



MORTAL ENEMIES

THE TYLER MICHAELS CHRONICLES

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For Bob, the love of my life.
Without you, my dreams would not have come true.

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1

“THIS is nuts, Ty. IA’s gonna be all over you if they find out you stole those drugs out of lockup. And all over some guy who you’re not even sure of his name?” The dark-haired undercover detective was confounded as he tried to understand what it was his partner had been thinking when he came up with this crazy idea, not to mention worried about what would happen when Internal Affairs figured it out.

“Borrowed,” Tyler corrected, his blue eyes dancing mischievously. “I borrowed the drugs.”

Tommy rolled his eyes in amusement at his wayward partner. “Fine. *Borrowed*,” he emphasized, “but why risk it?”

Detective Tyler Michaels, the younger of the two by four years and the epitome of the word “gorgeous,” was always inventing new ways to get them into trouble. At thirty-three, he still possessed a childlike sense of adventure and a daring personality, which truthfully made him excel at his job... but that didn’t stop those that loved him from worrying. His light blond hair blew slightly in the wind as he regarded his partner with an amused smile.

Detective Tommy Carmikael was the more cautious of the two, yet never more than a step behind his partner and always ready to jump in after him with both feet. They had been best friends for almost all of their lives, so Tyler’s antics didn’t faze him all that much anymore, but he still felt the need to be the voice of reason now and then.

His dark green eyes bore into his partner as he waited for his reply.

Tyler just grinned. The rational side of his brain agreed with Tommy. However, he was the more impetuous of the two and decided to forgo precaution and err on the side of impulse.

“You worry too much. It’s only a couple hours. Really, what could go wrong?”

Tommy shook his head in exasperation, a frown set in his ruggedly handsome face. “Do I have to remind you what happened the last time you uttered those words?”

Tyler just rolled his eyes in good humor as he opened the bay door to the empty warehouse they were currently standing in front of. Tommy followed him into the darkened building and palmed the light switch.

The lights flickered, a few sparked, and more than one exploded across the warehouse. The pair ducked instinctively, their hands automatically reaching for their weapons.

With a shake of his head, Tommy faced his partner, shoving his gun back into his holster and straightening his six-foot frame so that he was looking down slightly at Tyler, a mere two inches shorter. Both detectives were of average build, neither thin nor overweight, and tanned from the California sun, with Tyler’s tone deeper than Tommy’s. They worked out and trained quite extensively, and they both loved being active, so they were solid but not bulky. And they both knew how to fight—quite impressively, as they had been highly trained Navy SEALs, the elite of the Navy, before they joined the LAPD.

Not quite finished with his tirade, Tommy continued as though they hadn’t been interrupted. “Ryan spent forty minutes chewing my ass out while he stitched me up. Wanted to know how I could have let you pull such an idiotic stunt. I tried explaining that it wasn’t my idea to jump out a glass window and fall twenty feet into a tree, but he was a bit livid at the time because you were unconscious with a head injury. So since he couldn’t yell at you, he took it out on me.”

Tyler’s eyebrow rose fractionally as he listened to his partner’s rant. He remembered Ryan’s expression when he had woken up in the hospital, the relief and concern that had been etched across his lover’s face. It made his stomach flutter, and for a moment, he reconsidered his plan.

But only for a moment.

“Hey, did you *want* to wait and see what the Rottweilers were going to do?” Tyler asked with a knowing grin. “Besides, we got a two-week vacation out of the deal. We had a great time at the Grand Canyon. I didn’t hear any complaints.”

The mischievous tone in his voice made Tommy roll his eyes, and an amused twitch formed at the corner of his mouth. "So what's your brilliant plan this time, partner?" he drawled, knowing when to give in. He hooked his earpiece in his ear as he watched Tyler. The tiny mike wound down to his mouth and would keep him in contact with the backup that was positioned around the perimeter, awaiting Tommy's signal.

"You wait in the rafters. When we make the exchange, bring in backup. Then we'll get the drugs back and go grab pancakes at the IHOP," Tyler explained simply. His blue eyes twinkled, and his smile spoke of trouble.

IT HAD all happened so fast that Tommy hadn't anticipated the move. The arriving men had quickly fanned out, surrounding Tyler in a tight, threatening circle, and the leader had smirked at the blond with an all-knowing grin. Tommy had seen Tyler's expression change the moment he realized his cover was blown.

Demanding backup in a hissed rush, Tommy struggled to climb down from his perch and rush to his best friend's aid, hoping he'd be in time.

Tyler grimaced as he was tackled and taken to the ground the same second he reached for his gun. It was quickly knocked from his grip and sent skidding across the floor.

Swiftly regaining his momentum, Tyler twisted and rolled and sprang to his feet.

Tyler's movements were lightning-quick, and he implemented his entire body against the dozen or so men, quickly turning the fight in his favor.

Men literally fell at his feet as he rapidly took them out with elbows, fists, feet, and even his own head, until a sudden blow to his back sent him to his knees.

Within seconds, he found himself pinned flat on the cement floor. A gun was placed to his head, and the unmistakable sound of the hammer engaging stilled his struggles.

Across the warehouse, Tommy came to an abrupt halt. The sudden image of his partner pinned to the ground with a loaded gun to

his head had stopped him in his tracks. Unwilling to surge forward and surprise the man into pulling the trigger, he tried to process this new turn of events, his mind whirling to come up with a plan.

How had they known Tyler was a cop?

He watched in the shadows as his partner was jerked roughly to his feet.

The leader, a man in a gray suit, looked him over appraisingly. Tyler met the man's stare. Calm defiance emanated from the blond cop's blue eyes. The man in the gray suit obviously didn't like Tyler's insolent gaze, for he drew back a massive fist and nailed him on the jaw. The man then attempted to beat him into submission, landing several hard blows before underestimating Tyler's abilities.

Stepping slightly to his side and twisting, Tyler broke free from the grasp that held him and knocked the gun away from his head. It scattered across the floor. Tyler's foot landed in the middle of the gunman's chest, and he sent him sailing. Then he quickly turned and caught another man behind the kneecap, knocking him off his feet, just as a hard blow landed across his cheek.

Stinging pain blossomed in its wake as a large ring scraped his skin. As his head whipped to the side, he could see his partner land a punch to the temple of another, dropping him to the ground.

A blow to his kidneys and then the back of his head sent Tyler to his knees, but as he went down, he twisted and threw himself to the side. With his feet, he snagged a man around the ankles and jerked him to the ground. Rolling onto his back, he slammed his arm across the man's neck. Then he quickly rocked back and then forward and sprang to his feet.

Tommy had now reached the center of the battle. He aimed his weapon and shouted a warning, but a sudden flurry at his side had him turning. His gun up, he fired and caught one man in the shoulder just as another man slammed into him from the side, taking him to the ground. Fingers clamped tightly around his wrist, and they pounded his hand into the floor until his gun fell from his grip. Another foot kicked it across the floor just as he kned the man on top of him and shoved him off.

Tommy sprang to his feet and slammed a guy across the temple, then twisted the wrist of another who had just thrown a punch at his

head. Another landed a blow against Tommy's cheek, but he didn't let go of the wrist in his grip.

Tyler was there then. He rendered the man unconscious with a single punch just as the doors around them exploded inward.

"I underestimated you, Detective Michaels," a man's voice, steady amongst the chaos, suddenly resounded in their ears. They both turned to see the man in gray quickly retreating. "It won't happen again."

TYLER and Tommy sat quietly on the trunk of a police cruiser watching the scene as officers swarmed, finishing up their investigation. Red and blue oscillating lights lit up the darkness as they sat, lost in thought.

Tyler held an ice pack to his head, his mind processing the events. What had started as a simple drug bust had quickly escalated into something neither of them could quite put their finger on yet.

Tommy looked over at his partner in concern. Whoever the mystery man was, he was gone, had disappeared in the commotion of the failed bust. With him, he had taken half a million dollars' worth of cocaine. Cocaine that Tyler and Tommy had confiscated on their last bust and had "borrowed" for this one.

IA was definitely going to have a field day, and their captain was going to kill them.

ON THE other side of LA, inside a large garage, a man laughed, an odd mixture of amusement and annoyance reverberating from the well-dressed man. He shut the door to the truck he had just exited with a dull *clang* and turned to his remaining men. Concern lit up their eyes, as though they were not sure whether things had gone according to plan, yet none of them were brave enough to open their mouths to speak to their leader.

Their boss smiled at them, and a twinkle of eagerness lit his coal eyes. He calmly smoothed his well-pressed suit with his hands and then walked away in a gait that spoke of superiority.

The four men who had also managed to escape imminent capture along with their leader followed him quietly into the rather expansive mansion and down the dark hall.

Inside his office, the slightly graying, dark-haired man opened a cherry-colored wooden box on his desk and removed a Cuban cigar. He slid it under his nose slowly, inhaling the rich scent with an appreciative sigh. Removing a silver cutter from the pocket of his gray vest, he quickly sliced the end from the cigar and placed it in his mouth, sucking slightly, cherishing the flavor. He turned to face his men. A lighter appeared under his nose, and the corner of his lips twitched up in gratitude.

Inhaling with the air of success, he serenely strode behind his desk and sat down, leaning back in his thickly padded brown leather chair.

“Well, boys,” he began, his voice deep and silky. He crossed his right leg over his left and dusted the black leather of his shoe with his hand before looking back at his retinue. “Tonight did not go exactly as planned, but do not fear, it wasn’t completely without success.” He motioned for his men to sit down in his oversized plush office.

The man took a deep drag on his cigar. His expression thoughtful, he let out the smoky breath into the air and then tapped his cigar into a crystal ashtray before he spoke again.

“I admit I wasn’t ready for the quick action the police took tonight. I had thought we had a better handle on things. However, it is only a slight setback.” His smile was malicious as he looked at his four followers. “We go forward as planned. Have no doubt, Detective Michaels will suffer immensely.”

2

THE early morning sun was shining through the bedroom window, casting its orange glow over the occupants of the large bed in the center of the room. Dr. Ryan Douglas groaned and rolled over, pulling the pillow over his tousled brown hair and covering his face with it. He smiled as he breathed in the scent of his lover. He lifted the pillow slightly and slit an eye open to see Tyler lying on his stomach next to

him, one arm over his head, the other lying alongside his body, palm up.

Ryan put his hand on Tyler's bare back and leaned in closer, nuzzling his nose and mouth into the back of the deeply tanned neck. His fingers played with the soft blond hair behind Tyler's ear as he snuggled into the slightly smaller body. He felt Tyler shift into him and his breathing change as he began to wake up.

"What time'd you get in last night, Ty?" he asked his younger lover softly as Tyler rolled over, stretching as he went.

Ryan frowned. "What happened?" he questioned, eyeing Tyler in concern. His fingers trailed gently down Tyler's bruised and scraped cheek.

Tyler's hand went to the injured cheek, and then he shrugged. "Bad bust," he told him with a reassuring grin.

Ryan frowned again. "You okay?"

"Just great, doc," Tyler teased. "Sorry I didn't wake you when I got in. I think I was asleep before I hit the bed."

"What time *did* you finally get in?" Ryan asked again, his hand resting on Tyler's warm stomach.

"Four, I think."

"You've got to be exhausted. That's the third late night you've had this week."

Tyler nodded. "Yeah, but I gotta get outta here by 7:30," he said as he shifted to see the clock behind Ryan. "Cap'n wants Tommy and me in his office by 8."

Ryan watched Tyler grimace and quickly lifted his eyebrows, knowing his lover all too well.

"What'd you do this time?" he questioned, his smile amused.

Tyler looked at him innocently, an expression he had perfected.

"Why do you always assume I've done something?"

Ryan chuckled. "Because normally you have. So...?" he prompted.

A smile quirked the corner of Tyler's lips, and his eyes twinkled with amusement. "The deal that we were supposed to take down last night got a *little* outta hand."

Ryan lay on his side, his head in his palm, watching Tyler, who was tucked against his body snugly.

“A little? How little?”

Tyler shook his head. “Not even thirty seconds after they came in, the buyer started yelling about me being a cop. We got into a fight, and when our backup arrived, he split and took the drugs with him. Which we had sorta borrowed,” he emphasized with a smirk, “out of lockup.”

“Tyler,” Ryan admonished with a roll of his eyes. “You in trouble?”

“That may be an understatement. But I’ve got a lead. I may know where he is.”

“How’d they know you were a cop?”

Tyler grimaced as he stretched his sore muscles. “I think we were set up.”

“By who?” Ryan’s eyes widened.

Tyler shook his head. “That there is the million-dollar question.”

Ryan’s fingers caressed the bruised cheek again. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” Tyler assured him.

Ryan watched him, his fingers caressing his cheek, and then he leaned over him and captured Tyler’s mouth in a slow, passionate kiss. Tyler moaned and shifted into Ryan, pressing his erection into Ryan’s hip. Smiling, Ryan ran his hand down Tyler’s stomach and over the thick, hard organ, making Tyler groan and arch into him.

Rolling on top of Tyler, Ryan cupped Tyler’s neck passionately as he deepened the kiss and slowly rocked his own hardness against Tyler’s. Tyler’s hands slid up Ryan’s bare sides and down the contours of his back as he leaned into the kiss. The dance that his tongue was doing against Ryan’s had Ryan rock-hard and desperate for all of Tyler.

He slid his free hand down Tyler’s side and shifted slightly so he could cross his belly and slide his fingers slowly down Tyler’s needy organ. Tyler moaned into the kiss and pressed up into Ryan.

His fingers wrapped around Tyler’s rigid cock, and Tyler moaned again, this time more throatily, more needy. Ryan squeezed gently and pulled. Tyler gasped, his eyes rolling up in pleasure. Ryan pulled back to watch his face, stilling his hand once again.

“You’re killing me here, Ryan,” Tyler groaned.

Ryan smiled. He slid his hand around to fondle Tyler’s balls, then slid his fingers along the warm crevice, searching deeper. Tyler arched when Ryan’s fingers brushed over his sensitive opening.

Ryan latched onto a particularly sensitive spot on Tyler’s neck, just below his ear. He suckled, and his tongue teased, and Tyler squirmed, moaning.

His fingers continued their teasing pressure against Tyler’s hole while his other hand fumbled for the lube in the bedside table. He coated his fingers and then tossed the bottle aside, rubbing the slippery jelly onto his own aching member and then onto Tyler, pushing into him gently with his fingers.

Tyler’s gasp was full of lust and need, and it went straight to Ryan’s groin. He forced himself to focus, to hold out longer, while he teased Tyler with his finger. He pushed in and pulled out, sliding deeper with each gentle thrust until he hit Tyler’s prostate and Tyler arched, groaning deeply.

Ryan loved to watch Tyler as they made love, as he teased Tyler into a heated frenzy of lust and made the usually controlled man spin out of control with need and want.

Tyler’s cheeks were red, his eyes closed in pure bliss, and his mouth slightly open. He looked sexy as hell. His head was thrown back, exposing his throat, and Ryan couldn’t help but lean forward and lick slowly along Tyler’s neck, bottom to top. Tyler shivered, as Ryan had known he would, and moaned in sheer pleasure.

With a smile, Ryan rubbed his hand over himself once more and then slowly pushed into Tyler, watching his face.

He leaned down and lightly bit Tyler’s neck, then sucked gently as he thrust into Tyler’s body.

Tyler moaned again, and Ryan thrust faster. He wrapped his hand around Tyler, stroking with each thrust. Tyler gasped again, meeting each movement, and then he threw his head back and cried out as his orgasm rushed over him.

The contracting of Tyler’s body sent Ryan over the edge. He moaned and closed his eyes as he thrust hard one more time. His entire body tingled as his orgasm washed over him in wave after wave. He

collapsed down onto his lover, who wrapped him in his arms and held him.

“SO HOW late you gonna be tonight?” Ryan inquired, taking a sip of his coffee. He was dressed neatly in black dress pants, a dark-red silk dress shirt, and a black silk tie around his neck. His lover was dressed much more casually in faded blue jeans with a white T-shirt tucked into them. Above his shirt, tucked in the black holster at the back of his jeans, was Tyler’s black nine millimeter, which Ryan could see as Tyler opened the refrigerator door.

“I dunno. Guess it depends on whether or not I get busted or my lead is any good. Don’t you work emergency tonight?” Tyler responded, pulling a Mountain Dew from the refrigerator. He turned to look at Ryan, who was leaning with his back against the counter, as he closed the door.

“Yeah, until eleven.”

Tyler nodded in response as he picked up his blue dress shirt, which had been draped over the back of a chair, and slid it on. Ryan sat his mug down and walked with him to the garage door, where he enfolded Tyler in his arms. Tyler molded against him and laid his head against Ryan’s shoulder, his nose in Ryan’s neck. At six feet, Ryan stood just two inches taller than Tyler, and his build was nearly the same as his younger lover’s, with Tyler being a bit more toned and even more tanned. The tall, dark, and handsome type, Ryan had gentle brown eyes and a kind smile.

“Be careful. I don’t want to see you in my emergency room,” Ryan half-joked. Tyler had a way of finding trouble.

Tyler smiled playfully. “Aren’t I always careful?” His eyes were sparkling with mischief.

“Hmph,” Ryan snorted, pulling Tyler in for a slow and seductive kiss, his fingers sifting through the hair behind Tyler’s ear. “Like I said, be careful,” he repeated as they parted. He cupped Tyler’s bruised cheek in his hand and looked into his eyes.

Tyler smiled again, sincerely this time, and then turned toward his car.

Ryan watched him climb into his sleek black Mustang. He always worried about his lover. Being an undercover detective in the narcotics bureau wasn't the safest job, and today he just had an uneasy feeling. He could only hope it would go away.

3

“WHAT the hell happened last night?” Captain Jack Bree growled at the two detectives, who were sitting in his office, watching as he paced in front of them. His voice was low and dangerous, but neither detective look fazed as they met the scowl.

“They knew I was a cop,” Tyler told him calmly. He was used to Jack's outbursts, so they rarely ever bothered him—and Jack was one of Tyler's best friends, even if he did spend the better amount of his time yelling at him.

Jack's brown eyes narrowed in surprise, and he wrinkled his forehead in concern. “How'd they know that?”

Tyler met his partner's gaze, who shrugged, letting Tyler make the call. Tyler sighed. “We're not sure. An old perp,” he suggested, “or we could have a leak.” He didn't like thinking that a fellow officer was responsible for his near-demise the night before, but he had no other answers, and the evidence was too strong to ignore.

Tommy nodded his agreement.

“A leak?” their captain repeated.

Tyler splayed his fingers as if to say, *I don't know, could be*. “I hope not, but I've got a pretty bad feeling about this. Like we've only just seen the beginning.”

“I sure hope you're wrong, Detective,” Jack said as he sighed and rubbed his head wearily. “But you usually never are.” He leaned back against his desk, and his tone changed to concern. “Look, you'd better find those drugs, and find them fast. Internal Affairs is already sniffing around, and they're looking to drill you. They don't know the drugs are missing yet, so I'd be quick about it.”

“Yes, sir,” Tyler and Tommy agreed as they stood.

Jack pushed himself off his desk. "Be careful," he warned them both. Just a few years older than Tommy, and nearly the same height, the African-American captain's eyes were concerned as he regarded his two best friends.

They both nodded, fully understanding how complicated the situation had just gotten.

"Now what?" Tommy turned to his partner as they exited the office and headed for the elevator.

Tyler grinned.

Tommy groaned; he knew that look all too well. It always boded trouble.

"I have a lead."

"What'd you do?" Tommy eyed Tyler suspiciously as they stepped onto the elevator. It was just like Tyler to come across information a bit illegally and then spring it on Tommy later.

"I questioned a suspect."

"We already questioned the suspects together," Tommy pointed out.

"I, uh, re-questioned one." Tyler grinned.

"Mmm-hmm, and how'd we do that?" Tommy was looking at him skeptically.

Tyler gave him his best innocent look as they stepped off the elevator into the parking garage. "I just convinced him that he had some information that I wanted and that it would be in his best interests to tell me."

Tommy rolled his eyes knowingly. "Yeah, you and your nine convinced him."

Tyler just laughed.

Tommy shook his head, laughing too. "So where we headed?"

"Marty, that's the suspect, says that the buyer's name is Jackson. Harry Jackson."

Tommy tipped his head slightly with a frown, his expression contemplative. "Jackson? Why's that name sound familiar?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought too." Tyler shrugged it off.

"You get anything else?"

“Just an address.”

“Anybody ever tell you you’re adorable when you play innocent?” Tommy teased as he opened the passenger side door of the Mustang. His smile lit his green eyes as he looked at his partner over the top of the car.

“Yeah, Ryan tells me that all the time,” Tyler winked at him with a conspiratorial air. “And it usually leads to sex.”

Tommy laughed.

They stopped and picked up lunch for the stakeout and then drove to the address that Marty had provided Tyler. Tommy whistled at the expansive property that loomed in front of them.

“I’m in the wrong business,” Tyler muttered.

Tommy laughed at that. “According to IA, you’re not.”

Tyler smirked. “They’re just mad ’cause they can’t come up with a good enough reason to throw me off the force.”

“Well, if they followed you around for a day, they’d have their reason in no time,” Tommy teased.

Tyler responded by extending his middle finger.

4

THE sun had just begun its descent on the distant horizon when Tommy turned to his partner.

“So what’s your plan?” he asked, taking his eyes off the house.

“I thought we’d go knock on the door and ask if Jackson wants to play.” Tyler turned his head from the binoculars to grin at his partner.

Tommy shook his head at Tyler’s perfect childish expression. “I’m calling for backup,” he declared, reaching for the mike.

“You do that,” Tyler agreed, nodding. “Stay here and wait. I’ll be back.”

Halfway out of the car, Tommy latched onto his wrist.

“Tyler, get back here. You can’t go in there alone. I know how good you are, but you have no idea what you’re getting into. Besides,

you don't even have a warrant." Tommy tried to argue with his partner, although he didn't know why he bothered. Arguing with Tyler was like arguing with a brick wall, and even a brick wall caved more often than his partner.

"Tommy, I have to get those drugs back or my ass is going to end up in jail," Tyler replied seriously, meeting his friend's eyes. "And yours is going to be sitting right next to mine. You call in backup and get a warrant. I'll be careful." As he got out of the car, he called over his shoulder, "You may want to bring in SWAT. Just in case."

Tommy rubbed his head as he watched Tyler go around to the back of the house. "Of all the harebrained ideas," he muttered to himself. "Why can't he wait for backup? He never waits for backup."

Tommy relayed his position to headquarters, requested an expedited search warrant, and listened to the dispatch as he waited. So far, everything seemed quiet. He just hoped Tyler wouldn't get into too much trouble before backup arrived.

He shook his head. Who was he kidding? This was Tyler.

TYLER climbed silently into a window on the lower level of the house, gun drawn and resting in his left hand. He was careful to keep to the shadows to avoid any security cameras.

He found the security office fairly quickly. It was guarded by one lone man, slouching lazily in his chair.

Tyler slid in behind him quietly and quickly rendered him unconscious. He then securely tied his hands and feet with zip ties, put duct tape over his mouth, and stuffed him into a closet where he wouldn't be noticed for a while. Then he scanned the screens and found what he was looking for: an expensively decorated office.

He quickly disabled the camera to the office and the hallway in between and silently crept to the room.

After checking to be sure it wasn't occupied, he made his way inside. It only took him a moment to locate the safe behind an oversized painting of a black panther. He quickly skimmed the edges of the painting with his fingers, searching for a trip wire, which he found and deactivated within seconds.

Carefully lifting the painting from the wall, he placed it on the floor and then set about cracking the safe. His eyes gleamed as the last number clicked and the door swung open.

The large office safe was filled with folders and large amounts of cash. He flipped through the folders, pausing when he got to a listing for a warehouse. He scanned the contents.

Footsteps down the hall made him look up sharply. Shoving the folders back into the safe, he pushed the thick door closed and re-hung the painting. Then he moved silently to the doorway, standing just out of sight.

In mere moments, Harry Jackson stepped through the door, followed by two of his heavily armed men.

As Jackson turned and caught sight of him, Tyler grinned smartly. "Hello, Harry." He had his nine millimeter out, held steadily in his left hand and aimed directly between the other man's eyes.

"Detective Michaels." Jackson actually looked impressed. "So you figured out who I am?"

"Nah, your boy Marty told me. Not very loyal goons, are they, Jackson?"

Jackson frowned. "Apparently not."

Tyler tipped his head slightly and asked the question weighing foremost on his mind. "How'd you know I was a cop?"

Jackson quirked an eyebrow, his expression intrigued, then thoughtful, and then he smiled, his eyes practically glowing with glee. "Aww, feeling a bit betrayed, there, Michaels? Would it make you feel better if I told you exactly who ratted you out?" He smiled viciously. "Well, I'm going to let you die wondering who it was you thought you could trust, but who was willing to sell you out for the right price. Was it your captain? Your partner? Or how 'bout that pretty brunette three desks down? Shame you'll never find out." His voice was grating and impudent. Tyler glared, his eyes full of hostile rage.

He heard the footsteps a moment before the men entered the room. He dropped to the floor just as the gunfire erupted.

Wood chips splintered up along the floorboards as he rolled. He returned fire, causing men to scatter and retreat from the room briefly. Sliding to his knees, he dove behind the desk, hoping his backup would arrive soon.

Suddenly, arms were grabbing him. His gun arm was grabbed tightly and yanked behind his back, and then he was lifted and thrown face-first onto the desk. His gun was removed none too gently from his hand, and he was lifted once again. He struggled as he was shoved into the wall, and just as he broke an arm free from his captors, a gun came up under his chin.

From his side, Jackson smiled triumphantly at his prey.

"I must admit, it took real balls to come in here by yourself."

Tyler grinned impishly. "Gee, thanks, Harry. Comin' from you, that means a lot." He grunted as a fist slammed into his stomach. The air rushed from his lungs.

One punch after another followed. The constant blows made him dizzy, and sound and color all seemed to swirl around him. Suddenly, stars exploded behind his eyelids, and Tyler's body sagged between the two men holding him.

A sudden blow to his cheek made his head snap back. He tasted the blood. Through his haze, he caught a gleam. He sluggishly turned his head to see Jackson unsheathing a knife and crossing the distance to stand in front of him.

His first thought was that Ryan wasn't going to be happy.

5

JACKSON put the tip of the blade to Tyler's neck, his eyes gleaming dangerously. Tyler didn't flinch as the knife bit into him slightly, refusing to give the other man the satisfaction of seeing him crack under his torment. It stung more than anything, and the trickle of blood was warm as it slid down his throat.

Jackson met his stony glare. "How long can you suffer without screaming?" he inquired, curious.

Without batting an eye, Tyler hooked Jackson's ankle with his foot and pulled sharply, dropping him to the floor. The men sprang, but Tyler was ready.

As he fought, he heard the front door of the house being kicked in and the yell of the police as they arrived.

Tyler's legs were swept out from under him at the same second a man tackled him from the side. They rolled him to his back while someone kicked him sharply in the side. Pain flared as the booted toe connected with his already bruised ribs. His arms were pulled above his head.

Flat on his back, Tyler struggled, refusing to cooperate in their attempts to kill him. Several more men jumped in.

Exploding pain erupted as the knife came down against his unprotected stomach, piercing layers of skin and muscle. Agonizing waves suddenly overwhelmed him. He could hear the gunfire being exchanged above his head as the room swam before his eyes. Color and sound were muffled, and the floor seemed to pitch. He groaned as a wave of nausea threatened to overtake him.

He sucked in as much air as he could, let it out slowly, and focused. Adrenaline rushed through him, and he kicked the man with the knife hard, in the chest.

The man toppled back, ripping the knife from Tyler's stomach as he went.

Tyler groaned, clenching his eyes tightly as the knife was torn from his body, bringing a new form of agony. He rolled to his knees, forcing himself to focus.

Taking several breaths, he forced himself to move. He grabbed his gun from the floor nearby just as one of Jackson's men was taking aim.

He threw himself out of the way at the same second several bullets pierced the wooden floor where he had been kneeling. From where he lay on his side, he fired three rapid shots, nipple, nipple, belly, his instincts from years of training taking over. Entranced, he watched the man fall, the blood loss and the adrenaline rush causing a natural high.

His head jerked up at the sound of breaking glass. He looked just in time to see Jackson jumping through a window, taking an armload of paperwork with him.

Tyler clambered to his feet and dove through the shattered glass after him.

Several steps ahead of him, Jackson jumped into a car and fired it up. He slammed into and past the police cruisers that now filled the driveway. He swung out onto the highway, and the police took pursuit.

Tyler swore under his breath. He heard footsteps running toward him from behind, and he turned, gun aimed, teetering only slightly.

“Whoa, partner, it’s me. Put it down,” Tommy urged softly. He had his hands raised slightly in a calming gesture.

Tyler lowered his weapon.

“Y’okay?” Tommy asked, getting closer to Tyler. He frowned. Blood streaked down Tyler’s face and neck, and his shirt was torn and blood-soaked.

Tyler nodded weakly but swayed sharply on his feet.

Tommy grabbed him. He eyed the blood staining Tyler’s shirt, growing with each breath.

“Let’s get you to the hospital,” his said anxiously. He held his partner upright, supporting him with his own body.

“We have to go after Jackson,” Tyler objected stubbornly. He waved off the paramedics that surrounded them. They looked to Tommy for help.

Tommy put his hand tightly over the free-flowing wound, trying to staunch the flow of blood, which slid through his fingers effortlessly as he regarded his partner wearily.

He glanced down in worry, the blood warm and sticky against his hand. He looked back at his partner, his eyes pleading for Tyler to understand. “Don’t do this to me, Ty. You won’t make it if we chase after Jackson; you’re bleeding way too hard. Let me take you to get stitched up, and then we’ll go from there.”

Finally, Tyler nodded. He looked at his watch. It wasn’t even seven.

“Ryan’s going to kill me,” he moaned through the haze of pain.

6

THE emergency room was slow. Ryan was standing near the nurses’ station, talking to his best friend, Dalton Parks, a handsome, dark-haired, brown-eyed trauma surgeon who stood eye level with Ryan and shared the same birth year. Dalton was older by only a few months. They’d been friends since medical school and were just as inseparable

as Tommy and Tyler. When Ryan and Tyler had gotten together, the four men had become fast friends. Dalton adored Tyler and was just as protective of him as Ryan and Tommy were. Tyler often rolled his eyes at the overprotective streaks in the three older men in his life, but always with a smile.

A nurse came back to the station and looked at the doctors anxiously.

“Hey, Ryan. Have you heard from Tyler?”

Ryan shook his head with a slight frown. “Not lately. Why?”

She frowned. “Because I just heard that a drug bust went bad,” she told him. “Half the LAPD responded. I wondered if he was okay.”

“What happened?” Ryan asked, his heart rate increasing.

She shook her head. “Right now all they’re saying is that two undercovers were at a residence to take down a dealer. Shots were fired and backup was immediately dispatched. They’re reporting a lot of people down. Paramedics are on the scene now.”

Ryan and Dalton exchanged a worried look.

“Who’s down, dealers or police?” Ryan asked, fear gnawing at him. Trouble seemed to follow his lover almost magnetically.

She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ll go monitor dispatch. I’ll let you know if I hear anything and when the paramedics start to roll.”

Ryan nodded, and she hurried down the hall.

Dalton looked at him.

“You think it was Tyler?” he asked, his voice soft and worried.

Ryan nodded, running a hand over his face. “Just a couple of hours ago he told me they were staking out a residence, and we both know how he gets.”

Dalton nodded, his fear rising. He knew exactly how Tyler could get.

With a sigh, Ryan headed for the waiting room to grab some coffee out of the vending machine before the rush of ambulances swamped them. The coffeepot in the lounge had broken earlier that evening, leaving the staff to suffer the inadequacies of vending machine coffee.

Behind him, he heard the doors to the ER slide open, and he turned instinctively to look. He closed his eyes briefly, distress washing

over him. His stomach fluttered, and the blood in his veins felt as though it had suddenly turned to ice.

Tommy was practically holding Tyler upright, his hand protectively over Tyler's stomach. Tommy's hand was red with blood, and Tyler's once-white T-shirt was thoroughly soaked in crimson. Through the blood streaking down Tyler's face and neck, Ryan could see that he was extremely pale. His eyes were barely open.

Ryan ran over to them and put his arm around Tyler's waist, pulling Tyler's arm around his neck and helping to support his unsteady lover. Tyler's head wobbled once and then fell over onto his shoulder. Ryan glanced at him in concern before looking at Tommy.

"What happened?"

"I don't know," Tommy answered. "I found him like this. But he was lucid then, and it was all I could do to convince him to come in. He wouldn't get in an ambulance. He went downhill halfway here."

Ryan sighed as they carried him through triage, where doctors and nurses swarmed them.

"Put him in trauma two," the triage nurse called, gathering her supplies and rushing after the assembling trauma team.

In the critical care room, Ryan lowered Tyler to the bed. He held him in a sitting position while he reached around to the back of Tyler's jeans for the gun that he knew would be there. He heard Dalton calling out instructions.

