skin and cut on Dan's cheek, something that Tyler had yet to comment on. "You've been in the wars, young man."

It was what his grandmother used to say to him as she bathed his grazed knee or made up an ice bag for his bumped head; those words, a kiss, and a cookie, warm and chewy, pressed into his hand for him to nibble at until he'd stopped crying. Dan blinked away wetness and stared hard at the crisp sheet until he was pretty sure that he wasn't going to start blubbering like a baby and shame himself.

Cole, mercifully, turned his attention to Tyler, who had stood when Cole entered -- relaxed, as if he'd recognized Cole's footsteps, but rising quickly to his feet. Old habits, maybe. He hadn't saluted, at least.

"So," Cole said after a moment. "You missed something."

And that was so fucking unfair that it brought Dan's head up and he hissed a protest, because Tyler might be a psychopath -- God, those bullets thudding into flesh, so very many of them, literally overkill, and Tyler's *eyes*-- but the man had done his best, hadn't he?

Cole gave him a sharp glance that silenced the words Dan wanted to say, and he was glad that he hadn't bothered, because Tyler just nodded. "I stopped looking too soon."

How the fuck is that your fault? Dan screamed silently at him. He felt hot, and his heart was pounding, the way it used to when his dad was yelling at him. Cole shouldn't be doing this to Tyler in front of him. It wasn't fair.

"Mmm." Cole dismissed Tyler with that single cool murmur, and turned his attention to Dan, his voice kinder, warm with sympathy that Dan didn't trust for a moment. "Tell me what happened, son."

Dan licked his lips, unsure of what to do now. He hadn't discussed a joint version of events with Tyler, and he didn't want to say something that would get Tyler into trouble. He was aware on one level that it made no sense to be protecting Tyler, but he couldn't help it; what had happened might have made him seriously reconsider sticking around the man, but his loyalty was to Tyler, not Cole. "Uh..."

"It's okay," Tyler said quietly. "You can tell him everything that happened. If I get arrested, it won't be for killing her, just for not getting more out of her first."

"Let him speak," Cole said. He walked over to Dan's bed and drew up a plastic and metal chair that looked designed to discourage use. "You were at the cabin?"

"Yeah," Dan said. He was lying propped up, and sitting, Cole's face was level with his own. There was nowhere to look; if he tried, his gaze returned, inexorably, to those patient, impassive eyes. He reached out and picked up his glass of water, a lid and bendy straw making it easy to drink from and bringing back memories of Happy Meals and salted fries. The water was cool and flat and swallowing hurt.

"We were about to go on vacation, but Tyler needed to give Anne our spare key, so he drove into town. I was outside, waiting, and this lady came out of the woods. I thought she was a hiker."

"Paula Ryan," Cole said.

Shrugging with one shoulder didn't work, and it still hurt his arm. "I don't know. If Tyler says it was, then I guess that was her name. I'd never seen her before."

"I went to the morgue first," Cole said. "It's Ryan. Her fingerprints prove it, but I hadn't forgotten her face."

"She chatted to me," Dan said. "She seemed nice, but I didn't -- I didn't like her. She wanted water, but I said the house was locked up. Then she -- God, she pulled a gun on me and said I had to come with her. Bait. I was bait. And I knew she wanted to kill Tyler and I knew she'd kill me and I--"

Cole was closer, but it was Tyler who moved swiftly to his side, Tyler's hand that gripped his, Tyler's presence, solid, strong, that blocked the memories. Dan swallowed dryly, clutching at Tyler's fingers with a desperation that he knew was pathetic. "I'm sorry. God."

"It's difficult for us," Cole said, his voice a deep rumble. "What you went through is, well, it's something that the average person would experience only through the medium of a book or a movie; perhaps, sanitized, on the news. For us, for Tyler, it's his life, or it was. The need to think and react quickly and in a way that seems overly violent, shockingly so -- it's what's kept him alive."

"I get that," Dan said. "I just -- she had a freaking *gun*, you know? I thought it was a water bottle and it was a gun."

"Sig Sauer P220 Compact," Tyler said unexpectedly.

"What?"

"Her gun. I thought..." A muscle in Tyler's cheek jumped, but his hand lay quietly in Dan's. "If you know about something, sometimes it's not so scary."

"Right," Dan said ungraciously under his breath. "I nearly got shot in the head by a Ziggy. *Whatever.*"

That cost him Tyler's hand, moved away a moment later, and he felt a definite chill from Cole. Fuck.

"Sorry," he said, glancing at them both in turn. "I'm being a jerk."

"Yeah, you are," Tyler said, not under his breath, but loud and clear. His hand ruffled Dan's hair, a more tentative touch than usual. "You've earned it, though."

Dan snorted. "Right. I let myself get knocked out by a woman who was smaller than me." He touched his fingers to his throbbing temple. "I jumped her, but I fucked it up, and she punched me in the throat and then kicked me in the head. Lights out."

"You did what?" Tyler's voice was strangled. "She had a gun on you, boy! You should have just gone along with whatever she told you to do; you knew I'd be back soon."

"That was why! And she'd been listening to us for days, she said. Spying on us -- and there was this bird she was gonna shoot to show me she could -- and she was telling me how she'd shoot you in the head and fuck, Tyler, I just couldn't let her do it."

They were both looking at him now as if he was insane.

"You were trying to save the bird?" Tyler asked, his voice so carefully casual that it rasped over Dan's nerves like sandpaper.

"No! Well, maybe. She just wasn't looking at me, you know, and I heard the truck, so I saw a chance and I took it." He folded his lips together to stop them from quivering. "Didn't work."

"So when did you come around?" Tyler asked him. "You can't have been out long."

"I lay there for a bit pretending I was still unconscious," Dan admitted.

"Smart of you," Cole said, and Tyler nodded.

"No, I was just scared spitless. I heard you throw your gun over to me, but I was still pretty out of it."

"You gave up your gun?" Cole said to Tyler. "Why didn't you just shoot her?"

"One, she had a gun pointed at Dan, and two, I needed to know what was going on."

"And three, we don't say hello by maiming people," Dan said, which didn't go down well, judging by the pointed way he was ignored.

"She got me cuffed to the door," Tyler said, "and I found out that she was behind the Sturgis deal, working with him. I'll give you a full report, but for now, all you need to know is that she wanted me to do a hit for her -- Liam Derry, of all people -- with Dan a hostage to make sure I behaved."

"A hostage who, like you, would have been eliminated once the task was complete," Cole said.

Tyler nodded. "That was a given. I couldn't let him be taken away. I knew that I'd never see him again."

"So there are some differences between me and the bad guys," Cole said dryly. "I took your resignation much better than that."

"You did not, sir," Tyler said with a grin. "You threatened to tear me apart."

"And yet you're still in one piece. Continue."

"Not much to it. I got one hand free and made her drop her gun, Dan brought me my gun, and I killed her when she told me the name of the next compromised hit. It didn't seem worth keeping her alive after that; I'd gotten all I could without going further than you'd have liked."

Dan shivered at the idea of torturing information out of someone. It went on, of course it did, but still... And that had to be the patchiest description of a fight ever, even if Tyler hadn't technically lied.

"And Dan's wound?"

"Oh, she managed to retrieve her gun and shot him," Tyler said indifferently. "I made sure that she didn't get a second shot off."

"There's a lot missing from your verbal report," Cole said, when the silence had stretched like taffy to the point where Dan's nerve was about to break. "I trust that your written report, for my eyes only, of course, will be a little less concise, admirable though brevity is?"

Tyler nodded. "One of the reports I give you will be," he said, his meaning plain to a child of three.

It was the perfect opportunity for Dan to burst out with a confession of his own shot, the one that had brought Paula to her knees, and a denunciation of Tyler, who hadn't needed to kill her when she was wounded, helpless, but the words clustered and jammed in Dan's throat and no amount of sips would clear a way for them to be spoken.

Cole held out his hand to Dan to be shaken, something that had the flavor of a medal being pinned on him, though God alone knew that he didn't deserve it. "I hope to speak with you again one day, Mr. Seaton, under less fraught conditions."

"Dan." Dan released Cole's hand. "I wish you'd call me Dan, sir."

"Daniel," Cole said reflectively. "He was put into the lions' den and survived. Very apt."

When they were alone again, Tyler sat in Cole's chair and raised his eyebrows. "I didn't think you'd manage to do it; congratulations."

"Do what?"

"Keep quiet at the right moments," Tyler said succinctly. "I know you, boy. You wanted to confess your sins and get it all off your chest."

"Well, I'll have to when he gets your proper report," Dan snapped. "God, Tyler, am I -- am I going to get arrested?"

"He already knows what happened, more or less," Tyler said. "He doesn't really care. I got the job done and you're alive. Sure, he might have preferred a chance to interrogate Paula, but once

she was in the system, protected by it, any chance we had to get something useful out of her was gone. She'd have killed herself before helping us more than she did, and I wouldn't have put it past her to leak us data that would fuck us up one way or another. Bottom line: I took care of the woman who killed his people and you helped. Arrest you? No." Tyler grinned. "Don't expect a thank you card, though; not his style."

Dan stared at the weave in the white sheet covering him until the threads blurred. "I don't want to be thanked," he said. "I shot her. I *shot* her."

"After she'd shot you," Tyler pointed out. "She wasn't aiming at your arm, you know. She wanted that bullet to go through your heart."

"That's not the fucking point!" Dan's hands were shaking. He clenched them to hide it and glared at Tyler, stupid, blind Tyler. "I shot her for you. I had to; you were tied up and helpless --"

"Thanks," Tyler said dryly.

"She needed you alive; it's all that saved you from a bullet."

"And you."

"And me," Dan agreed. "So why did you have to do that, man? She was down, she was screaming. No way was she a danger after that. You -- I crossed a line for you, and I did it because I wanted to, no regrets about saving you -- us -- but I could have shot her in the head, you know? That close? Hell, I could have put a bullet anywhere you wanted me to. I wounded her on purpose, and you just -- you killed her. Like what I'd decided didn't matter."

"I should have asked you first or something?" Tyler demanded. "Fuck that! And wounding her was *stupid*. Would you have wounded a bear?"

"She wasn't an animal," Dan said softly. He had to get that through to Tyler, but he wasn't sure he could. How many people had Tyler killed? Twenty plus hits, more when he was a soldier... Adding another to the list didn't seem to be bothering him, but Dan had lain beside Tyler when the nightmares came, and he couldn't see this day's events doing anything but pushing Tyler back into the cold emptiness he'd been living in when Dan met him.

Therapy wasn't an option. He'd heard Tyler's views on that. They would have to work this through together, and right now Dan was so damn pissed off that it was difficult to be sympathetic about the trauma Tyler would be going through, when all that Dan could hear was bullets hitting flesh and Tyler saying sorry to the wrong person.

"She shot you," Tyler said, matching Dan for softness and managing to make three words sound like a death sentence. "And she would have seen to it that you died, no matter what happened, just to get even for what you did to her."

"Your world is a fucking freaky one," Dan said, the words needing to be said. "It sucks."

"Why do you think I walked away?"

"It didn't take much to get you to walk back." *Away from me*, but Dan didn't say that aloud.

"No. Just a few people dying."

"People die all the time," Dan said. "You can't save them all."

"Put it in a fortune cookie and shove it up your ass," Tyler said, and oh, yeah, Dan had done it now, hadn't he? Gotten Tyler angry, looming over him, gray eyes coldly furious. "The ones who were dead -- no, I couldn't save them, but I could stop more agents dying, and I did. No regrets."

"Is that why you looked so fucking happy to kill her?"

"Happy? I wasn't --" Tyler wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as if he'd tasted something bitter. "Relieved. I was relieved. You were safe, and I could see about getting you looked after. I've never been happy to kill anyone, ever."

"You didn't see your face," Dan told him.

"I know how I felt."

"And I know how *I* feel."

"About what?" Tyler's mouth was a thin slash across a pale face. "About me? About the blood-soaked, psychotic killer you've been fucking? Is that how you see me?"

"No," Dan said, forcing the words out of a tight, tear-closed throat. "Not like that. Fuck, I don't know, Tyler! Give me a break, won't you?" He stared up at Tyler, wishing they could solve this the way they usually did, because that was easy, that was fun. Fuck the bad temper out of them and settle back down -- but enough of him knew that it wouldn't have been an option even if he wasn't shot up and bruised.

"I love you," Tyler said, and that was so out there that Dan just gaped at him for a moment.

"Yeah," he said. "I know. You'd kill for me." Tyler nodded, his eyes watchful now, not angry. "But would you die for me?"

Tyler shook his head, smiling without much humor evident. "Boy, I've been ready to do that all my adult life for people I cared about a whole lot less than you. Yeah, I would. Ask me something harder."

Dan turned his head away. "You know, I think I'm done talking."

"Fine by me," Tyler said. "Okay if I borrow your laptop to do this report for Cole?"

The flip from the dramatic to the mundane was a jolt, but Dan just nodded and let the tiredness coaxing his eyes to close have its way.

Sometimes, Tyler didn't think he understood Dan. It wasn't the difference in their ages; fourteen, fifteen years or so, yeah, it was a gap, but one they could bridge easily enough. He didn't feel in the least bit paternal when it came to Dan, no matter how strong the urge to protect him was. What put them on different planets was the simple fact that Dan didn't truly believe that bad things happened to good people.

Oh, sure, Dan knew vaguely about wars and atrocities, but Tyler had never seen Dan read a newspaper headline or mention politics; their TV didn't get turned to a news channel often, and Dan's home page on his laptop changed frequently, but was usually connected with music or sports.

At times like this, Tyler wondered if Dan's easy acceptance of his past was rooted in a lack of understanding rather than an excess of it. Faced with the reality of Tyler's former life, Dan had backed away rapidly, shocked, disgusted. It wasn't a good sign.

Tyler stabbed at the enter key and began a new paragraph, refusing to allow himself to dwell on Dan's reaction. The boy had been through hell; he was entitled to his emotions.

I saved his fucking life and he wants me to be sorry about that?

He shook his head. No. He wasn't going to continue the argument with Dan in his head. It wouldn't go any better than it had in Dan's room.

The report was taking shape on the screen, the format Cole preferred coming easily to Tyler even after a gap of a couple of years. Cole liked a judicious mix of clarity, detail, and brevity, and agents soon learned how to balance the necessary elements.

He had to include Dan's part in the fight; Cole could smell an evasion, and since Tyler couldn't have been in two places at once, any attempt to write Dan out would have stuck out. If Tyler hadn't been utterly certain that there would be no adverse consequences for Dan, he'd have refused to expand on his verbal report, but he knew Cole. He'd approve of Dan's actions. Maybe even agree that Tyler should have brought Paula in alive after she'd given him the name he'd demanded.