He pulled the gun out and handed it to Tommy, who was standing just behind him with large, frightened eyes. A nurse tried to push him from the room, but Tommy looked at him in desperation.

"He can stay," Ryan told her quietly as he and Dalton gently laid Tyler on the bed. Tyler groaned in pain with the movement.

"Come on, Tyler, open your eyes, tell me what happened," Ryan urged as he placed an oxygen mask over Tyler's nose and mouth and turned the oxygen on at the wall.

Tyler looked up at Ryan with glassy blue eyes, his skin deathly pale and clammy.

Ryan swore under his breath, knowing he was succumbing to shock, and ordered lines started while he cut off Tyler's shirt. Across from him, Dalton was assessing Tyler's breathing, so Ryan moved ahead to circulation as he called off Tyler's allergies and blood type to

the triage nurse beside him, who nodded as she wrote and then rushed from the room.

He heard Tyler groan in pain, and he glanced at Dalton, who was expertly running his hands down Tyler's chest.

"I think he broke some ribs," Dalton told Ryan. "Let's get some films of his chest," Dalton called over his shoulder.

Ryan put his fingers in the wound to examine it. Tyler squirmed beneath him, but his movements were becoming weaker. Ryan's concern mounted.

"He's been stabbed," he finally conveyed, surprised. He glanced back at Tommy, the surprise clear on his face as well. They had all assumed he'd been shot.

While he examined the wound, the room swarmed with activity. Dalton was listening to Tyler's heart and lungs, and beside him, one nurse was attempting to start an IV, while another was attaching leads to Tyler's chest. Next to Ryan, another nurse was attaching Ident-A-Bands, one to Tyler's wrist and the other to his ankle, as they required in all traumas.

As Ryan pulled his hands away, someone reached in and put direct pressure on Tyler's belly. Ryan swiveled the red allergy alert band now attached to Tyler's wrist. He quickly looked it over, making sure they hadn't missed any of his allergies.

A nurse beside Ryan was attempting to start a second IV. She was shaking her head and muttering. A glance to the other side of Tyler answered Ryan's unasked question. So far neither had been successful in starting an IV. Tyler's veins were normally difficult, but now he was probably hypovolemic as well.

Ryan picked up Tyler's hand and squeezed the end of his first finger, watching for a capillary refill. It was slow. His fingers went to Tyler's neck to count his pulse. He then glanced at the monitors, then at the nurses attempting to start lines.

Ryan shook his head, counting off the minutes in his head that Tyler had gone without fluids while he lost more than he could afford.

"We need to do a cutdown," he finally decided.

Sterile drapes were placed over Tyler's upper body, leaving a small exposed area over his upper right arm, which was turned palm-up

to expose his inner elbow. The skin was cleaned and a local anesthetic injected.

Ryan then made an incision over a vein. After he exposed it, he passed a cannula through the vein, sutured it in place, and then sutured the skin closed.

“Start him on a rapid infusion of thirty milliliter Ringer’s,” Ryan instructed. “When you can get a vein on the other side, we need another fourteen gauge IV started, CBCs, and four liters warm saline. And someone check the rare blood registry.”

He put his stethoscope in his ears and listened to Tyler’s heart and lungs again while Dalton palpated his stomach. Swinging his stethoscope around his neck, Ryan pulled each of Tyler’s eyelids open and waved his penlight over his pupils, gauging his reaction.

Across from him, Debbie uttered a joyous exclamation. She had finally been able to establish a second line.

With the line running wide open, Tyler’s blood pressure began to climb, and his vitals began to stabilize. Ryan breathed a quick sigh of relief as they started to run a battery of tests.

After they were positive there were no serious internal injuries or nerve damage, they closed the wound in the ER and then transferred Tyler to a room.

Finally letting his emotions catch up to him, Ryan held Tyler’s hand in his while Tyler slept. He pressed his forehead against their joined hands and closed his eyes. A silent tear slipped down his cheek.

It was in this same hospital that Tyler and Ryan’s relationship had begun, at an even more tumultuous pace than they had just experienced.

Their meeting four years ago had been fast-paced and frightening, as a twenty-nine-year-old Tyler had been rushed into Ryan’s emergency room with a gunshot wound to the chest. Ryan hadn’t been sure that the young, blond cop would survive. It was the first time that Tyler had surprised and amazed him.

The strikingly handsome man had almost immediately captured the then thirty-four-year-old trauma surgeon’s attention, and Ryan had found himself unable to shake the man from his thoughts. Throughout Tyler’s recovery, he had played a much bigger role than he normally did with his patients, feeling drawn to Tyler and happy in his presence. He couldn’t help but want to see where the next step would lead him.

He wasn't supposed to fall in love with his patients, but he couldn't control love. That control belonged to a more powerful source.

After Tyler had been discharged, Ryan caught his mind wandering to the handsome blond with the brilliant blue eyes that changed colors with his moods. He was happy when they met again while having drinks with their friends a short time later. They'd exchanged phone numbers that evening, and the very next day, Ryan had invited Tyler to a hockey game, the blond's favorite sport—which, Ryan found out a few months later, Tyler played as well as the pros did.

The sparks flew that night, and Tyler, unable to deny the attraction anymore, admitted to Ryan that he was bisexual, even though with his career and background, it had been a well-kept secret.

7

SOMETIME during the hours after midnight, hours before the sun considered coming up, Ryan stood leaning against the wall in Tyler's room next to Tommy, his eyes on his lover.

Tyler was gingerly sitting on the bed, slowly pulling on the shirt Tommy had gotten out of the Mustang. The two of them always carried spare clothes.

Ryan had his arms crossed against his chest, watching Tyler with disapproving eyes, while Tyler was doing his best to avoid his glare as he buttoned his shirt.

The door opened, and Ryan turned his head. He heard Tyler groan and knew his lover was about to catch hell, as Jack had been pacing the hall the last few hours, alternating between worry and outrage at Tyler's stunt.

"What the hell happened, Detective?" Jack barked at his subordinate, who was attempting to put on his shoes.

Dalton, who had followed Jack into the room, exchanged an amused glance with Ryan.

Bree didn't give Tyler a chance to respond as he continued his rant. "Last I heard, you and Carmikael were following up a simple lead.

Next thing I know, SWAT's being called and Carmikael is calling for an expedited search warrant, which can only mean one thing: you were somewhere you shouldn't be. Not long after that, I get an officer-down call. The news that you are bleeding heavily, still pursuing your missing buyer, is being bounced around the scene faster than a rubber ball. I hear paramedics are trying to pin you down, but you're refusing treatment, and that your partner finally dragged your ass to the hospital, where I get the news that you're minutes away from bleeding to death. And before you even open your mouth to try and deny that," Jack interrupted Tyler as he moved to respond, "I've already heard how close you came to buying it. Again. So enlighten me, Michaels, what the hell possessed you to go in there alone? Without a freaking search warrant!?"

"You wanted me to wait for a judge to decide it was necessary?" Tyler defended.

Jack shook his head in irritation; this was an old argument between them. "You went into the house of a man who already tried to kill you once. By yourself!" he emphasized loudly.

Tyler had the good grace to look uncomfortable. Ryan watched him for an answer, curious himself as to Tyler's response.

"What else was I supposed to do? If IA figures out those drugs are gone and that it was an inside job, I'm going to end up in jail, and you know it."

Ryan's eyes narrowed.

Jack's sigh was exasperated. "You could have been killed. From what I hear, you were seconds away from being completely gutted. Had you not kicked that guy off you...."

Ryan's eyes were on Tyler, who didn't respond.

"Did you find anything?" Jack questioned.

Tyler nodded. "I think I know where the drugs are."

Jack's eyes lit up. "Where? Give me the address, and I'll send someone over."

Tyler shook his head stubbornly.

"You're not going to tell me?" Jack was incredulous.

Tyler shook his head.

“Why the hell not?” Most people backed off when the captain bellowed, but not Tyler. Ryan ran a weary hand over his face as he contemplated his lover.

“Because first of all, this is my mess, and I’m not leaving it to someone else to clean up. Especially not when IA’s just looking for a reason to bust my ass. Second, we both figured there was a leak before this happened. Jackson confirmed it tonight. I know I’m not the leak, so I’ll go find the drugs.”

“Michaels, you are in no condition to do that. Is he, Ryan?” Jack stole a glance at Ryan, one that clearly said, “Help me.”

Ryan shook his head. “He’s leaving against my advice.”

Jack looked at Tyler, who glared at Ryan. Ryan just shrugged.

“Do you trust anybody else to clean this up?” Tyler challenged Jack, finally tearing his eyes away from Ryan to meet his captain’s frustrated glare.

Jack sighed in surrender. “No,” he admitted. He ran his hand through his black hair wearily. “I need your statement,” he told him with a sigh as he watched Tommy hand his partner his gun. “How many rounds did you fire?”

“Eight,” Tyler answered. He slid the clip out of his gun and looked at his partner, who tossed him a new one. Tyler caught it and slapped it into place. He racked the top back, loading a round into the chamber, made sure the safety was on, and then stuck the gun in the holster at the back of his jeans. Tommy handed Tyler a box of rounds.

“Did you hit eight people?” Jack asked while Tyler reloaded his spare clip.

Ryan watched the entire process, a practice he’d seen a thousand times but which always managed to make his stomach tighten with the reality of Tyler’s job.

Tyler shook his head. “I hit three guns, which shattered on impact. Two of the guys they were attached to dove from the room. The third reached for a second weapon, and I kneecapped him. He dragged himself into the hall, and when he popped his head back in, I drove my fifth shot into the wall next to his head.”

“And the last three?”

Tyler rubbed the back of his neck. “One guy. I hit him square. I doubt he made it,” he said tiredly.

Jack nodded with a sigh. "I'll get started on my report. I expect yours on my desk by morning, and then I'm sure Ryan will put you on medical leave. I'll try to head off IA," Jack said with a sigh. "But don't count on it."

Tyler nodded. "Thanks, Jack," he said quietly.

"Tyler, I still don't think this is a good idea," Jack started, but then he shook his head with a sigh, knowing when to give up, especially when Tyler had the look in his eyes that he did now. "I want you to call in every hour. You find the drugs, you call for backup. You are *not* to move in without backup, is that understood?" Jack asked sternly, his eyes focused firmly on the only detective that he allowed this kind of leeway.

"Yes, sir," Tyler agreed a little too quickly.

"Michaels, I mean it," Jack threatened. "You disobey a direct order, and I'll bust you myself. Got it?"

Tyler sighed, knowing when he was defeated. "Yes, sir."

Ryan shook his head. "Tyler, you are in no shape to be out chasing drug dealers. You shouldn't even be leaving the hospital," he argued.

Tyler looked at Ryan. "I have to do this. I promise I'll be careful."

Ryan shook his head with a sigh. Tyler leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

"Thanks, Ryan," he told him quietly.

Ryan nodded and watched as they left. He hoped things would not get worse than they already were, and as he exchanged a look with Dalton and Jack, he could read the same thought in their expressions.

8

"READY?" Tyler asked Tommy, looking over at him.

Tommy nodded. "Remember, in and out. We find the drugs, we call in backup. Got it?" Tommy leveled his gaze, his hand around Tyler's wrist.

"Yeah, sure, no problem." Tyler grinned as he pulled out his gun.

Tommy shook his head as he readied his own weapon. Being Tyler's partner was a bit like jumping out of an airplane. A thrill a minute, but you spent the whole time praying your chute would open.

Tyler and Tommy slowly made their way over to a warehouse in a run-down, nearly desolate part of the warehouse district. They climbed atop some empty crates and peered in a darkened window.

It only took a minute for Tyler to bypass the alarm system wiring the window and jimmy the lock. Tommy quietly slid the window open. They both climbed through and slipped into the darkened warehouse.

A quick look around produced a crowbar, which Tommy used to crack open the nearest crate. He let out a low whistle at the white bags that filled the inside.

Tyler opened his knife and slit open the top of a bag. He dipped his finger into the white powder and tasted the drug on his finger. He smiled at his partner.

"Cocaine."

Tommy grinned in response. "Let's go," he whispered as he took Tyler's arm.

Too tired and in too much pain to argue, Tyler nodded.

Tommy guided Tyler to the car and called in their location. Moments later, they watched in dread as people ran from the warehouse, surrounding the car, guns drawn.

"We could be in trouble," Tyler commented dryly, sparing his partner a sidelong glance.

Tommy rolled his eyes.

At the motioning of the men with the Uzis, they climbed out of the car. Jackson approached them angrily, his strides quick. He watched Tyler for a long, silent minute, a malevolent glint in his eye, while his men roughly grabbed them, stripped them of their guns, and searched them efficiently, removing their backup pieces as well.

"You know, Michaels, you're really beginning to piss me off," Jackson growled, his voice low and reverberating with annoyance.

"It took this long? You must be slow, or else I'm slipping, because normally by now people are *really* pissed off," Tyler goaded him.

Tommy smirked and nodded. "It's true, they are."

Jackson studied them both and then rested his eyes on Tyler, who sighed slightly, knowing what was coming. His expression sinister, Jackson punched Tyler hard in the stomach.

Tyler gasped, the pain incredible. He felt the burning agony tear through him as the wound was struck and the stitches pulled taut. He sagged forward and would have fallen if Jackson's men hadn't been holding him on either side.

Fear and anger coursing through him, Tommy swore and lunged toward Jackson. Hands grabbed him from all sides, pulling him back and away. He struggled and fought against the fists punching and hitting him. He could hear Jackson laugh, see the smirk on his face while he struggled against the men holding him. A string of obscenities left his mouth as he fought the men now pinning him.

Jackson watched Tommy with a smirk, enjoying his reaction, before he returned his gaze to Tyler, still being held captive between two of his men.

"How's the stomach, Michaels?" he asked him casually before he drove his fist once more into the aching muscle. He didn't hold anything back.

The agony that flared through Tyler was completely overwhelming, and darkness swarmed his peripheral vision. His knees gave out, leaving the men on either side of him to support his full weight. Another blow fell against the burning hot pain, and he felt his eyes roll back, on the verge of unconsciousness.

He felt a hand tangle in his hair, and he opened his eyes sluggishly, only to see a fist swinging toward his face.

Tommy was on his stomach now, with a knee planted firmly in his back, another at the nape of his neck. His arms were twisted painfully behind his back, and a gun was pressed tightly to his temple. Hot anger rushed through him, and he vowed that Jackson would pay. He watched the final blow connect with Tyler's face, snapping his head back with the force of it.

"Tyler," he groaned quietly. Relief flooded through him as he heard the sirens cutting the still night air in the distance.

Jackson looked disappointed as he clicked his tongue at Tyler, whose head lolled lifelessly before him. He turned to Tommy.

“Looks like your boys are quicker than I pegged them for. When Michaels comes to, be sure to tell him that we *will* continue this later. He and I have unfinished business, so be certain he and I will meet again.”

His men released them, and Tyler collapsed to the ground, unmoving.

Before walking away, a man kicked Tommy viciously in the side. Tommy groaned, his eyes on Tyler.

His mind whirled at Jackson’s words.

Tommy pushed himself to his knees and crawled the distance between them, his eyes never leaving the still form of his best friend. Seconds later, police vehicles surrounded the warehouse and gunshots were exchanged.

“Tyler, you okay?” Tommy leaned over Tyler, checking the pulse in his neck. He heard the footsteps running toward him and the yells of “officer down” as they rang through the darkness, and others gathered in fear.

Tyler shifted, then moaned, grasping his stomach. Tommy laid his hand on his back, rubbing soothingly as his partner writhed. He waited with his heart in his throat until he could tell the pain was beginning to back down and Tyler breathed a little easier.

“You okay?” Tommy asked again as he helped Tyler into a sitting position.

Tyler managed a half-smile at his worried partner. He didn’t trust himself to speak just yet. He felt cold, clammy, and dizzy, and he swallowed down the nausea that was overwhelming him.

Tommy could see the pain Tyler was trying to mask as he helped him to his feet and handed him his guns. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jack approaching them in the distance.

Paramedics swarmed them, but Tyler waved them off stubbornly, assuring them that he was just winded but not any more injured than before. Tommy sighed. He’d argue with his partner later. They turned to meet their captain. Tyler leaned on him heavily, Tommy’s arm around his waist for support.

“Can you identify Jackson for us?” Jack asked them, looking Tyler up and down, concerned.

Tyler and Tommy nodded and followed Jack to where he already had the suspects handcuffed. Helicopters flew overhead, illuminating the dark sky with spotlights.

Tyler swore under his breath. "He's not here."

"What do you mean, he's not here?" Jack was looking at him with wide, disbelieving eyes.

"He's not here," Tyler repeated, slower this time, aggravated they'd missed him again.

Jack muttered under his breath and then finally sighed, running his hand over his face. "I want you both in my office later today to fill out your reports and to debrief. Then, Michaels, you're off for the next two weeks. Doctor's orders."

"Two weeks?" Tyler complained.

Jack nodded. "And then you're pulling desk duty until Ryan clears you."

Tyler groaned. Jack gripped the back of his neck fondly and then gestured his dismissal.

At the car, Tommy turned to Tyler. It was then that he noticed the blood beginning to stain Tyler's shirt.

"Aw, damn, you're bleeding again." He reached for the hem of Tyler's shirt and yanked it up. The blood-soaked gauze dangled from Tyler's stomach, and Tommy ripped it away. He couldn't see past the blood. "You okay?" Tommy looked him over critically, worry etching his handsome features.

Tyler nodded and let Tommy help him into the Mustang. With another worried glance, Tommy pulled out onto the road and then looked back over at Tyler, who had his head back and his eyes closed. Tommy reached over and felt for his pulse.

"I'm alive," Tyler mumbled sleepily. Tommy ignored him and continued to count the pulse beating in the wrist beneath his fingers.

"You want to go back to the hospital?" Tyler's pulse seemed fast.

Tyler shook his head. "I'll be fine. I just need sleep."

"And more stitches," Tommy added. "Where's Ryan?" he questioned, not convinced at his partner's half-hearted assurance and worried about the blood that was slowly staining Tyler's hand, which he held protectively over the knife wound.

Tyler sighed. "Home, I'm sure. What time is it?" he asked with sudden confusion.

"Five."

"Yeah, he's home." Tyler glanced over at his partner. "Don't tell him," he pleaded.

"Oh, I think he's gonna notice."

Tyler groaned and Tommy grinned.

"That's what you get for dating a doctor."

RYAN sat on the couch, looking at the clock on the wall. He couldn't help but worry about Tyler; he really wasn't in any condition to be out chasing leads. Yes, he understood the need, but it didn't stop the worry. He needed his lover home where he could take care of him. Where he could make sure he wasn't doing anything counterproductive.

He turned the police scanner on with a sigh. He listened for a while as he flipped through the channels on the TV, not really seeing anything.

"Undercover officers on scene. Caution advised," came the female dispatcher's voice. Ryan's head swiveled to the scanner.

"Unit seven en route."

"Please be advised, SWAT has been notified."

"Unit three en route."

The list continued to grow as the radio crackled with the volley of responses and dispatch calling units asking them for updates on their progress.

"Michaels and Carmikael have been forced from their vehicle," came another voice. Ryan felt his stomach flop as he listened to the scanner. Dispatch was trying now to raise Tyler and Tommy.

"Twenty William fifty-six, please respond." She paused. *"Detective Michaels, what's your twenty?"* Another pause. *"Detective Carmikael, please respond."*

Another voice broke through now, panicked. *"Shots fired! I repeat, shots fired!"* A long pause followed. *"Officer down! Requesting paramedics!"* he demanded.

“Unit four, paramedics en route,” dispatch responded.

Ryan put his head in his hands and groaned, rubbing his scalp.

“Situation under control. Suspects in custody,” Ryan finally heard. Ryan continued to hold his head in his hands, hoping that Tyler and Tommy were okay. He waited for Tyler to come home or the phone to ring.

9

PULLING into the driveway, Tommy turned off the engine. He turned to his partner and affectionately patted his leg.

“Ready?”

Tyler nodded and opened his door. Tommy ran around to help him. They both looked up as the door to the house opened and Ryan stepped out onto the porch, concern on his face.

Ryan saw Tyler’s face pale as Tommy eased him from the car. He hurried down the sidewalk and pulled Tyler into his arms. Relief flooded his body as he held him.

“You okay?” he asked, not relinquishing his hold. He needed the contact, the reassurance that Tyler was still with him.

“I’m fine,” Tyler told him, relaxing in Ryan’s arms. He was exhausted and in serious pain and on the verge of collapse. He let Ryan hold the majority of his weight.

Ryan pulled back so that he could see Tyler, his arms wrapped securely around his waist to keep him upright. The pain and exhaustion were palpable, his features tight as he tried to control it, and fresh blood streamed down the side of his face.

Ryan shook his head ever so slightly and helped Tyler to the house. Tommy followed, shutting the door behind them.

Ryan lowered Tyler to the couch, and it was then that he noticed the blood.

He swore under his breath and put his hand under Tyler’s shirt, over the wound in his stomach. Blood leaked steadily through his fingers.

“Get me the gauze,” he instructed Tommy as he pulled the recliner lever on the couch and laid Tyler back slightly, his hand never leaving Tyler’s stomach.

Tommy nodded, disappearing, and came back moments later with thick handfuls of gauze, which Ryan took with a soft “Thanks” and pressed tightly against the wound in Tyler’s belly.

Tyler moaned and tried to maneuver away, but Ryan didn’t relinquish pressure.

“What happened?” he turned to Tommy, pressing hard against Tyler’s stomach.

“We found our drugs, but someone tipped off Jackson, and his boys had Uzis. He got in several hard blows against the knife wound before our backup arrived.”

“Did you catch him?”

Tommy slowly shook his head.

Ryan looked at Tyler, who had his head back and his eyes closed. He pressed his fingers to Tyler’s wrist to count his pulse, while his other hand maintained pressure on Tyler’s stomach.

“He going to be okay?” Tommy asked quietly, worry making his voice tight.

Ryan nodded. “Go ahead and go home. Sara’s probably worried sick if she was listening to the scanner,” Ryan told him. He lifted Tyler’s shirt and pulled the gauze away. He sighed. At least half of the stitches had been torn, leaving a gaping hole into Tyler’s stomach.

“Why? What’d it say?” Tyler opened his eyes, his gaze on Ryan.

Ryan blinked and glanced up at Tyler, whose face was chalky and drawn. He was in significant pain, and that made Ryan’s heart ache.

“What?”

“The scanner, what did it say?”

“Oh, that you and Tommy were forced from your car.” Ryan didn’t understand Tyler’s concern. He watched Tyler look at Tommy in surprise. Tommy shook his head and turned his palms up.

Tyler looked back at Ryan. “Who said?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

“I don’t know. Why?”

Tyler looked at Tommy again, ignoring Ryan's question for the time being. "They couldn't have known. Nobody was on scene yet to have known that."

Tommy nodded, agreeing. Tyler looked back to Ryan.

"Was is a man or a woman?"

"Man. What's going on?"

Tyler opened his mouth to respond and suddenly paled even more dramatically. He cringed and tried to curl forward as a sudden wave of agony tore through him. He clenched his eyes shut, breathing shallowly, and tried not to throw up.

Ryan gently gripped the back of Tyler's neck. He could feel the sudden clamminess of his skin.

"Grab my bag," he told Tommy quietly.

Tommy handed it to Ryan, who quickly pulled out a vial and syringe and loaded it. He then shifted Tyler ever so slightly and pulled his jeans down a little to get to his hip.

"Quick pinch, Ty," he told him softly just before he injected the painkiller into the muscle.

When the pain abated somewhat, Tyler looked up at Ryan, whose eyes were full of concern as he watched his pain-wracked lover.

It was Tommy who answered Ryan's question. "We're guessing whoever's voice you heard was our leak. When we called backup in, guys came flying out of the building within minutes. They surrounded the car and we got out, but there wasn't anybody on scene yet. We didn't hear sirens for a good two minutes. Did they say what unit they were?"

Ryan shook his head, once again holding gauze to Tyler's belly. "Dispatch was asking for a status update," Ryan told them. "That's when they responded that you'd been forced from your car. It was a couple minutes before anyone else responded from the scene."

"That would explain how Jackson got away without being caught. Our leak was already there," Tommy said, glancing at his partner.

Tyler rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "Perfect," he sighed. "I guess we go back over the dispatch."

Ryan sat still, his eyes narrowed as he recalled the conversation being relayed on the scanner. "Who was down?" he asked,

remembering the stab of fear that it had been his lover or his lover's best friend. "They reported an officer down."

Tyler shook his head a little too quickly, and Ryan eyed him. When Tyler didn't say anything, Ryan turned to Tommy, his eyebrows raised.

"When our backup arrived, Tyler was on the ground, not moving, trying his best just to breathe," Tommy explained. "Arriving officers saw him down and called it in. Tyler, however, waved off the medics when they arrived," he told Ryan, his eyes on his partner. "Insisted he was fine. I didn't notice the blood until we were at the car."

Ryan shook his head at his lover. "Were you unconscious?" he asked.

Tyler shrugged. Ryan looked at Tommy for confirmation.

"Maybe briefly," he acknowledged evasively. "There were a couple minutes he was pretty still after a particularly hard blow to the face. I couldn't get him to respond to me, but he could have just been stunned. He came around quickly and has been pretty with it since."

Ryan sighed, running his hand over his face.

"He gonna be okay?" Tommy asked Ryan again.

Ryan nodded. "He'll need new stitches, but he should be okay."

Tommy nodded. "Then I'm gonna get home. You need anything, or if he gets worse, call me. If not, I'll be back in a few hours to pick him up. We have to report and debrief, then he's on his medical leave."

Ryan nodded. "Thanks, Tommy."

Tommy nodded with a smile and slipped out the door.

Ryan turned his attention back to Tyler, who once again had his eyes closed and his head back. He wrapped his fingers around Tyler's wrist and counted his pulse. He kept one eye on Tyler's face and the other on his watch as he counted.

He watched Tyler's eyes slowly open and settle onto his own worried gaze. Tyler smiled, and his head lolled slightly. The pain meds were kicking in.

"I'm okay, Ryan. Really," he whispered, wishing he could erase the worry and fear in Ryan's eyes.

"Who's the doctor?" Ryan arched his eyebrows playfully.

Tyler smiled.

Ryan smiled back and gently kissed Tyler on the head.

"I'll be right back," he told him, and then he quickly gathered supplies.

When he returned, Tyler's eyes were closed tightly, his face ashen and pinched, and he was once again breathing shallowly, hunched forward.

Ryan stroked his hair. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

"I moved," Tyler groaned.

Ryan nodded. "From now on, let me help you," he told him quietly. After a moment, he gently maneuvered Tyler back against the couch and undid the buttons on his shirt, exposing his stomach.

Tyler groaned as Ryan fingered the wound. "Don't do that." He tried to move out of Ryan's reach.

"Sorry, Ty, I have to. I need to see where it tore and what kind of damage it did," he explained, gently pushing Tyler's hands away.

"Didn't you do all that earlier?" Tyler moaned, trying again not to throw up.

"Yeah, but that was before you decided to get into a fight," he countered, glancing up at his lover's pain-filled blue eyes.

"I didn't get into a fight, I got the shit beat out of me," Tyler corrected. He hissed in pain and tried to move away from his lover's touch.

"Yeah, that you did," Ryan agreed. "It's obvious you took some serious hits, and the trauma from the blows, or the stitches tearing, could have done damage," he explained as he pulled out a hypodermic and a vial of lidocaine. "You realize it's not easy to rip stitches out, right?" He looked at his lover, his eyebrow lifted. They'd had this conversation before.

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Trust me, I know," he muttered.

Ryan punched the needle into the vial, filling it to the appropriate level, and then injected it into the skin under and around the wound, numbing it within seconds.

Tyler sighed in relief as the sharp pain faded.

Ryan cleaned the wound and finally stitched it back together again. He then rechecked Tyler's ribs. Tyler moaned quietly.

“Sorry, Ty,” Ryan apologized as he pulled his hands away. He reached for his stethoscope and put it in his ears before placing the other end against Tyler’s bare chest.

“Deep breath, Ty,” he instructed his lover. Tyler complied as best as he could, but Ryan knew it was seriously hurting him to draw a deep breath, so he moved as quickly as he could, listening intently.

Finally, Ryan removed the stethoscope and settled it around his neck. Tyler closed his eyes drowsily.

“I need to look at your head,” he told him quietly. Tyler just nodded.

Ryan tipped Tyler’s head and looked at the new cut above his eye. It wasn’t serious, so he quickly cleaned it and put two Steri-Strips over it. Then he clicked on his penlight.

He moved it between Tyler’s eyes, pulling one eyelid up, then the other, watching his reaction. It was a bit sluggish, signifying a slight concussion, which Tyler hadn’t had when he had left the hospital a few hours earlier. It gave Ryan a pretty good idea of the force behind the punch that Tommy had said had left Tyler unresponsive. It also told Ryan that it was a fair bet that Tyler had indeed been unconscious.

Ryan sighed and kissed Tyler on the forehead.

After he had helped Tyler to the bedroom, removed the hospital tags still attached to Tyler’s wrist and ankle, and gotten them both undressed and into bed, he curled around Tyler and held him.

Tyler slowly turned his head and looked over at Ryan, his expression innocent. “So, how was your night?”

“Well, it was slow until you dumped eight wounded people on us, yourself included.”

“Anything I can do to help.” Tyler smiled while Ryan shook his head.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay out of my emergency room?”

“I told Tommy to take me to Eastside Memorial.”

Ryan groaned. “Oh, yeah, you would have gotten terrific care there.”

“Well, if it had been up to me, I would have gone after Jackson, but Tommy made me go to the hospital.”

“And had you succeeded in talking him out of taking you, you probably would have bled to death in thirty minutes or less. As it was, you were hypovolemic and we couldn’t get a vein, so we had to do a cutdown.”

Tyler shook his head. “Use little words.” He snuggled further into Ryan, letting the floating feeling of the painkiller and Ryan’s voice ease him into a relaxed state.

Ryan smiled as he pushed soft, blond hair off of Tyler’s forehead. “Hypovolemic shock is when your blood pressure falls due to fluid loss, which stops your organs from getting enough fluid. Your veins are stubborn as it is. Add to it the blood loss, and it was impossible to get lines started. We were running out of time. You weren’t responding to me, and you were just fading so fast....” He drifted off and then shook his head slightly, as if he could shake off the memories. “So I had to cut the inside of your arm to get to the vein. When you access a vein that way, it’s called a venous cutdown.”

He paused. His fingers drifted through Tyler’s hair.

“You scared the hell out of me.” His voice was quiet. He had been terrified of losing Tyler. His mind kept repeating seeing Tommy holding Tyler up, his shirt soaked with blood, and then Tyler’s pale face as his body started to go into shock.

It wasn’t a new fear to Ryan. Ryan dealt with the knowledge that he could lose Tyler every single day. Some days, it was more powerful than others, like when Tyler got hurt. He’d known it was a risk when they had started their relationship, but it didn’t make it any easier.

Tyler frowned. “I’m sorry, Ryan.”

“When I saw Tommy helping you into the ER, blood covering both of you, and the lifeless way your head fell over onto my shoulder when I helped hold you upright, it was all I could do not to panic and let the terrified boyfriend who was so utterly close to losing you take over. It was hard to be the doctor instead.”

Tyler sighed. “I wish I had something to offer you. Something to make you worry less,” Tyler told him.

Ryan smiled. “I know, baby. I know.” He stroked Tyler’s hair and held him, grateful that he still had Tyler to love and hold.

10

“TYLER, come on, you have to get up.” Ryan shook Tyler’s shoulder, trying to wake him to go to his meeting with Jack. “Tommy’s here. You need to get up.” Tyler moaned and rolled to look at him.

“Who hit me with the truck?”

“No truck. You were stabbed, remember?”

Tyler hesitated and then nodded slowly. He got to his feet.

Ryan caught him as he swayed and nearly toppled over. He narrowed his eyes and lowered Tyler back to the bed. He grabbed his penlight and pulled one of Tyler’s eyelids up with his thumb, then the other. He swore under his breath. His concussion was worse than he’d first suspected.

“What?” Tommy was standing over his shoulder, watching in concern.

“He’s got a concussion,” Ryan answered wearily. “Get him dressed. I’m gonna get ready and go with you.”

TWENTY-FIVE minutes later, the trio walked into the LAPD undercover location. The station was downtown and looked like a regular office on the outside, but the inside was equipped as a state of the art police station, complete with holding cells and interrogation rooms.

Ryan sat at Tyler’s desk and waited while Tyler and Tommy went in to see their captain. A few minutes later, a man and woman got off the elevator and walked briskly toward Jack’s office, which Tyler and Tommy were just leaving.

“Don’t go anywhere, Detective Michaels,” the lady moving through the door Tyler was holding open practically snarled. Tyler just tilted an eyebrow in her direction as he continued on his path to his desk. She glared for a moment at his retreating back and then slammed the door to Jack’s office.