Tyler sighed and sat back in the waiting room chair, hearing the fake leather squeak a protest. Somewhere in the building, Paula's body lay cooling in a morgue drawer or illuminated under a light as she was sliced open for the inevitable autopsy. Cole would know how many bullets Tyler had pumped into her, would know how much damage Dan's single shot had inflicted.

Cole wouldn't know how it had felt to come that close to losing Dan. Tyler couldn't think about it without feeling a simmering rage boil up. If Dan decided to walk away, well, that was part of life. People did that. Relationships didn't always last, and Tyler didn't consider himself much of a catch. He'd understand if Dan called it quits.

For Dan to be dragged into Tyler's world, though, held hostage, terrified, bewildered, alone, and then killed without emotion or hesitation, disposed of like the trash from a take-out meal -- Tyler felt his hand clench as if it held a gun again.

He wasn't safe to be around like this. His hand was rock-steady, but that brought him no comfort; he hadn't come down from his combat high. When he did, he'd be a mess, shaking, lost, with no Dan to curl around, holding onto him.

Tyler wanted to be with Dan; he needed to guard Dan on some level that couldn't be appeased with logic or rationality. There was no threat to Dan from his wound. The doctor who'd examined him had been reassuringly casual about Dan's assorted injuries, promising no long-term effects with a casual flip of her hand. Tyler didn't think that Paula would trouble them from beyond the grave, although he was sure that if she could have done, she would. Any associates she might have had -- and Tyler doubted that there were many -- would scurry back under their rocks once word of her death leaked out.

No, he had to face it. At the moment, the only problem that Dan had was Tyler.

Maybe he should fade out of Dan's life quietly. Leave, the way Dan was so fond of doing. Except that didn't feel like the right thing to do, the way resigning had been.

Tyler stared at the screen and realized that he'd written a paragraph that made no sense whatsoever. He deleted it and tried to focus. Get this done and sent off and then he could go back to Dan's side; wanted there or not, it was where he belonged. He'd turned his back on Cole once and walked away from his job, but he didn't intend to do either to Dan.

"Who's paying for all of this?" Dan gestured at the room, dimly lit since the late afternoon sun had been shining in his eyes and Tyler had closed the white blinds, hoping that Dan would fall asleep. He hadn't. "I don't have insurance, you know."

"You're covered," Tyler said shortly. If Cole didn't pick up the tab on behalf of Uncle Sam, Tyler would, and Dan knew it, so this was probably leading up to Dan launching another attack on him. When Tyler had finished his report the night before and returned to Dan's room, Dan had refused to talk to him and slipped into an uneasy doze, interrupted by frequent visits from the nurse on the floor. Tyler had tried to stay awake to stave off nightmares and succeeded more or less. He'd cat-napped from time to time, no more than that, and his eyes felt sand-scoured as a result, but he hadn't woken Dan up by screaming, which was all that mattered.

The morning had brought a fleeting, pro-forma visit from Dan's doctor, breakfast, a sponge bath, lunch -- the chance to talk to Dan about the events of yesterday hadn't materialized. Tyler wasn't sure if that was cause for relief or not.

"Yeah?" Dan didn't sound too surprised -- or pleased -- which confirmed Tyler's suspicion that he already knew he wasn't going to get handed an itemized bill when he left. "So, if it's my room, I can tell you to get out of it, right?"

Hurt feelings weren't something that Tyler was used to feeling, but Dan was bringing all kinds of new experiences with him, wasn't he? "You can try. If I do go, it won't be far, though."

Dan rolled his eyes. "I'm not kicking you out because I'm still freaked out about what you did. I am, but it's not that. You've been in that chair for hours. Days. Weeks. Forever. Why don't you go out and get some fresh air? Take a walk. If we're near a store, get me something to read or some candy."

"Gimme, gimme never gets," Tyler said mildly, hiding his pleasure that Dan was back to normal enough to tease him, though true normal was a mirage at the moment.

Dan pouted. "Hey, flowers and such are traditional, you know. Just don't take that literally. I don't want vegetation, I want something unhealthy and an inch deep in chocolate."

Tyler eyed him thoughtfully. A fever spike had kept Dan from being discharged that morning, but he looked better now, and his cheeks had lost their dry, hectic flush. The livid bruise on his cheek stood out sharply. Tyler didn't want to talk about killing Paula, but he really wanted to tell Dan that he was sorry for hitting him. The perfect words to smooth things over eluded him, though.

Maybe Dan would get discharged after the doctor had finished her evening rounds. Tyler was used to being patched up and sent home without ever seeing a bed, but civilians seemed to get coddled, and when Dan was the civilian in question, Tyler had no beef with that. Dan's arm was in a sling, and he'd have physio in his future, but the bullet wound was healing well even in the twenty-four hours since it'd been inflicted. There was a lot to be said for being young and healthy.

A walk wasn't a bad idea in theory, but if he got back to find Dan's bed empty, it would be a terrible one in practice.

"You'll be here when I get back?" he said bluntly, refusing to sugarcoat his concerns.

Dan gave him a level stare. "Only one of us in this room is an asshole and it isn't me. I *said* I wouldn't run away, and I meant it. Stop pushing me. *I* haven't done anything to make you not trust me."

"Fine," Tyler said, already heading for the door because he wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. "Candy and a comic. Got it. And I promise I won't kill anyone today unless they really ask for it."

It was a shame that the hospital doors were designed not to slam; it would've made him feel a whole lot better to have made some noise.

Chapter Twelve

As soon as Dan was sure that Tyler had gone, probably to stay away for a while until the desire to punch Dan had been reduced to manageable levels, he slid out of bed. He couldn't get dressed -- something Tyler should have realized would make walking out difficult -- because of the sling and the fact that everything he'd been wearing the day before had been blood soaked and was, presumably, in a trash bin somewhere. Or did they wash them and hand them back to you solemnly, blood stains gone, bullet holes mended? Somehow, Dan didn't think so. The contents of his jacket pockets were in the drawer of the cabinet by his bed, and his sneakers were in the cupboard beneath it, but the rest of his clothes were still in the truck.

It didn't matter. A hospital was one place where a man could wander around in a nightdress without raising eyebrows, and Dan had a thin cotton robe and slippers, too, both stamped with the hospital name in indelible ink.

He got one arm in the sleeve and managed to sling the robe around his shoulders, the effort and pain involved enough to leave his back and forehead sweat-prickled and clammy. Dan gave his bed a longing look, but attractive though the idea of lying back down and taking the painkillers he should have swallowed an hour ago was, he had things to do, places to go.

Corpses to see.

Dan knew that if he'd asked to see Paula Ryan's body, he'd have been told to forget it. Rules, regulations, hygiene, mental trauma... the hospital and Tyler would have come up with a dozen reasons why he couldn't go to the morgue.

Hell, he could have come up with a few of his own if they'd wanted him to -- but overriding all of them was his need to see her one last time. He knew that Tyler was bemused, even irritated by his reaction to Paula's death. She'd tried to kidnap them both, she was, apparently, one of the people responsible for killing God knows how many agents, and she'd pretty much pushed Tyler over the edge by putting a bullet in Dan's arm. Dan *knew* all that. He got all that, for fuck's sake, he wasn't stupid -- but he wasn't a trained assassin, either, and the visceral punch of seeing a woman in agony, screaming, writhing around because he'd shot her, had left more of a mark than Tyler's fist in his face.

She could have been brought in alive. She *should* have been. Cole didn't seem to care; he'd slapped Tyler down, sure, but that had seemed to end it. No prison sentence for Tyler, no blot on his record, nothing -- but Paula had gotten a death sentence, no trial, no jury, just bam! Dead.

What had gone down the day before freaked Dan out. A few miles away from the cabin, Anne would've been listening to someone tell her about their in-grown toenail, maybe wondering if Tyler would remember to send her a postcard, already missing them both a little, the cabin key in

her pocket -- while Tyler, her friend, the man she'd hugged goodbye and waved off, was standing over a body, gun in his hand. Dan couldn't wrap his head around it at all. Dan had thought he knew Tyler; had even, smugly, patted himself on the back for knowing all Tyler's secrets, while Anne, who'd known him longer, only had a few scraps of the puzzle in her grasp.

And now Dan knew all of it, firsthand. The broken, fragmented memories that Tyler had shared in the aftermath of a nightmare had been horrific, but in a distant, sanitized way, filtered by distance and Dan's inability to really grasp the reality of a bullet exploding flesh and bone and death taking the light from someone's eyes.

What had happened at the cabin had been real, sickeningly, uncompromisingly real. Dan was used to movies where bullets inconvenienced heroes about as much as a hangnail would -- and none of them told you how fresh blood and recent death stank. The cloying, organic reek had clogged up his nose and made him gag, and lying in blood-soaked clothes for hours hadn't helped. Dying was messy and undignified and bullets fucking hurt; so endeth yesterday's lesson.

Dan made it past the door of his room by telling an instantly attentive and suspicious nurse that he'd been told to exercise, which had the benefit of being true. He walked up and down the corridor a few times and then ducked into an elevator when her attention was distracted by a querulous patient who had problems with everything from the temperature of the water in his bedside jug to the color of his curtains. Once inside the elevator, Dan pressed the down button, working on the assumption that the morgue was on the lowest level possible because it always was on TV. It made sense; easier to keep cool, and you could have a separate entrance to avoid wheeling bodies around the place and spooking people.

Unfortunately for him, the lowest level serviced by the elevator he'd chosen turned out to be the lobby, and when the elevator doors opened, Tyler, hands full of candy bars and a rolled sheaf of magazines under one arm, was twenty feet away. Shit. From the look of it, the hospital had a small complex of stores inside it, like an airport. A Starbucks, a flower shop --

Tyler's head turned, his mouth went thin, and Dan took a deep breath and stepped out of the elevator just as the doors began to close. Too many witnesses for Tyler to yell really loud -- in theory, anyway.

"What the hell are you doing out of bed?" Tyler demanded, striding over toward Dan, his body stiff with disapproval. "Where do you think you're going?"

Defiance came too easily to Dan for him to even think about trying to calm Tyler down. You did that when someone bullied you and they poured it on; fight back and sometimes they backed off. Tyler wasn't a bully, Dan would never have fallen for him if he was, but he did have this whole take-charge thing going on, and Dan didn't mind -- sometimes got off on it in bed -- but there were limits.

"I'm wearing slippers and a robe, where do you think I'm going? Dinner and a movie?" Dan waved his good hand around with an impatient flap of his fingers. "I'm taking a walk the way

you were supposed to be. Exploring. It's boring in that room, and they won't let me have my laptop."

They were getting some curious glances from a woman at the reception desk and a security guard at the entrance, and a man in a wheelchair a few yards away was shamelessly eavesdropping. Tyler glanced around as if he could feel their interested stares, swore under his breath, and grabbed Dan's hand, pulling him to a group of chairs screened by a lot of greenery in pots.

Sitting down was a relief as the room was wavering a little for some reason, but the chairs were low enough that Dan's gown rode up, exposing more of his legs than he wanted to share with the world. He tugged at the hem. "How do women deal with skirts?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Tyler said, which took care of that attempt to lighten the mood. Tyler dumped the candy and magazines he was carrying onto a low, glass-topped table. Dan could see a Snickers bar peeking out from under the latest edition of *Time* -- okay, that had better be for Tyler -- but his sweet tooth had been soured by Tyler's disapproval, and he didn't reach out to snag it. "I accept that you weren't trying to leave, but you weren't just wandering around, Dan. You were going somewhere. To the truck? Did you want something from there?"

Dan considered that. If he said 'yes,' it was a nicely plausible destination, and Tyler would buy it since it'd been his own suggestion. On the other hand, Tyler knew that Dan didn't have a key for the truck and, more importantly, Dan had never lied to Tyler after his futile attempt at giving Tyler a false name the day they'd met.

"No, not the truck."

Tyler's mouth went thin again, his lips pressed tightly together for a moment, but when he spoke, his voice was level and quiet. "Don't make me guess."

Of course, level and quiet from Tyler wasn't fluffy kittens and rainbows. Dan would have preferred it if Tyler had yelled at him. Then he could have yelled back.

"I was going to the morgue, okay? And you know what I wanted to see."

Shock and then disgust passed over Tyler's face, like cloud shadow over grass. "I never figured you for the kind who liked gawking at car crashes."

"What?" Insulted, Dan sat up straight, jarring his arm. "Ow! Fuck, now look what you -- *ow*. You really think that's why I want to see her? Do you?"

"I don't have a fucking clue why you'd want to look at a chopped-up, sewn back together corpse of a murderer if it isn't for kicks and thrills," Tyler said with a cool deliberation lacking even a hint of an apology. "Enlighten me."

"I just--" Dan floundered. His sudden need to see the body had been so overwhelming that he hadn't bothered to think it through, any more than he examined the urge to breathe. "It felt right. Closure, maybe. I wanted to -- shit, Tyler, I killed her. I need to see -- say that I'm -- say--"

"I killed her," Tyler corrected Dan, the frost mostly gone from his voice. He leaned over and slid his hand into Dan's, and Dan curled his fingers around it and hung on. He'd missed touching Tyler; the last day with Tyler sitting in a chair on the other side of the room had made him realize how much physical contact they usually had. Not the hugs and kisses kind -- well, yeah, those, too, but more the way Tyler would put a hand on him casually as they spoke, or ruffle his hair in passing. "You just got in the way. And if you think I'm going to let you go there and see something that'll give you nightmares for months, forget it. And if you think I'm going to listen to you apologize to that bitch for something that I did, you can forget about that, too. She needed killing and she deserved to die. End of story."

"You don't get to decide for me," Dan said sullenly. "You might feel that way; I sure as hell don't."

Tyler leaned back, and his hand went with him, leaving Dan to close his fist around empty air. "Yeah, I'm getting that. I'm still not getting why."

An awkward, heavy silence fell, with Dan lost for the words to make Tyler see things from his point of view. Tyler broke it. "There is one thing I wanted to say -- when I hit you, that wasn't something you deserved. I wish there could've been a different way of dealing with the situation. I don't know, maybe there was." Tyler sighed, a slow exhalation. "That, I'm sorry for."

Dan reached up and fingered the bruise on his face. It hurt a little to eat and to talk since that stretched the skin, but it was just a bruise. It would fade. Of everything that Tyler had done that day, it was the easiest to forgive.

"Heat of the moment. I get it. It's cool."

"That easy?"

"If you ever do it again, it won't be."

"It's not on my to-do list," Tyler said. He arched his eyebrows. "You know, I'm feeling guilty enough over it that you could use it as leverage to get what you want."

"You're funny," Dan told him, "but, no. That's like cheating. And since when did you own the key to the morgue, anyway?"

"Oh, they'd let me in," Tyler said indifferently. "And if I told them to, once you had some clothes on, they'd let you in as well."

"You're that important." It was weird how much he wanted Tyler to be someone special, to make up for all the shit the man had gone through.