Tyler grabbed a chair and brought it over next to Ryan, then threw a folder onto the desk, simultaneously reaching for a pen with his

left hand. He began filling out the paperwork, throwing copies at Tommy, who sat at the desk facing Tyler's.

When they were done, Tyler leaned forward in his chair and put his face in his hands, rubbing the top of his head with his fingers.

"Y'okay?" Ryan asked, eyeing him in concern.

"Headache."

"That's called a concussion," Ryan told Tyler with a smile. Tyler rolled his eyes with a slight smile of his own just as his phone chose to ring.

Tyler picked up the receiver. "Michaels," he answered with a sigh, settling the phone near his ear.

"Hello, Detective Michaels. How are you feeling this morning?"

Tyler sat up quickly and motioned to Tommy, while Ryan watched Tyler in alarm.

Tommy motioned to Detective Kenny Bird. "Start a trace," he ordered quietly.

Tommy then picked up his extension and punched in on the conversation, meeting his partner's eyes.

"Good morning, Detective Carmikael. You don't honestly think you'll be able to get an accurate trace, do you?"

Tyler and Tommy exchanged a bewildered look over their desks. The room around them had become silent, everyone watching the detectives, waiting.

"What's the matter, boys? Such confounded looks," the voice tormented.

Tyler was immediately on his feet, scanning the room with his eyes. He didn't rise to Jackson's bait and answer him. Tommy was on his feet across from him, also looking around the room.

Jack's door opened, and the man and woman headed toward Tyler, followed by Jack, who was clearly disgruntled. The woman stopped beside Tyler, her hands resting on her hips and her lips pursed in a fine, thin line.

"Detective Michaels," she declared briskly. Tyler waved his hand, not bothering to look at her. Ryan watched her face harden and her eyes narrow at his dismissive gesture.

“How’s your boyfriend this morning, Michaels? Doing well, I hope.” Tyler’s eyes darkened and his hands clenched, and he literally shook with anger at the well-placed, un-voiced threat.

“What do you want?” he finally asked, his voice harsh and tight. His fingers were gripping the phone so tightly that his knuckles had turned white.

“Oh good, finally the right question. It’s simple, Michaels. I want you. You won’t know when or where, but I will find you, and you will pay. And I don’t just mean by an easy death. I want you to suffer first. And if you cooperate, your boyfriend and your pal Carmikael won’t get hurt.” With that, the caller hung up.

Enraged, Tyler slammed the phone down. Tommy watched his partner silently.

Tyler swore and looked at Kenny. “Did we get a location?”

Kenny shook his head, disappointment in his eyes as he lowered his own phone to its cradle. “Sorry, Michaels. He had us bouncing all around the state.”

“Detective Michaels, we need to speak to you,” the lady stated again, her manner uptight.

Ryan wondered if her impatience was a permanent part of her personality, or if she just held some sort of grudge against Tyler. He decided that there was no love lost between the two of them either way, and his own eyes widened when Tyler spun on her with barely contained animosity.

“Look, Carter, not now.” His tone was low and undeniably dangerous, causing both the man and the woman standing before him to step back and blink.

“Michaels,” Jack interrupted firmly, giving the woman a glare of his own. Tyler turned his attention to his captain. “Was that Jackson?”

The lady looked even more agitated, if that were possible, and she opened her mouth to interrupt again.

“Captain, I need—”

“*Not now!*” Tyler, Jack, and Tommy all shouted at once.

Her face turned red, her eyes widened, and she looked quite flustered, but she backed down nonetheless.

Ryan, along with the rest of the office, watched the exchange as they tried to decide which of the officers was more aggravated.

Tyler nodded his response to his captain and sank back down in his chair, his head back in his hands.

“Well, what’d he want?” Jack inquired none too patiently when Tyler didn’t elaborate further. Tyler didn’t move to answer him, so he turned to Tommy.

Tommy looked at Tyler with anxious eyes, slid a quick look to Ryan, and then turned back to Jack with a sigh.

“Tyler,” he finally admitted. “He wants Tyler.” His gut was twisting in a raw, sharp, agonizing pattern of worry over his partner. The man on the phone sounded disturbed, unhinged, and Tyler was the subject of his game plan.

“What?” Jack and Ryan both questioned at once. Ryan’s eyes widened as he looked at his lover, a cold hand of fear wrapping its way around his body.

Tyler was rubbing his head. “He’s blowing smoke,” he tried to reassure them. He wasn’t sure whom he was trying to convince. He wasn’t worried about his own well-being. It was the threat toward Ryan that had him bristling. He couldn’t figure out how the man knew they were a couple. Not many people were privy to that information. He shook his head to clear it.

“Elaborate, Detective,” Jack demanded.

Tommy ran his fingers through his dark hair as he sighed. “I don’t know. He wants Tyler to pay for something. Said he was going to come after him and we wouldn’t know when. And he doesn’t just want him dead. He wants him to suffer first.”

“Great,” Jack muttered. “A psycho.” He turned to the officers nearest him. “Morton, Sandusky, pull all Michaels’ case files for the past year, see what we can find out about this guy. If you can’t find him there, keep digging through the years ’til you do. If it’s retaliation he’s after, he’s more than likely an old perp.”

“Or not,” Tyler muttered, more to himself than anyone else. Jack and Ryan eyed him.

Tommy nodded. “He’s right, Cap. This could be anyone from his past. Old perp, Navy days...” he trailed off, not needing to explain himself. The enemies Tyler could have made during his career as a

Navy SEAL, followed by his time at the department, weren't exactly covert, while the exact specifications of his careers were.

Jack groaned. "Well, it's all we have to go on for now, so get moving," he ordered Sandusky and Morton again, watching them leave the room for records.

"He was watching us, Cap'n. He knew exactly what we were doing," Tommy added, his focus on his partner.

Jack looked around the room, unsure of exactly what he was looking for but desperate to end this game Jackson seemed intent on playing with his detective.

"Bird, Murphy!" he yelled across the room. "I want this office searched for surveillance, and I want it done yesterday!" he ordered.

The two officers in question nodded and hurried off to comply.

Tyler rubbed a hand over his eyes. "We need to listen to the dispatch from the second bust."

"Why?"

"Because Ryan heard it reported over the scanner that we were forced from our car."

"Yeah, I heard that too." Their captain shrugged.

Tyler lifted his head to meet his captain's eyes, his heart speeding up. "Who reported it?"

Jack studied him. "I don't remember, why?"

"Because no one was on scene yet when we were forced out of the car. No one could have known." Tyler watched the understanding as it lit his captain's eyes.

"Let's go." Jack spun on his heel, quickly heading for the double doors leading out of Narcotics.

They heard Carter sigh irritably, but she followed them as they walked through the tunnel system that connected the undercover location to the main precinct and into the office where the recordings were stored. They found the recording from the previous night and went through the dispatch.

Tyler groaned from where he sat and put his head onto his arms on the table in frustration.

"It's been erased," he mumbled. Tommy was rubbing his head across from him as he let out a frustrated breath.

Jack shook his head in denial. "But I heard it. He heard it," he argued, pointing to Ryan. "It was there," he insisted to Tyler, Tommy, and the bewildered man and woman who were standing behind Tyler.

"Obviously our snitch realized their mistake and got to it first," Tyler muttered, head still down on the table.

The woman finally stepped forward and cleared her throat. "Detective Michaels, we need to speak to you." Her voice was a little softer this time—firm and a bit snide, but bordering on polite.

Tyler lifted his head and looked at her. "What can I do for you, Sergeant Carter?" He barely contained his anger as he glared at the woman next to him.

"We need to ask you a few questions."

"Pertaining to?"

"To start, your missing drug shipment and this so-called leak." She emphasized "so-called" as if she didn't believe a word of it. "Not to mention the death of a man by your hand last night." At least she hadn't known he went into the residence without a warrant.

It was becoming obvious to Ryan that she was from Internal Affairs. He watched Tyler stifle a groan and rub his head; he was curious to see how Tyler would dance his way around this one. He had no doubt that Tyler could and would; it was just always interesting to see how he did it.

"Fine. What do you want to know?" Tyler sighed, his fingers massaging his temples. His headache would not let up. It was bending and twisting all through his forehead, wrapping tight tendrils of pain around every nerve available, and the Internal Affairs woman was not helping it any.

"Can we go somewhere a little more private?" Her voice was still stiff. Ryan wondered what had happened to cause such friction between the two.

"Why? So we can make out in a dark closet?" Tyler asked with a perfect blend of sarcasm and flirtation as he turned blue eyes on her.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Tommy tried his best to stifle a chuckle, Jack groaned, the other man seemed amused, and Ryan watched Tyler with a curious smile.

Tyler's eyes flashed dangerously as he stood to glare at the woman before him, his chair sliding sluggishly across the floor with a loud groan.

"You want to drill me, drill me, but I'm not leaving, and I'm not making them leave." The tone of his voice held no room for argument as he continued to grow more and more agitated. "And I'd appreciate it if you'd make this quick, because I have a massive headache and your constant 'Michaels did it' accusations are making it worse." He paused, letting his grayish-blue gaze bore into her. She actually stepped back, but Tyler followed her, backing her into the wall.

The other officers simply watched the exchange, while Ryan's eyes darted between them, Tyler, and the Internal Affairs investigator Tyler had backed into the wall. He was curious how far they'd let it go. Tommy didn't seem concerned at all. Jack's eyes held pretty much the same malevolence that Tyler's did, and the man who'd accompanied Sergeant Carter seemed to regard Tyler with equal parts admiration and fear.

"Do you really have no life at all that you have to spend all the waking hours of your day trying to come up with a good enough reason to have my ass thrown off the force and actually make it stick? You have some serious issues, Regina, and I'm getting sick of every time I turn around you trying to shove some goddamn microscope up my ass, trying to pin a rap on me that doesn't exist and probably never will. I get your animosity, and I've pretty much ignored your idiocy for the last several years to give you time to get over it, but I've had it with you and your shoddy treatment and inflexible resentment over something I can't fucking change. Get over it! Your judgment, not to mention your life, is seriously being affected by your incapacity to acknowledge that she is dead, and she is not coming back regardless of what you do to me. I accept responsibility for her death. Do you really think anything you do to me is going to be worse than what I've already done to myself?"

Sergeant Carter's eyes were wide as she stared at Tyler, their faces inches apart, while Ryan was left pondering the conversation. One glance at Tyler's face left Ryan with no doubt that Tyler did feel responsible for the mystery woman's death, and he could only wonder what had gone down and how exactly Tyler was responsible.

“Get help, Regina,” Tyler muttered, taking a step away from her. “Fine. Do your best. Drown me, that’s what you want anyway.” He glanced at his watch. “But hurry it up. I’m supposed to be on medical leave, and if it’s okay with you, I’d like to go home and curl up in my nice warm bed. Preferably without you.”

Ryan shook his head at Tyler’s snide remark. The things that came out of his lover’s mouth really shouldn’t surprise him anymore, but they always did.

“Fine.” Sergeant Carter’s voice was snobbish now as she fought to regain her composure, obviously threatened by Tyler’s words. “Your captain reports that you fired nine rounds last night, which corresponds with evidence found at the scene. You injured two men and killed another. Your captain insists you are only aware of shooting two men, but as I told him, the third man wasn’t injured by a bullet, but by the gun that blew up in his hand. From the evidence, and the reports, along with the state of your injuries, we conclude that the shootings were in self-defense,” she told him hastily. It was obvious that it hurt her to have to admit that. “However, we would like to know what happened to the drugs, *Detective*.”

Tyler looked at her innocently. “What drugs?”

Ryan had to bite his lip to keep from laughing.

Sergeant Carter sighed impatiently. “The cocaine that you and Detective Carmikael confiscated on the Comeri bust.”

“Oh. Well, last I saw it, it was in lockup.” Tyler’s voice was light and innocent but laced with sarcasm.

Sergeant Carter glared, then looked over at Jack, who raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, why don’t we just go look, then, *Detective*,” she retorted.

Tyler shrugged, not showing the least bit of concern. He pulled the door open and waved the IA officer through.

“Some things just never change,” Tommy muttered to Ryan.

“Will she bust him?” Ryan asked in concern.

Tommy’s eyes lit up in amusement. “Just watch.”

They stopped in front of the door to the evidence room. Ryan watched Tyler take his badge from where it hung from his jeans and show it to the officer sitting behind the desk, who handed him a

clipboard. Tyler quickly signed it and handed it to the two IA officers, who had flashed their badges as well. They signed their names next to Tyler's. Sergeant Carter then handed the clipboard back to the officer behind the desk. Then, Tyler and the two IA officers disappeared behind a door.

Thirty seconds later, they came back out. Sergeant Carter slapped the door open with her palm, walking briskly as she shook her head, muttering under her breath. Ryan was certain it was obscenities about his fair-haired lover, who was following at a slower pace with an amused smile.

"Problem, Regina?" Jack asked, his eyebrows raised.

She didn't respond. She just shouldered past Jack and Tommy and started to storm away in an almost childish tantrum. Before she got out of the corridor, she spun back around, anger burning her eyes.

"We're not through, Michaels," she hissed. Then she turned and walked away with Sergeant McCormick on her tail.

"Loyal little puppy, isn't he?" Tyler commented, watching them.

"What just happened?" Ryan queried with raised eyebrows.

Tyler cocked his head innocently. "She's a bit pissed because the drugs she insists I stole are sitting behind that door." Tyler motioned to the door he'd just come out of while he grinned at Ryan. Ryan shook his head with a laugh.

11

"SO WHAT'S going on?" Ryan asked as he drove them home. He brushed his knuckles down Tyler's cheek, noting the coolness of his skin. He glanced at his lover's face in concern.

Tyler sighed. "With what?"

"With you, with Jackson, with that Internal Affairs investigator. You two don't seem to be the best of friends."

Tyler shook his head with a sad smile, his eyes far off. "We used to be pretty close," he offered softly. Ryan could read his pain.

"What happened?" he asked.

Tyler gazed out the window at the falling rain. “She can’t forgive me.”

“For what?”

There was a long pause, and Ryan glanced over at Tyler, worried. Tyler was still staring out the window, lost in his memories. His right hand came up, and he ran his fingers through his hair. Then he let his head rest in his hand, his elbow resting on the side of the door. He rubbed at his eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose, and finally sighed.

“I was responsible for the death of someone she cared a lot about.” He paused, his expression pinched. “Can we talk about this later?”

Ryan nodded. Worried eyes drifted over his lover before he looked back at the rain-slicked road. He was silent for a moment before he turned the subject to the man who had nearly killed his lover and clearly wasn’t happy that he hadn’t succeeded.

“What about Jackson?”

Tyler shook his head. “I don’t know. He’s probably just blowing smoke.”

“Blowing smoke? You call beating the hell out of you, stabbing you, and then beating the hell out of you again ‘blowing smoke’? I’d hate to see what you’d call serious.” Ryan looked at him incredulously.

“I don’t know, Ryan. If he really wanted me dead, he’s had three opportunities to just shoot me in the head. Don’t you think he would have done that already?”

Ryan shook his head. “Tommy said he didn’t want to just kill you, he wants you to suffer first,” he responded, gauging Tyler’s reaction.

Tyler took Ryan’s hand and gently entwined their fingers. “I’d tell you not to worry, but you’re going to anyways, and I honestly don’t have an answer to all this. All I can do is promise to be careful.”

Ryan could only nod. The not-knowing, the fear that came with Tyler’s job, was sometimes overwhelming and all-encompassing, but Ryan had accepted it a long time ago. He could only hope that Tyler would be okay. But it didn’t help him to worry any less.

Ryan glanced over at Tyler as his hand went slack within his own. He shook his head at his worn-out lover and moved his fingers to the pulse point in his wrist.

Assured it was beating strongly beneath his fingers, he smiled gently and wrapped his fingers back around the soft, tan hand. Pulling it up to his lips, he gave the knuckles a soft kiss. He once again admired the hand within his own. It was deeply tanned, a golden tone that matched the rest of Tyler's body, darkened from the California sun. It was the same hand that held his gun, the same fingers that had pulled the trigger on more than one occasion, ending the lives of others. Not for the first time, Ryan looked over at his lover, and for a moment, let the flurry of emotion in his stomach overtake him.

His Tyler was capable of ending people's lives.

Had ended their lives.

A shiver ran up his spine.

12

THE days crept by as Tyler began to recover. He was no longer feeling as worn-out, and the sharp pain in his stomach was more of an ache now.

The Saturday morning sun began to move higher in the sky as Ryan and Tyler sank onto the couch. Ryan pulled Tyler against him, his left hand resting on Tyler's hip. He snagged the remote and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels. He stopped on the local news channel and propped his foot up on the coffee table, his knee bent, right arm resting on his knee, remote in hand. He glanced at his lover's fair blond head resting against his chest and smiled.

The reporter's commentary had him turning his head back to the TV.

"As we reported earlier in the week, a LAPD narcotics detective was injured in a stabbing late Tuesday evening during a local drug bust. Recently, we gained footage of the stabbing, along with that of two other undercover operations in which he has recently been involved. We are unsure who taped this footage or why, but we bring it to you to show you the lengths our officers go to to help make our streets a little safer. This footage also shows the sheer violence of our city's escalating drug problem. Due to the nature of his job, we cannot

show you this officer's face or identify any of the undercover officers involved. We must also warn you that the following footage contains violence that is not suitable for young children."

"You've got to be kidding me," Tyler muttered.

The picture changed from the brunette reporter to the inside of an immaculate office, and Tyler immediately groaned.

Ryan glanced at him and then the unrolling scene on TV.

Several heavily armed men surrounded Tyler, who had his gun leveled at what appeared to be their leader. Ryan was guessing it was Jackson. True to the reporter's word, Tyler's face was being scrambled to protect his identity, but Ryan knew Tyler anywhere.

"Is this your stabbing?"

Tyler just nodded, rubbing his temple as he watched the screen with a look of utter disbelief.

There was no sound on the grainy video, which told Ryan that it was taken from a security camera. Tyler's next words confirmed this.

"I turned off that camera," he muttered.

Suddenly, others were entering the room, and the shooting began. Ryan watched Tyler dive out of the way, roll, and return fire. He saw the beating Tyler received, the knife to his neck, and the way Tyler surprised Jackson by pulling his feet out from under him.

The fight Tyler put up after the beating he'd already received had Ryan raising his eyebrows in surprise, and the warmth in his chest spoke of pride.

He winced as two men took Tyler down at once, pulling his body into a painful position.

Moments later, more men jumped in, and then the knife plunged into Tyler's stomach, his arms pinned above his head. He watched Tyler try to curl in as the knife sank in, just as police entered the room.

Barely a heartbeat passed before Tyler kicked the man off of him. He reached for his gun just as another man aimed his in Tyler's direction. Tyler dove out of the way, barely missing the spray, and returned fire. The man fell.

Another scene quickly followed, and in it, at least a dozen armed men were encircling Tyler.

Ryan glanced at Tyler, who was shaking his head, his look of disbelief growing.

A man suddenly flew at Tyler, knocking him back and to the ground. The two struggled, exchanging fierce blows. Tyler quickly got the upper hand, his fighting skills amazing Ryan once more as he took out man after man, dropping them at his feet.

A sharp blow to his back and then his head took Tyler by surprise. Several men jumped in. They punched and kicked and pinned him down roughly.

A gun was placed to his head, and Tyler stilled. Ryan stole a quick glance at his blond lover, who had leaned forward and had his head in his hands, shaking it, mumbling.

Tyler wasn't kidding—the bust *had* gone a *little bit* wrong. Ryan really thought they should have a discussion on the differences in their interpretations of the word “little.”

Tyler was jerked to his feet. Ryan could just imagine him calmly meeting the enraged eyes of the man before him. A sudden blow to his jaw from a massive fist had Tyler's head snapping back, and then the blows rained repeatedly, until Tyler surprised them all by knocking the gun away from his head.

He fought hard, holding his own against the dozen or so men, proof of the incredible hand-to-hand combat skills Tyler possessed. Some of the moves Tyler was making surprised the heck out of Ryan, who had seen Tyler fight numerous times. Somehow Tyler always managed to impress him.

Amidst the chaos around them, the camera stayed on Tyler, proof of the setup.

Onscreen, Tommy had now joined the fight, and then suddenly the police were rushing in.

Ryan looked over at Tyler again, whose eyes grew wider as the next scene popped up onto the fifty-two-inch screen.

Ryan recognized the warehouse district, knowing it was where Tyler and Tommy had gone the night Tyler had left the hospital against his wishes. He'd already seen the news footage of the bust the news team had caught.

On the tape, men were swarming Tyler's car. Seconds later, Tyler and Tommy climbed out. Ryan didn't need to see Tyler's face beneath the scramble to imagine the irritated expression his lover wore.

Several men roughly grabbed them, and Tyler was sucker punched in his already-tender abdomen. Tommy struggled madly against his captives, forced to watch his best friend being brutally beaten as he himself was manhandled to the ground, beaten, and practically sat on. Ryan felt his stomach tighten and his jaw clench in both anger and fear as his lover was beaten. He knew it had been bad, having seen the outcome firsthand, but watching it happen made the reality much harder to swallow.

Ryan saw the blow that rendered Tyler unconscious and winced as it connected with Tyler's face at an alarming rate of speed. Tyler's head hung limply as he dangled between the men holding him upright.

Finally, police sirens screamed in the background, and the men dropped Tyler. He fell to the ground, unmoving, while Tommy was kicked in the ribs before he crawled to his best friend's side.

Shouts of "officer down!" rang through the night. Tyler remained unmoving on the ground.

The tape switched back to the studio, where the brunette looked at the anchorman sitting next to her. She visibly shuddered.

"Amazing," she said.

The anchor nodded. "*Gives me chills every time.*"

The brunette looked back at the camera. "*We are not aware if the detective was seriously injured in this last fragment, but the LAPD was unavailable for comment at the time of this broadcast. What we do know about his stabbing was that he was admitted to Riverside Memorial for treatment and has since been released from the hospital and is expected to make a full recovery. The man that stabbed him remains at large. More updates as they become available.*"

"Unavailable, my ass," Tyler muttered as he took the remote from Ryan's hand and snapped the TV off. "That's their way of saying the department doesn't know they have this footage. Idiots," he mumbled.

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "Your bust went 'a little' wrong?"

Tyler glanced at him and shrugged.

"We really need to talk about your idea of the term 'little'," Ryan teased him. "And by the way, yes, Tyler, when you take a blow that

hard and remain unresponsive for that amount of time, it's a fair bet that you're unconscious."

Tyler rolled his eyes, and Ryan smirked. "I know you guys like to try to gloss over the details for the sake of my feelings, but do me a favor in the future, Ty, and don't. Okay?"

The phone rang just then, saving Tyler from his response, and Tyler snatched it up.

"Did you see what the news just played?" the agitated voice of his best friend came over the line.

"Yeah, I saw it," Tyler said as he ran his hand through his hair.

"Man, Ty, I think Jackson just raised the stakes in this game he's playing with you."

Tyler pinched the bridge of his nose, another headache starting to come on. "Call and see what you can find out. Call me back."

"You got it," Tommy agreed, and Tyler hung up.

Tyler sat the phone down and turned to look at Ryan just as it rang again. Tyler frowned at the caller ID, not recognizing the number.

"Lo?" he answered.

"So'd you watch the news, Michaels?"

Tyler closed his eyes with a silent sigh and sank back into the couch. "What do you want?" he asked in exasperation.

Ryan eyed him. Tyler just shook his head.

"You know what I want, Detective. I want you. To suffer immensely."

"So you keep saying. Who taped it? Better yet, why?"

"Oh, come on, Michaels, that one should be easy. I'm playing with you. And then I'm going to make you suffer. And when I'm through, I'm going to kill you."

The line clicked and then went dead. Tyler sighed, shook his head, and thumbed the phone off.

He looked at Ryan, who had his eyebrows raised, but before either of them could say anything, the phone rang again in Tyler's hand. He glanced at the caller ID.

"*What the hell was that?*" Jack shouted before Tyler could greet him.

“That was Jackson screwing with me,” Tyler explained patiently. “At least that was his explanation.”

“You heard from him?”

“Yep,” Tyler said, rubbing his head again.

Ryan glanced at his watch, then silently got up and grabbed Tyler’s pain meds and a glass of water.

“I’ll send a team to tap your line. See you in ten.”

Tyler sat the phone down and glanced up at Ryan, who held out his hands, a painkiller in one and water in the other. He took them with his thanks and had just swallowed the pill when the phone rang once more.

“Yeah, Tommy,” Tyler answered.

“You sound tense.” Tommy’s voice came over the line along with a click, which made Tyler frown. He cut Tommy off before he could say anything else.

“I’m tapped.”

Tommy sighed. “I’m on my way,” he told him.

Tyler thumbed the phone off and looked at Ryan, his eyes dancing dangerously.

“What do you mean, you’re tapped?” he asked.

“The phone.”

“You’re kidding?”

Tyler shook his head.

13

THE sirens cut the quiet afternoon, and it wasn’t long before uniformed and plainclothes officers were searching every nook of the house, both of their cars, and even the telephone pole outside.

Captain Bree strolled in a few minutes later and looked Tyler up and down, evaluating the man before him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jackson tapped our line, which probably means he’s got a bug in here too,” Tyler muttered. “They’re searching for it now.”

“Damn,” Jack swore softly. “Alright, I’ll see what’s going on.”

Tyler nodded and headed for the bedroom. Ryan followed.

“You think the house is bugged?”

Tyler nodded.

“What are they doing?” Ryan asked. “Besides searching for a bug.” He watched Tyler get out of his sweats and pull on a pair of jeans. Then he pulled his LAPD sweatshirt off, exposing his toned abdomen and the fine line of black stitches as his black T-shirt rode up. Tyler tossed his sweatshirt onto the bed, pulled his T-shirt down, and ran his fingers through his tousled hair. Ryan watched the blond locks fall back into place naturally.

“They’re tapping the lines,” Tyler responded. He pulled his holster from the gun cabinet and slid it over his shoulders.

Ryan nodded. “And what are you doing?” he questioned as he watched Tyler take two loaded clips out of the gun cabinet and slide them into his holster.

“Nothing.” Tyler took his wallet and his badge off the dresser. He put the badge in his wallet and the wallet in his back pocket.

Ryan knowingly threw on a pair of jeans. “Yeah, looks like nothing,” he commented as he followed Tyler from the room.

Tyler nodded to an officer standing in the kitchen as he picked his gun up from the counter and checked the clip. He slapped the clip back into place, racked it back, and then, after he made sure the safety was on, he slid it into his holster.

“Hey, Michaels, we’ve put in a tap and trace. You know how to work them, so I won’t go over the details with you,” Detective Martinez said as he cupped Tyler’s shoulder warmly.

“Thanks, Martinez.”

“You want an officer left, Michaels?” Jack asked, eyeing Tyler. Tyler was picking up his handcuffs off the end table.

Tyler shook his head. “No, not here, but I want one on him.” Tyler nodded his head toward Ryan as he slid on his shoes.

Ryan narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

Tyler ignored him.

Jack nodded. "Where?"

"From here to the hospital, at the hospital, and wherever else he goes without me. I can cover him the rest of the time. Be sure to put another on Sara," Tyler finished just as Tommy came through the door.

"Another what on Sara?" he asked, giving his partner a questioning look.

"Police protection. Is she at home?"

Tommy nodded. He ran his hand through his wavy brown hair, exchanging a look with Ryan.

Tyler looked at Jack. "Get somebody over there. Did you sweep the house yet?"

"Yeah, I was just going to talk to you about that." Jack turned to Detective Lincoln. "Lincoln, get over to Carmikael's and keep an eye on his wife." Lincoln nodded and gave them a short, sincere salute.

Jack turned back to Tyler. "We just finished. I've got a team thoroughly searching narcotics again now, along with Ryan's office, but..." Jack hesitated. "We found two bugs in the house, one on your phone, and one in both your cars. Your cells are clean."

Tyler's jaw clenched, and his eyes flashed dangerously.

"You couldn't have known they were there, Tyler. They were tiny and well-hidden. Only the sweep detected them, and there are no signs of forced entry."

"How'd they get past the security system?" Tyler asked.

Jack could only shake his head. "We're not sure yet."

Tyler turned to Tommy. He had his hands on his hips now, one knee slightly bent as he looked at his partner.

"What'd you find out?"

"The disc was dropped at the news station early this morning. It came in a plain package with a note inside. They're defending running it, saying it was too good not to," Tommy told him.

Tyler nodded. "Let's go." He started for the door.

"Hold up, Detective." Jack grabbed Tyler's arm. "You're still on medical leave."

"Are you seriously going to stop me?"

Jack took a deep breath and shook his head, throwing his hands into the air. "I cannot believe I'm agreeing to this. You still have stitches, for Christ's sake!"

Tyler grabbed Ryan's arm. "Fine, I'll take my doctor with me." He looked back at his captain, who was smiling while shaking his head in despair.

"I'll lock up and meet you at the station when we're through," Jack told him.

Tyler nodded and pulled his navy blue dress shirt over his T-shirt, leaving it unbuttoned as they headed out the door.

"So what's going on?" Tommy asked as Tyler pushed Ryan into the passenger side of the Mustang. From the look in his lover's eyes, Ryan knew that even though Tyler really shouldn't have been driving yet, he probably shouldn't argue about it.

"Jackson called me after you did," Tyler told him as he depressed the clutch and turned the engine over.

"What'd he say?"

"That he was playing with me." He met Tommy's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"You sure know how to make friends," Tommy muttered.

Tyler smirked and then looked over at Ryan. "You do realize what this could mean, don't you?"

Ryan shook his head, his eyes on Tyler.

Tyler groaned. "Damn, I should have figured he had the house bugged when he called us at the station." He looked at Tommy in the rearview mirror again. "Remember what he said?"

Tommy slowly nodded as the conversation came back to him. "That comment about Ryan?"

Tyler nodded, and Ryan's eyebrows rose. He watched Tyler punch the car into fifth gear.

"What comment?"

Tyler sighed and looked over at him. "He asked how my *boyfriend* was." Tyler paused and then added quietly, "And said if I didn't want anything to happen to you or Tommy, I'd do what he said."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?" Ryan wondered if Tyler would ever stop leaving out half of the story.

"I didn't want you to worry," Tyler tried to explain. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I really am, but you do realize what this could mean, right?"

"No, Tyler, I don't. Why don't you enlighten me?" Ryan said angrily. He was hurt that Tyler didn't trust him enough to confide in him. This was an old argument between them, and one they had on a regular basis.

"It means," Tyler said as he downshifted to take the corner, "that if Jackson wants to, he can broadcast our relationship to the entire city." He kept his voice even, watching Ryan for a reaction.

Tyler heard Tommy swear from behind him as he realized the implications. He turned his eyes back to the road and pulled into the driveway of the news station. He put the car into park and shut off the engine. He got out and held the seat forward for Tommy, then went around to Ryan's side. Ryan was leaning against the car, looking at him.

"Do you realize what this could do to your job?" Ryan questioned Tyler evenly.

Tyler and Ryan weren't entirely hiding their relationship, but they hadn't exactly come out to the world yet either. Ryan worried about the PD being such a closed society and what some of them would do if they found out Tyler was gay, though many had already figured out that they were a couple. After four years of being nearly inseparable, people were bound to put two and two together. Surprisingly, none of them had too much to say about it. In fact, those that did know were supportive. Ryan was amazed by their reaction; they were simply happy for them.

Tyler could only nod. He looked Ryan in the eyes. "I told you already, Ryan, I'm not hiding that I love you." The power of Tyler's love radiated from his blue eyes, and it took Ryan's breath away. "I just need you to be aware of what could happen. I'm more worried about him knowing that we're together than anything else."

"Why?"

"Because he could use you against me," Tyler answered honestly. "And then I'd have to give him what he wants."

Ryan blinked, registering Tyler's words. "But he wants you," Ryan told him quietly. "Dead."

Tyler looked him in the eyes. “I know. But I won’t let him take you down with me.”

14

WHEN they stepped inside the lobby of the news station, a metal detector awaited them. Ryan just leaned against the counter and watched as it went off when Tyler walked through it. He’d become accustomed to this by now. He’d even been with Tyler once when he’d been tackled, frisked, handcuffed, and jabbed in the ribs with a police baton when the hostile guards didn’t believe he was a cop. When his badge had finally been confirmed, Ryan had enjoyed watching Tyler drill them into the ground and trump up whatever charges he could think of on them. Assaulting an officer of the law was a good start—they had broken one of Tyler’s ribs.

A guard on the other side of the counter stood and approached them. Tyler and Tommy both pulled their wallets from their back pockets and flipped them open to display their badges and police ID. The guard nodded and touched his cap, and the duo continued up to the reception desk. Ryan followed a step behind.

“Can I help you?” the young woman behind the desk asked as they approached.

“A disc came in here earlier. We’re here to pick it up, along with the package it came in,” Tyler requested without emotion. Ryan called it his game face.

“And you would be?” The lady was smiling into those oh-so-blue eyes.

Tyler showed his badge again, holding his wallet open with his thumb. “Detective Michaels, LAPD.”

The woman looked impressed. Her eyes lit up, and she started rummaging under the desk. She pulled out a package and laid it on the counter. Tommy slid on a pair of gloves, picked the package up, looked inside, and then pulled out a note. He glanced at it and snorted. He showed it to Tyler.

*~ Caught something interesting that
our loyal Los Angeles Police are up to.*

Thought your viewers might enjoy. Many regards. ~

~J~

“Jackson,” Tyler muttered.

Tommy put the note back in the package, pulled out the disc, looked it over, nodded at Tyler, put it back in the package, and then dropped all of it into an evidence bag. Then he took off the gloves and shoved them back into his pocket.

“Can you sign here please, Detective?” The woman was literally batting her eyelashes at Tyler, and it was all Ryan could do not to laugh.

Tyler picked up the pen and signed his name to a sheet of paper attached to a clipboard.

“Oh, you’re left-handed,” she cooed.

Ryan tried not to roll his eyes at the flirting she was unsuccessfully trying. It never seemed to fail that, no matter where they went, women *and* men flirted with and fell all over Tyler.

Tyler, however, barely seemed to notice. He nodded and smiled at the woman, apparently unfazed. “Yeah. Thanks... Angela,” he said, reading her name badge.

“You’re very welcome, Detective Michaels.” She fluttered her eyelashes again.

Ryan watched Tyler smile one of his award-winning smiles, the kind that could make ten women fall simultaneously at his feet, and then turn and walk toward the door. Tommy and Ryan smirked at each other as the woman stared after Tyler, her jaw slack.

At the door, Ryan turned to Tommy, his expression amused. “He doesn’t even notice, does he?”

Tommy laughed and shook his head. “Not usually.”

Tyler turned, one eyebrow lifted. “Notice what?”

Ryan ignored him, a smile on his face. “Women always fall all over him like that when you two go out?”

“Oh yeah, and sometimes men too.” Tommy grinned. “In fact, some guy gave him his number last week.”

“Oh really?” Ryan raised his eyebrows. He could see Tyler shaking his head off to the side. He put his hand on the small of Tyler’s back as they walked toward the car. Tyler leaned into his touch.

“Yeah, we were downtown at a bus stop questioning a hooker, and this guy waiting for the bus couldn’t take his eyes off Tyler. He must have stared at him for five minutes. Finally, he came up to us, hit on him, and then tucked his number in Tyler’s pocket. I think he just wanted to cop a feel. Or feel a cop, perhaps?” Tommy laughed. “It was hysterical. You should have seen the look on the hooker’s face.”

Ryan and Tommy were both laughing, while Tyler shot Tommy a dirty look. “Oh sure, get me in trouble, why don’t you?” But the amusement was clear in his voice.

“You don’t need my help to do that.”

Tyler ignored him. “And if I remember correctly, Lily solicited you not two minutes later.”

“Lily?” Ryan questioned.

“The hooker,” Tommy told him. “And if you had been listening,” he continued to his partner, “she said she’d do both of us *and* the stray at the bus stop all at the same time, if I told her where you lived.”

Ryan chuckled as he watched the friendly banter between the two. They often acted like little boys.

Tyler grinned at his best friend, his eyes twinkling. “Sounds like an opportunity you hated to turn down.”

Tommy shuddered dramatically. “I’d rather do you and have Ryan and Sara walk in and catch us than have to do Lily.” He gave another full-body shudder.

Tyler threw his head back and laughed. Ryan was shaking his head, humor in his eyes.

Tommy turned to Ryan, not done ribbing Tyler yet. “Tyler’s our designated pretty boy. If there’s a female suspect to be questioned, and she won’t talk, they always come and get Tyler. It never fails. She opens right up. And he usually ends up with her number.”

Ryan laughed as Tyler rolled his eyes.

15

A HALF-MILE from the news station, Tyler swore under his breath, dropped the car into third gear, and swerved into oncoming traffic.

“Tyler, what the hell are you doing?” Ryan asked, looking over at Tyler in alarm.

Tyler didn’t respond; he just floored the accelerator and upshifted. Seconds later, he swerved back into their lane, narrowly missing a car heading straight toward them.

Tyler’s right hand went to the wheel while he reached inside his dress shirt with his left and pulled out his gun, snapping the safety off with his thumb. His left knee came up to hold the steering wheel as he shifted gears with his right hand and pushed the button to unroll his window with his left.

“How many, Ty?” Tommy asked from behind him as the safety on his gun slid off.

“Two.” Tyler gritted his teeth. “Shit, make that three. Hang on.” Tyler swung them onto another road and put the car into a spin. As they slid around, he took aim out his open window at the car coming at them at a high rate of speed. Ryan watched in pure fascination as Tyler squeezed off three shots while he spun the car. Once they had spun completely around, he gunned it and sped toward the once-pursuing vehicles. He heard the metallic *thunk* of the bullets as they ricocheted off Tyler’s car. He knew Tyler wasn’t going to be happy about that.

“Son of a bitch,” Tyler muttered emphatically, confirming Ryan’s thought. Tyler reached for the radio. “Twenty William fifty-six requesting backup.”

“What’s your location, Twenty William fifty-six?”

“Fifth going south, crossing Beach.”

“What’s the situation, Michaels?” their captain’s voice came over the phone at Tyler’s hip.

Tyler unclipped it and pressed the two-way button. “I got three cars on my ass, and they’re loaded with automatic weapons. I really think someone should come out here and explain to them that automatics are illegal here in the U.S.” Ryan and Tommy both smirked at Tyler’s comment.

“I’ve got units on the way. Can you hold them off?”

Tyler threw the phone toward Tommy as he grabbed the wheel and shifter, dropping gears and spinning the car around once again, his feet dancing on the pedals.

“Cap, we got a chopper here,” Tommy relayed. “I don’t know how much longer he can keep them off.”

“Roger, Carmikael. I’m on my way.”

Ryan looked on in amazement as the helicopter flew overhead, and Tyler reached out the window and fired at it. The helicopter banked swiftly to the left. Tommy lay flat in order to lean out Ryan’s window, firing on the cars behind them.

It wasn’t long before they heard the sirens coming up from either side of them. Tyler spun the car sideways and locked up the brakes, blocking the three cars between him and the upcoming police cars. The helicopter banked again and took off.

Tyler kicked open Ryan’s door and shoved him out. Tyler and Tommy quickly followed.

Guns drawn, the duo popped their heads over the hood of the car, and then, while Ryan watched, they moved as one from the safety of the vehicle.

Tyler and Tommy approached one of the cars, both hands on their guns, arms outstretched in front of them and aimed at the men inside. They ordered them out as backup surrounded them.

“On the ground,” Tyler ordered, gun aimed at one of their chests. “Spread your legs and put your hands on your head.”

When the two men were on the ground, he put his gun away and knelt over the man closest to him; Tommy took the other. Tyler grasped the man’s wrist, twisting it, and jerked it behind his back. Then he reached inside his shirt for his handcuffs. He snapped a handcuff onto the wrist, and then grabbed the other arm, doing the same.

After he had dragged the guy to his feet, he spun him around and slammed him against the car. He patted him down and pulled out a gun from under the man’s jacket, which he handed to the officer at his shoulder. Then Tyler fisted the suspect’s shirt and pulled his own gun. He stuck it under the man’s chin.

“*Michaels!*” Captain Bree bellowed from where he was just getting out of his car. As usual, Tyler ignored him.

“What the hell does he want?” Tyler demanded, his voice low.

The man looked Tyler in the eye, not seeming to care that he was dealing with the one pissed-off cop who could very well pound him

into oblivion. Tyler's eyes flashed dangerously. Those that knew him knew this wasn't a very good sign.

"*Michaels, back off!*" his captain shouted again, heading in his direction. Ryan watched the scene unfold from a few feet away.

Tyler's eyes gleamed, daring the man to resist him. "I asked you a question."

The other man swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "All he said was to make sure we brought you in, and anybody who got in the way."

"Why?" Tyler demanded.

"He said something about owing you. You took something from him a long time ago, and now he wants your head."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tyler pushed, confused.

"I don't know. I really don't know!" the man pleaded.

Tyler sighed and backed off, shoving the man toward a uniformed officer, who handed Tyler another pair of handcuffs. He put the handcuffs in his holster and put his gun away as he looked around.

He saw Ryan leaning against the front of the car, watching him. His arms were crossed against his chest, one leg bent at the knee, his foot resting against the front tire. Tyler started toward him, but paused when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye.

Tyler's eyes widened, and he ran toward Ryan, tackling him just as the report from a gun sounded.

16

RYAN felt Tyler's body collide with his, and then the ground as they slammed into it.

His eyes met Tyler's for a split second, and then Tyler was up and running after the gunman, who was tearing down the alley.

Ryan got to his feet and watched Tyler tackle the man and roll him over. He could only hope that Tyler wouldn't rip his stitches out again. Either way, he was going to be in a lot of pain once the adrenaline wore off. Keeping Tyler down for very long after an injury

was nearly impossible. Always had been, and Ryan figured it always would be.

“Shit, he’s going to kill him,” he heard Tommy mutter from beside him as they jogged toward the struggle.

On top of the other man, Tyler punched him in the head. Hard. He kept on hitting him until Tommy got to his side and pulled his partner off the man, wrapping both arms around Tyler’s chest and holding him tightly against his own body.

Tyler shrugged Tommy off. “I’m fine,” he growled.

But as soon as Tommy let him go, Tyler charged the man, ramming him up against a building.

“Why the hell did you do that?” His voice was low and dangerous.

“I wasn’t going to hit him,” the man entreated shakily. “Jackson just told me to shoot at him. He didn’t want me to hit him. He just wanted me to get your attention.”

“Well, you got it! What the hell does he want?”

“You! That’s all I know, honest!”

“Where is he?”

The man shook his head. Tyler slammed him back into the building again—harder this time.

“You wanna play?” Tyler pulled out his gun, shoved it into the man’s neck, and clicked the safety off. “You’ve got three seconds.”

“Michaels, you’re really trying my patience. Put it down, now!” Jack growled as other officers surrounded them.

“One”

“Stand down, Detective!” Jack ordered as he exchanged a quick look with Tommy. He’d seen the fury in Tyler’s eyes, and he knew there was no stopping him. He had little doubt that Tyler’s plan to scare the man to death would work. He just prayed he wouldn’t pull the trigger *after* he got the information he wanted.

Tyler ignored him, concentrating solely on the man who had taken a potshot at his lover. “Two”

“He was in a black sedan down the block. He watched the whole thing,” the man caved, his words coming out in a rush.

Ryan sighed with relief as Tyler lowered his gun. He let the suspect go, but not before kneeling him in the stomach and slamming him on the back. The man slid bonelessly to the ground.

They all heard the gun of an engine. Tyler turned and looked down the alley just as the sedan pulled away. He ran to his car and jumped in before anyone else could move.

“Back him up!” Jack ordered the surrounding officers. “Tommy, Ryan, you’re with me. Jordan, you’re in charge!”

They ran to his car, and Jack turned the engine over and tore down the alley after Tyler. Others followed.

Tyler was a block ahead of them, racing after the vehicle inches in front of him, both of them weaving in and out of traffic.

The fleeing vehicle suddenly charged through a crowded intersection with Tyler hot on its tail. Ryan’s heart sailed into his throat when, at the last possible second, Tyler swerved and locked up his brakes, narrowly missing the car coming speeding through the intersection, which came within inches of broadsiding him.

Stuck behind traffic, Tyler could only watch as Jackson slipped away.

A half-second later, they heard Tyler’s irate voice come over the radio. “Why the hell isn’t anybody on the other side of the city?”

“They were pulled off the pursuit, Detective,” dispatch responded calmly.

“Pulled off? Who the hell pulled them off?” Tyler yelled.

“Lieutenant Peters,” came the response.

Tommy and Jack exchanged a look.

“Oh, shit,” they muttered in unison.

They watched Tyler spin off, burning his tires as he did so. Jack followed, the other cars close to his own bumper.

“In the mood he’s in, we’re going to be lucky if he doesn’t kill him,” Jack muttered.

Tommy could only shake his head while he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Tyler tore into the LAPD’s main headquarters and jumped out a second after braking. Tommy, Jack, and Ryan scrambled out of the car to chase after Tyler, who was running up the many steps to the precinct.

Ryan noticed that he had taken off his outer shirt and was now just in his black T-shirt with his black gun harness crisscrossed over his shoulders.

Ryan saw somebody dash out of the glass doors to headquarters and wisely jump the rail to get on the opposite side of Tyler. Tyler leapt over after him and tackled him while they were both still more than halfway up the steps.

The men below winced as the pair rolled down the steps and hit the cement at the bottom. Officers began to surround them.

Ryan, Tommy, and Jack ran over to the struggling cops on the ground. Tommy grabbed Peters, while Ryan wrapped his arms around Tyler and pulled him back and up.

“Let me go,” Tyler seethed, struggling in Ryan’s grasp.

“Not until you calm down,” Ryan hissed back.

Tyler relaxed, so Ryan cautiously let him go. As soon as he did, Tyler slammed back into Peters, whom Tommy was still restraining.

They all went down.

Ryan shook his head. He had known better then to let Tyler go. He groaned as he saw Tyler snatch Tommy’s gun from his holster.

And push it against Peters’s head.

“Give me one good reason not to pull the trigger,” he growled, his voice low.

“Tyler.” Tommy kept his voice soft as he pushed his way out from under both of them. He moved around to kneel next to Tyler, where he put his hand on Tyler’s arm.

“Tyler,” Tommy tried again. “He’s not worth it.”

Tyler let out a deep breath and then relaxed his grip on the gun. Tommy pulled it from his hand and helped him to his feet, while Jack handcuffed Peters from behind and read him his rights in a disgusted grumble.

Peters leered at Tyler as he was pulled to his feet. “You know, it doesn’t matter that you know I sold you out. I already gave you to Jackson on a silver platter,” he taunted him.

Tyler’s fist flew before anyone could react, and he connected squarely with Peters’ jaw, snapping the other man’s head back with the

fierce blow. When he pulled back again, Ryan stopped him by grabbing Tyler's wrist.

Tyler met Ryan's eyes briefly and then turned his gaze to Peters.

"Why?" he asked, his voice hard but quiet.

"Payback."

"For what?" Tyler asked, clearly confused. The hurt was evident in his voice.

"We were *friends*, Tyler. And then you had to fuck Ra'shel!"

Tyler's head snapped back at the name as if he had been struck. The pain was evident in his eyes.

Tommy pulled the gun from Tyler's holster, while the rest of the officers waited tensely.

"What does Ra'shel have to do with this?" Tyler demanded, his voice shaky.

"Everything! Don't you see? You fucked her!" Peters snarled again, clearly unhinged.

Tyler's eyes darkened. "She was my wife," he hissed back.

17

"DON'T you get it, Tyler? I loved her, but she wouldn't have me because of you!" Peters snarled vehemently.

Tyler shook his head. "So you sold out the entire department?"

"No, Tyler, just you."

"What about Tommy? You sell me out, you're selling him out."

"Jackson doesn't want Tommy," Peters challenged.

"What happens to him happens to me, Peters," Tommy shot from Tyler's side.

Peters only laughed. "Then you deserve it as well."

Tommy was quick enough to block the punch Tyler was about to throw. He squeezed Tyler's fist gently, their eyes locked.

"What does he want?" Tyler turned to Peters.

Peters laughed. "You, dead."

“Why?” Tommy challenged him.

“Because Tyler killed his brother.”

Tyler shook his head. “Who?”

“Lucas Jackson.”

Everyone watched as recognition finally clicked in both Tyler’s and Tommy’s eyes. They exchanged a wide-eyed look.

Peters laughed at their expressions. “You probably would have figured out who he was earlier if I hadn’t doctored his records. Everything he does before he kills you is just to screw with you. It’s a game. He already took the life of someone you loved, now he just wants you.”

With Tyler’s body touching his own, Ryan could feel him begin to shake. He looked at him in concern.

“Ra’shel,” Tyler whispered, his eyes haunted. His knees buckled. Ryan and Tommy both grabbed him before he could hit the ground.

“The little bitch had it coming. So when Jackson approached me with an offer, I couldn’t refuse. Sell you out, screw Ra’shel. So, I fucked her, and Jackson killed her. She was a fine piece of ass, wasn’t she, Tyler?” Peters grinned sadistically. “She screamed for you all the way down.”

Ryan turned his horrified gaze toward Tyler. He saw the anger and rage boiling, and he could feel him shaking under his hands.

Suddenly, Tyler sprung. He dove into Peters, knocking him to the ground. He hit him over and over again, powerful, crushing blows, never decreasing in velocity. Both Tommy and Ryan grabbed him, but Tyler wouldn’t relent. And then Jack joined in the struggle.

Between them, they were able to wrap themselves around Tyler and pry him off of Peters. They pinned him to the ground, practically lying on him, and they held him there as he struggled beneath them, tears streaming unmercifully down his face.

Once they had him under control, Ryan looked at Tommy, who nodded his head. Ryan squeezed Tyler’s shoulder and moved to the unconscious traitor. Blood streamed down his rapidly swelling face. Ryan put his hand to his wrist and counted his pulse. He heard Tyler behind him.

“Don’t touch him, Ryan! Don’t you dare help him!”

Ryan turned to Tyler, who was in a half-sitting position with Tommy behind him, holding on for all he was worth. Jack was kneeling near his side, helping Tommy hold him back and trying to calm him.

Tyler's eyes bore into his own. "I have to, Tyler, for you," Ryan told him quietly. He then turned back to Peters. He didn't want to help him. But he had to. Not because it was his job, but because if the man died, Tyler would pay.

"I don't think he did any permanent damage," Ryan finally told Jack. He heard the ambulance pull into the station.

Jack nodded. His eyes filled with disgust, which was mirrored by every officer in the parking lot.

Peters was loaded into the ambulance, and Jack sent two officers in after him.

"He is to be handcuffed to his bed. I don't care if he is unconscious. When he wakes up, he's to be placed under arrest for the rape and murder of Ra'shel Michaels, corruption, and whatever other charges you can come up with, including assault on Detective Michaels and tripping over his own damn feet down these blasted steps!" The officers nodded their heads with identical smirks, disdain at their onetime friend and amusement at the defense Jack was giving for Peters' condition in their eyes.

Ryan squatted next to Tyler, his arms over his knees. He rubbed his left thumb with his right as he surveyed his lover. Tyler's expression was closed, except for his eyes, which were dark, nearly black with anger.

"Get off," Tyler whispered to Tommy. Tommy sighed but let him up. He handed Tyler his gun back, which Tyler tucked into his holster, and then Tyler started for the car.

Ryan grabbed Tyler's arm, but Tyler shook him off. Jack stood in front of Tyler, blocking his retreat.

"Tyler, I am so sorry," Jack whispered, cupping Tyler's face in both his hands. No words could be offered to comfort his friend, who had suffered such a tremendous loss. He couldn't even begin to imagine the agony that Tyler must feel now, to have the wound ripped back open the way he just had.

Jack watched Tyler coolly meet his eyes, but no words were forthcoming. A long second passed, and then he pushed past Jack, moving toward his car.

“Michaels, where you going?” he asked him quietly, turning toward Tyler’s retreating back.

“Home....” he paused. “For now.”

Jack sighed. “When you go after him, make sure Tommy goes with you. And if you need me, you call me.”

Tyler didn’t respond, he just climbed into the passenger side of the Mustang and waited for Tommy and Ryan to get in. His body was practically shaking from the rage he was trying to contain, which was blocking out the waves of pain his brain was trying to signal he was in.

Tommy glanced at Jack and nodded a silent promise. Then he climbed in the back of the car, and Ryan got in the driver’s side. They both looked at Tyler, concern in their eyes, but neither had words to offer. Tyler had his chin cupped in his hand and was staring out the open window. What he saw was beyond either of them.

Tommy told Ryan to just drop him at home and that they’d pick up his car later in the day. Ryan nodded and drove silently to Tommy’s house, unable to find the right words to comfort Tyler.

At Tommy’s, he let Tommy out, and Tommy walked around to Tyler’s window.

Sara and Detective Lincoln came out onto the porch, and Sara looked at Ryan in concern. Ryan shook his head sadly and turned worried eyes on Tyler. Tommy had squatted next to the car door and put his hand on Tyler’s arm. Tyler didn’t meet his eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Ty.” Tyler didn’t respond. Tommy leaned up and kissed the top of Tyler’s head. Then he cupped the back of his neck, forcing their eyes to meet. “You need me, you call me. And when you go after him, I’ll be there.” He watched Tyler swallow and then nod his head slowly. Tommy squeezed his neck once more and then got up, moving back to the other side of the car.

“Give him time,” Tommy told Ryan softly. “He’ll come around. Call me if you need me.”

Ryan nodded. Tommy hugged him, and then, with a final glance at his best friend, he turned and walked up the steps, pulled his wife to him, and held her close.

“What?” she whispered into his chest, fearful of what the answer would be.

“We found out what happened to Ra’shel,” Tommy told her quietly.

Lincoln clenched and unclenched his fists, meeting Tommy’s eyes over Sara’s head. Tommy remembered the pain that had encompassed Tyler when she had died. No one thought he’d ever recover from it. He’d surprised them all by just how strong he was.

“Is Tyler okay?” Sara choked through her tears.

Tommy shook his head. “No,” he whispered, his tears finally falling.

18

TYLER leaned against the bedroom door and took a deep breath, trying to calm his frayed nerves. He felt the tears streak down his cheeks as his heart constricted in agony. He rubbed his face and choked back the tears. There wasn’t time to cry or mourn. He had to find Jackson and kill him for hurting Ra’shel. His heart broke at the thought of what she had gone through in those final moments, and he began to agonize over it, just as he had for the long months after she had died.

No matter how hard they had tried, no matter how many hours they had sifted through the evidence, there hadn’t been even one lead to help them find the person who had been responsible for her rape and murder. It had left Tyler feeling like a failure. He couldn’t find the person who had destroyed his world, yet he had no problem solving cases that had nothing to do with his life.

Tyler walked to the attached bathroom and scooped cold water up over his face, letting the coolness sooth him. When he calmed, he dried his face and hands and slid off his holster, hanging it on the door. Then he pulled off his shirt and tossed it into the hamper.

He looked at the blood streaking his stomach, fighting the nausea that the pain overwhelmed him with. He took a handful of gauze and soaked up some of the blood. It hadn’t reopened as bad as it had the first night, but it was still pretty bad—freely flowing blood that was

refusing to clot. He put three layers of gauze over it and then taped them down, knowing as he did so that he should just tell Ryan, but his emotionally overwhelmed brain couldn't muster the energy.

When he was done, he went into the bedroom for another shirt and then he headed for the kitchen.

He laid his gun down on the counter and took the pain pill Ryan held out to him with a mumbled, "Thank you." Then he picked up the receiver the squad had left and swore as he found two new bugs.

After crushing them, Tyler sat down gingerly on the couch. His movements, more painful than they had been since his stabbing, had Ryan raising his eyebrow and studying him more closely. Although he had known that once Tyler came down from his adrenaline rush, the strenuous activity he'd put his still-healing body through would finally catch up to him, it still pained him to see it. He studied him in concern as Tyler put his head in his hands and rubbed his forehead.

Ryan sat down beside him and put his hand to the back of Tyler's neck, rubbing the tense muscles as he watched Tyler's face, pale and drawn from the amount of pain he was in.

"How bad is the pain, Ty?" he asked his lover quietly.

Tyler sighed without looking up. "Pretty bad," he admitted.

"Scoot forward," he told Tyler softly. Tyler obeyed, and Ryan slid in behind him. He put both hands on Tyler's shoulders and rubbed the knotted muscles. Tyler leaned into Ryan's touch.

Ryan kissed the back of Tyler's head. "I love you," he whispered, his forehead resting against the back of Tyler's silky blond head.

"I love you, Ryan."

Ryan glanced at Tyler's neck, seeing the bruises already beginning to form from his tumble down the stairs. He pulled the neck of the shirt away from Tyler's skin and peered down his back.

"That's gonna be some bruise when it finishes forming," Ryan remarked. Tyler just nodded in reply.

"I'm gonna lay down," Tyler said quietly as the pain overwhelmed him. His whole body hurt, and his stomach burned in agony.

Ryan nodded and kissed him on the temple. Then he led him to the bedroom and helped him lie down on the bed. He watched Tyler

maneuver until he was on his stomach with his hip tilted up so he was partially on his side, avoiding putting pressure on his stomach wound. Then he closed his eyes.

Ryan wanted nothing more than to comfort Tyler, but he understood Tyler's need for space. Soon he would offer him the shoulder he desperately needed, but until then, all he could do was wait, as painful and as hard as that was.

So he wandered around the house. He washed up the few dishes and swept the floor. He glanced at the calendar and remembered it was trash night, so he went room to room dumping the trash into a large garbage bag. He got to their bathroom and pulled the trash out from under the sink.

His eyes fell on the gauze, saturated with dark red blood, and he swore under his breath.

After washing his hands, he went into the bedroom, where he rolled Tyler to his back.

Tyler's eyes flew open. "What?" his voice illustrated his shock and pain.

Without a word, Ryan pulled Tyler's shirt up, and his eyes settled on the blood seeping through the gauze. Tyler tried to push his shirt back down, but Ryan stopped him by grabbing his wrist.

"Stop," Ryan warned, his voice low. He unbuttoned Tyler's shirt and pulled the gauze from his stomach. Frustration and anger coursed through him at the gaping hole he found in Tyler's abdomen.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?" he seethed as his heart thudded quickly in his chest.

Tyler only shrugged. He had no words to offer Ryan to make him understand. He didn't really understand himself, except he hadn't wanted to worry his lover any more than he already had.

Ryan gently took Tyler's chin and forced their eyes to meet. "You can't keep things like this from me, Tyler." Their eyes held for a long moment, and then finally Ryan exhaled deeply, and he grabbed his bag from the dresser and pulled supplies from it.

He cleaned up the blood and then looked the wound over carefully. At least it wasn't torn as badly this time. He shook his head and picked up a vial and syringe. Then he proceeded to stitch the tear back together.

“You’re a mess, Ty,” he finally sighed when he was through. His eyes roamed Tyler’s body. His chest and stomach were mottled with bruises in a variety of magnificent colors. He rolled Tyler slightly so he could see his back, then rubbed his eyes with his thumb and fingers.

“I cannot believe you rolled down those steps with broken ribs and stitches. Couldn’t you at least have waited until you got to the bottom to tackle him?” He kept his voice light.

Tyler smiled lightly at Ryan. “Didn’t exactly occur to me at the time.”

“I swear, one of these days, I’m going to put you on a leash,” Ryan replied with a smile. Tyler smirked. Ryan ran his hands along Tyler’s sides and felt his belly.

“When’d the stitches rip?”

“On my way down the stairs. Although I think I loosened them tackling you, and then even more taking down the guy who shot at you.” Tyler paused and looked Ryan in the eyes. “I should have killed him.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, you shouldn’t have. For a minute though, I thought you were going to. That look in your eyes....” he drifted off. “You gotta stop taking years off my life like that, Ty,” he joked playfully, trying to lift the mood.

“You? Man, when I saw him aiming at you....” Tyler broke off and shook his head.

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, baby, I know,” he finished for him tenderly.

Tyler looked at him, his eyes soft, once again fully aware of the torment Ryan went through, having to watch bad things happen to him.

Ryan smiled and stroked his cheek gently, the way only a lover could. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

Tyler shook his head.

Ryan placed both hands gently on Tyler’s chest. “Don’t shut me out, Tyler,” he whispered. “I know you loved her, and I know in a way you always will. That doesn’t bother me. What bothers me is how badly you’re hurting, and you won’t let me help you.”

Tyler watched him quietly for a long moment, and finally, with a resigned sigh, he slowly got up and walked to the closet. He pulled a small box off the top shelf and sat it on the bed. Sitting down next to it,

he opened it and pulled out an envelope. He held it for a second, contemplating, before he handed it to Ryan with trembling fingers.

Ryan looked at Tyler and then slowly opened the envelope. He pulled out a stack of pictures. On the top was a sonogram. His stomach lurched.

“Oh my God, Tyler. She was pregnant?” Ryan gasped. This was the last thing he’d expected. His experienced eyes scanned over the in utero picture of the tiny fetus.

Tyler nodded. “Six months. That was taken two days before Ra’shel was killed. They tried to save the baby, but....” Tyler choked off.

Ryan leaned forward and pulled Tyler against his chest. “Why didn’t you tell me?” His voice wasn’t criticizing, just bewildered.

Tyler shook his head. “I didn’t want to think... couldn’t think about it. Losing Ra’shel was hard enough, and then when I lost the baby too....” His voice drifted off with the unspeakable pain. “As time went on, I wouldn’t allow myself to think about her. Wouldn’t let anybody talk about her.” His gut twisted in agony as he drifted off again. The pain of the memory he had locked so deep inside threatened to crush him.

“The baby lived for a day and a half at Riverside in the NICU.” Tyler closed his eyes tightly. “I held her as she died in my arms.” His body was shaking as the emotional pain began to consume him.

“Tyler, I am so sorry,” Ryan whispered. His heart constricted painfully in his chest as he thought of Tyler’s agony. He felt his own tears streak down his cheeks.

After a long moment, Tyler pulled away from Ryan and let him look through the other pictures.

A tiny infant hooked up to life support. Tyler holding her in his arms while he rocked her in a rocking chair.

The baby looked like Tyler. A lot like Tyler. Her skin was darker, a cross between her mother’s ebony skin and her father’s naturally tan tone. But her features—they were definitely Tyler’s.

“What did you name her?”

“Brina Rose,” he said, wiping the tears from his face. “I buried her in Ra’shel’s arms.”

Ryan could only watch helplessly as Tyler began shaking uncontrollably. “Oh, Ty,” he whispered. “Do you want to go see them?” he asked softly.

Tyler nodded, and Ryan slowly got to his feet and walked to the dresser. He propped the picture of Brina and Tyler in the corner of the mirror. Then he turned back and pulled Tyler off the bed and into his arms.

He held him for long moments, his right hand gently rubbing Tyler’s head as he soothed him the only way he knew how.

Finally, he pulled back. “Let’s go,” he whispered softly.

He watched Tyler pull a box of rounds from the gun cabinet and slip his holster in the back of his jeans. Then he walked to the kitchen, Ryan a step behind.

Ryan took a bottle of water out of the fridge and unscrewed the top. Taking a drink, he watched Tyler pick up his gun from the counter and thumb the button to release his clip. After he had reloaded it and placed it in his holster, Ryan handed him the water, and Tyler took a long drink.

“Thanks.” He handed the bottle back to Ryan, who put the lid on and set it on the counter. “I ever tell you how much I love you?”

Ryan smiled. “Yeah, as a matter of fact you have. But you can always tell me again if you want to.” Ryan leaned against the counter and put his hands on Tyler’s hips, pulling Tyler toward him.

Tyler leaned in and kissed Ryan’s lips. “You are so good to me. I love you so much, Ryan,” he murmured against Ryan’s lips.

Ryan brought his right hand up to cup the back of Tyler’s head as he deepened the kiss. When he finally pulled away, he looked deeply into Tyler’s eyes.

“And I love you, Tyler. We’re going to get through this. Together. I promise.”

19

RYAN had never been to Ra’shel’s grave. Tyler had never wanted to go, and Ryan had never pushed it, although at times he wondered if

Tyler had dealt with her death. It was obvious now that he hadn't, and that left Ryan worried. Tyler was notorious for locking in all his emotions, hiding them away where he thought they couldn't hurt him and pretending that all was right in the world. Only Ryan knew better, having watched Tyler practically self-destruct on more than one occasion. He knew that this was going to be one of those times, no matter how much Tyler would try and deny his pain.

They approached the headstone, and Ryan took it in. It was pitch-black with an engraving of a teddy bear and two pictures set inside. The first picture was of Tyler and Ra'shel. Ra'shel looked nearly six months pregnant. They were sitting in a yard. She was leaning against Tyler, and Tyler had his arms around her, his hands resting on her swollen belly. Both wore smiles of pride and hope on their faces.

The second was of Tyler holding Brina. Tyler looked completely lost as he looked down at his baby daughter, yet Brina looked peaceful—free.

"That picture was taken right after the sonogram, two days before Ra'shel died," Tyler told him, gesturing toward the picture of him and Ra'shel. "We'd just found out we were having a girl. We were at Tommy and Sara's to celebrate and were having a heated debate over girls' names when Tommy said, 'Smile.'" Tyler had a soft smile on his face as he remembered the day of hope, the day of promise, perfectly in his mind. "She wanted to name her Brina Dawn. I wanted to name her Alexa Rose. In the end, I named her Brina Rose."

Ryan watched Tyler shake himself, pushing away the memories that had flooded him again, threatening to consume him with their power.

"The picture of Brina was taken twenty minutes before she died," he finished. His voice was controlled, but his eyes held the truth.