Tyler grinned. "Me? They've never heard of me. Cole, though, well, in some ways, they've never heard of him, either, but they know what they think he is and yeah, he's important enough to make a lot of doors open." Tyler studied him pensively. "The question is, do you really want to do this or do you just think that you should? She wasn't the sort of person who'd do anything but laugh at the idea of paying last respects to someone, you know. And I meant it when I said she wouldn't look pretty. If we walk in and they're weighing her liver or something, you'll pass out or throw up, and neither of those appeals."

"I'm not squeamish. I've seen animals slaughtered, and I've gone hunting." Tyler didn't need to know how much he hated both activities.

"It's different in a morgue. I'd seen men wounded in battle, their heads split open by shrapnel like a rotten pumpkin dropped off a bridge, their guts trailing on the ground, and I kept my lunch where it was, but my first autopsy, I took one whiff of the body and bam, hit the deck. Passed out cold."

"Why do I think you're trying to scare me?" Dan asked.

"Because I am. I don't want you to do this." Tyler sounded as definite about it as Dan had ever heard him.

Dan wavered for a moment and then shook his head. "I need to."

Tyler stood. "I'm going to get an orderly and a wheelchair for you. Maybe even some clothes. Go back to your room and wait there. I'll organize it."

Dan blinked up at him, surprised by the sudden victory, "Just like that? And I don't need a wheelchair; I got a bullet in my arm, not my leg. Hell, technically, the bullet didn't even go in, just said hello in passing."

The hint of a smile flickered across Tyler's face. "I've known you for long enough to know when it's not worth fighting you. In case it's never been pointed out to you before, you are one stubborn man."

"Thanks," Dan said uncertainly.

"It wasn't a compliment. And I'm stubborn too; you're getting in a wheelchair, and don't push me on that." Tyler jerked his thumb at the candy. "Another word of advice? Don't eat any until after the morgue."

Dan gave the Snickers bar a wistful look, but nodded a promise. He didn't think that he would throw up, but if he did, he'd sooner lose the lime Jell-O and beef stew they'd fed him than a candy bar.

Tyler stood beside Dan, who was still in a wheelchair and still in his robe. The morgue staff had been as cooperative as anyone could wish for after Tyler had made a call to Cole, who'd done what Cole did well and leaned on people. Ryan's body, a sheet drawn up to her neck, was on display for Dan to get whatever closure he could from the sight.

Dan was looking pale, but not the ashen pallor of someone about to pass out. He stared at the corpse and licked his lips. "She -- the bullet in her leg -- what did it do?"

The medical examiner, a Doctor Pike, mid-thirties and just a little too conscious of his position in Tyler's opinion, frowned. "The one in her leg? Not much. To put it in layman's terms, there was a glancing blow to the thighbone that cracked it, some blood loss -- had she lived, she would have walked again, if that's what you mean."

"Oh."

Tyler smothered a smile. Dan sounded vaguely disappointed. *Give up the guilt, boy*, he thought. *You just shot her; I killed her.*

"Death was almost instantaneous," the doctor continued, warming to his subject. He glanced at the contents of the file he held, ruffling through the papers with a self-important air. "The bullets to the chest region ruptured --"

"It wasn't that fast," Dan said flatly, as close to rude as Tyler had ever heard him. He turned his head and glanced up at Tyler. "Okay. I'm done."

Tyler didn't waste time asking if he was sure. With a nod to the doctor, who was looking a little tight-lipped at Dan's abruptness, he wheeled Dan out of the morgue and over to the elevator. Once inside, Tyler crouched down beside Dan and tapped Dan's chin to make him look up.

"Are you okay?"

Dan jerked his chin free, not to avoid being touched, Tyler guessed, but to hide the sheen of tears in his eyes. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not." Tyler, moved to a rare tenderness, stroked Dan's hair and got a glare for his troubles.

"I said, I was fine!"

"Oh, yeah," Tyler said, straightening. "You sound it, boy."

One of Dan's good points -- and as far as Tyler was concerned, he had more than most people -- was that he calmed down fast after flaring up. That was why his continued resentment over Tyler's actions at the cabin was worrying Tyler; it wasn't like Dan to cling to a grudge, but when he did, it took a lot to persuade him to shake it loose. Tyler had discovered that on Christmas

Eve, when he'd suggested that Dan might want to call his father and make peace with the man. Only Anne's timely arrival with a bottle of wine and their presents had saved them from an argument. Dressed up and on her way to a family gathering, she'd brought in a gust of frost-crackling air and enough holiday spirit to make Dan forget his annoyances.

When she'd gone, after tucking a sprig of mistletoe into her hair and claiming a kiss from them both, Dan had turned to Tyler, his expression vulnerable and lost. Tyler had braced himself for a potentially awkward discussion, but Dan had sighed and started to kiss him, and Tyler couldn't remember saying much of anything for the rest of the night that wasn't directly related to what they were doing.

He'd stored snapshots in his head, but the one that had stuck with him had been Dan's skin gleaming in the light of the fire as he sat across Tyler's hips, lube-slick hands wrapped around their cocks, working them slowly, biting his lip in concentration, soft moans escaping him now and then. The flickering pattern of the flames reflected on Dan's chest, the rush of arousal he'd felt, and the scent from the wood smoke stinging Tyler's eyes... it had all come together to make a perfect moment, and Tyler's life hadn't held many of those.

They reached Dan's floor, and Tyler wheeled Dan out of the service elevator and down the maze of corridors to his room.

"I'm going to get discharged tonight or tomorrow," Dan said when he was back in bed. Lines of pain were etched around Dan's mouth and eyes, but Tyler couldn't see any reason why Dan would be kept as a patient, so he nodded. He felt more than capable of looking after Dan when it came to changing the dressing on Dan's arm. Stopping Dan from doing too much as the wound healed would be more of a problem.

"I want to go..." Dan paused, and Tyler watched him swallow hard and then wince. Dan's throat was still recovering from the blow it had received, a mottling of bruises scattered over the pale skin. "I want to go home."

"Well, sure," Tyler said, hiding his dislike of that idea as best he could. Returning to the cabin this soon wouldn't be easy on Dan -- or Tyler -- and it would mean a lot of questions from Anne, but if Dan was set on it... "We can get some of what we need back out of storage until you're fit enough for us to take that vacation. Or we could just check into a hotel. In a week, you'll be --"

"No," Dan said, and as soon as he saw the way Dan was avoiding his eyes, Tyler knew what was coming, but this was one bullet he couldn't dodge. "I don't mean the cabin. I'm not sure that I ever want to go back there. I mean my home. The farm. I want --"

"You want to see your dad," Tyler said, as gently as he knew how, when he was starting to see what was headed his way. "Yeah. I can see how you'd need that."

More closure. Or maybe not; maybe this was a new start.

"He might not want to see me," Dan said hesitantly, talking more to himself than to Tyler, "but I don't know... he never threw me out, you know. Yelled at me, went on and on until I -- but he never told me to get out. I just went because I couldn't stand it and I missed Luke so much." Dan gave him a swift look, a barely there meeting of their eyes. "I might stick around a bit if he's cool with that. Just for a while. See how it goes. It's spring; it's a busy time for him, and when my arm heals, I can help him. I can get there by myself if you don't want to make the drive. I'll be okay."

Tyler didn't trust himself to speak right then. If he'd opened his mouth, he'd have said more than he should, words that Dan would remember and be hurt by because Dan hated seeing Tyler break down. For every nightmare Tyler had shared with Dan, turning to him for comfort, there had been an equal number of moments during the day, sun shining brightly, when Tyler had retreated to somewhere private, his teeth chattering, his ears filled with screams, and worked his way through to a semblance of normal without telling Dan what he was enduring.

He smiled instead, and felt his face ache with the falseness of it. "I see," Tyler said, and sat down on the bed, putting an arm around Dan without jarring him, and giving Dan a shoulder to hide his face in. "I'll give you a ride home," he murmured into Dan's hair, and breathed in the scent of it and felt the heat of Dan's body against his as Dan whispered a thank you that Tyler didn't want to hear.

"It's pretty there this time of year," Dan said, as if he'd only just realized it. "All the fruit trees are covered with blossom, like little blobs of strawberry and vanilla ice cream, you know? And everything smells green and wet and new."

"Before they start spreading the manure," Tyler said, and got a reproving nudge in return. "Yeah, okay, it's pretty. I can see how you'd want to see it."

"Just for a while," Dan said drowsily. "Until I get better."

Dan hadn't said that he wanted to keep in touch or asked Tyler to go with him. Tyler didn't want to know the answer to a question he had too much pride to ask, but he had a feeling that he already did. Dan had run in a circle, and now the music had stopped and left him somewhere that Tyler didn't belong.

Dan's choice, he told himself, cradling Dan to him awkwardly, gently. *He'll be safe there. It's a good choice.*

Chapter Thirteen

"It looks just the same."

Tyler gave Dan a sidelong look. "It hasn't been that long. Not even a year."

"No, but -- oh, that's new, that house there. It used to be a field -- and Ted traded in his truck finally -- unless that's Chuck's, might be Chuck's -- he's dating Ted's daughter, Kathy, or he was."

Muttering a comment about soap operas that Dan ignored, Tyler slowed down to give Dan a chance to get his bearings. The town that Dan came from was a twin to Carlyle in some ways, although Braeburn was maybe a little smaller. They'd driven past fields where soil was being turned, ready for crops, with neat, isolated farmhouses perched on the tops of small rises. The trees were beginning to fuzz over with buds, and there was a sense, even in the cool, fresh morning air, that spring had truly arrived. The town itself had passed by in the space of a minute, and that was only because they'd hit a red light and had to pause, engine idling. If Dan had recognized anyone on the street, he hadn't said so, but his gaze had flickered from face to face, his expression half eager, half tense.

Tyler's truck, mud-splashed and several years old, hadn't gotten a second glance, which was how he liked it.

"Turn here -- no, stop, just pull over. Right here, just stop." Dan's words tumbled out, panicked, squeaking, and he put his hand on Tyler's arm as if that would make the truck come to a halt.

Tyler eased the truck over and put it into park, looking not at Dan, but the unremarkable farm up ahead on the left. "So that's it, huh?" It looked like all the other farms they'd driven by -- a red barn, brown fields, a scatter of outbuildings around a square house. Too far away to tell, but Tyler would have put money on the house needing maybe a lick of paint but the barn being well-maintained. There was no one in sight, but Dan was close to hyperventilating, the bruise on his cheek a stark patch of color in a milk-pale face.

"Breathe," Tyler advised him, and pushed Dan's head down, keeping a hand curved around the back of Dan's neck. Automatically, his thumb brushed back and forth in a caress as familiar as the shape his hand was making, and Dan shuddered and pushed himself upright again, turning to stare at Tyler.

"I can't do this. Suppose he won't see me. Suppose he won't even fucking *talk* to me --"

"I'll be waiting," Tyler said as calmly as he could, and let his hand drop back in his lap. "Right here, for as long as it takes. When you know what the situation is, just call me. If you need me to

come and get you, I'll drive up to the house. If it's --" He couldn't bring himself to describe Dan staying here as 'okay' or 'fine.' "If you're staying, just tell me that, and I'll go."

"I never asked where you were going," Dan said, his pallor replaced by a guilty flush. "I've been so focused on me... sorry."

"Me?" Tyler shrugged. "Short-term, after two nights sleeping in a chair, I'm going to drive until I find a hotel with a bed."

"I think they all have them," Dan said. "And windows. And doors. But they're an extra."

Tyler cuffed Dan's head, because Dan would expect it, the action easy, taking his hand away less so. "After a good night's sleep, I'm going to keep on driving and go to see Cole. I've got a few loose ends to tie up, and it's easier to do it face to face."

He doubted that he'd get the restful sleep he craved. He'd staved off the nightmares in the bustle of a hospital that never quite slept, but once he was alone in the dark, he'd dream. And wake sweating, shaking in an empty bed, hoping that he hadn't made too much noise.

Better make it a motel; somewhere cheap, where no one cared.

"Cole?" Dan pulled a face. "I guess you have to... but you're not going back to work for him, are you?"

He'd thought about it, God help him. It would be so easy to slide back into the warm water and let it close over him. But Tyler didn't need a therapy session to decode that image, and he was too old to be crawling back into the womb. He'd stood alone for the last few years and survived, he could do it again. Dan's support had been helpful, but without it, Tyler wouldn't fall over, or worse yet, cling to Cole as a replacement crutch.

"No. Loose ends. A report. That's it." The terse words seemed to reassure Dan more than heartfelt protestations would have done, and he nodded.

"And after that?"

"We had a vacation planned, remember?" Okay, that was cruel of him, and he regretted saying it, but fuck, he was human, and Dan was walking away from him *again*.

"Oh. You're still going to --" Dan folded his lips together. "Send me a postcard, as well as Anne?"

"Sure," Tyler said, the lie easy. Speaking of lies... "Assuming you stay, what do you plan to tell your father?"

Dan's gaze returned to the farm. "I'll tell him the truth. Most of it, anyway. If I go back, he's got to take me as I am. I'll tell him about you and just... change the ending. No crazy hit woman, no

spies and snipers... I'll say I met you and you saved me from starving and we lived together. When he asks about my arm and the bruises, I'll say I got beaten up."

"Not by me," Tyler said, the vehemence of his words surprising him. "You're not going to tell him that I did this to you?"

Dan turned his head. "In a way, you did," he said quietly. "And I don't mean my face. But no, I won't. Me getting attacked was always something he was worried about, so he'll accept it if I say it happened outside a bar one night or something." A trace of cynicism flashed over Dan's face, reminding Tyler of what Dan had gone through on the road and how it had made him grow up fast. "Deep down, he might even think I deserved it."

"He won't do that."

"You don't know him." Dan wrinkled up his nose, the gesture endearing. "I'll tell him that and then say it made me rethink staying in Carlyle, and if he asks about you, which I doubt, I'll say you found someone else."

Tyler couldn't help it. He slammed the heel of his hand against the steering wheel, jarring his arm painfully. "Fuck!"

"Hey!"

"I found someone else?" Tyler demanded. "Is that what you think I'll do, boy? Just drive away and pick up the next man I see hitching a ride who's got a tight ass and a smile?"

"No, of course I -- it's just what I'll tell him, that's all. *Tyler*." Dan grabbed hold of Tyler's arm and shook it. "It's a story, it's not what I think. I'm not planning to do that, either. Find someone else, I mean. I just need a break, okay? You me, all that shit that went down and what you did -- if I stayed with you right now, we'd end up at each other's throats, and I don't want that. I'm not going to ask you to wait for me to get over myself, because that wouldn't be fair to you, but God, Tyler, you have to know how I feel about you."

"No," Tyler said, the words difficult to say because they exposed a weakness. "I don't. I'd like to."

"I love you," Dan said, easy, simple words spoken casually in a way Tyler would never have been able to do. "You get me hot just by looking at me, but that's only part of it. When I thought she was going to kill me and I'd never see you again, it felt like something inside me was broken, it hurt so fucking much -- and when I thought she was going to hurt you, I wanted to take her down. You're fucked up, moody, and you like your curries way too spicy, but yeah. Love you." Dan leaned in and kissed Tyler on the mouth, a swift, hard kiss that left Tyler's lips tingling. "And I know you love me or you wouldn't have put up with me the way you do, so you don't need to say it back to me."

Dan opened the truck door and grabbed his backpack without waiting for Tyler's reply. "I've got your number, and I'm going to keep in touch with you, okay? This isn't goodbye, just a -- a time out. I'll call you -- no, God, that sounds like a promise that I won't. But I will."

"Sure," Tyler said, and managed to put a smile on his face. "You do that, boy."

Dan smiled back at Tyler, his eyes blank, dazed even, as if now that the moment to leave had arrived, he was having second thoughts. Tyler wanted Dan to go with an intensity that alarmed him. If Dan stayed even a few seconds more, Tyler could see himself breaking down and begging him to stick around, and putting that much pressure on the boy wasn't fair.

Finally, Dan got out of the truck with an awkward grace, his injured arm throwing him off-balance. He stood for a moment, his hand flat against the truck's door, and then nodded once and slammed it closed.

Tyler watched Dan walk away, along the road, across it, dodging a red pickup truck going way too fast, and then up the lane leading to the farmhouse. Before Dan reached the house, a man appeared from the barn, taller than Dan, dressed in overalls and a loose jacket.

The two men stood, a distance between them, and then the older man began to walk forward, his steps quickening, and Tyler turned away just as Peter Seaton hugged his son for the first time in months.

So that was that. He thumbed off his phone -- Dan wouldn't need to call him now -- and drove away without looking back.

He supposed he should have cried, yelled, done something dramatic like running after Dan. Those were all normal reactions that normal people would have had.

Tyler just drove, eyes dry, his attention focused on the road, the route he'd need to take clear in his mind. He'd need to stop for gas somewhere and maybe pick up a can of soda or a bottle of water. He glanced in the mirror and, yeah, he looked the way he usually did.

Something inside me was broken...

As long as it didn't show on the outside, he'd be fine.

Peter put a mug of coffee in front of Dan and then sat down at the kitchen table and took a gulp of his own drink, his mug cradled in his large hands as if he wanted to feel its warmth.

"I didn't think you'd come back."

"I wasn't sure I would."

The kitchen looked different somehow. Big. Bigger than Tyler's, anyway, and it smelled wrong, as if something was missing. After a sniff, Dan decided that it was because Peter never cooked anything that wasn't traditional American. The only spices Peter kept in his cupboards were salt and pepper; the only herbs around the place the mint and parsley in the kitchen garden, run wild and never picked, just slashed back when they threatened to take over. Dan supposed that his mother must have planted them, along with the rose bushes on the south side of the house and the two lilac trees outside the rarely used front door, lilacs that bloomed in May and filled the air with a rich, dizzyingly purple scent. Peter didn't know the difference between a daisy and a delphinium.

"I thought you were dead," his father said. He sounded bewildered, as if Dan's return had confused him, a cruel trick played on him. "Months you've been away, son. Months."

"I know. I--"

"My birthday. I thought maybe you'd call then. Or Thanksgiving or Christmas." His father shook his head, correcting himself. "No. Not Christmas. I knew you were dead by then."

"Well, I'm not," Dan said. He resisted the urge to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't a ghost; given the way his head was aching, he didn't need the extra pain. God, this was so fucking awkward. "I'm sorry you were worried--"

A blessedly familiar snap of impatience restored the situation to something Dan could deal with. "Not sorry enough to pick up the phone."

"True," Dan admitted, "but I wanted space between us and calling you would've gotten us nowhere. It's not as if you'd have changed your mind about me just because I wasn't around to remind you of how disappointed you were."

A frown creased his father's forehead, and Dan couldn't figure out why until he realized that he'd spoken to him man to man, not father to son, sharing his feelings without defensiveness or apology. Hanging around with Tyler, who definitely qualified as an adult, had made Dan less conscious of the generation gap.

His father stared at the bruise on Dan's cheek and then nodded at the sling Dan wore. "You've been fighting. Is that why you came back? Are you in trouble?"

And now he felt like a twelve-year old again, his nose bloody from a punch, a letter from his teacher in his pocket detailing his shortcomings.

"No. No trouble. And yes, I guess I was fighting, but I was helping someone. A friend." He wanted to tell his father the truth, all of it, not these careful evasions, but he couldn't. It wouldn't be fair to worry the man. God, he was protecting his dad; that was just -- that was freaky. It should be the other way around.

"A friend," his father repeated heavily. "I see."

"Yeah," Dan said, knowing just what lay behind that comment and too exhausted to force Peter to spell it out. Leaving the isolation of the hospital had been a shock; the world outside seemed noisy, untidy, and the journey, even with Tyler driving carefully around potholes, had left him feeling battered and bumped. "He was like Luke. That kind of friend. We lived together. He found me when I was starving because I'd..." No, he couldn't tell his dad how he'd lost his belongings and what he'd done to survive. He just couldn't. "I'd lost most of my stuff. I was on his land, and he took me in. He was kind to me."

Peter's mouth twisted with revulsion. "His sort only wants one thing." And there they were, right back where they'd been when Dan had left. It hadn't taken long, now, had it? "His *land*? He was older than you?"

"Fifteen years or so," Dan said levelly. If he started yelling, any chance to make this homecoming work would be lost for good. "And he offered me a meal in exchange for helping out around his place for an hour or two, that's all. We were fixing the roof when he fell off and hurt his ankle. I said I'd stay a while longer until he was better -- look after his garden -- and we just... we clicked."

His father raised his hand, a small, involuntary movement, as if he was pushing aside the images Dan's words had placed in his head. "But you're not with him now."

"No," Dan said, not missing the hopeful note in Peter's voice. Trust his dad to home in on the emotional bruises as well as the visible ones. "I'm not with him now. We didn't split up the way you think, though. He brought me here, dropped me off, and he's gone to, uh, see someone he used to work for about a job. I could've gone with him, but I needed some space. A lot's happened to us recently, and I'm not sure how I feel about it."

"Space? You need space? What in the name of God does that even mean?" Peter sounded genuinely baffled by the concept, which amused Dan enough to allow him to regain control of his emotions. Talking about Tyler wasn't easy. Peter sighed. "Never mind. You came back. I suppose that's something."

"Yeah..." Dan cleared his throat. "I thought you could use a hand around the place. It's a busy time of year."

Not that it was ever anything else; even in winter, there was always work to be done on a farm. It never ended. This past winter had been a revelation to Dan, as he and Tyler had holed up and seen it through in warm, cozy, lazy isolation. He hadn't had to get up once when it was pitch-black dark, shivering as he dressed, the frigid air outside waiting to numb his hands and feet as he toiled away. If he'd woken before the sun came up, and habit meant that he had, to start with at least, Tyler had given him plenty of incentive to stay in the haven of their bed -- not that he'd needed it.

"You can't work if you can't use your arm," Peter said bluntly. "How long will it be before you can take the sling off?"

"Oh, it's only there to remind me to be careful. It's going to be a few weeks before I can really do a lot with that arm, though," Dan admitted. "They put some stitches in it, and I'm on antibiotics." Peter was looking curious, so he added casually, "I fell and sliced it open on a piece of metal, all edges. Hurt like hell, but it's not serious." Okay, that was bending the truth, but not breaking it. A bullet was metal and it had edges...

Peter snorted. "Doesn't sound like you're going to be much help, but it doesn't really matter. I don't need any."

"Huh? Oh..." Dan bit his lip, a little chagrined by the dismissal of his offer. "Yeah, I guess you had to take someone on after..."

"After you and that worthless piece of shit took off."

Ouch. Luke hadn't been as special as Dan had thought he was, but that was a little harsh. Luke had been unceremoniously kicked out and hadn't had any choice in the matter; it was Dan who'd left without warning.

"Luke wasn't--" Dan shook his head and stared at his father, willing him to see sense. "No. I'm not going through that again. It's done, let it lie. Who do you have helping you? Anyone I know?"

"Matt Jones." His father drained his coffee and set his mug down, giving the clock on the wall a sidelong look. Coffee breaks weren't part of his schedule; this interruption in his routine had to be killing him. "You went to school with him, didn't you?"

"Matt? Yeah, he was a couple of grades above me." Bulky, brainless, and when he had a few beers in him he was easy to provoke, but not mean with it. Dan didn't know him well, but he guessed they could work together if they had to.

"And his mother, Alison? Do you remember her?"

"Who?" Dan shook his head, puzzled by the question. "If I saw her, I might know her, but I don't think..." His father pointed at the dresser on the far wall of the kitchen, and Dan stopped talking.

A large photograph, posed for and framed in gold. His dad and a blonde woman, all fixed smiles and smart clothes. His dad in a suit, with a *tie* on, for God's sake.

"We're getting married next month," Peter said, looking a little shamefaced, as if he was admitting to a liking for hip hop. "They live here now, both of them. I wasn't sure -- people talk -- but Alison said it didn't matter these days and we weren't getting any younger." A flush stained his father's neck, the way it always did when he was embarrassed. "I started seeing her not long after you left. She has a brother who's... like you, and she made me see that it wasn't really your fault that you're the way you are."

Peter gave him an expectant look, as if he'd made a huge concession and deserved applause for his broad-mindedness. *Welcome to the twenty-first century, Dad. Now try and say that again without making it sound like me and this brother have head lice or something. Not my fault? You mean, not your fault, not a reflection on you--*

"Married? Wow. That's -- Well, that's nice," Dan said, the flat, inadequate words all he could come up with. He made an effort and smiled brightly. "Congratulations, I guess. Is she around?"

He couldn't hear anyone in the house, but he supposed she could be out seeing to the chickens. Peter kept a dozen; not to sell, just for their eggs and, when they stopped laying, their meat. Taking care of them had always been one of Dan's jobs, and, the occasional peck aside, he'd enjoyed the collection of the eggs, warm and flecked with shit and downy fragments of feathers, but still feeling like a gift for all the mess. The chickens had been kept in a barn, free to flutter around, with a large outside area to scratch in, soft brown bundles with sharp beaks. Dan was too much of a country boy to get attached to something he'd end up eating, but he'd been fond of them in a general way.

Peter shook his head. "She's in town with Matt getting her wedding dress fitted. I don't know why she needed him when there's work to be done here, but she said something about a tuxedo..." He smiled indulgently and looked a little foolish doing it. "It's not going to be a fancy affair, but you know how women are."

"Uh, yeah. I guess." Dan screwed up his face, the unreality of it all hitting hard. Home wasn't supposed to change. Home was supposed to be there, eternally as it was the moment you left it, preserved in amber. That disconcerting sense of missing a step aside, he didn't really have a problem with his dad remarrying. His mother had been dead a long time, after all. He just wished that his dad had taken the step earlier. It would've been kind of nice to have had some company on the farm when he was growing up.

Something occurred to him. Luke had slept in a small room carved out of the basement, with free run of the rest of the house. The basement had tiny windows and only a few power outlets and lights, which meant that it hadn't been ideal, but as Peter had pointed out to Luke, if he was doing his job properly, he'd be too tired to notice his surroundings. It stood to reason that Matt wouldn't want to live down there. "Matt -- does he have my room now?"

A discomfited look passed over his father's face. "I didn't think you were coming back, remember. I kept your things. Most of them, anyway. They're boxed up in the basement."

Well, that answered that question -- and what he owned would have fitted in about three boxes after Peter had winnowed out the small stash of gay porn Dan had kept under his bed, almost hoping it would be found, and the collection of crap every teenager collects.

Unless the porn was still there, waiting for Matt to discover -- and wouldn't that be a disappointment to him. All that bare skin and no tits in sight.

Dan pushed his hand through his hair, fighting back the urge to laugh aloud because he'd have to explain what was amusing him. Short hair, shorter than it'd been for a year or more, which reminded him of the day he'd cut it and Tyler's reaction.

Tyler. Everything led back to Tyler. He felt as if part of him was still beside Tyler in the truck, the road disappearing under their wheels, the horizon their only destination. Time to cut to the chase.

"So, you don't really need me back here at all."

"Need you? No. Not when it comes to work, though Matt's not as bright as you, son. Strong as an ox, dumb as a post." His father chuckled. "Shoulda seen his face when I told him to get me a left-handed wrench one day. He caught on, sure, but it took him a minute or two." Peter shook his head, his smile fading. "But needing and wanting are two different things. You're wanted here and don't ever think otherwise. It's your home, and I'm your father. You and me... I think if you'd stayed, I'd have gotten over the way I felt in time. You just didn't give me that time. I was... it was a shock. The way I found out..."

Dan winced. The door opening, the cool air on his bare skin, the shock of shame at being caught, naked, erect, by his father... He hadn't given his dad time? Well, Peter hadn't given him anything but grief, so he guessed that they were even.

"It wasn't easy for me, either."

His father slammed his fist down on the table, making Dan jump. "Maybe it wasn't, but you knew what you were. I didn't. If I'd have walked in on you and a girl, it would still have -- I would have wanted to know why you didn't tell me about her -- but that, what I saw..." Peter wiped his mouth with a hand that shook slightly. "My son and the man I'd hired. You made a fool out of me, Daniel, and it wasn't much consolation knowing that Luke did the same to you."

"What? By leaving, you mean?" Dan frowned, annoyed at his dad's blindness on that point and the use of his full name, always a sign that he was in disgrace. "He *had* to; you'd kicked him out, and no one around here would've hired him after that." Neighbors stuck together, and they'd have assumed that Luke was lazy or careless, cardinal sins on a farm, both of them.

His father looked away, his mouth tight and twitching, tiny, spasmodic jerks. When he spoke, the words were said reluctantly, but they stung just as much -- more -- than if they'd been meant to hurt. "He wasn't just with you. You weren't the only one. After you'd gone, I made it my business to find out about him. I thought maybe you'd gone after him, and if I found him, I'd find you." Peter met Dan's eyes, and Dan saw the anger there and knew that, for once, it wasn't directed at him. "When I knew that, I worried even more. You -- you were safe, weren't you? When you and he -- you used protection?"

Dan closed his eyes for a moment to blot out the sight of his father's embarrassment. The truth wasn't as easy to ignore. So Luke had been screwing around. Nice. It shouldn't have mattered -- he'd moved on, after all -- but it did. He pictured Tyler doing that to him, but it just didn't register

as a possibility. Tyler finding someone else was, though... oh God. Of course he would. God, that thought was unbearable. He'd take another bullet if it would spare him that raw agony of loss. Luke's past betrayal faded to nothing in comparison.

Peter was still waiting for an answer, but at least Dan had nothing but good news for him on that count.