Ryan watched with silent tears as Tyler sank to his knees, his entire body shaking. Ryan couldn't even begin to imagine the pain that Tyler had gone through when he'd buried his wife and daughter. He knew that Tyler's dad wouldn't have offered any emotional support and wondered about Ra'shel's family. He also knew, watching Tyler now that he'd done a fine job of locking up the emotions that Peters' confession had brought rushing back.

"Why?" Tyler questioned for what seemed like the millionth time.

Ryan sat next to Tyler, and Tyler fell into his arms. Ryan held him, offering what little comfort he could.

"I don't know, Ty. I just don't know." He paused. "But isn't it you who always says we shouldn't chase after questions we may not be ready to know the answers to yet? That if we go fishing for an answer, we might not like what we find?"

After a slight hesitation, Tyler nodded. "But she was a baby, Ryan. My baby," he whispered. "She had nothing to do with it. Ra'shel had nothing to do with it. It was *my* fault they died. They killed them because of *me*. Why didn't they just kill me instead?"

"It wasn't your fault," Ryan tried to soothe.

"Yes, it was. Had I not killed his brother, Ra'shel and Brina would still be alive."

"But you had no way of knowing that."

"I *should* have known. It was their lives I was playing with. When I decided to become a cop, I knew that I was risking my own life, but not my family's." Tyler's body shook, exhaustion and shock wearing on him. "You should run now, Ryan, before someone hurts you because of me," he mumbled as he laid his head in Ryan's lap.

Ryan gently smoothed Tyler's hair away from his eyes. "Tyler, I'm not going anywhere. No matter what, I'm here for the duration."

"I'm not safe."

"I can't think of a safer place to be."

"People want to kill me."

"Yeah, Ty, and so do I on days," he offered as a joke. He was rewarded by Tyler's small smile. "You can't change the past, Ty. What happened was horrible, wrong, and cruel. But it happened, and you can't stop your life because of it, you just have to go on."

"What if I don't want to go on?" Tyler whispered into the wind.

Ryan froze. He closed his eyes as he thought about his next words carefully. "Tyler, you've made it this far. You've gone on. We've started a life together. You want to throw that all away? You want this lousy bastard to win?"

"Hasn't he already?"

Ryan forced Tyler to meet his eyes. "No, Tyler, he hasn't won. He only wins if you let him. You know more today than you did

yesterday or than you have in the past five years since they died. Use that. Fight him. Win. Don't give up on me, Tyler. Don't you *ever* give up on me. Do you understand?"

Tyler nodded slowly.

"Good, now answer my question. Do you want to throw all that we have away?"

"No, Ryan. I love you more than life itself. I need you more than I need my next breath. I'd give my life for you. But, Ryan, I went on when I didn't know what had happened to them. Now I find out that I'm responsible for it. I *caused* their deaths. God, Ryan, I'm a cop and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't protect them. And I couldn't find the person responsible. I tried. So hard. But there was nothing. Nothing at all to go on. I solve cases *every day*, but I couldn't do this for them."

"Don't do this to yourself, Ty," Ryan said quietly.

"And now, what about you?" Tyler pushed on. "You're right, I went on. I fell in love with you. My life is complete. You're my moon, my stars, my whole world. But what if I screw up again?"

"You can't think like that."

"I should just quit. Quit being a cop so I can't do this again."

"Ty, you're good at being a cop. You're good at what you do. You help so many people. Because of you, there are fewer drug dealers in this world. Fewer children get hooked on the crap. Fewer teenagers die because of it. Tyler, you save people's lives every day. Heck, Ty, you saved mine today."

"But if it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have been a target to begin with."

"Tyler, we can't do anything about the past. We can only live for the future. Do you like being a cop?"

"You know I do," Tyler mumbled softly.

"Then you can't give that up. What if I chose to give up after I lost my first patient?"

"But, Ryan, you couldn't. You're a good doctor. You save more people than you lose, and you don't give up until there is no more hope. Sometimes you push on even past that point."

“That’s right, Tyler, and so do you. Granted, you’re the reason that I lose half my patients,” Ryan teased, “but you always try to save the good guy, and you normally do, don’t you?”

Tyler nodded.

“Have you saved the good guys more times than you’ve lost them?”

Tyler nodded again.

“Then isn’t that the same thing?”

Tyler hesitated and then slowly nodded, unsure of himself. “I guess, Ryan, but in your case, you didn’t lose me. I lost them.” Tyler motioned toward the grave.

“Do you know how close I came to losing you the first night I met you?” Ryan asked quietly as he spoke of his worst nightmare—losing Tyler.

Tyler shook his head.

“Your heart stopped twice. At first, we weren’t sure whether or not you’d pull through.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t in love with me then,” Tyler argued.

Ryan shook his head at the stubborn man. “Fine. A year ago, you got shot, and you came into emergency by medevac. My heart almost stopped when I saw it was you—yours did. You crashed as soon as you were pulled from the chopper. I jumped on top of the gurney and started compressions. Tommy was holding your hand and all I could see was terror on his face. I was so scared I wouldn’t be able to save you. God, there was so much blood. I had no idea where it was all coming from. We got you stable, and not five minutes later, you crashed again. I had to shock your heart to get it beating again. We got you to surgery, and I barely reached the first bullet when you went into v-fib. You didn’t wake up for two days, and even then it was touch and go. We weren’t sure what you were going to do.”

Tyler’s eyes were wide at the story he’d never heard, memories he hadn’t retained. Ryan continued. “Every time you come into my emergency room, I take a chance at losing you. Sometimes, it’s enough to paralyze me when it’s over. But in the meantime, I have to keep going and do what it is that I do best: save your life and love you.”

Tyler closed his eyes, allowing the emotions to sweep over him, to truly absorb what it was that Ryan was saying.

“Alright, I won’t quit.” He paused and looked up at Ryan. “As long as you’ll never quit on me.”

Ryan closed his eyes and prayed he’d never have to.

THE sun was beginning to set in the distance, and the wind stirred. Ryan held Tyler, who was curled half in his lap, and rocked him slightly on the ground near Ra’shel and Brina’s grave.

They heard a car pull up and stop. Ryan felt Tyler go for his gun. He pulled it out and laid it on Ryan’s leg, near where Tyler had his head. He heard the soft click of the safety as it was snapped off, but other than that small movement, Tyler was still.

Ryan saw him scanning the distance with his eyes, and he could feel his body tense, but he quickly relaxed when Tommy and Sara stepped into view.

Tyler sat up, pushing the safety back into place, and put his gun away. Tommy and Sara sat down next to them wordlessly. Tommy put his hand on Tyler’s back, and Sara, sitting directly in front of Tyler, pulled him to her and held him. Tyler lay his head on her shoulder and let her comfort him.

When he pulled back, he wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb and smiled softly into her eyes.

“I’ll get him, Sara,” he whispered. His hand cupped the back of her neck, and his thumb stroked her cheek.

She smiled. “I know you will.”

Tommy’s eyes drifted over the grave containing his goddaughter. He squeezed Tyler’s leg affectionately. Finally, he turned to Tyler and took his chin, tipping his head so that he could see his eyes. Concern for his best friend overwhelmed him.

“Let’s go out, Ty.”

“Where?”

“Where else?”

“Jack’s Pub,” Sara and Ryan answered, laughing. Tyler smiled and let his heart begin to heal with their laughter.

They stood and turned toward the cars, but then Tyler turned back slowly, his eyes landing on the grave.

The others watched while a silent tear slipped down his cheek.

20

ON THE drive to the bar, Ryan glanced over at Tyler, who was staring out his window at the sky as night fell. Ryan let out a breath and reached over and squeezed Tyler's hand.

"What'd your dad say when Ra'shel and Brina died?"

Tyler looked over at him. "You're kidding, right?" He shook his head, his eyes partially closed, and his next words were soft. "He said I deserved it."

Ryan clenched his jaw. He wondered how many times Tyler's dad had to hurt him.

"He didn't even care his grandchild died?"

Tyler sighed deeply while his bruised knuckles made patterns on the window he was staring out of.

"He wasn't exactly thrilled when Ra'shel and I got together. I guess he has a problem with interracial marriages. Or maybe it was just *my* interracial marriage." He shrugged. "Either way, when Ra'shel got pregnant, he was... less than amused. When they died, he told me that I deserved it and that it was probably my fault. I just didn't know how true that was until today." He glanced over at Ryan, his head on the back of his seat. "I used to blame myself for not being there. I just never realized their death was for revenge."

"Did he go to their funeral?" Ryan shouldn't be surprised anymore at the hurtful things Tyler's dad did, but he was. He didn't think any person could be any more cruel than the one who called himself Tyler's parent.

Tyler shook his head, biting his top lip.

"I'm sorry, Ty," Ryan said softly.

"Don't be. I got used to it when I was a kid. I only called him because I..." He broke off, unsure of himself.

"Because you needed him," Ryan finished.

Tyler shrugged absently, lost in thought. Ryan could see the tears forming. He knew how badly Tyler ached to have a real family. To be

loved. But no matter how hard Tyler had tried to please him, his dad had never cared about him.

Instead, he had abused him. Ryan found out quite by accident the story of Tyler's past when he'd had some of his records faxed to him after an accident Tyler had had. Ryan had been shocked at all the medical history.

He remembered asking Tyler about the abuse later, and he would never forget Tyler's look of shock, confusion, and finally devastation as he broke down and let out the horror he had bottled up.

But through it all, despite the man never showing Tyler an ounce of compassion, Tyler still continued to wait for the day when he would love him. And that broke Ryan's heart.

When Tyler told his dad about Ryan, they had gone out to his house in Nevada. It was the first and only time Ryan had seen Marvin, and he remembered the day with clarity.

Marvin punched Tyler. Hard. Not because Tyler had introduced him to his male lover, but because his father was a drunk. Tyler caught him as he stumbled.

It shocked Ryan to his core, the gleam in Tyler's father's eyes as he threw the punch, which connected solidly with Tyler's left cheekbone. He enjoyed using Tyler as a punching bag, and Tyler just stood there, his expression unchanged.

There wasn't a time that Ryan could remember Tyler ever standing still after someone had thrown a punch at him. Normally, Tyler was fast with his fists and quick to defend himself. But that day, he hadn't. He had just stood there and taken it. As though he had somehow deserved it. And it was then that the reality of Tyler's entire childhood hit him at full velocity. The drunken man and the little boy who was programmed from day one to believe that he deserved everything the older man threw at him.

Outraged, Ryan grabbed Tyler's arm and pulled him to the door. His father called after him just as Tyler's fingers twisted the doorknob.

"You're just as worthless today as you were the day you were born. Someday, everyone else will realize it, too, and then you'll have nothing. And then you'll come back to me, and I'll make your life just as miserable as you have always deserved."

Tyler didn't look back at the cruel words; he just let out a soft breath and walked silently to the car and got in. Ryan, however, turned on the other man.

"What is wrong with you?" he ground out bitterly. It took all his will to keep himself from knocking the man senseless after he had hit Tyler. The only thing controlling him was his respect for his lover. "How could you treat your own son like that? If you didn't want him, why the hell didn't you just let the state take him? Why'd you fight so hard to get him back each time he was taken from you?"

"No one ever said I didn't want him," Marvin snarled back.

"You have a funny way of showing it."

"I didn't want him to ever be happy. Giving him up would have made him happy. So I spent every day I could making his life hell."

"Why?" Ryan was absolutely floored by the cruelty in the man's voice.

Marvin smiled savagely. "Because he deserves it."

"He doesn't deserve it!" Ryan hissed. "No little boy deserves what you did to him. And he doesn't deserve what you are doing to him now."

Marvin narrowed his eyes. "He did." He kept his voice low, venom pouring from his words.

"How can you say that?" Ryan was staring in shock.

"Because he made his mother leave!" he snarled, anger causing his whole body to shake.

Ryan shook his head as the venom and accusation in Marvin's words hit him full force.

He had known Tyler didn't have a mom, but Tyler never really talked about it. All he had ever said was that she had walked out on them when he was young.

Now Ryan's eyes widened fractionally. "What?"

"She was a wonderful and beautiful woman, and he killed that in her!" the man snapped, and Ryan's mouth hung open in complete astonishment. "He made her miserable from the day he was born, and then one day she just left. And she never came back. So I made sure he suffered for it."

Ryan shook his head, absorbing the cruel words. "How can you blame him? He was just a child." Ryan's heart thudded wildly in his chest.

"Because before he was born, she was happy. Then he came along, and she was never the same. Then one day, she was gone. Just up and left without a word. But I know she left because of him. He drove his mom away, so it was up to me to make sure he knew how worthless he was. And trust me, Dr. Douglas, he knows. He will always know."

Ryan remembered his heart racing at the harsh words. The feel of heat as the anger coursed through him. He clenched his fists and tightened his jaw, wanting to hit the man, but he knew that if he did, he'd be no better than the bastard himself.

So he walked out of the house, slamming the door behind him. He hadn't told Tyler about his conversation, although Tyler had looked at him wearily with tired and defeated eyes. He had known something had happened.

Ryan shook his head, dragging himself from his thoughts as they pulled into the parking lot of Jack's Pub.

"What were you thinking about?" Tyler asked Ryan, watching him.

"Nothing," Ryan lied, unwilling to bring up the conversation. He had often wondered if Tyler had gone through life believing that he had made his mother leave.

"Don't bullshit me, Ryan. I'm a cop. It's my job to read people."

Ryan sighed. "Just thinking about what you must be going through."

"Do you like it when I lie to you?" Tyler asked calmly.

Ryan shook his head and opened his door. He came around to Tyler's side. Tyler was leaning against the car. Tommy and Sara were approaching them.

"So don't lie to me, Ryan."

Ryan sighed again. "How did Ra'shel's parents react when she died? Did they support you?"

“What?” Tyler shook his head, apparently shaken by the question. He looked at Tommy. Tommy turned to Ryan, picking up on Tyler’s distress.

“Ra’shel’s parents... well, they....” Tommy took a breath and closed his eyes as the anguish over the past and the shoddy treatment his best friend had received engulfed him. “They blamed Tyler. They said he should have protected her. That was his job, to protect, they said. They wanted to know where he’d been when she was killed,” Tommy told him, putting his hand on Tyler’s shoulder and squeezing gently.

Tyler shrugged. “See? Everybody knew that it was my fault.”

Tommy turned to Tyler, his eyes ablaze with the argument they had had a thousand times before.

“It was not your fault. What did I tell you all those months that you insisted on blaming yourself?”

Tyler sighed. “That I can’t go back and change it no matter how much I want to,” Tyler repeated stonily. “Same thing Ryan just told me,” he muttered.

Tommy and Ryan gave each other knowing looks.

“Then why do you keep doing this?” Tommy asked Tyler.

“Because now I know I could have prevented it.” His voice was critical.

“How? By not shooting Jackson?” Tommy asked. “What would have happened if you hadn’t shot him?”

“Don’t,” Tyler warned, leveling him with a warning gaze that Tommy ignored.

“Dammit, Tyler, what would have happened?”

Tyler hesitated and fiddled with the cuff of his shirt before he finally closed his eyes. “He would have killed Lani,” he said softly.

“Would you take it back?”

Tyler shook his head. “No. But because I killed him, Brina’s dead, Tommy. He killed her,” Tyler pleaded with him to understand.

Tommy squeezed Tyler’s neck, tipping their foreheads together affectionately. “I know, buddy. I know.”

Sara stepped up beside Tyler. “I never blamed you, Ty,” she offered softly. “And I still don’t.”

Tyler gently touched her cheek. A small, grateful smile tweaked the corner of his lips.

“Wait a sec. Ty saved Lani?” Ryan asked in shock, his face showing his surprise. “Your sister?” he asked Sara for clarification.

Sara nodded, wiping at her eyes.

“Tyler, Ra’shel, Sara, Lani, and I were going to dinner,” Tommy told him. “Lani was barley three. That guy Peters was talking about, Lucas Jackson, happened to be coming down the street at the same time. We still don’t know if he was following us, or if it was purely coincidental. Either way, he hated Tyler and I. We had testified against his buddy and sent him to prison. Shortly after, the guy pissed off the wrong person, and they killed him. Lucas blamed us. He vowed revenge. We didn’t see him that night. He just popped out of nowhere, grabbed Lani, and put a knife to her throat. He didn’t want her to bargain with, he just wanted us to suffer. He was totally insane and hell-bent upon revenge. He dug the knife in and slit part of her throat. As I went for my gun, I caught Tyler out of the corner of my eye as he took him out with a single shot to the head. Thanks to Tyler, Lani only needed stitches instead of a casket.”

Ryan looked at Tyler, whose whole body shook as he relived a part of his past that had cost him so much.

He put his arm around Tyler’s waist. “You need a drink,” he told him, and he steered his lover toward the bar.

21

RYAN watched Tyler consume yet another drink. He was beginning to doubt that Tyler would actually be able to stand on his own when they left.

He was right. When Ryan finally took Tyler’s hand and told him that they were going, Tyler got to his feet and immediately swayed, nearly toppling over. Ryan and Tommy both grabbed him, but Tyler pushed them back with self-assurance, a smile on his handsome face.

“No, no, I got it,” he slurred.

Ryan shook his head at his lover but allowed him to stand, moving mere inches from him in case he should fall.

Tyler wavered once but remained on his feet and took a stumbling step toward the exit. With a small smile and shake of his head, Ryan followed.

It was decided that Tommy and Sara would follow Ryan and Tyler home, just in case Jackson decided to make his move on Tyler when he was less than capable of protecting himself.

When they got there, Tommy came over to the car and helped Tyler out. Sara was laughing at his attempts to move a drunken Tyler into the house.

Tyler had other ideas.

“How’s ’bout a game of football?” Tyler asked, trying to weasel out of Tommy’s grip.

“You’re too drunk. You’d hurt yourself.”

“No, I wouldn’t.”

“You’d fumble the ball and we’d lose.”

“Oh, good point.”

The others smiled, and Tyler tried another tactic. “How ’bout a run?”

Tommy shook his head. “You’d get hit by a car.”

Tyler cocked his head and whispered loudly, “You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“No, but now I’m going to have to.”

“Oh, oops.” Tyler giggled, and Ryan looked at Tommy quizzically, who shook his head with a sigh.

Finally, Tommy pushed Tyler through the door and onto the couch. Tommy ran the sweep through the house, and Ryan watched as Tommy muttered and pulled two more bugs from the same place Tyler had pulled them earlier. It was almost as if the man was taunting him. Then again, he probably was, Ryan thought.

When he was standing next to Tommy, Tommy looked his way, green eyes blazing. “I don’t like this,” Tommy said as he crushed the bugs. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Those were in the same place Tyler found them earlier,” Ryan told him softly. Tommy’s eyebrows shot up at the statement, and he shook his head.

“He’s in a lot of trouble, isn’t he?” Ryan questioned, his tone soft.

“Yeah, he is,” Tommy admitted.

Ryan looked over at Tyler and tried to fight the uneasy feeling in his stomach. He watched Tyler struggle to his feet and stumble to the kitchen.

“Ty? What are you doing?” Ryan followed him. One never knew with Tyler.

“Getting a beer,” came the slurred reply.

Ryan smiled in amusement and shook his head. “I think you’ve had enough to drink.”

“Have not.”

“Yeah, you have.”

“Nuh-uh.”

Ryan stood back and waited patiently, looking into the stubborn blue eyes as Tyler stood and glared. Finally, Tyler turned and headed back to the couch with a grumble. A few minutes later, he was sound asleep.

Ryan then cornered Tommy.

“Okay, spill it.”

“Huh?” Tommy tried to feign confusion.

“Not going to work, Tommy. What was Tyler talking about?”

Tommy shook his head. “He’s going to be really mad at himself come morning,” he mumbled. He looked at Ryan and could feel Sara’s eyes boring into him as well.

“We were running a couple weeks ago. I didn’t think Tyler had had that much to drink, but for whatever reason, he stepped into traffic. The guy in the car jammed on the breaks, but he still bounced Tyler off his hood.”

“What?” Ryan’s jaw was slack. He shook his head in shock. “Back up. When, where, how, and why?”

Tommy let out the breath he’d taken and sat down on the couch next to his best friend. “After work, two days before he got stabbed.

You and Sara were both working late, so Tyler and I went and grabbed a couple beers. Then we decided to go for a run. He didn't seem drunk, or I would have never agreed to it. We were just talking when all of a sudden Tyler swayed kinda funny and stepped out into traffic. I heard the car squealing its tires; I don't know why Tyler didn't. I turned and reached to grab him, but the car smacked into him before I could. Tyler rolled up the hood and bounced off the windshield, which he managed to cave in, and landed on the pavement. The paramedics said that if he hadn't been drunk he'd probably have really gotten hurt. As it was, he walked away with some scratches and bruises."

Ryan shook his head; he could not believe Tyler had kept this from him.

"Paramedics?"

Tommy rubbed his forehead, knowing he was digging himself, and Tyler, a deeper grave as he spoke. "Well, the paramedics had to be called because Tyler was unconscious when the police showed up," he tried to explain.

"He was *unconscious*?"

"Well, yeah, but not for long."

Ryan was shaking his head and cursing under his breath.

"Police?"

"Some motorist passing by called in to report the accident. I guess they didn't know we *were* the cops." Tommy shrugged, a smile playing at the corner of his lips. "There probably wouldn't have even been a police report if Tyler hadn't blown over the legal limit."

"What? Police report? Limit?"

"Well, yeah. For some reason they made him do a Breathalyzer. It was some rookie cop. I tried to explain you only did Breathalyzers if the person was driving while intoxicated, not jogging, but he wouldn't listen. Proceeded to try and give Tyler a ticket. I asked him what the hell for, jogging under the influence? I ripped it up and told him I'd have his badge. Bree showed up then."

Tommy failed to notice Ryan groaning and rubbing his head and Sara laughing, her hand over her mouth, trying to keep her giggles from escaping.

"Jack was pretty pissed. At everybody. Something about his son's cat getting hit by a car, and then Tyler. He yelled at Tyler for being a

moron, me for being a moron's partner and letting him jog into traffic, the rookie cop for being incompetent, the paramedics for fussing over Tyler, Tyler for giving the paramedics a hard time. He probably would have calmed down eventually had Tyler not made that comment about the corncob up his ass." Tommy stopped as Ryan let out a loud groan. "Oh, I shouldn't have said that."

Ryan shook his head in disbelief. "And you kept this from me?"

"Tyler didn't think you'd be too happy to find out he'd gotten arrested for—" He stopped, looking at Ryan with wide green eyes.

"Arrested?"

"Well, um, yeah. Bree got a bit pissed over the corncob comment, and so he slapped on the handcuffs and hauled Tyler's ass off to his car. It wasn't pretty. Tyler was yelling about his rights, his phone call, and police brutality. Jack was yelling at him about shutting the hell up before he showed him the true meaning of police brutality. Tyler said something like, 'Bring it on, big boy.' Jack wasn't too happy about that."

"No, I would think not." Ryan pinched the bridge of his nose near his eyes.

"But what really sent him over the top was Tyler kicking him in the shin."

Ryan's hand dropped. "He didn't?"

"He did. Cap knocked his ass to the ground so fast I thought it would suck Tyler right in. Tyler glared up at him but had enough sense to keep quiet. Jack hauled him to his feet, mumbled something totally incomprehensible, and then threw his ass in a cell to cool off. When they'd both had time to calm down, they realized how stubborn they were being, and Bree let him go."

Ryan stared at Tommy as if he had grown three heads. "I can't believe you didn't tell me. He was knocked unconscious. He should have been in the hospital having scans. It could have been serious. At the very least, he should have been watched for complications. Chances are good he had a concussion."

"Yeah, I know. I stayed with him in the cell. We played cards. He seemed okay. Not off at all. Jack tried to send him once he came to his senses, but Tyler can be really stubborn." Ryan rolled his eyes. "So instead, I took him to dinner."

Ryan sighed, contemplating Tommy. "Have you guys ever had a normal evening together?"

Tommy looked as though he were thinking it over carefully. "Come to think of it, I don't think we ever have."

Somehow that didn't surprise Ryan.

22

"SO, YOU wanna tell me about this car you bounced off of a week ago?" Ryan asked after he sat down on the coffee table facing Tyler, who was sitting on the couch watching a hockey game. He snagged the remote from his lover and switched the TV off.

Tyler paled significantly. "Tommy told you?"

"No, actually you did in your drunken state last night. Tommy just filled in the details for me after I pried it out of him."

Tyler sighed and leaned his head back against the couch, rubbing at his face with the palms of his hands. "What'd he tell you?"

"Pretty much everything, but I'd love to hear your side."

"Isn't much to tell."

"Humor me."

Tyler sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Another headache?" Ryan's expression changed to concern.

Tyler nodded.

"Lean forward," he instructed softly.

Tyler did, and Ryan got up from the coffee table and sat down beside Tyler. He rubbed Tyler's neck and waited.

Tyler finally sighed. "We'd gone to the bar. I had too much to drink, and while we were running, I stepped in front of a car. I'm fine, end of story."

"Try again, Tyler."

Tyler sighed in exasperation and turned abruptly toward Ryan. Ryan dropped his hand to his lap and waited patiently.

“What do you want to hear? You obviously already heard the whole bloody story. Fine, I was drunk. I got hit by a car. Some thickheaded cop made me do a Breathalyzer and tried giving me a ticket, although Tommy threw a fit over that. Jack showed up, and I probably said a few things I shouldn’t have, and he threw my ass in jail to cool off. What more do you want?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think you’d be too happy to hear I’d gotten arrested.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t, but I tell you what, Tyler, I’m more mad to find out you lied to me about it.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Yes, you did. You came home that night with cuts and bruises all over and you said you got them in a fight, not from a car that you decided to play tag with and lose. You were unconscious, for Christ’s sake. I need to know these things.”

Tyler met his eyes for a long moment, and then he sighed, the fight going out of him. “I’m sorry, Ryan, I didn’t think.”

“You’re right, Tyler, you didn’t think. Yes, I would have been mad that you probably knew you were too intoxicated to run on a busy road. And yes, I would have definitely been mad that you were insubordinate with Jack. *Again*. But Tyler, I would rather you told me than keep it from me, and then have me find out the way I did.”

Tyler didn’t say anything, and Ryan studied him carefully. “What about your head?”

“It’s fine.”

Ryan watched him thoughtfully. “When’d the headaches start?”

“It’s just stress, Ryan.”

“When’d they start? Seems to me they started about a week ago.”

“Ryan, they’re—”

“Tyler, you hit your head hard enough to knock yourself out,” Ryan interrupted. “Then you start getting headaches at nearly the same time. I’d feel better if you had a CAT scan.”

“I’m fine, Ryan.”

“You going to make me drag you down there kicking and screaming?”

Tyler finally relented. “Man, I knew dating you would only get me in trouble,” he grumbled good-naturedly.

“No, you get yourself into trouble. *I* usually bail you out of it,” Ryan reminded him, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes.

“Smartass.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Ryan laughed at Tyler’s blue glare, then reached for his hand and pulled him closer. He lowered his head to Tyler’s and kissed him gently. His tongue pressed at his lips, urging Tyler to open his mouth to him. Tyler immediately obliged and pulled Ryan’s tongue into his mouth. Ryan heard Tyler moan from deep in his throat, and moved his tongue deeper. His hand slid up Tyler’s thigh, and he fumbled with the button on his jeans.

What started as a passionate kiss quickly turned into a heated frenzy as Ryan pushed Tyler from the couch, following him to the floor, one hand on his back to guide him, the other on the floor to ease their fall.

He stripped Tyler’s jeans from his body, and Tyler pulled his shirt over his head while Ryan divested himself of his own clothing.

Flipping Tyler to his stomach, Ryan nibbled on the sensitive skin of his lover’s neck, and teased along his hairline with his tongue. The tantalizing seduction elicited a moan from Tyler as he pressed himself up into Ryan, who bit down on Tyler’s shoulder passionately.

Tyler groaned deeply. The sweet sensations Ryan was creating were wiping all thought from his head until all that was left was a deep desire for more.

When Ryan ghosted his fingers down Tyler’s side, the guttural sound that escaped from Tyler’s throat was full of hunger and need, and his movements became more aggressive as he rubbed against Ryan.

Moving both hands to Tyler’s hips, Ryan pressed down to still him, and Tyler whimpered in frustration. Ryan smiled. He slowly ran his tongue down the very center of Tyler’s back, drawing a gasp from Tyler, who pushed his forehead into the floor, wanting nothing more than for Ryan to sink deeply into him.

After preparing himself with oil, Ryan slowly pressed into Tyler’s body. Tyler moaned in pure bliss and tried to thrust back to meet him, but Ryan held him still. He leaned down and kissed Tyler’s back

between his shoulder blades, licking the skin delicately, then moved to his neck, sucking passionately.

Ryan's actions were slow and teasing at first, but soon he picked up speed and force, one hand on Tyler's hip, the other at the center of his tanned back.

Tyler groaned beneath him. Ryan could see his knuckles turning white as he gripped the rug under him.

With a moan, Ryan thrust one last time into his lover and held onto him tightly as his orgasm rushed through him. He collapsed down on Tyler and took a deep breath, regaining control of himself. Then he rolled off of him, quickly turned Tyler onto his back, and devoured him. He smiled as Tyler's eyes rolled to the back of his head just as he reached a peak of ecstasy.

23

"SO, WHAT do you want to do tomorrow?" Ryan asked as they were sitting at the table playing cards.

"I, um, I'm going back to work tomorrow," Tyler answered uneasily, studying his cards to avoid his lover's eyes.

Ryan hadn't cleared Tyler from medical leave yet, but he had known his lover wouldn't stay home for very long. He never did.

Ryan sighed. "You haven't been cleared yet," he pointed out.

"Will you clear me?" Tyler looked up at him.

Ryan shook his head. "You're not ready yet, Ty."

"I need to go back, and whether you clear me or not, I'm going."

"Jack's not going to let you without a release."

"It's almost been two weeks. You were going to clear me after two weeks anyway."

"It's been just over a week, and besides, you ripped your stitches out. Twice. That set you back, Ty. If by this weekend you're up to it, I'll sign your release, but give yourself a few more days, or else you'll just end up back where you started from."

"I have to go back, Ryan. I'm going crazy sitting here wondering what Jackson's next move is going to be instead of out there finding him."

"Even after I clear you, you still have to ride a desk. Don't you get it, Ty? You were seriously injured. It takes time to recover. Give yourself time."

"I can't, Ryan, not this time. You can approve it or not, but either way, I'm going back."

Ryan sighed. He considered continuing to try and argue with Tyler, but then thought better of it. He'd seen that look in his lover's eyes before and knew from experience that arguing with him only gave him a headache. It never got him anywhere.

"What, Ryan?" Tyler looked up and studied his lover, who was flexing his jaw as he considered how to respond.

Ryan shook his head. "Nothing. I'm not going to argue with you. I'd tell you not to push it, but you'll just find some way to argue, so forget it."

"Ryan, I feel fine."

"Okay, Tyler." Ryan sighed.

"What, Ryan? You don't think I know what my own body tells me?" Tyler challenged him.

Ryan glared. He should have known that Tyler would argue anyway. Tyler always argued when he felt threatened or defensive or as though he had a point to make.

"No, Tyler, I don't. You always push it. You always try to go beyond your limits. But who am I to argue with you about it? I'm just a doctor who happens to know your body better than you do, not to mention your lover who actually cares what happens to you." Ryan threw his cards down on the table and pushed his chair back. He walked toward the bedroom, shaking his head. Tyler would push himself into the ground if it meant catching his man, and since this time it was personal, he'd probably push a whole lot farther.

Tyler came into the bedroom on his heels. "So, what? You don't want me to go after the man who killed my wife and baby?"

"No, Tyler," Ryan said calmly, turning to face his lover. "I didn't say that. You know I want you to get whoever did this to you. To them. You know I would never stop you from avenging their deaths. Heck,

I'm all for it, but I don't want you to kill yourself in the process. I don't think they would either."

Tyler shook his head and stormed out of the bedroom. Ryan lay down on the bed with a sigh. Tyler had an incredibly hot head at times, and usually it was best to just leave him alone and allow him to cool off before trying to talk to him, although it wasn't always that easy. Tyler was like a pit bull. Once he grabbed hold of something, he refused to let go.

There was no way Tyler wasn't still feeling pain after the damage his stomach muscles had suffered. Short of tying him up, though, Ryan knew he wouldn't be able to keep him down for long. All he could really do was be there to catch him when he fell, which was a very likely scenario.

A while later, he opened his eyes as he felt Tyler sit down on the bed next to him. His brown gaze settled on his lover, who looked tired and unhappy.

"I'm sorry, Ryan."

"Don't be. I know you're upset." Ryan propped himself up on his elbow, his eyes on Tyler. He wasn't angry with Tyler. He'd learned a long time ago that Tyler was going to be Tyler no matter what he did, and he'd accepted that. It was too much work not to.

"Yeah, but you're just worried about me. I shouldn't have bit your head off."