"Yes. Always, with everyone. I'm clean, Dad. I've been careful. I'm not stupid."

Except he was. He made Matt look like Einstein. He'd missed how much hurt lay behind his father's anger, how his decision to hide what he was from the man who'd raised him had been taken as a rejection of the love his father had tried, clumsily at times, to give him. Peter hadn't hesitated to apply his belt to Dan's backside when he thought it was needed, and cuffs to the head were more frequent than hugs, but as fathers went, Dan knew of plenty worse.

He'd come close to being found in a ditch somewhere, half-starved, robbed, raped, killed because the road he'd chosen had been too long to walk and the risks of hitching a ride had been worth it to save himself a few blisters. So fucking close.

Dan didn't open his eyes, just pillowed his head on his folded arms and started to cry at the kitchen table, in front of a man who'd taught him never to shed a tear no matter how hurt he was.

After a moment, he heard the scrape of a chair and his father's footsteps. Oh, God, his dad was going to walk out on him. He deserved it; he'd walked out on Tyler instead of facing him and risking rejection, and this was retribution for that weakness, he knew it.

The footsteps weren't receding, though. Dan lifted his face, sniffed wetly, and felt a light, tentative touch on his head. "It's okay, son," Peter told him, and patted his back comfortingly, awkwardly. "You're home now. It's going to be okay."

It was the freakiest part of the whole goddamned week.

Chapter Fourteen

Tyler pulled over after driving for two hours, hours in which his speed had decreased until he was cruising along just under the limit on roads as empty as his thoughts. He felt as if the truck was attached by an elastic band to something; it was getting harder to drive, and if he stopped he could almost imagine that he'd find himself hurtling backward.

Stupid idea.

The truck's engine pinged as it cooled, small, cheerful sounds that were irregular enough to be irritating. Tyler opened the door and got out to escape them. He'd parked on a wide verge of dusty gravel. No cover, but he didn't need it. No one was likely to be shooting at him today. He'd been driving across land like this since leaving Dan, the countryside interrupted now and then by small towns. Narrow side roads leading nowhere offered little incentive to turn off the main road.

There wasn't much to look at, but as the silence settled back around him, Tyler felt a measure of peace return. Hurrying on, racing toward nothing... what was the point? When he'd felt restless living in the cabin, his journeys to the ocean or the mountains had served a purpose and calmed him down, but this journey carried with it no sense of freedom or release.

He'd told Dan that he wouldn't let Cole persuade him to return, but as he'd driven away, Tyler could see it happening. Oh, not as a sniper, no; those days were behind him. But as Cole's deputy, maybe. He'd make his report and get asked to stick around while this got checked and that got organized, his input on tighter security measures would be asked for... and soon they'd be assigning him a parking space and a dental plan.

Even covert operatives got cavities.

"Fuck that," he said under his breath. Maybe the time in the cabin had shown him that pastoral bliss wore thin after a while, but it'd also kept him sane. If he went from that aimless contentment to the hamster-wheel predictability of an office job, even one with the stakes high enough that he'd wake each morning with a crushing load of responsibility, he'd die of boredom.

It wasn't easy to admit how little ability to cope with life he had these days, but he was strong enough to do it. Just.

Maybe after a summer traveling with Dan, he'd have been ready to come up with something he could do other than putter around a garden. But right now, with Dan behind him, miles of road separating them physically, and a gulf between them less easy to bridge, his sense of purpose was missing.

Tyler's life had always been filled with certainty. Even his breakdown had been a concrete fact for him to deal with, and he'd known what was happening to his mind and body and why. University, the army, Cole... each step had been taken with a clear view of the road ahead. Now, he was driving into darkness.

He stared back the way he'd come, squinting against the dazzle of sunlight. Dan would be telling his edited stories and catching up on what had happened in his father's life. Awkward moments were inevitable, with excess emotions slopping all over the place, and there'd probably be an argument before long, just to relieve the pressure, but give it a week or so and the status quo of Dan's life would be restored.

For a while, anyway. It would be interesting to see what happened when Dan found himself a partner, as Tyler was sure he would. Dan was too fond of sex, too pragmatic to stay loyal to a memory -- and it wasn't as if they'd been together long enough for many memories to be created.

Tyler pushed aside a crowd of mental images that proved him wrong and focused grimly on his line of thought. Now that Peter Seaton knew how it felt to be without Dan around, would he develop enough tolerance to grudgingly accept a boyfriend, especially if it was a young man he knew, son of a family in town? Maybe. If Dan pointed out that his last partner had been fifteen years older with a murky past, it would help. One last favor that Tyler could do for him.

With a sense of becoming part of the world again, linked to it by the simple fact of being accessible, Tyler reached into the pocket of his jacket and took out his phone, switching it back on with a stab of his finger.

Decision time -- but when it came down to it, it really wasn't that difficult to work out what he wanted to do. He called Cole, and when he was shunted to voice mail, left a message telling Cole that their meeting would have to wait and where Dan was. Cole would find out soon enough that Tyler wasn't with Dan, but this way he wouldn't have to learn about it through a report. Tyler wasn't sure why that mattered, but it did.

"I'm going to take that vacation, Cole. Don't try and stop me at the airports or tail me. Just let me go." He paused and then added, "Please."

Cole liked his agents to be polite. Tyler would have said thank you as well, but Cole hadn't let him go yet.

With his journey abruptly terminated, he stood looking around him. Which way? East or west? He hated retracing his steps as much as anyone, but ahead held no appeal: gray cities and gray skies -- but behind him lay the ocean.

He got back into his truck and started the engine. Up ahead, a rig was kicking up dust in a swirling cloud, a lumbering behemoth that would pass him soon, heading west. Tyler started the engine and turned the truck around in a squeal of tires that put a grin on his face.

The rig fell behind him as he drove away and somehow, going in this direction, the road looked different; a beckoning finger.

Tyler told himself that he wouldn't slow down passing the Seaton farm. Wouldn't even look at it, hoping to catch one final glance at Dan.

Lying to himself worked about as well as playing chess solo the winter before this one. Stalemate.

Alison had said all the right things when she'd walked in and found Dan at the kitchen table. If her eyes had held just a flash of irritation when the surprise had faded, well, it was understandable, and she'd hugged him warmly. Dan's sling had meant that it was a careful hug, but he'd *felt* hugged, which was something.

He'd repaid her by saying all the right things back, which included congratulations on the upcoming wedding and assurances to Matt, silent by the doorway, that no, he didn't mind that Matt had his room now.

At some point in the babble, he found himself saying that he wouldn't be staying for long and discovered that he meant it and was okay with it. His homecoming had gone better than he'd expected, but an hour here and he was already finding it hard to breathe. Too familiar, too constricting... After the freedom he was used to, he couldn't just step back inside the box he'd lived in most of his life.

"Just until my arm heals and I can look for work. Maybe even just a day or two. I'm not back for good."

Was that relief on all three faces?

"But you only just got here!" Allison protested. "And it's the wedding in three weeks; you'll still be here for that?"

It was impossible to interpret his father's expression, all frown and tight lips. Peter could have been pleading with Dan to stay and support him against a rising tide of white frosting and lace, or asking him to quietly walk away now that they were as reconciled to each other as they were likely to get. Weddings were for couples, and Dan would be expected to have a date. Peter wasn't going to like Dan showing up at the wedding with a guy on his arm, and there was no way that Dan would cave to pressure and invite a woman. Either way, he didn't know anyone to invite, and they'd be there just for show; he wasn't interested in anyone but Tyler.

Pointless, all of it.

"I don't think so, sorry." That sounded too blunt, and he added, "It's not like you were expecting me to be there. I'd throw off all the seating plans."

From the wince Alison gave, that point had been a good one to make. Dan had never been around a wedding in its planning stage, but he'd seen enough of them on TV to know that unexpected, last-minute changes were every bride's nightmare.

"I just wanted Dad to know that I was okay," he said.

"And now that you have, you're leaving?" Alison asked. "Oh, Dan... I hope you know that Matt and I would never want you to feel unwelcome here. This is your home."

Peter nodded. "I told him that," he said, his voice gruff. He jerked his chin at Dan. "What are your plans, son?"

Plans? He had to have a plan? "Travel. See stuff, you know?" He couldn't keep the triumph out of his voice as he added, "Already made it to the ocean."

His dad had always treated that particular ambition with scorn, dismissing it as childish, as if Dan had said he wanted to go to the moon. Now that Dan knew just how easy it was to get there, he was the one feeling contempt for his father's lack of adventure. Peter hadn't ever left the state, let alone the country.

Peter sniffed on cue, his expression dubious. "Salt water. Can't plow it, can't live on it. I don't see the point."

Matt opened his mouth as if to speak and then closed it again when he caught Peter's eye.

"It doesn't need to have a point," Dan said. "It's just there. And it's fucking incredible."

He stood before the rising flush on his dad's face could translate to a demand that he apologize for swearing in front of Alison and headed for the door. "I'm going to take a look around. Get some fresh air."

He didn't look back.

Once outside, he took the first easy breath since he'd arrived, the familiar smell of earth and manure attaching itself to him, wrapping around his head like a wet blanket. He'd get used to it soon, but right now it was pungent to say the least.

The place hadn't changed; no reason why it should have. Fields destined for potatoes lay waiting, placed around the house like quilt patches, their brown soil dark from the rain that had fallen overnight, lightening as the sunlight dried and warmed the ground.

Dan wandered toward the small stand of apple trees that sheltered the kitchen garden. Tightly furled buds were showing hints of white between the green, but it was too early for them to burst out into the starry blossom that Dan had never quite believed really turned into apples, small,

tart, and juicy. His mouth watered remembering the taste of them and the way they'd fitted, sun-warm and smooth-skinned, against his palm.

"Hey."

Dan turned and saw Matt standing a few yards away, looking uncertain of his welcome.

"Hi, Matt."

"You in the mood for company?"

"Sure," Dan said cautiously, wondering if Matt was here as a messenger, and if so, who had sent him. "Just don't bother giving me the guided tour. I've seen it all before."

Matt smiled, his brown eyes gleaming under a thick shock of white-blond hair. "I guess you have at that."

They walked in silence for a while, following the fence around the biggest field, the new grass springy under their feet.

"So what's it like living out here?" Dan asked finally. "Must feel weird after being in town?"

Matt shrugged. "It's okay. Better than hanging around the bars with no money for more'n a beer or two. Your dad pays me, and I'm saving up..."

"What for?" Peter had paid Dan once he'd turned eighteen, but not much. To be fair, he hadn't charged Dan rent, so it evened out. "A car?"

"House," Matt said briefly. "Place of my own."

"Unless he's paying you a lot more than he paid me, it's going to be a while before you need to think about buying curtains."

"I'm not the only one doing the saving," Matt said. "I'm engaged. Trish Parker."

"Wow." He was saying that too much, with a fake, desperate edge to it, but it just kept popping out. "Trish. You and Trish Parker. That's just... wow."

Matt laughed. "You don't remember her, do you?"

"Not one little bit," Dan said. "You were a couple of years ahead of me, and you hung out with the jocks. Unless she's the one who dumped a pitcher of fruit punch over your head when you pinched her ass at the Homecoming dance?"

"That's my baby," Matt said with evident pride. "She's got a job in town as a realtor, working with Tommy Biddell. She's still learning the ropes, but she made this great sale last week to a retired couple from Des Moines. See, they'd always wanted a place by a river..."

Dan tuned out the story that followed. Too many names he didn't recognize, and those he did, he didn't care about. Matt was being nice, but like his dad's kindness, it was just making him feel even more like Alice wandering around Wonderland, lost and confused.

"You mean it when you say you're moving on?" Matt said after his anecdote had ended and Dan had made some appreciative noises. "Because there's enough work to go around. Your dad's going to be hiring someone soon, but he'd like it if it was you."

"Now, he would," Dan said. "In a few months? Not so much."

"Because of the uh, the gay thing?" Matt shook his head. "Yeah, that didn't go down well, but he's over it. Mom talked to him and made him see that it wasn't the end of the world. And if he wants grandchildren, well, Trish will see to that. She wants a big family."

The mild smugness in Matt's voice was annoying, but Dan let it go. The sun was pleasantly warm, and he felt drowsy and spaced-out. He hadn't slept well in his hospital bed, alternating between drug-induced naps that left him groggy and long hours of trying to get comfortable and failing. Arguing with Matt was too much effort.

"I can't stay," Dan said. "I've got -- there's this guy..." Was there? Was getting back with Tyler even a vague possibility? They'd left it so up in the air... why had they done that? Dan felt, fiercely and unfairly, that Tyler should have stopped him from walking away. Should have realized that Dan was still getting over what had happened and wasn't in the best frame of mind to be making big, life-changing decisions.

Pushing him around just wasn't Tyler's style, though, and Dan knew that he would've resented it if Tyler had tried. Tyler had always accepted the restlessness and independence that Dan's father had tried to eliminate. Sure, Tyler had gone after Dan when he'd run away -- twice -- but...

"Earth to Dan," Matt said, and snapped his fingers under Dan's nose. "What man?"

Dan blinked until Matt's face came back into focus and then turned and leaned on the fence, the worn, silver-gray wood warm against his stomach and thighs. "Short version?"

Matt joined Dan at the fence, his muscular body making Dan feel small. Tyler had been just as strong, if not as Hulk-like, but he had never made Dan feel -- oh, for fuck's sake, he was thinking about Tyler *again*. "I'm not going anywhere."

"There's not much to say either way," Dan admitted. "I left here, heading for Canada -- Luke had gone there, and I guess I thought I might see him, and yeah, I know how dumb that sounds, but I needed something to aim at."

"He was a jerk," Matt said with unexpected force. "Forget him."

"I have," Dan assured him. "Totally. So, anyway, I was hitching rides, and that wasn't going well. Luke isn't the only jerk out there." He caught the sudden tension in the man beside him and gave Matt a sidelong smile. "Relax. Nothing happened. Well, nothing much... I lost my gear, though, and I was just about close to starving, lost in the woods, when I met Tyler."

Telling Matt about Tyler was like pressing on a bruise or picking off a scab; painful, but oddly satisfying. Dan gave Matt a much-edited story, making Tyler a Marine with PTSD, and the encounter with Paula reduced to a bland reference to a bar fight, but by the time he'd finished, he was awash with nostalgia.

"He just dropped you off?" Matt said slowly, and pointed at the road. "Let you get out over there and drove away?"

"Mm," Dan said, his lips pressed tightly together to stop them from saying more than he wanted to share.

"Man, and I thought that Luke guy was an asshole."

Dan turned on Matt, ignoring the throb from his arm as he knocked it against the fence. "What did you just say?"

There was no trace of apology in Matt's expression. "You've lived with him for months, gotten him through some bad patches, and when you need him, he bails? I'm just saying that the guy sounds like a jerk."

"I *told* him to go," Dan said, indignant on Tyler's behalf. "I made him bring me here."

Matt shrugged. "It doesn't sound like he took much persuading to dump you."

"Fuck *you*," Dan said, and watched Matt's eyes narrow dangerously. Oh, yeah, that looked more like the Matt Dan remembered... the one who'd hung Ted Ellis from a tree branch for mouthing off, wedging it between Ted's belt and the waistband of his jeans and left Ted there struggling until the branch broke. "You don't know him. You don't know *me*."

"Fine," Matt said levelly, keeping hold of his temper better than Dan had expected. "You're both assholes. Happy now?"

Dan wanted to punch something, preferably Matt, but it would be a fleeting release of tension at best, and the consequences -- guaranteed to be painful -- would wipe out the gains. He settled for some deep breaths, which worked about as well as he'd expected, and then lashed out with his foot, giving the fence a solid kick that jarred his leg. "Fuck!"

"I'll take that as a no."

That sounded like something Tyler would have said, but Matt's voice lacked the dry affection Dan was used to; the smugness was showing again.

"I needed space," Dan said. "I needed to come back home and deal with what I'd left behind."

"You ran again," Matt said, "but this time, you ran home. I guess that's a smarter choice." Which summed it all up neatly.

"Shit, I did, didn't I?" Dan murmured under his breath. Dan glanced at Matt and gave him a bitter smile as the truth sunk in. "Took off the way I always do, and pretended I was being all mature when I was just -- *God*. I promised I wouldn't do it again, and he let me, he just fucking *let* me--"

"Uh, yeah," Matt said, his hand rubbing the back of his neck, looking as if he wanted out of the conversation. "That's what I said, remember?"

"I've got to talk to him." Filled with decision now, Dan took out his phone and called the last dialed number as the quickest way of getting to hear Tyler's voice. Discovering that Tyler had turned off his phone was a slap in the face. Telling himself that it might just be a loss of signal to blame, he shrugged, attempting nonchalance. "Can't get through."

"Sounds like you're not the only one who wants space," Matt said with a wise nod.

Dan shoved his useless phone back in his jacket. "Matt? If Trish ever wants to talk to you about her feelings, just nod and smile, okay? Because you suck at this kind of thing."

"Just calling 'em as I see 'em, bro."

"I'm not your brother," Dan snapped.

"You will be soon," Matt pointed out. He patted Dan's good shoulder with a heavy hand. "Just get over him and forget about taking off. You'll find someone real fast in town, I bet. Now your dad knows about you, it'll be easy enough. I don't know what you go for, but you won't need to settle for jerks or geriatrics."

"For *what*?"

Matt shrugged. "How old did you say this Tyler was? Thirty-five? Shit, could he even get it up more than once a night?"

Dan gaped at him incredulously and then started to laugh. It wasn't even worth taking offense over. "Sometimes. Viagra works wonders, and when that didn't work, I dressed up as a --"

"Hey! TMI," Matt said, the gullible, brain-dead idiot.

"Let me get one thing straight. Our sex life was *not* a problem."

"Whatever," Matt said, losing interest. He nodded in the direction of the house. "Mom's waving at us. Guess that means there's food on the table. You hungry?"

"I could eat," Dan said, suddenly aware that he was starving. Breakfast had been oatmeal, watery and thin.

"You won't want to leave when you've tasted Mom's fried chicken," Matt said with a touching faith in the power of grease.

Chapter Fifteen

The Seaton farm was up ahead. Tyler's hands were sweating, slippery against the steering wheel, and he was aware of his heart beating and the pulse of blood in his neck. With clinical detachment, he noted the signs of emotional stress and tried to calm down. He'd jumped off a bridge once, with bullets like rain around him, swimming for hours before deciding it was safe to make the move to dry land, all without feeling one tenth as agitated as this.

He couldn't help slowing down as he got closer to Dan's home. When he pulled over to within a few yards of the place where he'd stopped to let Dan get out four hours earlier, it was an action as inevitable as his next breath.

This was why he'd always been glad that he'd never been in love. He liked being able to decide what to do without his hormones forcing the issue.

Without turning off the engine, he looked up at the house, searching for Dan at a window, beside the barn, out in the fields... nothing. The place looked deserted in the afternoon sunlight, a postcard of pastoral contentment.

What did he expect? Dan to appear, freeze in place, and then start walking toward him, breaking into a run, with the music swelling and the --

His phone rang, startling him, and he swore, fished it out of his pocket, and snarled, "Yes?" into it, braced for Cole's flinty disapproval.

"Are you parked on the road outside?"

Dan sounded breathless, shocked. He could lie, hit the gas, take off... but Dan would know.

"Yes, that would be me you're looking at. I only just got here, though. I'm not stopping. In fact, I'm leaving right now, so --"

"*Wait there.*" The urgency cut through the medium of plastic and metal like a knife, and Tyler turned the engine off so that he could hear better. "I haven't even unpacked, I can be with you in a minute. Less. Just let me tell them I'm going and --"

"What? No! Look, Dan, I just changed my mind about seeing Cole and decided to head for the nearest airport, which meant coming back this way. I was passing by, and I just... slowed down."

"You stopped."

Tyler rubbed at his forehead and wondered when his head had started to throb. If it got worse, he was going to have to find somewhere to stay. He didn't get headaches often, but when he did, they turned him into a pain-dazed zombie.

"I stopped, yes, but that doesn't mean that you can come with me when I start driving again. You made your choice; I respected that. So should you."

There was a charged silence, and then Dan said calmly, "You stopped, Tyler. You wanted to see me again."

"And you wanted to go home," Tyler said, guilt making him harsher than he ever wanted to be with Dan. "Hours, Dan. It's only been hours, and you're ready to run *again*? You just can't stick to anything or anyone, can you?"

He expected a snarled 'Fuck you' and a buzz in his ear as the conversation ended, but he got nothing but silence for a long moment before Dan said softly, "I made a mistake. You're not going to let me put it right?"

"Mistake? You and your dad, how's that working out?" Tyler demanded.

"Good, actually. He's... he was worried about me. He's not shouting, and he's told me I'm welcome here."

"See? A happy ending," Tyler said evenly. "Glad to hear it."

"Not really," Dan told him. "He's getting married to someone with a son around my age who loves working on the farm and who's engaged to a nice girl who wants kids. They're all one big happy family here. I'm just in the way."

"Have they said that?"

"No. They don't need to."

"Right." Tyler looked away from the house and at the road ahead, stretching out, waiting for him. He should go. Toss this phone out of the window so that Dan couldn't call him again and just go. "You can just tell instinctively."

"Yes, you sarcastic son of a bitch, I can." Look at that; he'd gotten Dan angry. Good to know that he hadn't lost the knack. "I've already told them that I'm not stopping. Said I'd be gone in a day or two. That was before you did your little drive-by."

It took a second or two for Tyler to get his voice under control. "And just where the *hell* were you planning to go?" Not so controlled; he sounded like one of his drill sergeants bawling out a recruit with soup stains on his uniform. "Out on the road again? Hitching? Where to this time?"

"I don't know!" Dan took a ragged, audible breath. "Wherever you were, I guess. Or I *was*. The way you're talking now, telling me you'd be there when I needed you was just words. You were glad to get rid of me, weren't you?"

"Boy, when you decide to play stupid, you should get an Oscar," Tyler said tiredly. "No, I wasn't glad to get rid of you. I still don't know why you wanted to leave me, though I'm glad you've made things right with your dad. It's just -- you can't keep doing this, Dan. You change direction more times than a pinball and just about as randomly. I can't deal with it." He'd never laid his feelings out like this before, spread out to be picked over, rejected, but it had to be done if he was going to make Dan understand. "I never expected you to stick around for long. You're... young, not just in years, and I'm not. God, there are days I wake up and feel about ninety. I could have handled you leaving, or finding someone more your age, a better fit, but this going, coming back, going again... no."

"Yeah," Dan said too calmly for it to be genuine. "Okay."

"That's it?"

He could almost hear the shrug. "Sure. I mean, I just got shot at and watched you blow someone away, but that doesn't mean that I'm entitled to freak out, does it? Shit, you must think I'm a complete waste of space."

"Dan --"

"No," Dan continued, his voice louder now, sparking and fizzing with annoyance, a snap, crackle, pop voice. "I'm a scream-like-a-girl coward who runs home to his daddy first time things get rough, right? No way a hardass soldier like you would give me time to get over what happened, because you can't imagine *needing* any time. You don't see her face when you close your eyes, you don't dream about blood on you, sticky, thick, hot like... like jam, like raspberry fucking jam --"

Tyler could hear Dan fighting not to cry, and it was killing him. "I see all of that. More. I did it to her, remember? But I did it to save you, and I don't regret it. She was dead the minute she went rogue, Dan, living on borrowed time. And of the two of us, I'm the one trained to deal with this shit, not you, and I never thought you were a coward. Ever. You saved my life. And, yes, you're entitled to a meltdown -- but why the hell couldn't you have let me take care of you for once? Why couldn't you trust me to know what it was like and help?"

He rubbed his hand across his eyes, his headache worsening by the minute. If he didn't find a quiet, dark room to ride this out, he was going to throw up soon.

"I didn't -- you weren't listening --" Dan was stammering now, lost in a misery Tyler shared. "Tyler, please --"

"Don't," Tyler said. "Don't --" He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, which helped to stop the world from breaking up into rainbow shards. "I'm going to find somewhere to stay in town. I can't drive anymore; I'm beat."

"One of your headaches?" Dan said, sounding refreshingly concerned and normal, as if they weren't in the middle of the kind of scene that Tyler had no experience with at all. "Shit, Tyler, come here. Dad will let you stay, and you can't drive like this."

"I can make it to town," Tyler said. He'd seen a place that would do as he'd driven through that morning, the bright blue of its sign and the silver rocket hanging from it catching his eye. "I'll check into the Satellite Inn. Think about what you want to do, Dan. I mean it; make up your mind one way or the other. I'll be there until ten tomorrow."

"I can go with you?" The eager hope in Dan's voice almost made Tyler cave and tell him to grab his gear right away. He could sleep off this migraine with Dan beside him, Dan's breathing even, his body fitted snugly against Tyler's...

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," he said, refusing to commit himself. "If you decide it's what you want, maybe. If it's not... hell, come and say goodbye anyway. We can do that, at least, but right now --"

"Yeah. You go and get some rest." Dan sighed, his relief evident. "God, you don't know how much I've missed you."

It hurt to smile, but Tyler did it anyway. "It's been four hours, boy. I could hold my breath that long."

"Felt like forever," Dan said flatly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Dan put his phone back in his jeans pocket, a familiar pressure against his hipbone, and watched Tyler drive away. Tyler was going slowly, which wasn't all that reassuring, since it meant that his headache was one of the bad ones. Dan chewed his lip indecisively. Would it piss Tyler off if he called the motel in half an hour or so just to check that Tyler hadn't crashed into a fence or something? He'd just ask the person on the desk, of course, not bother Tyler directly, though Tyler would know what he'd done. Dan didn't doubt that.

Deciding that it probably wouldn't be a good idea, he left the parlor, a stiff, formal room, rarely used in his memory, that Alison had somehow made part of the house without, as far as Dan could see, changing anything. The couch invited people to sit on it now, and the air smelled fresh. Napping on the couch would have been a good way to spend a few hours, but if he was going to leave tomorrow, Dan wanted to go through his stuff in the basement and supplement what he had in his backpack. He'd left a lot behind when he'd hit the road the year before.

He made it into the cool basement without bumping into anyone asking questions. The others had gone back to work after lunch, which had been tasty, Dan admitted, even if a bowl of salad on the table besides the fried chicken, crisp green and red lettuce curling around a rainbow of vegetables, had made his jaw drop an inch. Watching his dad biting into a strip of orange bell pepper had lowered it another inch. Peter Seaton and raw veggies just didn't go together. Dan didn't mind that his return had merited only a momentary pause in the routine chores; he was used to work taking priority, and anything else would have surprised him.

He'd had enough surprises for one day.

The boxes with his belongings were easy to find. Peter kept things organized as the best way of cutting down the time wasted looking for items he needed, and the boxes, labeled with a terse 'Dan' in black marker, were stacked in a column beside a motorbike Dan had intended to restore. The bike had cost him a summer's wages, and he'd never found time to do more than strip it down, let alone get it running again. The bike was on a tarp to protect the floor, oily stains glistening here and there, fresh enough to make Dan wonder if Matt had been tinkering with the bike. The thought brought with it a surge of possessiveness that quickly faded. Let Matt have the bike if he wanted; it was no use to Dan now.

There were three boxes, and Dan opened them all, sorting quickly through each one, brought to a halt now and then by something that held a special meaning for him. A photograph of his mom was the only item he set aside to take with him from the memorabilia, though. He'd learned on the road just how little was enough.

His clothes smelled musty, but he'd have time to run them through the washer. There wasn't much that he wanted. He'd taken his favorite T-shirts with him and lost them all, but he threw in some nice shirts in case he and Tyler ever went someplace that merited one, and added his only pair of dress pants, a relic from graduation.

When the clothing was whirling around in sudsy water, he went to find his dad. Peter wasn't going to like hearing that his long-lost son planned to get lost again, but it had to be said.

Dan could see Peter in one of the fields, tinkering with a tractor and looking, even at a distance, harried. Maybe not a good time... Without thinking about it much, he veered away, looking for someplace to sit and think. Tyler had wanted him to do that, and right at that moment Dan was in the kind of mood where he'd have done a lot more than that for Tyler.

He didn't need to think about it, of course. The Christmas morning feeling of seeing Tyler's truck in the road and the jolt of pure happiness at hearing his voice had been enough to tell Dan that he wasn't ready to walk away from Tyler. Not yet. Maybe not ever, though he didn't think that either of them was ready to think about the long term.

Tyler didn't want assurances that when he was eighty, a sprightly sixty-five-year-old Dan would be taking care of him. Dan had thought it through and realized that Tyler just needed to know that Dan wouldn't bail on him in a crisis. Deciding that it wasn't working was okay; doing what Dan had done and turning away, not talking, apparently wasn't.

The apple tree Dan had perched in as a child wasn't an option; it had grown, sure, but so had he, and he wasn't sure it would take his weight. Besides, it was spring, and the branches were tipped with buds, fragile fruit on soft, green growth.

His bedroom would have been ideal; it had always been a refuge for Dan, the place where he lay staring up at the slanted ceiling and the familiar, irregular stain from a leak caused by a missing tile. Dan could've drawn that stain from memory, he was sure of it.

Walking into that room and finding it scattered with Matt's belongings, unwelcoming, indifferent, would have been yet another reminder of how the hole that Dan left had healed over.