"Ty, it's okay," Ryan told him again.

Tyler nodded, determination in his eyes. "But I'm still going."

Ryan gave him a half smile. "Yeah, I figured you would."

"I'll be okay," Tyler tried to assure him.

Ryan shook his head, knowing that was an empty promise meant to make him feel better. It didn't. He sighed deeply. "I hope so, Tyler. I really hope so."

Tyler met Ryan's eyes. He didn't like the worry that he saw on Ryan's face, but he didn't know what else to offer him. He couldn't just sit and do nothing while the man who had altered the path of his life stood just outside and taunted him.

"Do you remember Cole Rainer?" Tyler asked Ryan.

"Isn't he a Homicide detective?"

“Yeah, you remember him?”

“Yeah, why?” Ryan asked slowly, looking at Tyler quizzically.

“He’s coming over to play with you tomorrow.” Tyler smiled.

“Tyler, I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Think of it more like a play date,” he told him, his smile mischievous.

Ryan rolled his eyes, a smile quirking the corner of his lips.

Tyler took Ryan’s hand and intertwined their fingers. “I don’t want to take any chances. I can’t lose you too. I know you can take care of yourself, but it would make me feel better if he was with you.”

Ryan nodded, understanding clear in his eyes. And Tyler smiled, his relief evident.

24

RYAN sat down in his office. He leaned back in his chair while Cole sat down across from him and filled Ryan in on his recent phone call with Tyler. Another dead end, and Tyler was as frustrated as ever.

It’d been nearly a week since Tyler had gone back to work, and Ryan could tell he was exhausted. Of the numerous leads he and Tommy had chased, not one of them had panned out. He was annoyed and frustrated, and he was wearing himself out. He was pushing himself too hard, too soon. And Ryan could tell he was in pain. Tyler’s headaches seemed to be growing more frequent, which had Ryan concerned. He had scheduled Tyler to come down for a CAT scan earlier in the day, but Tyler had called and told him he was too busy to make it. So Ryan rescheduled it and planned on dragging Tyler down with him tomorrow, even if it meant manhandling him. The headaches *were* probably just stress—Lord knew he was under enough of it—but the fact that they had come on about the same time he’d been hit by that car bothered Ryan.

Ryan sighed, and then a thought occurred to him. “Have you guys ever been through Ra’shel’s medical records? Just to see if something was overlooked with the autopsy?”

Cole looked thoughtful. “Not her medical records, no. The autopsy was pretty conclusive. And we had full doctor cooperation with any questions we had. But it’d be great if you could give us a fresh opinion on it. Maybe we did miss something.”

Ryan and Cole picked up the files on their way out of the hospital. When they got home, they found Tyler asleep in the bedroom, so Cole bid Ryan a good evening and headed for the door.

“Let me know in the morning what you find from the reports,” he told Ryan.

Ryan promised he would, and then, after locking the front door, he headed for their home office and settled in his chair with the reports.

He went through Brina’s first, since it was smaller. The care she’d been given was routine. Ryan noticed she had the same blood type as Tyler, O negative. She had died from complications of underdeveloped lungs and a brain hemorrhage, which was common in babies born so many weeks premature. From what Ryan read, everything that could have been done, had been. In the end, however, it just hadn’t been enough.

There were remarks in her chart about Tyler. In the entire thirty-eight hours that she had lived, he had not once left her side except during the four one-hour shift changes, and even then, he stood right outside her window, watching, and waiting, and hoping. Even with the urging of the staff and his friends to take a break, he had stayed.

Ryan shook his head sadly and flipped back to her birth.

Her birth had been a Cesarean performed at 11:08 p.m., shortly after Ra’shel’s arrival at Riverside. She weighed in at two pounds, one ounce, and was fourteen inches long.

Ra’shel had coded and they had been unable to restore a cardiac rhythm, so Brina was quickly delivered. Brina was immediately intubated and incubated and rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit. Her heartbeat held strong throughout the night and all the next day. But sometime in the middle of the second night, it grew weaker. By morning, it was dangerously slow. The doctors knew the end was growing near, so they allowed Tyler to hold her.

By noon, she was extremely critical, and despite their best efforts, she died in Tyler’s arms at 1:08 p.m., exactly thirty-eight hours after she’d been brought into the world.

With a sigh, Ryan closed the folder and opened Ra'shel's. He turned to the back and read through the EMT reports and the emergency physician's.

She had been found, bleeding heavily and clutching her swollen belly, in an alley by passing pedestrians. She had been conscious when the EMTs arrived and had been able to give them her name, the baby's due date, Tyler's name, and that he was an LAPD detective before she lost consciousness.

She was unresponsive when she reached Riverside. The hospital, and then the arriving police, had all unsuccessfully tried to reach Tyler. Someone had gotten hold of his captain, and they were still tracking Tyler down during the final moments of her life.

When she crashed, they worked on her for several long minutes. Finally, with all hope gone, they performed an emergency C-section in the ER. Tyler arrived minutes later.

From the reports, he had rushed in before they could tell him she had died. They couldn't stop him. Tommy followed on his heels. Tyler had panicked and pulled her into his arms, begging her to wake up. The doctors had been sure they would have to sedate him. But then he asked about his baby, and they took him to her.

Ryan scanned through the autopsy reports. Ra'shel had been raped, beaten, and stabbed twice, and they had found three different DNA strands from the semen inside her. None of them matched Tyler.

Ryan stopped and read that part again. He couldn't ever remember Tyler telling him that more than one person had raped her. As far as he knew, until Peters' confession, Tyler had only been aware of one assailant.

With a shake of his head, Ryan continued on to find the cause of death. He was stunned when he read the results and had to skim back over the last words again.

Drug overdose.

Ryan shook his head and went over it again. It was the first time he'd ever heard anything about a drug overdose. Tyler had told him that she'd died from blood loss and internal injuries, which she did have, but according to the medical examiner reports, they weren't fatal.

She had large amounts of heroin and cocaine in her system, along with track marks on the soles of her feet and between her toes, signs of

repeated drug use. Ryan had seen addicts inject in hard-to-notice places. He knew that someone trying to hide an addiction from their spouse, who also happened to be a cop, would probably inject in these places.

Unrelated to her death, upon the autopsy, they discovered organ damage from prolonged drug use, confirming Ryan's suspicion.

He closed his eyes and shut the folder. Then he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face with his hands.

Ryan sat there for a moment, sorting through the new information, and then opened the folder back up. This time, he turned to the beginning. He flipped through the pages quickly and stopped when he found her prenatal records from the hospital OB/GYN clinic.

His eyes wandered to the date.

He paused.

The date was ten months before Brina's conception.

He shook his head as he continued to read. And then Ryan's eyes widened in disbelief. When she had been nearly three months along, the pregnancy had been terminated.

He scanned the prenatal test results. She'd had a normal blood workup for the Rh factor done, followed by an amniocentesis. Ryan looked over the results. Ra'shel had A negative blood typing. The baby had been B positive.

"That can't be right. That's not possible," he muttered to himself. He knew that Tyler and Ra'shel had been married at the time of this baby's conception. He also knew that there was no way that Tyler had been the father of that baby.

He rubbed his head as he wondered if Tyler knew she had been pregnant. If not, should he even tell him? He knew that Tyler had a right to know, but she was dead. Maybe he should just leave it be and let him keep on believing that she'd been faithful.

Then again, if it had been him, he would want to know.

But would Tyler?

Ryan skimmed through the rest of the folder.

He stopped cold on treatment she'd received in the ER for injuries and bruising that the doctors had classified as spousal abuse, although Ra'shel had insisted otherwise.

Ryan knew beyond a doubt that Tyler would never hurt Ra'shel, even if he had found out that she had been pregnant with someone else's baby.

He continued to read through the reports. He noticed traces of drugs in her system during subsequent ER visits, mainly heroin and cocaine, and abuse had been reported five more times before her second pregnancy.

The police had finally been called.

Ryan sighed deeply and slammed the folder shut. He rubbed his temples as he shook his head.

25

"TYLER, we need to talk," Ryan told him after dinner as they stood in the kitchen and finished up the dishes.

"What?" Tyler asked, throwing the towel over the dish rack after he had dried the last dish and put it away. He turned to his lover, his eyes inquisitive, and rested his hip against the counter.

Ryan looked his lover over once and noticed again how tired Tyler looked. Dark circles marked the delicate skin beneath his eyes, which normally sparkled but were now tired and dull.

Ryan took Tyler's hand and led him out to the living room. He pulled Tyler down on the couch with him and turned to face him.

"What, Ryan?" Tyler asked in concern. His blue eyes bore into him with worry.

"I went through Brina and Ra'shel's medical records today."

"Yeah?" Tyler said slowly, eyeing him.

"I wanted to see if maybe I could find anything that might be helpful to you," he continued cautiously.

Tyler nodded. "And?"

"What were you told about Ra'shel's autopsy?"

"That she had been beaten, raped, stabbed, and bled to death." His tone was flat, as though he were speaking of just anyone, not his dead wife, and it sent shivers down Ryan's spine.

"Who told you that?"

“The M.E. Why?”

“Dr. Brogman?”

Tyler shook his head. “Dr. Marnsteen. Dr. Brogman did the autopsies, but he had a heart attack before he could deliver the reports. Dr. Marnsteen was filling in for him.”

Ryan sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck. “He lied to you, Ty,” he told him gently. “The cause of death wasn’t blood loss. It was a drug overdose.” He watched the stunned expression slowly settle over Tyler’s face.

“What?” Tyler asked in disbelief as he shook his head in denial.

Ryan watched him, letting it sink in. He waited for the storm he knew was brewing.

He didn’t have to wait long.

Tyler jumped to his feet and spun on his lover, who watched him calmly from the couch.

“That’s. Not. Possible,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Ryan sat quietly. He watched Tyler pace relentlessly, running trembling fingers through his hair. Finally, he turned to his lover, his voice calm and level. “If she did, then it was forced into her.” He waited, his eyes pleading with Ryan to agree.

“Maybe,” Ryan did agree. “But from what I read, she was an addict.”

“Are you freaking insane? She wouldn’t do that!” Tyler insisted, his voice rising.

“Tyler, I don’t want to do this to you, but if I can help you in any way find the people responsible, then I can’t keep this to myself.”

Tyler stilled. “People?” he questioned.

Ryan rubbed at his face as he realized even more of the autopsy had been kept from Tyler. He took Tyler’s hand, pulling him back down onto the couch beside him.

“Did he say how many DNA samples were found?”

Tyler’s face went blank, and Ryan was momentarily concerned. Finally, Tyler shook his head as if to clear it.

“He said that they didn’t find any DNA.” He paused. “But I have a copy of their autopsies.”

Ryan tipped his head, his eyebrow raised.

“Get them,” he told him softly.

Tyler got off the couch and headed for their office. Ryan followed a pace behind. He watched Tyler pull open the bottom drawer of his desk and search through it.

Finally, he pulled out a file and handed it to Ryan. Ryan leaned against the leather couch near the window as he opened it.

The sun was beginning to descend, casting an orange glow upon the world. Tyler stood nearby, his hands resting in his rear pockets, his gaze lost out the window.

Ryan read quickly, flipping through the pages. He froze when he came to the pictures. Cold daggers of dread pierced his skin.

“You have the photos?” His eyes shot up to look at Tyler in alarm.

Tyler continued to stare out the window, unwilling to see the gruesome pictures that sometimes still haunted his mind.

Ryan watched him, worried.

“I sorta lifted them from Homicide,” Tyler told him with a sigh. “Policy doesn’t let me investigate my own family’s deaths, but you know me, I never do what I’m told. Cole was the investigating officer, but pretty much all of Narcotics, Vice, Homicide, and any other officer who could spare time was investigating. The one thing they were adamant about was that I didn’t see the pictures. But I didn’t care what they thought. I needed to see them. I don’t know why, I just...”

He shook his head, pulling himself from the memory. “I picked the lock on Cole’s desk, scanned a copy of them, and there they are. No one knows I did it. I never told anyone. Not even Tommy. He’d probably have a heart attack if he knew I’d seen them.”

Ryan glanced at the photos in his hand and then back at his lover.

“Tyler...” He stopped and sighed deeply. His chest heaved with the deep breath. “I wish you hadn’t seen these.”

Autopsy photos were always horrific, but when it was someone you loved.... He couldn’t even begin to imagine what Tyler had felt, was feeling.

“Yeah, you and me both,” Tyler whispered.

“Why’d you keep them?”

“I don’t know,” Tyler answered honestly. “To punish myself, maybe.” He shrugged.

Ryan sighed, concerned, as he watched his lover. He finally set the file on his own desk and then moved over to Tyler and stood behind him. He placed his hands on his shoulders and squeezed gently. Then he soothed his hands along his lover's arms and slipped them around his waist. He kissed the back of Tyler's neck and then pulled him against his chest.

"It's still in your head, isn't it?" he finally asked.

Tyler could only nod as the first tear threatened to spill.

"I'm so sorry, Tyler," he whispered.

He held Tyler for a long time before they sat down on the couch, angling sideways so they faced each other. Ryan laid his hand upon Tyler's thigh, rubbing gently.

"The report's bogus," Ryan finally told him.

Tyler did a double take. "What?"

"I have the original report. Dr. Brogman's report. Ra'shel's injuries and the blood loss weren't fatal. She died of a massive drug overdose." Ryan hesitated, unsure of how Tyler would take his next words. "They also found three different DNA samples. None of them were yours."

Ryan watched Tyler's rapidly changing expressions. Finally, Tyler groaned as the tears slid down his cheeks. Ryan brushed them away with his thumbs.

"I'm sorry, Tyler," was all that he could offer.

Tyler rubbed at his face tiredly. "So what about the drugs?"

Ryan ran his fingers through Tyler's hair before answering. "They found heroin and cocaine in her system at the time of her death. Yeah, the heroin could have been forced, but it's pretty unlikely that the cocaine was."

"But she was pregnant, Ryan, she wouldn't have done it."

"If she was an addict, Ty, she might not have been able to stop. They found organ damage caused by prolonged drug abuse and track marks in her feet. You and I both know she would inject there to hide it from you."

Tyler sat, stunned, as Ryan's words sank in. "Why? Why would she do the exact thing I fight?"

Ryan shook his head, for he didn't have the answer Tyler was searching for. The only person that did was gone, leaving Tyler with questions that would never have any answers.

"If she was an addict, did that hurt Brina's chance at survival?"

Ryan sighed. "It didn't help it," he finally admitted.

Tyler took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His gaze settled on Ryan, and he sighed knowingly.

"There's more, isn't there?"

Ryan nodded. He watched as Tyler raised his eyebrows in question at his hesitation.

"Who was abusing Ra'shel?" he finally asked, looking intently at Tyler.

Tyler groaned, and his shoulders fell. He should have known that was coming.

"I didn't beat my wife, if that's what you're asking," he said sarcastically.

"But you knew?"

"Of course I knew. It was sorta hard not to tell my wife had bruises all over her all the time."

"The reports said it was spousal abuse."

"Who else were they going to blame?"

"It also said they notified the police," Ryan continued, watching Tyler and his reaction.

"I know," he responded dully. The fire had suddenly gone out of him.

"Did they blame you?" Ryan asked, a heavy feeling forming in his gut.

Tyler turned his head. Ryan reached out and cupped his chin, pulling gently so that Tyler's eyes drifted back to his own.

"Ty, did they?"

Tyler nodded slowly. "At first."

"What happened?"

"What do you think happened?" Tyler replied, his voice bordering on sarcasm. "I was arrested and charged with domestic assault, assault and battery, and aggravated assault."

Ryan's heart pounded in his chest. Disbelief and pain were written across his face. "You went to jail?"

Tyler just nodded numbly.

"Didn't Ra'shel tell them the truth?"

"Yeah, but they figured she was just covering for me, or was afraid of me, and since she wouldn't say who did it...." He let the sentence drift off.

Ryan got the picture.

"Did you know who did it?"

Tyler shook his head. "At first I didn't know where to start, and by the time I did...." He paused, remembering. "I went to jail. And after that, I stopped caring."

"How long were you in jail for?" Ryan could not believe Tyler had gone to jail. He'd known that Tyler had done overnights for minor things, like fighting. And he'd done several days for contempt of court once or twice. But this was a whole different picture, and Ryan didn't like the color it was painted in.

Tyler looked away. "Nearly six months, by the time everything was said and done."

Ryan's jaw dropped, and he struggled to close it.

"Six months?" he repeated.

Tyler nodded. "Then she was beat up again, and they felt like idiots."

"Yeah, I can imagine," Ryan finally said. His heart was racing, and his stomach felt like lead. He had to work to speak past the lump that had formed in his throat.

"Was she having an affair?" he asked Tyler quietly, already knowing the answer but waiting to see if Tyler did.

Tyler sighed deeply and let his head drop against the couch. He was sitting sideways, facing Ryan, one leg tucked up under him, and he looked lost.

"I had hoped not, but... probably." He sighed. "I don't know what was going on," he admitted softly. "But my guess was that she was cheating on me." He looked at Ryan and narrowed his eyes. "You know something," he accused.

Ryan couldn't hide his surprise at Tyler's observation. Tyler had always been quite adept at reading people. "Tyler...." He stopped and

shook his head. "Maybe some things you are better off not knowing," he told him quietly.

"What are you hiding?"

"Something you can't unhear once you know."

Tyler stared at him stonily, his eyes clear. "Tell me."

Ryan relented with a sigh. He cupped the back of Tyler's neck and rubbed his thumb over the silky hair at the base of his skull. "Did you know she was pregnant before Brina?"

Tyler's eyes widened, and he shook his head slowly. Ryan could see the pain in his eyes. "When?" he asked quietly.

"Ten months before she would have conceived Brina."

Tyler's shoulders drooped, and he sighed. "What happened to it?"

"She had an abortion," Ryan told him quietly.

"What?" His voice was dangerous as he watched Ryan.

"Ty, the baby wasn't yours."

Tyler felt cold, and for a brief moment, he couldn't move as the world went fuzzy. "How do you know?" he finally asked as the pain hit him.

"The baby's blood type was B positive."

"So?"

Ryan rubbed Tyler's leg. "You and Ra'shel both have a negative blood typing. Two negatives can't make a positive. And beyond that, you're O and Ra'shel was A. The baby would have had to have one of the two of your blood types. It couldn't be B and be yours," he explained gently.

"What was Brina?" Tyler gasped suddenly as the implications became clear.

"She was O negative, Ty. She was yours," Ryan assured him softly.

"You sure?" Tyler asked, relief flooding him.

"Ty, she looked like you."

Tyler smiled softly.

"I didn't want to hurt you, Ty. I wasn't sure whether or not I should tell you. I didn't want to change your memory of her."

Tyler ran his hands along his jeans. "Yeah, well, my memory of her isn't as wonderful as you might think," he admitted with a sigh.

“We had a lot of problems, and I just couldn’t seem to fix them. My job was hard on her. I wasn’t home a lot, and the danger that comes with it was overwhelming for her. She was constantly on my case, and when I’d get hurt, she’d go nuts. She’d act as though I did it on purpose. I tried to understand her, that she was hurting too, but we ended up fighting constantly. And then she started getting hurt.” Tyler stopped, lost in thought. Ryan rubbed his leg affectionately.

“I knew something was going on with her, but she wouldn’t talk to me about it. At first I thought maybe someone was hurting her to get to me, and that she was afraid to tell me. But then I started to realize that I just didn’t want to accept that she was having an affair. When I went to jail, I was so angry that I stopped caring.” He shrugged.

“But then she got pregnant, and somewhere I hoped we could put everything behind us, that we’d have a fresh start. Sometimes the baby seemed to overwhelm all the other problems we had.”

Ryan could read the pain in Tyler’s expression, his posture, and in his voice, and it hurt him deeply to know that Tyler had been treated so badly. He was confounded by the fact that Tyler had never told him this part of his past. It was just one more twist in Tyler’s life that he hadn’t been aware of, and he couldn’t help but wonder how much more Tyler had to hide.

“Did it ever go to court?”

Tyler’s fingers rubbed over his closed eyes. “Being that she was in a violent situation and refused to leave her accused attacker, who also happened to be considered a lethal weapon, and because of my standing in the community and the fact that I carry a deadly weapon, I was denied bail, and the DA hurried up with the court date and convicted me almost immediately. The whole thing felt like a setup. Not just to me, but everyone around me. Nobody believed I’d be convicted. There was no hard evidence, and yet I received a five-year minimum sentence before I’d even be eligible for parole.”

Ryan’s eyes were wide as he listened. “You never told me they consider you a lethal weapon.”

Tyler shrugged. “The Navy does, because of my martial arts training. But it was just the DA’s way of rubbing it in and making sure the judge considered me a threat.” He let out a breath that sounded annoyed. “When she got beat up again, she went to Tommy. He took her to the hospital and called Jack. Jack went to a judge and expedited

my release. Shortly thereafter, the conviction was overturned, and I got an apology and my badge and gun back. I tried to move on, to put it behind me, but have you any idea how hard that was?"

Ryan swallowed. He shook his head, his hand gently encircling Tyler's.

Tyler sighed, letting out a slow breath as he thought, and then he shook his head. "I don't know, maybe I never completely got past it." He paused and then shrugged. "Eventually, though, Ra'shel got pregnant, and I tried to forge on. Then she died," he stated matter-of-factly.

Ryan's heart felt heavy. Tyler's entire life had been filled with pain. He knew it had been bad, but never imagined it was *this* bad. He couldn't even begin to imagine what six months in jail had done to him, or what that time must have been like.

"What was prison like?"

"Hell," Tyler replied. He rubbed the back of his neck. "Against protocol, they threw me in a high-security prison, where I'd sent a lot of very angry people."

Ryan froze. "What happened?"

Tyler shook his head. "Let's just say I got my ass kicked pretty much on a daily basis. Even in low-security, cops don't normally last too long in prison. I honestly have no idea how I survived six months. I should have been dead the first day."

Ryan didn't know what to say. Tyler read his mind. "I'm okay, Ryan. I survived. That's all that really matters."

"Is it?" he questioned, his eyes narrowed. Ryan thought there was plenty that mattered, including Tyler's state of mind and the nightmares he must still deal with.

Tyler shrugged. "It's all that I'll let matter."

Ryan sighed, knowing now was not the time to push. "Did anyone try to help you?" he asked instead.

"Oh yeah, they all did, but there wasn't much they could really do. It was just beyond their control. Tommy, though, he nearly got sent up himself for some of the crap he was trying to pull."

"I'm so sorry, Tyler. I have no idea what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. It's over. Let's just leave it there."

Ryan wasn't sure if Tyler was stating a fact or begging him not to dig deeper. Either way, he knew that someday they'd have to pursue it further, because he was certain by the haunted look in Tyler's eyes that he wasn't yet past what had been done to him. But he also knew that Tyler wasn't ready to analyze his feelings just yet.

Ryan pulled Tyler against his chest. He laid his cheek on Tyler's head and wrapped his arms around the warm body of the man he loved more than anything.

"I love you, Tyler," Ryan whispered.

He felt Tyler's smile. "You know, you're the only person who had enough guts to tell me the truth about Ra'shel. You knew I could have blown up and Lord knows what else, but you took that chance and told me the truth. Right there, you showed me how much you love me, how much you care about me. I know that no matter what, I can always depend on you."

Ryan gently rubbed Tyler's back. He *had* been afraid of what Tyler would do. He had been afraid that he would blow up and storm out on him. He was relieved that he hadn't, but in a way, he was also a little bit nervous about his reaction. Normally, when Tyler exploded over something, it was his way of getting it off his chest and moving on. But when Tyler was calm, Ryan worried even more. He knew that when Tyler was quiet, the bomb would have to go off sooner or later, and when it did, the pieces would be hard to pick up.

26

THE phone on Tyler's desk rang, interrupting the comfortable silence.

Tyler answered it. "Hello?"

"So, you ready for our next game, Detective?" Jackson's irritating voice came over the line.

Ryan watched Tyler close his eyes with a slight shake of his head and hit the button next to the phone.

"And what would that be?" he responded.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough."

"You do realize that I'm going to kill you, don't you, Jackson?"

“Well then, that will make it all the more fun. To see which one of us is left standing.” Jackson laughed, sure of himself and his plan to take Tyler down.

“Look, Harry, I’m tired of playing this little psychopathic game. So why don’t you just tell me where you are and I’ll come kick your ass and shoot you in the head.”

Ryan shook his head at his lover, who shrugged at his expression. Ryan would never understand why Tyler baited people the way he did.

“But that wouldn’t be any fun.”

“Would be for me.”

“Yes, I’m sure it would be, but I have other plans. You see, you’re the one who is going to die. After I break you, that is. I’m looking forward to breaking you.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else. Let me save you the trouble. No one else has succeeded, what makes you think you’re so special?”

“Because I know your weak spots. I’ve studied you.”

Ryan watched Tyler’s temple throb as he ground his teeth.

“No comment on that, pretty boy?”

“Not really,” Tyler responded flippantly.

“Well then, the game continues. Watch your back, because when you least expect it, I’ll be there.” Jackson laughed as he disconnected the call.

Tyler pressed the disconnect button on his end, glanced at the trace, and dialed headquarters, directly into the unit tracing the calls.

“This is Michaels. Give me an address, you had enough time.” He wasted no time with pleasantries.

“I’m sorry, Detective Michaels, he has the trace so scrambled, we can’t get an accurate location,” the officer on the line told him apologetically.

Tyler swore, and Ryan rubbed his leg. He was turned toward Tyler, watching him in concern.

“Thanks,” Tyler responded. The second he had thumbed the disconnect button, the phone shrilled in his hand.

“Hey, Jack,” Tyler answered with a sigh.

“Tyler, I heard the conversation. This guy is seriously off balance. You could be in deeper water than you can stand.”

“Don’t worry, Jack, I was a SEAL, remember? We’re good swimmers,” he told him good-naturedly. He glanced over at his lover with a smile. He heard his captain sigh.

“Did you get an address?”

“No. Headquarters says he’s scrambling his location.”

“Damn! Watch your back, Tyler. This guy is nuts and obviously good at this game.”

“I hear you, Jack. And I will,” he promised.

“Call me if you need me.”

“I will. Thanks, Jack.”

After he had hung up, Ryan lifted his eyebrows at his lover.

“What’d Jackson say?” he asked.

“Same thing he always says.”

“He wants to play some more, huh?”

“Yep,” Tyler said, rubbing his head.

“What are you going to do?” Ryan pulled Tyler’s hands down and slid behind him, rubbing his shoulders in a deep massage.

Tyler moaned appreciatively and ducked his chin, giving Ryan better access.

“What can I do? Play the game, I guess. He’s getting irritated. Which means he’ll screw up, and when he does....” Tyler’s voice drifted off, his unvoiced threat hanging thickly in the air.

“Be careful, Tyler.” Ryan squeezed Tyler’s shoulders and pulled him tightly against his chest, wrapping his arms around his lover.

Tyler smiled. “I will be, Ryan,” he promised, and he sank into the embrace, feeling safe and loved.

27

TWO hours before Tyler’s scheduled CAT scan, Ryan decided to track him down and personally bring him to his appointment. He knew his

lover all too well and figured Tyler had either forgotten about the appointment or was already trying to figure a way out of it.

He wasn't surprised when he didn't find Tyler at his desk, so he strode to Jack's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he heard Jack holler from the other side. He pushed the door open, and the captain glanced up at him.

"Oh Lord, what has the kid done now?"

Ryan smiled at his reference. People still referred to Tyler as "kid," particularly when he'd done something outrageous or outlandish. Tyler had so many boyish features, not to mention he didn't at all look his age.

"Hey, Jack. You got a minute?"

"Sure, Ryan, have a seat. Coffee?" He motioned toward his coffeepot.

"No, I'm fine. Thanks. You seen Tyler?" Ryan asked, sitting in a chair across from the Narcotics captain.

Jack shook his head. "Not lately. He ran out of here an hour or so ago with Tommy on his heels. I swear that kid doesn't know the meaning of the term 'desk duty'."

Ryan laughed. "I think that's just one of the many phrases missing from Tyler's vocabulary. I was thinking of buying him a dictionary for Christmas with all the important words highlighted. You know like, 'little', 'truth', and 'yes, a bullet wound to the chest *is* considered serious.'"

Jack let out a long, jovial laugh. His eyes were bright with humor. "That's our Tyler. Always keeping us on our toes." Jack stretched his legs out in front of him and then settled back in his chair, a smile on his face. "So, normally when you're looking for him, it's because he's doing his best to avoid you because he's afraid of getting his ass chewed out. So what's he done this time?"

"Nothing, *yet*," Ryan told him, emphasis on "yet." "He's got an appointment for a CAT scan in a couple hours, and since he backed out yesterday, I figured I'd cover all the bases today."

"He had an appointment yesterday?" Jack raised his eyebrows. "That little weasel. He didn't mention it at all."

"And that surprises you?"

Jack shook his head. "It shouldn't." He let out a deep, irritated sigh and exchanged a look with Ryan. "Is he okay?"

"He's been having a lot of headaches, which could very well just be stress, but as far as I can figure, they came on at about the same time he was hit by that car, which he forgot to mention, by the way, so I scheduled an appointment just to be on the safe side."

"He didn't tell you? He promised me he'd tell you as soon as he got home. Only reason I didn't drag his ass to the hospital was I figured *you* would if it was serious. I swear, when I get my hands on him...." He let his threat die off, not needing to vocalize it. He and Ryan both knew that when he found Tyler, Tyler would be getting the ass-chewing of a lifetime, or in Tyler's case, of the week.

"Well, shall we track him down, then?" Jack grinned playfully at Ryan, and Ryan smiled, an amused twinkle in his brown eyes. "So, you think he forgot, or is he avoiding it?" Jack asked as he reached for his phone, dialing Tyler's cell number on speaker so they could both listen.

"Hard telling with Tyler. Avoiding it would be my guess, though."

Jack nodded. "Mine too." He listened to the phone ring while drumming his fingers on his desk.

"Hey, Jack," Tyler answered on the third ring. Heavy traffic could be heard in the background.

"You want to tell me where the hell you are?" Jack growled into the phone, his voice gruff, but at the same time he was grinning at Ryan.

"Uh, walking into the Plaza Hotel," Tyler responded.

"And can you tell me why you're at the Plaza instead of planted behind your desk where you're supposed to be glued for the next week?"

Tyler sighed from the other end of the phone. "Because my informant tells me that Jackson is staying here."

The noise from the background slowly died away, signaling that Tyler had entered the hotel and got away from the busy street. They could both hear the muffled sounds of Tommy talking to Tyler, and then Tyler's muffled reply.

"Take your hand off the phone, I want to hear what you're saying about me!" Jack ordered Tyler. Tyler's long sigh was pronounced over

the speaker of the phone, but they could tell he'd complied with the order.

"...you this wasn't a good idea. You're gonna get your ass reamed for this." Tommy could be heard clearly now.

"Tell him he's right, and that I'm gonna ream his ass, too, for allowing you to gallivant all around town when I specifically ordered your ass to a desk again this morning after you deliberately disobeyed me yesterday."

No reply was immediately forthcoming, so Jack hollered again. "Michaels, are you even listening to me?"

"Yes, hang on."

"*Michaels!*" Jack roared, exchanging an incredulous look with Ryan. "That little shit," he muttered.

Ryan chuckled softly as he shook his head.

They listened to the conversation Tyler and Tommy were having on the other end of the line.

"Well, has his room been cleaned yet?" Tyler was questioning.

"Let me check with housekeeping," a female voice replied.

"Get a key, Tommy," Tyler told his partner. "Alright, Captain, what's up?" Tyler returned his attention to his superior.

"Jackson's not there?"

"No, he checked out this morning."

"So what do you think Ryan would say if he found out you were gallivanting all around the city before he releases you from desk duty?"

There was a long pause before Tyler answered. "Uh, well... I kinda thought we wouldn't tell him."

Ryan and Jack exchanged an amused look over the desk. Ryan rolled his eyes, and Jack bit his fist to keep from laughing out loud.

"Oh, so if he asks, I'm supposed to tell him that you sat behind your desk all day like a good boy and weren't out trying to re-injure yourself?"

Tyler snorted. "For some reason, I highly doubt he'd believe that."

"So, Tyler, there anything you forgot to tell me that you think I might need to know?"

“Um... huh?”

“You know, you supposed to be anywhere today? Or yesterday, for that matter?”

Tyler groaned over the line. “He’s there, isn’t he?”

“Listening to every word you say. Say hi, Tyler.” Jack was chuckling, his dark eyes dancing with amusement as he waited for his subordinate to respond.

“I was going to call you, Ryan, I swear.”

“Call me and what? Back out? Again?” Ryan accused with a smile.

“No. Well. Maybe. But only because of this lead on Jackson.”

Jack broke in. “Which you followed up on. Now I’m giving you fifteen minutes to search the room, and another ten after that to get your ass back here. I’ll send Forensics out to you. As soon as you brief them, your ass better be here.”