So he went to see the chickens and leaned on the fence, watching them scratch and peck at the earth, industrious and intent. Without intending to, he did begin to consider his options, breaking them down into more than just stay or go. He might not want to plan his life out -- surprises were good, and so was flexibility -- but he wanted more than being Tyler's shadow, and he could do better than odd jobs. He was bright; not school-smart, but not stupid, either, and he was a hard worker.

It wasn't easy to decide what he wanted to do. Factor in Tyler's own future and it got really complicated, because the two of them just didn't overlap. Tyler, in the time that Dan had known him, had lived on what he'd grown and kept his bank balance healthy by playing the market. The gardening had been a necessity dictated by Tyler's desire for isolation, and the share trading was more of a mental exercise to keep Tyler from getting bored -- financial Sudoku.

Dan scowled at a chicken who seemed to be clucking right at him in a motherly, scolding kind of way. He needed a game plan, or Tyler might just drive into the sunset solo.

He began to mentally narrow down some options and broaden others. Staying here and working for his dad alongside Matt had the appeal of familiarity, and he knew he'd be an asset, not a liability -- but he'd also be a reminder of the past to a man who, incredible a thought though it was, had created a new life for himself.

Maybe he and his dad weren't so different after all.

Staying in town and coming over for Sunday dinner once a week to make nice... Possible, but there just weren't that many jobs around, and people would talk, which his dad would hate.

And why was he even bothering with any of those options when they didn't have room for Tyler? Dan wasn't sure of much right then, but wanting Tyler with a fierce desperation was an unchanging certainty.

He walked over to the barn and collected a handful or two of feed for the chickens and came back to scatter it for them. He got a kick out of the way they exploded into life, scurrying over, clucking and squawking. They knew what they wanted, and they kept it simple.

Of course, they were also fenced in and destined to be fried by Alison.

By the time the last seed had been pecked up and swallowed, Dan had made up his mind. He'd leave with Tyler if he had to chain himself to the truck's hood to get Tyler to take him along, and they'd take that vacation because they'd earned it.

After that, they'd find somewhere to live that suited them both, with Tyler getting the casting vote since it would be his money paying for it -- and that was something Dan didn't like, but it wasn't like there was much he could do to change it, and Tyler genuinely didn't seem to care. Maybe by the ocean...

Buoyed by a fantasy of the two of them fishing off a pier or running a tours-around-the-bay company, Dan gave up on the future in favor of the present. He could hear the tractor running, but when he walked over to the field, Matt was riding on it and his dad was walking over to him, an oily rag in one hand.

"Damn thing drinks oil, I swear," Peter said by way of greeting. He nodded at Dan. "You took off the sling."

"What? Oh, yeah... thought I'd see how it feels without it." Dan wiggled his injured arm cautiously. It didn't hurt too much, though he didn't think he was ready to do more than that, at least not until the stitches were out. "It's okay."

Peter nodded again and would have continued on if Dan hadn't grabbed his dad's arm.

"Dad? Can I -- there's something I've got to tell you."

"You're going." The lines around Peter's mouth deepened. "That it?"

"I got a call from Tyler," Dan told him. He had to keep this short and leave out the sweet. "Turns out he didn't keep going the way I thought he would. He's staying in town and leaving tomorrow. I'll be going with him."

And if Tyler turned him down, well, Dan was still leaving.

"From what I remember of the Bible, the prodigal son stuck around a bit longer than that," his dad said with an unexpected flash of humor. "I guess there's no point in arguing with you, though. I know what you look like when you've got your heart set on something. Never could figure out a way to change that about you."

"Why did you want to?" Dan asked. "You're kind of like that, too."

Peter sucked air through his teeth meditatively. "Yeah, you could be right. Don't know as how it's made my life much easier, mind you." He met Dan's eyes. "I don't want you getting hurt, son. Not by this Tyler fellow or by anyone or anything." His gaze fell on Dan's arm. "Or anything," he repeated.

"I'll try not to," Dan said, feeling awkward. As emotional scenes went, he'd had more extreme ones with Tyler over breakfast, but that was him and Tyler. When it was him and his dad, the lines were drawn in different places.

"If it helps," his dad said, "you know you've got a place here. Yeah, you feel pushed out of it now, I get that, but Matt's never going to be blood the way you are. And now you can go get in the truck, because you and me are driving into town."

"Town? Why?" Too early for a drink, but that was about all he could think of.

"Matt's getting something from his mother and me when he gets married, and it's only fair if you have the same, seeing as how... well."

"It's a blessing in disguise. I'd look awful in a white dress," Dan said, the sass just popping out of him.

His dad stared at him in silence for a moment and then chuckled and cuffed the side of Dan's head. "Always were a smartass, weren't you? Well, now you can be a smartass with some money to tide you over."

"You don't have to do that," Dan said, touched by the offer. "I know how things are around here, and you need a cushion in case you have a bad year or two."

Peter's face twitched as if he was about to sneeze, and then he grinned. "Cushion? Son, why do you think I got up the nerve to propose to Alison? I've got a whole damn couch."

"Huh?" Dan blinked at him in surprise. "What, you won the lottery or something?" Peter shrugged, his grin getting wider, and Dan gaped at him. "You did? God, Dad, that's amazing."

"Surprised the hell out of me, too," Peter admitted. "It was one of those lotteries the cure for cancer people run, with the big prizes. House, cars, boats... Twenty years I've been buying a ticket, figuring if it was for charity it'd do someone some good, and never won a thing. This year, I walked away with a cool half a million." Peter waved his hand dismissively, though a pleased smile was glued to his face. "Not enough to retire on, not today, but enough that I won't be worrying much if we have a drought or a flood, and God knows either's possible. It's sitting in the bank while I figure out what to do with it, but I can't think of a damn thing better to invest in than my son -- both of my sons."

He patted Dan's arm. "So maybe you have more options than you think, son. You can go to college if your heart's set on it, start up a business... You can stand alone." Peter looked at him quizzically. "You're being awful polite and not asking how much."

"Guess I was brought up well," Dan said. He could feel the future he'd just been fretting over, a black hole of uncertainty, light up like a sunrise.

"That you were," Peter said with pardonable satisfaction. "Twenty-five thousand, son. It's not a lot --"

"Are you kidding me?" The words burst out of him. "That's just -- that's too much."

The smile faded from Peter's face, but not his eyes. "You left here with angry words said, and you walked away thinking I hated you because of the way you were. And I won't say you were wrong about that. I didn't like it. I didn't like it one bit, and part of me still doesn't. But I thought you were dead. You were all I had since your momma passed, and you were gone. Alison might have knocked some tolerance into me, but it was thinking you were dead that allowed her to do that, or it would've just slid off me like water off a duck's back because I'm too old to change. It's not too much. It's just what's fair."

Dan sighed and felt his shoulders move down, tension bleeding out of him with the used air. "I still get to say thank you, right?"

"Sure, but don't bother writing a note. All I want is for you to remember to call home every once in a while. Not every week -- phone calls are expensive -- but now and then."

Dan opened his mouth and closed it again, settling for a quick hug that his father endured stoically.

This changed everything -- no, not everything. Independence was good, but standing alone was lonely. He wanted Tyler standing right beside him, close enough to touch.

Chapter Sixteen

Tyler made it to the motel, checked in with his vision narrowed to what he could see without turning his head because that pushed the pain level up way too high, closed the door of his room behind him, and threw up in the toilet a few seconds later.

He hadn't eaten much that day, but that didn't make the process of losing it any more pleasant. The motel, in addition to soap and shampoo, had left a complimentary toothbrush and a tiny tube of toothpaste by the sink, wrapped in plastic that was a bitch to tear off. Since the alternative was rummaging through his case to find his own supplies, Tyler used his teeth to rip through it and fought back a second wave of nausea as he bit down.

Teeth brushed sketchily, mouth rinsed clean of the taste of puke and mint, equally unappealing right then, he lurched toward the bed and crawled onto it, toeing off his shoes on the way. The pillow was cool and yielding, and the room, curtains discreetly drawn, was blessedly dim. He closed his eyes and fell asleep within moments, riding out the storm raging behind his eyes. He had painkillers in his case, too, but sleep was the best cure.

He woke several hours later, shivering in the blast of chilly air from the AC unit, but able to move his head without a spiked ball careening off the inside of his skull. Progress. A shower helped, and by the time he'd dressed again, he felt light-headed from hunger but back to normal.

Braeburn didn't offer anything that qualified as fine dining within walking distance of the motel, but Tyler was too hungry to be picky and too tired of sitting behind a wheel to even consider getting back in his truck. He walked along streets lined with trees in bud and stopped at the first place that smelled good. Roberto's pasta and pizzas might be made by cooks who'd never been closer to Italy than a spaghetti western, and the décor was rustic pine and red and white checked tablecloths, but the mustard cream sauce on Tyler's beef cassarecia packed just enough punch, and he found himself finishing it down to the last piece of red onion.

After tipping his waitress -- young enough for him to wonder if she was a classmate of Dan's -- with just a little more than usual because she'd been attentive without bothering him, he went back out onto the street. The sun had set, and the sky was a deep navy blue with a sharp-edged crescent moon pinned to it. Tyler breathed in the spring air and hoped that the mild buzz from half a bottle of Chardonnay would do what it should and let him sleep some more.

He walked a roundabout route back to his room, relying on his good sense of direction to keep him heading the right way. Dan's town. Streets Dan had walked down, stores he'd shopped in... people passing Tyler with a nod or a wary glance that Dan might know... all that was missing was Dan himself.

And Tyler did miss him.

With Dan beside him, their arms bumping, Dan's quick smile flashing out, this walk would have been entertaining instead of a saunter to aid digestion on a pleasant evening. Dan added a spice and zing to Tyler's life -- sometimes he added a little too much -- but it was preferable to the bland tastelessness of life without him.

A dog began to bark as Tyler walked past the yard he was guarding. For some reason, baffling since he preferred cats, most dogs loved Tyler. They greeted him with ecstatic wuffs and thrust damp noses into his crotch. Sadly, guard dogs, trained to quivering ferocity, weren't as susceptible to his charm, but that was why God invented trunk darts. Tyler smiled as the miniature dachshund caught his scent and whined a welcome. All snap and yap, but no bite.

His smile faded to a shiver of lust as he remembered Dan's teeth digging into his skin, never enough to break the surface, but more than enough to leave Tyler marked up. Claim marks. During sex, bites like that drove both of them wild, even if afterward Tyler retreated into himself a little, disturbed by just how deep those marks went. Dan didn't hide his vulnerabilities; oh, he tried, ducking behind a façade of brash toughness that wouldn't have fooled anyone with eyes, but he was so open that Tyler could read his mood from a look, a word.

Tyler didn't hide his weak spots, he just denied that they existed and usually it wasn't that hard to convince people to see it his way. Convincing himself wasn't all that much harder, either.

He'd reached the street that the motel was on when his phone rang. He took it out of his pocket and stared at it for a moment before flipping it open. Cole, Dan, a wrong number, someone working their way down a list of numbers trying to sell something?

The first two were the most likely, but for once, Tyler would have welcomed a recorded message telling him that his credit card bills could be reduced if he just pressed 'one.'

He answered the phone with a terse, "Yes?" and heard a sniff that told him it was Cole. No one else could get quite that much reproof into an inhalation.

"Where are you?"

Tyler gave the virtually empty street a jaundiced look. Even the parked cars looked as if they'd been there for years and weren't going anywhere. "The middle of nowhere."

"More precise." When Tyler didn't reply, Cole said pointedly, "I can track you in under two minutes."

"I can destroy this phone in under ten seconds and good luck tracking me then."

"You're being needlessly difficult."

There was a bench under a tree whose roots had buckled the sidewalk. Oak? Elm? Tyler didn't know, but he admired the ruthless, contemptuous shrug the tree had given to the imprisoning

concrete. He sat on the bench, his legs stretched out in front of him, and smiled at nothing in particular. "Yes, I am."

"It's most annoying."

Abruptly tiring of the game, Tyler sighed. "I'm still in Dan's home town."

"Like a moth to the flame," Cole said, which was about as close to poetic as Tyler had ever heard him get. "Are you feeling your wings sizzle yet?"

"I'm not here to get back together with him," Tyler said. "At least..." He rubbed his hand over the wrought iron arm rest, once painted black, now mostly just plain iron. It felt cool against his palm, solid and immovable. "He wants to, but I just -- oh, the hell with it. You don't care about that, you just want to know why I'm not in Washington."

"I never expected you here, no matter what you said," Cole said, surprising Tyler. "If I'd brought you back with me... but you wouldn't have left Mr. Seaton at that point. Not willingly, anyway."

Something in Cole's voice made the back of Tyler's neck itch. He did a sweep of his surroundings, keeping it casual and unobtrusive. "If you've sent a team to bring me in..."

"A team? For a broken-down wreck of a man like you? If I judged you by your own estimation, my twelve-year-old niece would be sufficient."

"Very funny," Tyler said. "What do you want?"

"To say goodbye."

"Shit!" Tyler surged up out of his seat and got behind the tree, crouching low and not caring about the startled looks he was getting from a couple approaching who were walking their dog, optimistic plastic bags in hand. "Cole, you cold-hearted son of a bitch, if you want to listen to me die, you're sicker than the people I took out for you."

There was a moment's silence, and then Cole began to laugh, a helpless chuckle that went on for long enough that Tyler, flushed with irritation at himself, stood up.

The couple with the dog crossed the street to avoid walking past the crazy man, murmuring to each other and giving Tyler frankly curious glances. Well, he'd given them something to talk about; the night wasn't a total loss.

"You -- you really thought that I'd -- Oh, John." Cole gave a final chuckle and took a deep breath. "I'm insulted and a little hurt."

"Sorry," Tyler said insincerely, as his heart rate began to slow to normal again. He brushed at his chest as if a red dot that didn't exist had left a mark. "So when you say good bye, you mean..."

"Happy retirement and the end of our working relationship."

"Hmm."

"I mean it," Cole assured him. "You're far from irreplaceable, you know. I just prefer to work with people I know."

"It doesn't always work out," Tyler reminded him quietly.

"It did with you," Cole said. "You were one of my best agents."

Tyler had waited a long time for approval from Cole when he'd first gone to work for the man; it had come rarely after that, but it had always meant something to him. Now it was bittersweet to hear, but still welcome.

"Thanks, Cole. You were... you were a good boss. Still are."

"Just not your boss," Cole said gently. "Not any more. Have a good life, John."

The call ended as Tyler was fumbling for a way to rephrase 'Thanks, you too, and give my regards to Mrs. Stevens' into something a little more eloquent. He clutched the phone tighter and then sighed and tucked it back into his pocket.

So. That was that.

Of course, it didn't guarantee that his past would stay where it belonged. Cole might have cut him loose, but he'd made enemies over the years. Not many, for the simple reason that his identity had been secret -- it had to be for him to be effective. People out there had sworn vengeance on his aliases without knowing who he really was, or had sought a killer without knowing anything but that he was a good shot.

Still, he couldn't give Dan any guarantees that they'd live safe from reprisals.

This small town had its own dangers. Everywhere did. It had its share of murders, suicides, rapes. It had a smattering of monsters with smiling faces. Tyler knew all that and still wanted Dan to be here, safe, reconciled with his father and just... safe.

Feeling protective about Dan didn't stop Tyler from wanting to punch the boy when he got back to his motel and found Dan outside, leaning on the hood of Tyler's truck.

"What the hell are you doing here, boy?"

"Free country," Dan said with a shrug. "It's not like I broke into your room, though I could have probably gotten a key off Shandi on the desk."

"And if you had, I'd have gotten her fired," Tyler said. "So it's lucky for her that you didn't."

"Chill," Dan said. "She wouldn't tell me your room or if you were even staying here. And how hypocritical is that? I bet you've sweet-talked room numbers and keys out of people all over the world."

"True," Tyler said. "Which doesn't mean that I like my privacy being invaded or you showing up twelve hours early."

"I wanted to make sure you were okay," Dan said. "Those headaches wipe you out." His gaze flickered over Tyler. "Not this time, though. Or was it just a way to get me off your back?"

"It was real," Tyler said. "Trust me on that." He eyed Dan and then sighed. "Now that you're here..."

"I can come in?" Dan pushed away from the truck, his eyes bright. "Cool!"

"No, it isn't," Tyler said as he opened the door. "It's intrusive and irritating of you, and I'm not pleased to see you here." He walked into his room and tossed the key onto the night stand.

Dan closed the door behind him and came to within a foot of Tyler, staring up at him. Tyler held still, refusing to give in and kiss a mouth that was waiting for him to do just that. Jesus, that pout of Dan's got to him every single fucking time...

"Oh, you lie," Dan told him. "You lie so very fucking much."

"Do I?" Tyler hadn't moved, not an inch, he swore he hadn't, but his hands were on Dan now, one threaded through Dan's hair, his fingers tight and possessive, one caressing Dan's ass as lightly as he could when he wanted to dig in with his fingers, mark it, claim it.

"Yeah," Dan said on a slow, soft exhalation and brought Tyler's head down within reach of his mouth.

Part of Dan knew that they shouldn't be doing this. Sex wasn't the problem, never had been, probably never would be. They got each other hot, and they knew how to make each other pop like shaken-up soda, and it'd been that way since the first time. Get him in the same room as Tyler and he wanted to touch that lean, muscular body; split them up and he couldn't keep his mind on anything else for very long.

He hadn't walked away from his dad -- from his family -- to get Tyler rubbing against him like a cat, biting his neck, licking his ear... not entirely. Dan was here to build something that could hold them both safely, and that had to be done with words.

Right now, though, all he had to say was Tyler's name and some heartfelt moans and whimpers mixed in with it. It felt like weeks since he'd had this. Weeks. He tilted his head to let Tyler kiss

his neck, tiny, sucking bites that stung and burned and got him so hard he wanted to unzip right there and give his cock some room to grow.

"Fuck me," he said, gritting the words out when he wanted to howl them. "God, Tyler, just do me. On the floor, against the wall, don't care."

"I'd care," Tyler said, and bam, just like that the barrier slammed down between them again.

Dan stepped back as Tyler did, breathing in gasps as if he'd been running a race. His face burned from the scrape of Tyler's stubble, and his lips felt bruised and tingling from all the kisses he'd gotten. The throb in his arm didn't bother him as much as the ache in his balls. "I didn't come here for this, but it's a little fucking cold to stop when we're both ready for it."

"Not as cold as fucking you as if you were someone I'd bought for the hour," Tyler said bluntly. "Your arm's still hurting you, and if I took you the way you were begging me to, it would hurt a lot more after we'd finished."

"So use the bed and make it slow. Let me ride you, let me -- fuck." Dan scrubbed the dampness of frustrated tears from his eyes. "Never mind. Forget it." He gave the hard swell of his cock a consolatory rub with the heel of his hand and then took a deep breath. "Okay. So let's talk."

Tyler reached out and cupped his face, the soft brush of a thumb over Dan's mouth unbearably arousing, even if Dan supposed that it was meant to calm them both down. "So talk."

"Keep touching me and I'll forget my lines."

"You rehearsed what you were going to say?" Tyler pulled an amused face, but it took him longer to let his hand fall away than it should have, which left Dan feeling less rejected.

"Kind of did on the way over and when I was waiting for you to get back." Dan sat in the room's only chair, a thinly padded, spindle-legged object that wasn't at all comfortable. It was still better than sitting beside Tyler on the bed and getting too comfortable again.

"So what did you have to say that couldn't wait until the morning?" Tyler gave an annoyed hiss, frowning again, the way he had been when he'd walked around the corner of the building and seen Dan. "You weren't supposed to just come here. You were supposed to think about what you wanted and weigh up your options."

"What makes you think that I didn't?" Dan countered. "And don't assume that I've decided I'm going with you. I might be here to tell you sayonara. In case you missed it, I don't have any of my stuff with me; it's all back at my dad's."

Tyler arched his eyebrows. "Is that how you plan to say goodbye to all your exes? A final, farewell fuck? I'm not sure it's an effective way of getting rid of them."

It was hard to breathe with this much misery choking your throat. "You're not my ex. We haven't -- we didn't -- shit, Tyler, are you breaking up with me?"

"If I wanted to regress to my teenage years, I'd grow my hair long and learn to play the drums or something. No. I'm leaving, and you might be staying, but I'm not sure that's the same thing."

"Sounds like it to me." Dan bit down hard on his lip and tried to keep calm. *Be mature*, he told himself. *Don't blow this*. "And you're not the fucking boss of me, so don't go thinking that you can nail my feet to the sidewalk here and I'll stay put, because I won't. I'm leaving town tomorrow, that's settled, and whether I go with you or make my own way, well, that's my decision, not yours."

Okay, not so mature, but he got points for being sincere, right?

"Boy, I see you on the road with your thumb out and I swear I will run you over."

"You might just see my dust," Dan said with a jerk of his chin. "I've got enough to buy a car now, and it won't be a truck, either."

That got Tyler's attention, as he'd known it would, distracting him from what even Dan could see was a load of bullshit. Tyler run him over? Yeah, right. Haul him over a knee and wallop him, maybe, but if Tyler tried to pull that kind of daddy-knows-best crap, Dan was prepared to do his best to take Tyler down.

"Your dad?"

Oh, Tyler was quick at connecting the dots. "Yeah. He won the freaking lottery while I was away." Dan shook his head, still feeling the unreality of that piece of news. "He got a fiancée, a better son, and a cool half a million. I guess if I'd stayed away longer he'd have struck oil in the south field or something. He's put twenty-five thousand into my account, can you believe it? I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but, God. Twenty-five thousand dollars..."

Tyler frowned, brushing aside the money as if it didn't matter, which, given Tyler's bank balance, it probably didn't. "A better son? Is that what he said?"

Abashed into honesty, Dan shook his head. "No, I guess not. In fact, he was kind of laughing about Matt not being all that bright, but you can tell he likes him."

"He loves you," Tyler said unexpectedly. "Doesn't he?"

Dan stretched out his legs and contemplated his running shoes, scuffed here and there, sure, but he didn't like them when they looked fresh out of the box. "Looks like he does, and I was wrong about that, too. Guess if I'd stuck around, all his yelling and preaching would have died down. I just didn't give him long enough to adjust."

"He shouldn't have needed long," Tyler muttered, which wasn't fair, maybe, but still made Dan feel protected somehow. Tyler gave him a direct look. "You think he's a different generation and all set in his ways, don't you? He's closer in age to me than you are, and I've never been like that."

Dan supposed if he'd done the math that wouldn't have come as such a shock to him. It wasn't like he didn't know how old his dad and Tyler were, but he didn't like thinking of them both as the same age more or less.

"Tyler, do me a favor and don't mention that ever again, or I'll need to go and see one of those therapists you kept pushing at me in the hospital." Dan shuddered. "What, you think I've got issues with him that I'm working out by fucking you? That's kind of sick."

"I don't know." Tyler shrugged. "Do you see me as a father figure?"

"No!" Dan got out of his chair and walked over to Tyler with two long strides. "You've taken care of me, sure, and you watch out for me, but you're just -- you're you. You're *mine*. Not a replacement for my dad or Luke, not ever."

He went to his knees in front of Tyler and put his hands on Tyler's thighs, pushing them apart enough to make room for him to edge forward. He tilted his head back and stared up at Tyler, into the cool gray eyes he knew how to read. "You're not going anywhere without me."

Tyler's mouth tightened, and Dan felt the tremor that ran through him. The muscles under his palms were bunched and hard. "Until when?" Tyler asked him, and God, he sounded so tired and resigned. "Don't misunderstand me; I'm not asking you for a commitment. I just don't want you to waste time with me when you could be doing so much more with your life. We're at different places; you're just starting out, and I'm..." One of Tyler's shoulders lifted up in a shrug. "I'm finished."

"Since when?" Dan said. "My dad was finished as far as I could see -- stuck in a rut, just turning over the calendar month by month, year by year, same old, same old. He's changed. Hell, he's reinvented himself, and you need to get the fuck over yourself and do the same." Dan scrambled to his feet and glared down at Tyler's bent head, the back of his neck bared. It was a place Dan loved to kiss, smooth, warm skin that felt good against his lips, but right then, he wanted to administer a slap, not a kiss. "You've had a rough deal, and things just blew up in both our faces, but it's over now. Isn't it?" Tyler didn't answer, and Dan nudged Tyler's knee with his own. "Isn't it?"

"I hope so. No guarantees." Tyler sounded lifeless, dispirited, which drained the optimism out of Dan, but he kept fighting.

"Yeah, life's like that."

"My life carries risks that most don't. Staying away from me might be the best choice to make."

"Bullshit," Dan snapped. "Your sucky, fucked-up life *did*, but it's over now." He wasn't entirely sure about that, but he wanted to believe it. After all, how many more psychos like Paula could there be out there, looking for Tyler? "I'd be just as much at risk of losing you if you were a fireman, or a cop, or back in the army, and last I heard, plenty of those people were married with kids. And if you mean I'm at risk personally, well, I don't suppose people like Paula come calling every day, and shit, Tyler, you know what happened right here?"

"What?"

"The man on the farm next to us, Mr. Peyersen, known him all my life, nice guy, around sixty -- he choked on a cherry stone and died right there in his own kitchen. Freak accident, million to one chance, whatever -- but it just proves my point."

Tyler finally looked up at him, eyes narrowed, a spark of interest showing. "What point would that be? In all the eloquence, I must've missed it."

"Oh, you think you're so fucking funny, don't you?" Dan breathed in and pushed for the finish line. "One life, one death. For all of us. Those are the numbers. I'm going to die and there's no avoiding it. I can go looking for it early by driving smashed out of my skull or swimming with sharks, sure, but staying with you isn't like that. It wouldn't be stupid and reckless and dumb, it wouldn't be me missing out on part of my life and skipping to the middle of the book. It'd just be me finding the guy I love early. It'd be me hitting the jackpot. I'm not walking away from a piece of luck like that. I'm not walking away from you."

Dan put his hand out and allowed himself to touch the thick brown hair Tyler kept so soldier-man short. He needed to have his hands on Tyler, storing up each tactile memory in case Tyler, bone-stubborn, stupid Tyler, wouldn't listen to him.

"Don't push me away if you still want me close," he said, barely able to hear himself. "Don't make me pay for freaking out over what happened and not being strong enough to handle it right away."

"You were strong," Tyler said, and pulled Dan down to sit beside him, his fingers curled around Dan's wrist like a cuff before they slid inside Dan's fingers, joining them together. "When it counted, when I needed you to be, you were plenty strong."

"Didn't feel it," Dan said, and shit, he wasn't going to cry, he wasn't, and he wasn't going to crawl into Tyler's lap either. Face to face. Equals. Because they were both in the same place now, and it didn't matter how many more breaths Tyler had taken, or how much horror and death he'd seen.

They both needed to turn and look to a future that was clean and empty, waiting for them to paint it vivid, tear it up, and reshape it.

"Ask me," he said, demanding it, because Tyler had to make this choice, the same way that he had.

Tyler rolled his eyes and hauled Dan in for a hard, bruising kiss that held no tenderness but plenty of love. "Come with me. Stay with me. Stop running away and making me drive halfway across the country to get you back."

Dan pursed his lips and hid the elation he felt. "Okay, that sounded like you're still pissed. Are you sure you mean it?"

There was a dangerous glint in Tyler's eyes that sent a shiver of anticipation down Dan's spine. He knew that look. He was going to get reduced to nothing but heat and hunger with Tyler over him, staring down, totally focused on making him beg, not for mercy but for more.

"Do you want me to show you how much I mean it?" Tyler said with a deceptive mildness.

Dan skinned his shirt over his head, without bothering with anything as time-consuming as undoing buttons, and gave Tyler a grin. "Yeah. And then keep on reminding me if it looks like I'm about to forget."

"I can do that," Tyler said, and dragged the tips of his fingers over Dan's bare stomach, making Dan shiver as his skin tightened in response.

"Yeah," Dan said, "I know you can." He hesitated, eying Tyler uncertainly. Was this a good time to break the news that they were expected at the farm for breakfast the next day?

"What?" Tyler asked, his eyes narrowing. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"I love you," Dan said, which was totally cheating looked at one way, but he meant it, which had to count for something.

"Thank you, but I still want to know what you're hiding." Tyler was frowning again.

"You're supposed to say it back to me!"

"Tell me." Tyler pushed Dan to his back on the bed and straddled him, being careful not to knock Dan's arm, but showing no restraint when it came to the rest of him. Tyler's hands held Dan pinned against the bed, and his breath was warm on Dan's face as he leaned down. "Right now, boy."

"I love you," Dan said, and squirmed wildly as Tyler began to tickle his ribs, robbing him of breath. "Tyler! Fuck!" He got it together enough to begin an assault of his own, targeting Tyler's vulnerable areas without mercy. "I love you, I love you, you've got to meet my dad tomorrow, still love you..."

Tyler froze, and Dan risked a glance up at him. Stone-face. Not a good sign.

"We don't have to," he said, willing to compromise since he wasn't sure how the meeting would go or if it was a good idea. "We can stop long enough for me to grab my stuff and just hit the road. He can't make us eat bacon and eggs with him."

"You *want* me to meet him, don't you?" Tyler asked, his voice curious, almost puzzled.

Dan propped himself up on his elbows. "Well, of course I do. I want him to see that I don't just go for the assholes. You -- I'm proud of you, okay? I want to show you off."

Tyler gave him a look that strayed so close to tender that Dan felt tears prickle the back of his eyes, but all that Tyler said was, "I'd like to meet him."

It sounded a lot like 'I love you' to Dan.

End