At the hotel, Tyler had moved away from the counter and was looking past the flowing water fountain at a man standing nervously near the check-in counter. His eyes scanned the man’s body, and then he chuckled into the phone.

“Cap, you’re never going to believe this.” He glanced over to where his partner was standing near the courtesy desk, still trying to get information from the woman behind the counter, and then back to the nervous man with the long coat.

At the office, Jack was re-filling his coffee mug and offering Ryan a cup as he did. Ryan nodded and took the offered mug with a smile.

“With you, Michaels, I’ll believe anything,” Jack responded as he sat back down behind his desk. “What’s up?”

“Some guy’s getting ready to rob the Plaza.”

Jack choked on his coffee, setting it down with a thud, not noticing the hot fluid slosh over the edge and run down the mug. He and Ryan exchanged a shocked expression.

“You’re joking!”

“Nope.”

“In front of you?”

“Practically.”

“Is he armed?”

“Yep. He hasn’t drawn yet though. I think he’s debating whether it’s a good idea or not.”

“Plan?”

“I’ll let you know when I know.”

“Where’s your partner?”

“Not close enough. Don’t think he’s noticed yet.”

“I’ll send backup.” Jack glanced out the large window overlooking the rest of Narcotics. “Feldmore, my office!” he hollered.

The detective in question opened the door to the captain’s office and poked his head in nervously. “Yeah, Cap’n?”

“Contact Robbery. Tell them there’s a robbery in progress at the Plaza Hotel. Get some units out there. Michaels and Carmikael are on location.”

Feldmore quirked an eyebrow in question, and Jack just shook his head with a sigh. Feldmore smirked, then nodded and moved to leave the office. “Oh, and have Forensics get down there as well to search a room. Michaels is the lead detective. Have them report to him.”

“Got it, Captain,” Feldmore said as he backed out of the office and headed for the nearest phone.

“What’s the situation, Michaels?” Jack questioned, redirecting his attention back to Tyler.

“Looks like our boy’s gonna make his move,” Tyler answered, glancing around the lobby, his eyes straying to his partner, now arguing with the management, and then back to the robber-to-be.

“You got a plan?”

“Backup en route?”

Jack looked out the window to where Feldmore stood. Feldmore nodded and gave him the thumbs-up. Jack nodded back.

“On its way, Michaels.”

Tyler watched the man pull a shotgun from under his coat, and loud shrieks of terror emanated from the people around him. His partner turned quickly, took in the situation, and found Tyler’s eyes. Tyler nodded once, and Tommy nodded back.

"I take the commotion as he's drawn?" Jack asked over the line, his voice tight with worry.

"Yep, sawed-off shotgun. He's ordering people to the ground. Hang on. I'll be back."

"Don't get yourself shot, Michaels," Jack warned him as his and Ryan's eyes met. Jack sighed deeply, running a weary hand over his face, while Ryan groaned, dropping his elbows to the desk. He rubbed his temples as he shook his head.

"Tyler, I swear you could attract trouble in a nursery full of defenseless infants," he muttered to his lover.

Tyler just laughed as he clipped his phone to the holster at the waist of his jeans without disconnecting it. He pulled his gun from his holster and peered around the fountain, which had obstructed the robber's view of him.

The man had all the patrons on the ground now, including Tommy, and was threatening the woman behind the counter, waving his gun in her face. Tommy found his eyes in the chaos, and Tyler nodded again, adding a wink and a grin this time.

Tommy rolled his eyes, thinking the same thought his captain had just spoken aloud moments earlier.

Back at the office, Jack and Ryan and the detectives that had gathered listened to the chaos broadcasting over the speakerphone. Now that the terrified hotel-goers had quieted down, the gun-wielding robber's demands could be heard fairly clearly over the speaker. The clearer and louder the demands became, the closer the people in the office assumed Tyler was getting.

At the hotel, Tyler softly and swiftly moved in behind the deranged man. When he was barely a foot behind him, he stepped slightly to the left and leveled his weapon at the gunman's head, his black nine millimeter braced with both hands.

"LAPD. If you even breathe deep, I'm going to blow your head off," Tyler announced evenly to the man. The man holding the shotgun froze completely; even his eyes hesitated in his head before he cautiously slid them in their sockets to find the face of the voice.

"Now, very slowly," Tyler continued, "remove your finger from the trigger, and even slower, hold the gun out to your side."

“Um, uh, I—look, officer,” the man started to stutter. He swallowed nervously, turning his head slowly to get a look at Tyler. “I wasn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“Oh yeah, then why the gun?” Tyler questioned, his own gun held steadily on the man, eyes daring the man not to comply with his orders.

Meanwhile, Tommy was quickly and quietly clearing the hotel lobby of guests and workers. Arriving police soon took over, allowing Tommy to move to assist his partner.

The man holding the gun was still standing, finger frozen on the trigger, debating what his next move should be. Tyler flicked his wrist slightly, motioning with his own gun.

“My partner just stepped up to your right. If you’re smart, you’ll do as I asked and remove your finger from the trigger and slowly hold the gun out to your side.”

The man swallowed nervously. Beads of sweat popped out over his forehead, and his eyes darted around for his escape.

Finally, the man relaxed his stance and moved to comply. At the last second, however, he swung the gun around and caught Tyler on the arm. Tyler automatically relaxed his finger on the trigger so as to not cause it to misfire at any of the officers nearby as his gun arm was jarred. Reacting quickly, Tyler dove into the man as the others shouted for backup.

Back at the office, the sudden commotion caused Ryan and Jack to lean forward in their chairs. At first the sounds were muffled by Tyler’s body, causing the listeners to worry that the phone would be disconnected. However, the line was quickly cleared as Tyler’s phone was knocked away from his body.

Seconds later, the deep blast of a shotgun sounded.

Those in the office looked at each other in panic.

At the hotel, officers—Tommy included—dove onto both men to quell the struggle. They quickly subdued the man and pinned him to the ground. The whole attempt for freedom lasted no longer than two minutes, including the intentional firing of the shotgun aimed point-blank at Tyler’s chest.

Seeing the man’s finger clench on the trigger, Tyler had reacted quickly and turned the barrel of the gun away from his chest and

toward the high, vaulted ceiling, which was empty space clear to the roof.

Pinned to the ground by several officers, the man finally ceased his attempt to escape, instead choosing to verbally assault the arresting officers.

Tyler climbed out from under the mass of arms and legs and crawled a few feet from the ensuing arrest, where he picked up his discarded phone, sat down on the floor, and put his phone back to his ear.

“You still there?” Tyler asked, trying to control the pain in his voice. He re-holstered his weapon and wrapped an arm around his stomach.

Jack breathed a sigh of relief, and the office visibly relaxed. Across from him, Ryan sat back in his chair with a relieved sigh, and his eyes closed for a brief moment. Jack could clearly see what those precious few seconds of the unknown had cost him. He had felt the pain himself. The fear.

Jack cleared his throat. “Still here, Michaels. What’s the situation?”

“Perp’s in custody,” Tyler informed him, trying to control his breathing.

Tommy sank down beside him and looked him over critically. “You okay?” he mouthed. Tyler nodded, but his eyes said otherwise.

“Any casualties?”

“No, everyone’s okay. Perp was just eager to add more charges to his sheet.”

“Yeah, like attempted murder of a police officer,” Tommy interrupted loud enough to be heard by those in the office.

“He tried to kill you?” Jack asked, exchanging a look with Ryan.

“Sorta,” Tyler tried to dismiss it. “Hey!” he objected when Tommy yanked the phone from his hand.

“Sorta?” Tommy asked sarcastically. “What gun were you looking down the barrel of?” He put Tyler’s phone to his ear. “The man had his shotgun point-blank at Tyler’s chest. He’d even started his drawback. Luckily, Tyler was paying attention, or they’d be drawing

his chalk outline right about now. He managed to deflect it to the ceiling.”

“Is he okay?” Jack asked.

“Says he is,” Tommy told him. “But he looks like he’s in pain.”

“He doesn’t ever do anything the easy way, does he?” Jack asked, shaking his head.

“Well, in his defense, this time he did try. He just didn’t have much choice when the perp decided he wasn’t going down the easy way. They’re bringing him in now. Forensics just arrived, and we’re going to go up and check out Jackson’s room.”

“Make sure Tyler doesn’t forget about his appointment,” Jack reminded him, dismissing the other officers in the room with a wave of his hand.

“What appointment?” Tommy shot his partner a look as Tyler groaned and sat his head on his knees.

“He didn’t tell you either? And here I thought he told you everything.”

“Just everything that *doesn’t* pertain to his health. You want to hear about his sex life, I’ve got the goods, but when it comes to his health, he keeps me in the dark just as much as everyone else.”

“Figures. Well, have your partner update you on his health and my orders that his ass is to be back here within the next twenty minutes, or he isn’t going to *have* a sex life.”

“Twenty minutes, no sex life. Got it.” Tyler motioned for Tommy to hand him the phone. “Hang on, Cap, think he wants to argue for an extension.” Tommy handed Tyler the phone.

“No extension. Twenty minutes,” Jack told him before he could speak.

“Funny,” Tyler told him. “Actually, I don’t want one. Ryan, can you come down and pick me up? That way Tommy can stay here with forensics.”

“Sure, when?” Ryan agreed.

“Whenever you get here. Is Cole still with you?”

“He came to the office with me, but he wanted to go see how his unit was coming with Ra’shel’s autopsy.”

“He left you?”

“Well, I think we both just figured being in the middle of a police station, in Jack’s office, that’d I’d be safe enough.”

“Very funny, Ryan. You busy, Captain?”

“I *can* drive eight blocks by myself, you know,” Ryan told him, although he highly doubted Tyler would listen.

“He isn’t listening,” Jack confirmed with a smile.

“I am too listening. I’m just not going to respond. Captain?”

Jack laughed. “Sure, I’ll ride with him. I’ll help Carmikael at the scene.”

After they’d disconnected the call, Jack looked over at Ryan, a sympathetic look on his face.

“You’re taking this whole police protection thing in stride.”

Ryan shrugged. “Well, I figure he deserves the peace of mind. It’s the least I can do. I just wish I could do more.”

“But you did, with finding the original autopsy report,” Jack told him. “We never even suspected.” He shook his head. “We’re trying to find Dr. Marnsteen, but amazingly enough, he’s left the state.”

Ryan nodded his head. That didn’t surprise him. From what he’d already discovered, he’d left the hospital shortly after delivering the false report.

Jack fiddled with the handle of his coffee mug, a faraway look in his eyes. And then he sighed deeply, meeting Ryan’s eyes. “When Ra’shel and Brina died, I thought Tyler was going to lose his mind. He felt so responsible that he nearly went insane with guilt. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he has always blamed himself for their deaths, even though there was never any link between Tyler and the murderer. It was ruled a random act of violence even though we had all, at one point or another, wondered if it couldn’t have been someone out to get Tyler. Standard OP called for all his past case files, open and closed, to be gone through in search of anyone with a motive, or any prior record of rape or murder, just to rule out the possibility that it *was* a retaliation against him. Nothing held strong. So eventually, we all had to believe it was random. Ra’shel was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It wasn’t too hard to believe, really. She was found in a bad section of town, and she was a beauty. A sicko’s prey. We tried to convince Tyler that it wasn’t his fault, but he wouldn’t be swayed. As the months passed and the investigation kept running us into brick walls, we were

forced to set it on the back burner as other things began to take precedence. Don't get me wrong, we didn't want to give the case less attention, but the longer a case goes, the colder the leads become and the less chance we're going to find the person responsible. New cases come in, and we have to investigate those. Tyler was livid, but he accepted it. Or so we thought." Jack shook his head, his eyes haunted.

"He slowly began to shut down. He stopped being Tyler. I don't know how to explain it other than he just wasn't Tyler anymore. None of us knew what to do. We'd brought back in the police psychiatrist to try and intervene. She said that he was going through a normal grieving process, that his family's case taking a backseat was almost like losing them all over again. It sounded reasonable enough, but something in the back of my mind kept nagging at me to pull him from the streets. But I didn't. I ignored it."

Jack stopped and took a drink from his coffee. Ryan was watching him intently, ever curious over Tyler's past, frightened by the pain Tyler had lived. Jack's fingers were tracing his desktop, his mind far away, reliving the past. Ryan sat still, waiting patiently, allowing Jack to tell the story in his own time.

"It was a Friday night when I got the call. Somehow, I knew it was coming. When I picked up the phone, it suddenly became clear why the voice in my head had been so insistent that I pull Tyler from the street. I wondered if I could ever forgive myself for ignoring it. Tyler and Tommy had been meeting with their suppliers. Backup was in place, ready to take down the deal. We still don't know what went wrong. Someone pulled a gun, backup started in, Tommy pulled his weapon, but Tyler never pulled. He *never* pulled," Jack repeated slowly, his eyes completely lost in that tragic night.

"The supplier's gun went off, and fifteen cops unloaded into him. When the shooting stopped, Tommy said he turned and Tyler was sitting on his heels, just staring. It was dark, and they couldn't see him too clearly. No one was exactly sure what had happened, but they knew the gun had been aimed in Tyler's direction. Tommy started toward him, and as he got closer, Tyler looked up at him. The helicopter spotlights came on then, and Tommy got a clear look at him. Tyler had taken a bullet in his chest, and he wasn't wearing. When Tommy got to him, Tyler looked at him and whispered, 'I'm sorry,' and then he passed out in Tommy's arms."

Jack met Ryan's horrified gaze. "We didn't think he was going to make it. *You* didn't think he was going to make it. I remember meeting you for the first time that night. I'd already known Tyler was bisexual, and I remember thinking how perfect you'd be for him. I was hoping you were at least bi so I could set the two of you up when he was better. It was just one of those stray thoughts that pop into your head when you're trying to think of anything but the real possibility of losing one of your best friends." Ryan smiled, knowing exactly what he was saying, and nodded for him to continue. "But I remember it now like it was yesterday." Jack smiled for the first time, remembering.

"While we waited for him to come out of surgery, we started going over the night. They told me that Tyler hadn't pulled his weapon. I questioned if there had been enough time for him to pull, and they'd all agreed that there had been. We tossed around thoughts and possibilities of why he'd frozen. But Tyler never freezes. Never. He's an ace shot with a faster pull than anyone in this department. It all came down to, Tyler hadn't wanted to. When he finally woke up, he couldn't remember any of the events of that night. Psych checked him out and cleared him for duty long before you ever cleared him physically. And then his behavior started to change, and I started to doubt our observation of that night. Perhaps we were scared and tired and jumped to that conclusion out of fear. There could have been any number of reasons why Tyler hadn't pulled his weapon. And since he was the only one who held that answer and he had what you'd called... oh, what's that word?"

"Post-traumatic amnesia," Ryan supplied.

"Yeah, post-traumatic amnesia—I knew I might never know for sure what had happened. And like I said, his behavior was changing. It happened right after we saw you at the bar that night, and the two of you got together. I watched Tyler completely turn around. He became Tyler again. Eventually, I stopped blaming myself for Tyler's accident that night. I still believed I should have listened to my heart and pulled him from active duty, but then if I had, he may not have met you. You saved his life that night in more ways than one. You brought back to us not only the man we love and cherish, but his soul, his peace of mind, and his happiness. I watched him love Ra'shel, and I've watched him love you. He never loved her the way he loves you. And if he loses you, it won't take a supplier's bullet to take him down. He'll pull the trigger himself."

Jack watched Ryan carefully as he absorbed his words, and after a long pause, he continued. "When he found out that all along he had been inadvertently responsible for Ra'shel and Brina's deaths, I was really surprised that all he did was pull some stitches. He had so much rage. I really thought he was going to kill Peters. I don't know, maybe he would have. And then on top of that, he receives a direct threat against you, and... well, I think maybe you're right, maybe we ought to let him have his peace of mind with the babysitters." Jack winked. "Besides, it'll give us the chance to chew him out for not telling you about that car. Hell, maybe we'll bring Tommy into it too. We can all chew him out."

Ryan snorted. "Tommy kept it from me too."

"That figures."

"Sometimes, I think one's just as bad as the other." Ryan smirked as he rose from his chair and headed for the door.

"You can say that again."

Both men laughed as Jack followed him.

His hand on the doorknob, Ryan turned to the Narcotics captain. "Thanks, Jack." He smiled sincerely, truly touched by Jack's words and thankful for more insight into the man he loved so dearly.

28

"HOW'S it going?" Jack asked Tommy as he and Ryan entered the hotel room.

Tommy shook his head. "It isn't. It's like he wasn't even here."

"Maybe he wasn't."

Tommy shrugged. "We've got people on it. We're trying to figure out if he was, or if it's just another game." Tommy sighed. "There's something wrong with Tyler, Ryan." Tommy was pinching the bridge of his nose, and he sounded exasperated.

"What?" Ryan asked, worried.

"I don't know. He's acting as though he's in pain, but he won't let me check his stomach. He's in there." Tommy motioned toward the bedroom of the suite.

Ryan nodded and followed Tommy's directions. Jack and Tommy followed him.

Tyler was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall and his knees to his chest, watching a team dust the room. He glanced up as Ryan walked through the door. His face was pale and drawn, signaling the pain he was in.

Ryan crossed the room and knelt down in front of him. "You okay?"

Tyler sighed. "Frustrated."

Ryan nodded, and Tyler took his outstretched hand and let Ryan pull him to his feet.

Jack, standing by the door, cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, will you give us a moment, please?"

The other officers nodded and quickly left the room, very aware of the Narcotic captain's reputation for a temper.

Tyler groaned. "I knew having you bring him down here wasn't a good idea," he mumbled with a shake of his head.

"Why the hell didn't you tell him you'd been hit by that car?" Jack started in on him without replying to his comment. "You had two options. One, I took your ass to the hospital, or two, you told Ryan when you got home and he looked you over. You chose to tell Ryan. What, do I have to start sending notes home pinned to your shirt like they do my kindergartner?"

Tyler wasn't quite sure if that was a rhetorical question or not, so he decided to refrain from answering. He instead shifted from one foot to the other, waiting for the litany to continue.

"I swear, Michaels, you remind me of my children sometimes. You're just as stubborn, just as conniving, follow directions just as well, listen about as well, and disobey me just as much. One of these days, Tyler, I swear you're going to push me too far, and I'm going to beat your ass until you can't stand on your own."

Tyler unconsciously stepped back into the wall behind him. He wasn't sure what made him do it. He wasn't afraid of his captain, his friend, but memories of years before came rushing back with one small

sentence he'd heard so many times before, and he was helpless to stop them.

"Hey, Captain," Tommy tried to interrupt, seeing the panic cross Tyler's face.

"You stay out of this. I'll get to you in a minute!" Jack shouted at him, turning slightly. Turning back to Tyler, he continued his rant, stepping right into Tyler's face.

"I told you to park your ass at a desk today. What part of that didn't you get? I told you to tell Ryan you'd been hit by that car! What part of that did you fail to understand? Why is it that I didn't know about your appointment for a CAT scan today? Better yet, why didn't you go yesterday? You cannot screw with your health this way, Tyler! Maybe you don't give a rat's ass what happens to you, but the rest of us do!"

He pushed Tyler back against the wall and pinned him there, one hand planted firmly on Tyler's chest. "I swear to you, Michaels, I am going to kick your ass from here to Cleveland the next time you disobey a direct order. I don't care what your excuse is, I'm going to knock some sense into that head of yours. And then, when I'm finished drilling your ass into next Sunday, I'm going to suspend you until you're too old for active duty, and *then* I'm going to bust you back down to patrol. Are we clear, Detective?"

Tyler just watched him quietly.

Jack knew that his rant was full of empty promises, and he was pretty certain that Tyler knew it too, but it still made him feel better to have his little tirade. Deciding to let Tyler stew for a while, he turned to Tommy, one hand still on Tyler, palm against his chest, pressing him into the wall. Tyler didn't move, just followed him with his eyes.

"As for you, Detective. You're just as bad as he is. I don't know what anyone was thinking, partnering the two of you together. I've heard the stories. I've heard stories all the way back to your academy days, and it's amazing neither of you has ended up in jail permanently. The two of you managed to send two of your academy instructors to an early retirement, turned one man's hair gray—literally—and sent another to a psychiatric hospital for several months."

"Hey, Captain, that one wasn't totally our fault," Tyler found his voice. "He was crazy before that."

Ryan looked at him as though he'd lost his mind, while Tommy smirked at the comment. Jack spun his head to glare at Tyler.

"*You* shut up. I have not given you permission to speak yet. And don't think just because I'm not looking at you that this little pep talk doesn't pertain to you too!" Jack hollered at Tyler, pinning him with a glare and pushing harder on his chest.

Tyler clamped his mouth shut, and Jack continued on.

"And that was just in the academy. The stories beyond that are even better. I can only imagine what your Navy days together were like. If the two of you didn't spend every other week in the brig, I'd be real surprised. And now, now you both scheme and plot and wiggle your way around every single law and procedure we have, that is if you don't flat out break the damn law first. You disobey orders, you withhold evidence, you *steal* evidence out of police lockup—"

"Uh," Tyler started to open his mouth again.

"Shut up, Michaels!" Jack shouted. Tyler's mouth closed again. "Good reason or not, you still did it. And now, now you've got IA all over your ass—"

"Now wait a second, that's not fair, she doesn't like me. She's always on my ass about something—"

"The two of you need to work it out, then, Michaels, because the little catfights the two of you have every other week are really beginning to grate on my nerves."

"*Your* nerves? I'm the one she's trying to bury."

"With good reason half the time! If I didn't put my neck on the line every other time she comes sniffing around, you wouldn't have a job anymore."

"No one ever asked you to, Jack," Tyler practically growled at him.

"Dammit, Tyler! Don't you get it? You and Carmikael are the best team I have. The best detectives I have. As if I'd really give it up because some woman has a five-year-old grudge against you!" Jack was still shouting.

"Let her have her grudge. She was obviously right on the money. Something the rest of you refused to see."

"We didn't see it because it wasn't there to see!"

“Bullshit!” Tyler exploded as he shoved Jack backward and stepped toward him angrily.

Ryan watched him with wide, worried eyes. He’d seen Tyler and Tommy fight plenty of times, but never had he seen Tyler take an angry advance toward Jack. But Tyler was livid as he advanced on his captain.

“That’s bullshit, and you know it! It was my fault they died, and if you all would have pulled your heads out of your asses way back then like I tried to get you to do, maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess today!” Tyler yelled at Jack.

“Tyler,” Tommy started warningly.

“No!” Tyler yelled at him. “Don’t even start with me! I told you it had something to do with me, but you all came up with some goddamn random killing excuse when we all fucking know that cops’ wives don’t get fucking killed randomly! Who the hell rapes and murders a cop’s wife who is six months pregnant if they’re not out for revenge? Yes, Ra’shel was gorgeous. She attracted attention everywhere she went, but she wasn’t attacked because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was attacked because of who she was. It was because of me, and none of you would see it. You were all so quick to throw my ass in prison when she was being beat, but when she was murdered, no one wanted to see the truth. I’m surprised as hell you didn’t try to pin that rap on me, too, even though I was your number-one suspect for the better part of two weeks.”

Ryan’s jaw dropped with that information.

“Tyler, you know damn well why you were a suspect,” Jack yelled back. “The spouse is always a suspect, and to top it all off, your alibi sucked.”

“So’d yours, but I didn’t accuse you of her murder.”

“Dammit, Tyler, I never accused you of her murder!”

“No, you just refused to search for the person who did it. Found it easier to just call it random,” Tyler mouthed off sarcastically.

This time it was Jack who advanced on Tyler, but Tyler didn’t back down. Tommy rubbed his face wearily, while Ryan watched the exchange anxiously.

“You’re treading on real thin ice, Michaels.”

“Yeah? So why don’t you break out your ice pick and chop away like you did when you busted me for domestic assault!” Tyler snarled.

“Dammit, Michaels, that’s enough!”

“Like hell it is!”

“Stand down, Detective!” Jack barked.

“Make me!”

The fist came out of nowhere so fast that Tyler didn’t have time to duck or block it. Instead, it nailed him across the jaw, sending him crashing back into the wall behind him. But before anyone could blink, Tyler was diving into Jack, catching him in his midsection and tackling him to the floor.

Ryan and Tommy looked at each other, eyes questioning.

Tommy finally shrugged. “I guess we give them a minute to work it out on their own. I think,” he added after a pause, totally unsure of his own answer.

Ryan shook his head as they looked back at the two now wrestling on the floor. Tyler wasn’t fighting hard. Whether it was because he was injured, or because he’d realized whom he was fighting and the stupidity of the move, or because the fight had simply gone out of him, they didn’t know, but it didn’t take much for Jack, who was three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier, to get the upper hand.

Jack quickly flipped Tyler to his back, straddled his waist, and pinned his arms above his head. Tyler’s chest heaved with each breath, and he looked up at Jack with rage, but he didn’t struggle beneath him.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Jack demanded, staring at Tyler in complete shock.

“Get off me,” Tyler grunted, continuing to glare at Jack.

“No! Not until you tell me what the hell is wrong with you.”

“Nothing!”

“That’s a crock and we all know it, so try again.”

“I have an appointment, get off me.”

Ryan glanced at his watch. “Actually, you still have forty-five minutes,” he offered.

“Don’t help,” Tyler hissed at him.

“He can help all he wants. In fact, he gets to have a go with you next. He’s the one you lied to, *again*.”

“I didn’t lie to him,” Tyler defended.

“No, you just left out the fact you were hit by a car, bounced off its hood, smashed in its windshield, landed on the pavement, and knocked yourself out cold. How would you like it if Ryan was hit by a car and he forgot to mention it to you?”

Tyler’s jaw clenched, and he glared at his captain. But he didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to.

“That’s what I thought. Maybe next time, Tyler, you should think before you withhold information. Maybe you should think about how it makes Ryan feel. Or Tommy feel. Or me feel.” Jack let his words sink in before he continued. “And for the record, I didn’t want to arrest you for domestic assault. I had no choice. I wasn’t *left* with any choices. They brought the warrant to my desk and offered me the chance to bring you in—peacefully. What was I supposed to do, Tyler? You are my responsibility, one of my best friends, and I owed it to you to bring you in myself, not let them do it. I knew if I let anyone else do it, you would have fled and got yourself in deeper than you already were. I hated myself for it, Tyler. I knew you weren’t guilty, but what was I supposed to do?”

Tyler looked away, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“What was I supposed to do, Tyler?” Jack repeated.

Tyler finally sighed. “I don’t know. Arrest me, I suppose. I never really blamed you anyway.”

“Then why the attitude?”

Tyler didn’t answer, so Jack shook him a little. “Then why the attitude, Tyler?”

Tyler met his eyes evenly. “Because I spent nearly six months in a high-security prison with a thousand people who wanted me dead, all for something I didn’t even do. You let me go to high-security. What the hell were you thinking?”

“Jesus, Tyler, I didn’t hand you the guilty verdict. I was on your side, remember? We didn’t even know you’d gotten sent to high-security until it was already too late. Aside from breaking you out, we tried everything in our power to get you out of there, and breaking you out was our next option. And believe me, Tyler, we would have done

it.” Jack looked at him so solemnly that Tyler truly believed they would have.

Jack relaxed his grip on Tyler’s wrists a little but didn’t let go. “Are we okay?”

Tyler nodded.

“Good, now can we can the insubordination for a little while?”

Tyler sighed and looked away but finally nodded.

“And can we try a little harder to be honest about your health?”

Tyler sighed again but nodded.

“I swear to you, Tyler, you don’t knock some of this shit off and I’m going to come down on your ass. I let you do your own thing. I let you manipulate, bend, and flat-out break the rules, and I turn the other way. Why? Because your way usually works, and you don’t normally get caught. But this flat-out disobeying me has got to stop. You don’t look out for yourself often enough. You jump into things without thinking, you forget you’re still healing, and you never tell anyone when you’re in trouble. Someone has to look out for you, and if I have to suspend your ass to keep you safe, I’m gonna do it. Are we clear?”

Tyler finally met his eyes, still pinned beneath the other man. “Yeah, we’re clear.”

“Good, now get up and go to your appointment with Ryan. If you give him a hard time about it, I’ll bench your ass for another week. Got it?”

Tyler nodded again, and Jack let him up, pulling him into a standing position.

When Ryan turned to Tommy, his eyes were still on Tyler, whom Jack had pulled into a hug, murmuring something into his ear.

“So you’re saying all I have to do is sit on him and threaten him, and he’ll do what I tell him to?”

Tommy kept his expression schooled, his eyes on Ryan, avoiding Tyler’s glare. “Believe me, I’ve tried it. It’s never worked for me.”

“That’s why I’m the captain,” Jack told them with a smile, puffing his chest out slightly in exaggeration.

“You guys are hilarious,” Tyler muttered, shaking his head.

“Yeah, we like to think so.” Tommy smiled.

Tyler rolled his eyes and tossed Tommy his car keys. “Besides, I didn’t say how long I wouldn’t be insubordinate for.”

With that, Tyler opened the door and strode out, leaving the others to shake their heads, smiles of amusement on their faces.

29

RYAN opened the passenger door of his TrailBlazer for Tyler and took his arm, guiding him in.

“You feeling okay?” Ryan asked, looking in at him intently. Tyler’s face was even more drawn, and his skin was clammy to the touch.

Tyler turned tired blue eyes his way and sighed. “No, not really.”

“Are you hurt?” Ryan asked in concern, leaning in the passenger door to get a better look at him.

“Not really. My stomach just hurts. I think I pulled something when I took down that perp.”

“Tackling your captain probably didn’t help much either,” Ryan pointed out.

“No, it didn’t. Didn’t help that the guy butted me in the gut with his shotgun either.”

Ryan frowned. “Did you rip it open?” Ryan had removed the stitches already, but it was still healing and susceptible to injury.

“Didn’t look,” Tyler replied honestly.

Ryan sighed. “I’ll check you out at the hospital. Can you wait a bit for pain meds? If you can, I’ll just put some morphine in your IV.”

Tyler shot him a look. “What IV?”

“The one you’re going to get for your CAT scan.”

“You didn’t say anything about an IV.”

“How many CAT scans have you had now, Ty?” Ryan argued with him playfully.

“How many of them have I actually been conscious for?” Tyler threw back.

“Point taken.”

Ryan closed Tyler’s door and walked around the SUV, getting in behind the wheel. He looked over at Tyler as he started the vehicle and rolled his eyes at the pout he was getting.

“You are such a baby about needles, you know that?” he teased as he glanced over at his lover.

“You try getting stuck a million times before they actually find a vein and then tell me how you feel about needles.” Tyler glared over at him.

Ryan chuckled. “Yeah, well, in their defense, your veins are a bit stubborn. Hell, even I have trouble getting one on the first try, and *I* know your veins.”

Tyler continued to shoot dirty looks his lover’s way. Ryan just laughed, reaching over and taking Tyler’s hand.

“You poke me more than once and I’m walking,” Tyler informed him with a grumble. Ryan just rolled his eyes and squeezed Tyler’s hand.

“So, what was up with you? You were being awful insolent with Jack.”

Tyler shrugged and leaned his head against his seat as Ryan fought midday traffic. The sky was bright blue, barely a cloud to be seen, and the sun was shining brightly, warming Tyler’s skin as they drove. It felt good, and he enjoyed the warmth on his skin while he considered his answer.

Finally, he sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just frustrated. This whole thing is getting to me. *Jackson* is getting to me. And Jack was there.” Tyler ran his hand through his hair in agitation.

Ryan nodded thoughtfully. He glanced over at Tyler as he stopped in the line of traffic at the red light. “Do you blame Jack?”

Tyler exhaled, turning his head against the seat to look at Ryan. “For what?”

Ryan met his eyes for a brief moment before turning back to the road before them. “For you being arrested? For Ra’shel and Brina’s deaths? For the failure to find their killer?”

“Jack’s my friend.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t be angry with him.”

“He was doing what he was supposed to do. What he had to do. He didn’t have a choice,” Tyler answered sullenly.

“No, he didn’t. But he was the one who arrested you, and because he arrested you, you ended up in a high-security prison where you suffered a great deal,” Ryan pointed out. He knew Jack wasn’t to blame, but he knew that somewhere, Tyler was still angry, and until he learned to deal with those feelings, he would never fully heal.

Tyler studied Ryan’s face for a long moment before he finally sighed and spoke softly. “I *know* it wasn’t his fault, and I don’t blame him for arresting me. He was given a warrant for my arrest, and one way or another, I was going to get brought in. And he’s right, had it not been him, I would have fled... but sometimes, sometimes I just can’t help being hurt.”

Ryan listened quietly as he pulled the TrailBlazer into the parking garage of the hospital and parked in his spot. After shutting the motor off, he turned to Tyler.

“Do you think it’s wrong to feel that way?”

Tyler turned his head to gaze out the window and shrugged.

“Come on, Tyler, look at me,” Ryan urged gently.

Tyler slowly turned his head back. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel. When I start to feel hurt, I try to close off those feelings, because I remember the look on his face as he was reading me my rights. He didn’t want to do it. He hated himself for it. So, why am I angry with him?” Tyler’s blue eyes were intent as he practically begged Ryan for an answer to his pain.

“Because he’s one of your closest friends. He’s someone you look up to and trust, and even though you *know* he didn’t want to do it, he did, and it hurt.”

Tyler watched him and slowly let out the breath he was holding. “I don’t want to be mad at him. It wasn’t his fault.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Ryan’s voice was even and nonjudgmental. “And you’re not blaming him for your arrest. You were wrongly accused, sent up the river, and hurt terribly in the process. Don’t you think you have the right to be angry over that?”

Tyler nodded miserably, his fingers twisting the cuff of Ryan’s long-sleeved blue dress shirt. He was unable to meet Ryan’s eyes, so instead, he stared at the black tie hanging from Ryan’s neck.

“It’s okay to be hurt. It’s okay to be angry. You’re not mad at *him*, he’s just the easiest to blame because it was *Jack* who was forced to betray you. And you were betrayed, Tyler. Don’t try to downplay what was done to you. Accept your feelings and realize that it’s okay to feel that way.”

Tyler’s eyes shone brightly, moist with the unshed tears of a pain he had tried to hide, tried to pretend didn’t matter. With Ryan’s words, he began to understand that his pain was truly justified. That it was okay for him to be angry and hurt. And as he began to realize it was okay for him to feel that way, his heart began to ache a little less, and the weight pressing on his chest began to lift just a little.

Ryan smiled gently as he saw the understanding begin to settle in Tyler’s eyes. He squeezed his hand once and brought the tan fingers to his lips, kissing them softly.

“Come on. Time for your appointment.”

Tyler sighed but moved to get out of the vehicle. Ryan came around to his side and took him by the elbow as Tyler swayed stepping out of the truck. Ryan looked at him sharply.

“How’s the pain?”

“Gnawing.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes and reached for Tyler’s black shirt, untucking it from his blue jeans. He lifted the shirt and glanced at the swollen pink line across Tyler’s belly. It wasn’t open or bleeding, but Ryan wondered if he hadn’t pulled some still undissolved stitches on the inside. He pressed on the scar carefully and then pulled Tyler’s shirt back down and studied his lover.

Tyler’s face was pale, and his jaw was clenched against the pain. He’d brought up his left arm and crossed it over his stomach, guarding it. He was leaning against the SUV, watching Ryan wearily. Attached to the waist of his jeans, over Tyler’s left hip, were his black gun holster and his gun. In front of that was his badge, and on the right side, his cell phone.

Ryan eyed him for a slight minute, again thinking how absolutely sexy the man was despite the pain Tyler was obviously in. He was often unable to keep his eyes off of Tyler. Ryan had never met anyone quite as stunning as him.

“Come on, let’s get you something for the pain,” Ryan told him as he helped Tyler slide on his green dress shirt, which, as usual, Tyler left casually unbuttoned.

Tyler fell in step beside him, and they headed into the hospital.

“Do you blame Jack for what happened to Ra’shel and Brina?” Ryan asked, having sensed more hurt toward Jack than just what his arrest had brought.

“No, it had nothing to do with him.”

“What about the investigation turning away from it being a retaliation against you? Or you being a suspect at all?” Ryan held the door open for Tyler, who stepped through it and headed for the elevators. Ryan punched the up button while he waited for Tyler’s response.

“As a rule, the spouse is always a suspect. Usually, he or she is quickly eliminated, but in my case, they couldn’t because I couldn’t prove my whereabouts. Not at first, anyway. I was investigating a case, and I had talked to one of my informants at about the same time she was being attacked, which happened to be a good thirty minutes from where she’d been killed. I was so agitated after their deaths that it took me a while to retrace my steps, and then even longer for them to actually find my informant. It wasn’t that I was angry that I was a suspect. I knew the drill.”

They stepped onto the elevator, and Ryan checked his watch. He pushed the button for the eighth floor and leaned against the wall, watching Tyler. Tyler continued his story without prompting.

“I was mad because they were more focused on me than whoever did it. The problem was, though, they didn’t have any evidence. And what they did have was altered or messed with, or conveniently misplaced. Now, knowing Peters was involved, that makes sense. We should have been looking for a leak back then, but admitting that someone you depend on to watch your back could quite possibly be plotting against you isn’t something you easily do. In the police department’s closed society, you really have to be sure before you make an accusation like that. Otherwise, you might as well tie a noose around your own throat and jump from the building.”

The doors to the elevator swished open as he was finishing his last sentence, and Ryan steered Tyler down the hall toward Imaging.

“Do you hold it against Jack?”

“Not him personally. It wasn’t our investigation, it was Homicide’s. But when it came down to dismissing the chance she was killed because of me and ruling it a random killing, yeah, I was a little miffed at him,” he stopped with a sigh.

“I guess in a way, I blame them all for the mess we’re in now. What if they hadn’t dismissed it as random? What if they had kept investigating my past cases? What if they had questioned Lucas Jackson’s family? I pulled his file shortly after Peters’ confession. Guess who I happened to be investigating the night of Ra’shel’s death?”

Ryan was watching Tyler in concern. His face was even paler than it had been, and sweat glistened on his forehead.

“Who?”

“Harry Jackson.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. “And they missed it?”

“I don’t know if they missed it or just dismissed it, or if Peters intervened and had it dismissed. IA is investigating. Either way, Jackson, Harry Jackson,” he clarified, “had been a joint investigation between Narcotics and Homicide. They suspected him in three murders before they learned of his drug trafficking. They were trying to get me on the inside. But shortly after Ra’shel and Brina died, Jackson left the country, and my investigation ceased. I had just started the process of going undercover, so there wasn’t anything really memorable about the case, and I’d never come face-to-face with him. I had totally forgotten about it. I didn’t even remember him after my suspect named him. Apparently, when they investigated my stabbing, they ran his name through the database and didn’t come up with anything. All of his files had been destroyed and his name erased from the system. Luckily, I had made notes in his brother’s file. Otherwise, the past homicide investigations would have ceased to exist.”

Ryan’s eyes were still wide as he listened to Tyler. “They went to a lot of trouble to cover it up, didn’t they?”

Tyler nodded.

Suddenly, his hand went to his stomach, and he clenched his eyes closed. He swayed a little, and Ryan turned and grabbed him, holding him up, both hands wrapped around Tyler’s biceps.

“Ty?”

“I don’t feel very good,” Tyler told him quietly, opening his eyes and meeting his lover’s concerned brown gaze.

“Can you walk?”

Tyler nodded.

“Come on, we’re almost there, and I’ll give you something for the pain.”

Ryan kept one hand around Tyler’s arm as they walked down the hall. They turned into the last room on the left, and Ryan sat Tyler down in a chair gently. Then he disappeared into the back.

Ryan found the CT tech and smiled at her as she walked up to him. “Finally get him down here?” she teased.

“Yeah, had to escort him down here personally, but he’s here.”

“Well, go ahead and bring him on back. I’m ready for him.”

Ryan nodded as he picked up the phone on the wall. He dialed Dalton’s office and waited for him to pick up.

“Dalton, got a minute?” he asked when Dalton answered.

“Sure, Ryan, what’s up?”

“I’m with Tyler in Imaging. Can you round up some morphine and bring it to me?”

Dalton groaned, rubbing his head. “Tell me he didn’t rip anything back open?”

“I don’t know. I’m going to check for internal bleeding just to be cautious. You know Tyler.”

Dalton laughed. “Yeah, I know Tyler. Alright, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

30

“TYLER, this is Jill,” Ryan introduced him as he settled Tyler on the bed of the CT scanner. “Jill, Tyler.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Tyler. Dr. Mason wanted me to thank you, by the way.”

Jill looked at the attractive young blond with the confused blue eyes. Her blue eyes sparkled with amusement as she explained. "The docs all had a bet going on how long it would take Ryan to get you down here and whether or not you'd actually be conscious when he finally did. Dr. Mason won."

Tyler raised his eyebrows at his lover. "And what was your day?"

"I wasn't allowed to bet. They said I'd just knock you out and drag you down here on my day if I did. Dalton had tomorrow, though."

"That's not fair. He'd knock me out and drag me down here before you would."

"That's what I said."

Ryan helped Tyler lie down, and Jill pulled a needle and tubing from the drawer.

Ryan watched Tyler eye the IV in Jill's hand wearily and took it from her with a small chuckle. "You'd better let me do that. We have to poke him more than once and he's going to walk."

She raised her eyebrows good-naturedly. "Didn't he just get stabbed a couple weeks ago?"

"Yep," Ryan answered, tying a tourniquet around Tyler's arm.

"Yet he's afraid of needles?"

"I'm not afraid of them, I just don't like them," Tyler responded, trying to sound indignant, but the twinkle in his eyes said otherwise.

"Tyler's got stubborn veins," Ryan explained, tapping the back of Tyler's hand. Sighing, he turned his hand to the side and then over completely in search of a vein.

Jill peered over his shoulder. "I'd say," she mused.

"Check the other side?" Ryan asked, slapping Tyler's wrist, trying to get a vein to pop up. Jill tied a tourniquet around Tyler's other arm and began searching for a vein as well.

"Jeez, Tyler, no wonder you don't like needles. I don't blame you at all. I've seen better veins in severely dehydrated heroin addicts. Want me to call the lab, Ryan?"

"Not yet, I think I've got one," Ryan said as he bit the cap off the needle and positioned it at Tyler's hand. "Ready, Ty?"

Tyler nodded, and Ryan slid the needle in, threaded it through a vein, and then backed the needle out, leaving the tubing in place. He

took the syringe of saline that Jill was handing him, punctured the end into the IV port now in Tyler's hand, and pushed the contents into Tyler's IV slowly.

"Got it," Ryan said as he capped off the end of the IV.

"Wow, kinda thought that one would be iffy," Jill said, peering once again over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I did too," Ryan admitted, taping the IV down.

"Now how the hell did you manage to hurt yourself while sitting behind a desk?" Dalton inquired as he stepped through the door.

Tyler rolled his eyes with a smile. "Would you believe my desk jumped up and bit me?"

"With you, yeah. But somehow I highly doubt that's the story. Knowing you, you probably weren't even behind a desk today."

"You have such little faith in me." Tyler strove to sound offended, although his eyes held his humor.

"So, you *were* behind your desk all day?" Dalton challenged him with a smile.

"Well, no. Not exactly."

"Mm-hmm."

"Some nut tried robbing the Plaza Hotel," Ryan told Dalton as he leaned against the scanner bed. "Too bad for him Tyler happened to be there too. Tyler ended up taking him down and got the butt of a shotgun in his gut for his trouble."

"Nice." Dalton shook his head in wonder as he uncapped the morphine and pushed the syringe into Tyler's port slowly. "So, how'd you manage to get him down here today? I was certain he'd blow you off at least one more day."

Ryan laughed. "I got to Jack before I actually found him."

"That explains it. You couldn't have waited until tomorrow? The pot was up to five hundred bucks," Dalton joked.

Ryan laughed again while Dalton pushed more morphine into Tyler's system.

"Yeah, I almost feel bad," Ryan smiled, watching Tyler's face relax as the morphine kicked in.

Tyler's eyes began to droop with the effects of the morphine, and he fought to keep them open, but Ryan's soft, reassuring voice at his side changed his mind, and he gave in to his exhaustion.

31

"HOW'RE you feeling?" Ryan asked as he handed Tyler a Mountain Dew from the soda machine.

"A lot better. Thanks." Tyler unscrewed the top of his soda, took a long drink, and then sighed appreciatively. "I'd been feeling so much better these last few days too."

Ryan shook his head. "That's exactly why I hadn't pulled you from desk duty yet. Your body is trying to heal, and just because you're not in constant pain doesn't mean you won't be if you pull something the wrong way. You're just lucky you didn't do any serious damage. Then we'd be right back where we started from."

"I say we lock him in the house for the rest of the week. We can take turns sitting on him," Dalton offered from Ryan's side with a grin.

Ryan smiled at the idea, while Tyler rolled his eyes.

Both Dalton's and Ryan's phones sounded simultaneously at that moment, and they both glanced at them, reading the quick message.

"Come on, Ty," Ryan said, tugging his shirtsleeve.

Tyler grumbled. "One minute they say to take it easy, and the next they're dragging me down the hall."

Ryan pulled him into the empty elevator, while Dalton pushed the button for the ground floor. Ryan rolled his eyes. "*Now* you listen to me."

In the emergency room, the trauma team was assembling in the main hallway, donning gowns, gloves, and masks. Ryan caught the gown he was being tossed as he and Dalton took charge.

"What do we got?"

"Ambulance en route. ETA two minutes. MVA. One victim. Female in her thirties. Airway clear, oxygen started at twelve liters a

minute. Pulse one-ten. BP one eighty over one twenty. Pulse ox ninety-two,” a nurse began rattling off.

Tyler sat down in a chair behind the nurses’ station and leaned back in his seat, watching Ryan fall into his role easily. He always loved to watch Ryan at work, as long as it wasn’t him that he was working on. He was always so calm and levelheaded, and his knowledge amazed Tyler.

The sirens sounded outside the hospital, and Ryan and Dalton went with the assembled trauma team to the doors to meet the paramedics.

As they rushed down the hall and into the room across from the nurses’ station, the paramedics relayed the patient’s vitals, and the room swarmed with people and commotion.

Ryan was by the woman’s head. She had just regained consciousness and was thrashing around on the bed in distress. He leaned closer to her, trying to calm her down.

“You’re okay,” he told her quietly, his hand on her head. “You’re in the hospital. You’ve had an accident. But I need you to lie still so we can take care of you.”

The woman looked over at Ryan. Her eyes were wide with fear, and she began to rattle off words in a language that Ryan couldn’t identify.

Ryan glanced up. “Anyone know what language this is?”

Everyone shook their heads. Ryan looked across the hall at Tyler, who was already getting to his feet. In his Navy days, Tyler had been trained as a linguist and spoke more languages than Ryan even knew existed. “Tyler?”

“Russian,” he answered as he walked to Ryan’s side. “She’s looking for her husband.”

“Ask her where her husband is and how we can contact him, and if he speaks English. Then ask her if she remembers what happened to her and what hurts,” Ryan instructed.

Tyler nodded and switched places with Ryan, bending close to her and taking her hand. He smiled warmly as he introduced himself and asked for her name.

The woman simultaneously sighed with relief and calmed down on the bed.

As he assessed his patient, Ryan watched Tyler converse with the woman out of the corner of his eye, translating for them as she spoke. Listening to Tyler speak another language so fluently never failed to send shivers down his spine.

As the minutes ticked on, she began to get agitated again. She tried to turn her head from side to side, but the neck brace was prohibiting the movement, and she slid her arms and legs around on the bed in awkward movements.

“What’s wrong, Tyler?” Ryan asked as Tyler stroked her hair.

“Her head hurts,” Tyler told him. “Badly. She can’t focus much on what I’m saying anymore. She’s agitated and probably trying to escape her body, from the looks of things.”

Ryan turned to him. “Escape her body?” he questioned.

Tyler nodded, turning his attention to Ryan. “Yeah. You kinda get in this place where your body just doesn’t feel right, and everything’s so distorted and messed up, and you can’t think, and everything hurts, and you just want to get out of your body,” he told him with a shrug. “It’s hard to explain.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Well, try to keep her talking. Neurology is on the way. So is a translator,” he told him, seeing the exhaustion in his lover’s eyes. He knew Tyler was going to start feeling pain again soon.

Tyler nodded. “Have you found her husband yet?”

“He’s on his way.”

32

“SO, YOU really try to escape your body?” Ryan asked, snagging Tyler around the waist as the elevator doors closed behind them. He held Tyler close and snuggled his nose against his ear and kissed his neck.

Tyler nodded. “In a way. You don’t really know what you’re doing, your head is so foggy, and nothing makes sense. You just know you want away from whatever it is that is making you so miserable, and that just seems like the best course of action.”

“That makes sense,” Ryan said, nodding. “I guess I never really thought about it much. I mean, agitation is a common symptom of a head injury, and Lord knows I’ve seen you agitated more times than I can count,” he said with a roll of his eyes and a slight smirk. Tyler laughed. “But I guess I never really thought about *why* the patient is agitated. Interesting.”

“Sure. For you,” Tyler said with a smile. “But it’s not something I’d recommend trying as an experiment.”

Ryan laughed. “No need. That’s what I have you for.”

Tyler laughed.

“Is there anything that helps make it not so bad?” Ryan questioned.

Tyler shrugged. “Blessed oblivion?” he asked with a laugh.

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Which is the last thing we want, a patient with a head injury unconscious.”

Tyler shrugged. “It might be what *you* don’t want, but we pray for it.”

Ryan shook his head with a smile.

“But, if we can’t have that,” Tyler said with a dramatic sigh, “which would be the kind and humane thing to do—comfort.”

“Comfort?”

Tyler nodded. “Yeah. Whenever I get in that place, which unfortunately seems to be often, I always feel a little better when you talk to me quietly and stroke my hair.” Tyler shrugged again. “It’s comforting.”

Ryan was watching him, a pondering expression on his face. “Really?”

Tyler nodded.

Ryan smiled, kissing Tyler gently. “Good to know,” he said quietly.

Tyler looked at him. “I figured you already knew. You always do it.”

Ryan nodded, his fingers stroking Tyler’s cheek. “Yeah, but I didn’t know it helped. I’m glad,” he told him softly.

The pair stepped off the elevator and walked toward the doors to the parking garage. Ryan held the door open, allowing Tyler to go through.

“Thank you for your help. You were really great with her. And there is something very sexy about hearing you converse in another language. Except when you’re pissed off at me and mutter to yourself in whatever language you feel like, that is,” he added with a smile.

“So if I want to drive you crazy all I have to do is mumble to myself in another language?” he asked mischievously.

“Like you don’t now?” Ryan retorted humorously.

Tyler laughed.

At the TrailBlazer, Ryan unlocked the doors and opened Tyler’s for him. Tyler smiled at the gesture, his eyes sparkling with happiness. He paused before he climbed in. “Spanish,” Tyler told Ryan, turning slightly.

Ryan looked at him. “What?”

“Spanish,” he repeated. “When I’m pissed off at you and mutter to myself. It’s usually in Spanish.”

“Really?” he asked. And then he nodded. “I guess I knew that. As that’s probably the only language you speak that I can pick up a word of here and there.”

Tyler laughed.

“Why Spanish?”

Tyler shrugged. “I’ve spoken it the longest. Besides English, anyway. I was fluent by the time I was thirteen.”

“Really?” Ryan asked. “I never knew that.”

Tyler shrugged. “I never told you.”

Ryan looked at him. “Why not?”

Tyler was quiet for a moment, and a strange expression crossed his face. And then he shook his head. “I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Guess I never thought about it much.”

Ryan stared at him for a moment and then closed the door and went around to the driver’s side. He got the feeling that Tyler was holding something back. He opened his mouth to press him further, but Tyler’s cell phone chirped from his hip, and Tommy’s voice came over his two-way.

“How’d your appointment go?”

Tyler unclipped his phone and depressed the two-way button. “Fine. Ryan says I’ll live.”

“That’s not exactly what I said, Tyler,” Ryan admonished, shooting him a look before Tyler had a chance to pull his finger from the button.

“So what exactly *did* he say?” Tommy asked. Ryan pulled the phone from Tyler’s hand.

“I said that he had bruising on his CAT scan, which leads me to believe he had a serious head injury not too long ago,” Ryan told him, glaring at Tyler.

“Oh man, are we in trouble,” Tommy muttered.

Ryan knew Tommy well enough to know that he was beating himself up. He also knew that Tommy wouldn’t be withholding information from him again anytime soon, so he figured he’d let him off the hook.

“Yeah, well, I’ll kick your ass later,” he told him, letting his humor show in his voice. He handed Tyler the phone.

“S’up, Tommy?” Tyler asked.

“Just thought you might like to know what we found at the hotel.”

“What?” Tyler asked, exchanging a look with Ryan.

“Well, apparently our would-be robber was sent by Jackson. He started squawking as soon as he was loaded into the cruiser. Want to know what his orders were?”

Tyler was rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Probably not.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll tell you anyway. You’ll like this story. It seems Jackson told him to go down to the Plaza, seize control, make it look like a robbery, and look for a good-looking 5’10” blond guy, grab him, and take him to Jackson. Hell, he even had your picture in his pocket.”

Tyler looked over at Ryan. Ryan shook his head.

“Wonderful. What else did he say?”

“That Jackson is psycho. The guy’s so scared of him that he *wants* to sit in jail rather than return to Jackson empty-handed.”

“Find out anything more at the hotel?”

“Nope. We think it was a setup to get you to go down there. Worked too.”

Tyler rubbed his head. “Looks like I’m going to have to go have a little chat with Midas.”

“Midas?” Ryan asked.

“My informant,” Tyler told him. “In fact, turn left here. His apartment isn’t too far from here.”

“Got anything else?” Tyler inquired of Tommy.

“Nope. That was about it. Thought you’d want to know.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m gonna go talk to Midas. I’ll let you know what he says.”

“Like hell you are,” Tommy squawked from the other end of the phone, already grabbing his keys.

Tyler sighed and rolled his eyes but waited for Tommy to finish his spiel.

“You know that’s probably exactly what Jackson expects. His kidnapping plot went awry, so he’ll have his goons waiting for you at Midas’s.”

“Or he’ll think that’s what we think and not send anybody at all. He’s losing guys to us left and right.”

“Small price to pay to get what he wants. Sit tight. I’ll be there in five.”

Tyler sighed, knowing when he was beat, and looked over at Ryan, who was frowning.

Tyler touched his leg. “What’s wrong?”

Ryan looked over at him and shook his head. “This whole Jackson thing just bothers me,” he admitted. “I’ve never liked the idea of you putting yourself in imminent danger. I’m kinda scared here.” Ryan pulled the SUV over to the side of the street where Tyler had indicated and turned in his seat to look at Tyler. “What happens if Jackson wins?”

Tyler and Ryan held eye contact for a long minute before Tyler sighed and shook his head. “I can only tell you that I’ll try my best not to let that happen.”

Ryan swallowed and nodded. He looked away for a moment, then back to Tyler. “How’re you doin’?”

“I’m fine.”

“Any pain?”

“Nothing like it was; just an ache now. I’m more tired than anything.”

Ryan nodded. “Well, when we get home, you can take a nap. If you’re really good, maybe I’ll take you to dinner.” He smiled.

Tyler smiled at that. He liked the idea of doing something normal and relaxing with Ryan. The last few days had been hectic and were wearing him a little thin. He couldn’t think of anything nicer than spending a quiet evening with Ryan.

33

TOMMY pulled up behind them a few minutes later, and Tyler opened his door, looking over at Ryan.

“Come on,” he told him.

Ryan had accompanied him on more than one investigation, several times hired by the department itself to help him from a medical standpoint, so Tyler didn’t worry too much about taking him along. Besides, right now he figured Ryan was safer with him than waiting in the car by himself, where he’d be a sitting duck if Jackson *were* waiting.

“So how ya want to do this?” Tommy asked as they opened the doors to the building and stepped inside.

Tyler grinned at him, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Tommy groaned. “Hanging out with you always gets me into trouble,” he quipped with a shake of his head.

The trio took the elevator to the tenth floor, where Tommy and Tyler unholstered their guns before stepping out cautiously. They silently made their way down the hall and stopped at door number 1006. Tommy and Ryan stood off to the side of the door. Tommy’s gun was outstretched and ready, pointed at the door. Tyler knocked on the door, his gun in his left hand, pointed at the floor. He put his finger over the peephole.

They could hear feet shuffling to the door and the sound of the deadbolt disengaging. The door opened a crack, and a man's face appeared. His eyes lit up in shock, and he tried to slam the door in Tyler's face, but Tyler was ready for it. He kicked his foot against the door and pushed it open, forcing his way inside. Tommy and Ryan followed.

The man was backing up, looking from side to side nervously. He snagged a bat lying against a wall, but Tyler's gun arm came up, and he leveled his gun at the man's head, his right hand cupping his left. Tommy's gun was still up.

"Wouldn't even think about it if I were you, Midas," Tyler warned him.

The man's shoulders drooped, and he dropped the bat and backed away. Tyler kicked the bat behind him, toward the door, his gun never leaving Midas's head.

"That wasn't very nice, Midas. After all the leniency we've shown you? After all the times I've turned my back on your little scams? This is how you repay me? What were you going to do with the bat? Slam me upside the head and hope my partner didn't shoot you? Not very bright today, are we?"

Midas shook his head and sunk down into a chair.

"Nuh-uh. Don't think so. You can stand back up and keep your hands where we can see them," Tyler told him, motioning with his gun.

Midas wisely stood back up.

"I think our trust in you is a little off today. Can you tell me why that might be?" Tyler asked, cocking his head and lowering his weapon, but he didn't engage the safety. Tommy's remained trained.

"I'm sorry, Detective Michaels. I just panicked. Thought you were gonna shoot me," the man stuttered nervously.

"And why would you think that, Midas?"

Midas looked between the three men nervously. "Who's that?" Midas motioned to Ryan, abruptly changing the subject.

"He's going to help us hide your body if you don't start talking," Tyler told him.

“W-what do you want to talk about?” The man was sweating as he watched Tyler. His beady eyes practically rolled with fear, and his body shook.

He was older than the trio, in his forties, about an inch shorter than Tyler, his hair thinning and red, and from the looks of things, he was terrified of Tyler. That didn’t really surprise Ryan. Tyler’s being a cop intimidated a lot of people, and Tyler’s no-nonsense attitude with the criminal world, not to mention his reputation as a “shoot first, ask questions later” kind of cop, left most smart crooks quaking in their boots at even the mention of Tyler’s name.

“Oh, is that how you want to play?” Tyler smiled, his blue eyes dancing. “Okay, I’ll play.” Tyler handed his gun back to Tommy and grabbed Midas by the front of his shirt.

“Now you’ve done it, Midas,” Tommy deadpanned from behind Tyler, engaging the safety on Tyler’s gun and tucking it in his own holster, his own gun still out and ready. “You know how he gets when he’s pissed off.”

While he spoke, Tyler was dragging Midas to the door. Ryan and Tommy followed them up the next flight of stairs to the roof.

On the roof, Tyler pulled his informant to the edge, while Midas dragged his feet and begged for his life. Ryan looked at Tommy, who shook his head hopelessly.

“Welcome to my life,” he sighed.

“Detective Carmikael, you gotta help me,” the man pleaded from the edge, where Tyler had him by his throat, on his back, half over the edge, his head dangling toward the street below.

“Well, ya know, Midas, I’d like to. I really would, but I just can’t control him when he gets like this. Just ask the last guy he dropped eleven stories to his death. Oh wait, you can’t. Sorry.”

Tyler was kneeling over the man, and Ryan couldn’t help but wonder what he would do if he actually dropped him or the guy pulled him over with him. Midas was looking directly at him now, his neck straining to keep his head up, his eyes desperate.

“Make him stop,” he begged Ryan, his voice harsh from the hand around his throat.

Ryan shrugged. “I can try,” he told him. “Hey, Ty, wanna let him up?” he asked, not sounding as though he cared either way.

“No, not really,” Tyler answered easily.

Ryan shrugged again. “Sorry, I tried.”

Midas met Tyler’s eyes as Tyler pushed him a little further off the roof. He grasped Tyler’s arms tightly, his knuckles white from his death grip.

“Alright, alright, I’ll talk, just pull me up.”

“Nope, you had your chance, Midas.” Tyler pushed him further, and Tommy groaned.

“Tyler,” he warned quietly from behind him.

Ryan watched Tyler warily. He wasn’t too sure anymore how much of this was their “bad cop, worse cop” routine.

Midas was squealing now as his eyes widened in fear. “I’ll talk, I’ll talk. I swear. Just let me go.”

“Okay, I’ll let you go.” Tyler shrugged, and loosed his grip on his right hand.

Ryan’s eyes widened, and his heart sped up. Tommy was shaking his head, his head bowed, his hand over his eyes as he muttered something about Tyler, jail, and never seeing the light of day again.

“No!” the man shouted. “No, don’t let me go! Don’t let me go!”

“Would you make up your mind?” Tyler said with a sigh as he adjusted his hold. “I swear you are worse than my former wife before a simple trip to the movies,” he muttered.

“I-I didn’t know you were married, Detective. What happened?” he stuttered nervously.

“She met an unfortunate end.” Tyler’s eyes gleamed as he answered truthfully, but Ryan and Tommy both knew the man took it exactly the way Tyler had wanted him to.

“Dammit, man, I told you I’d talk. What more do you want from me?”

“You don’t want me to answer that.”

“Tyler, maybe you should pull him up before you accidentally drop him. I don’t think IA’s gonna believe the ‘he tripped over his own shoelaces and fell off the roof’ excuse again this time. He’s not even wearing shoes.”

“Run down and grab him a pair, would ya?” Tyler glanced over his shoulder, relaxing his grip on Midas. Midas shrieked. “We got another witness this time. Nobody’s gonna discredit Ryan.” Tyler grinned at Ryan, and Ryan’s eyebrow went up a fraction.

“Harry Jackson paid me five thousand dollars and promised me twenty G’s of the purest White Dragon straight from South America if I fed you the line about him staying at the Plaza. That’s it, that’s all I know, now pull me up!”

“Where’s he at now?” Tommy demanded, dropping to kneel beside Tyler.

“I don’t know. He came here with the offer. It was too sweet a deal to turn down. What was I supposed to do?”

“Tell me the truth,” Tyler told him, not pulling Midas back up.

“Aw, man, if I would have told you the truth, then I would have lost the money and the deal with the blow.”

“Instead you lost your freedom. Some exchange,” Tyler huffed, pulling him back over the edge and standing up. He turned away from Midas and faced Ryan. Ryan watched as Tyler smiled and counted down on his fingers silently.

Right on cue, Midas scrambled to his feet, and Ryan’s eyebrows lifted at his lover.

“No, man. Don’t say that. Don’t bust me, man. I can still be useful.”

“Useful?” Tyler spun around, his mask back in place. “You sold me to a man who wants me dead for a lousy five grand. How the hell are you ever going to be useful to me again?”

“You forgot the blow,” the man muttered, watching his socks as he scuffed the blacktop on the roof.

“Blow you will never see, unless it’s through the bars of your cell, and the only use you’ll find for it in there is to pay off the guys who want to use your ass as an outlet for their frustrations. And trust me Midas, you’ll make a great bitch in prison.” Tyler turned and walked away, his expression tight, and Ryan watched him.

“Come on, Michaels, give me another chance.”

“Sorry, pal, you only get one chance. You fuck it up and you pay the price,” Tommy told him as he turned Midas around and handcuffed him.

“I know a guy who knows a guy who can get you Jackson,” he continued to plead, his eyes glued to Tyler’s back.

Tyler hesitated in his stride. After another moment, he turned around.

“Who?”

“Bruce Miller. He owns the pizza place down on Fifth and Vine.”

“Thanks, Midas.” Tyler nodded, taking out his phone. “This is Detective Michaels. I need a black-and-white for a pickup and delivery at 136 Hines Street. We’ll be out front.” Tyler turned again and headed for the stairs, Ryan followed, and Tommy pushed Midas forward.

“Hey, I just gave you Jackson. Now you give me something,” Midas yelled at Tyler.

“Don’t worry, Midas, I will. I’ll bring you lube and condoms on visiting day,” Tyler told him, bringing smiles to both Ryan’s and Tommy’s faces. Midas, however, continued to scream and holler all the way down to the main floor to await the police.

Out by the curb, Tommy handed Tyler his gun. Tyler reholstered it and clipped it into place. Ryan leaned against the bumper of his TrailBlazer, watching Tyler. His comment to Midas about prison life bothered him. Not because of what he said, but because of how he said it and his body language when he did. Ryan swallowed the lump in his throat, wondering how far out of hand prison had gotten for Tyler.

Tyler, however, was standing calmly, his blond hair blowing slightly in the breeze. He had his thumbs in his rear pockets and was talking to Tommy about their next move. He glanced over at Ryan, and his expression switched to one of concern as he regarded his lover. His eyebrows knit in question, and he cocked his head to the side. Ryan shook his head and waved him off with a shrug.

“After the boys pick up Midas, we’ll swing on over and talk to his buddy Miller and see what he has to say. Hopefully he’ll be a bit more cooperative than Midas here. Maybe he wants to cut a deal with us. We’re gonna need a new informant,” Tyler told Tommy, baiting Midas.

“Man, Michaels, *I’m* your informant. I’ve been a good informant for going on two years now. I’m sorry. It’ll never happen again,” Midas begged.

Tyler and Tommy ignored him, continuing on with their conversation as though he’d never spoken.

“Maybe we’ll even let it leak to Jackson that Midas here squeals like a stuck pig when threatened,” Tommy added with a smile.

Midas’s eyes widened. “You can’t. You wouldn’t,” he stuttered.

“Jackson’d probably save the state quite a bit of money on boarding his ass for the next ten or so years if he heard that,” Tyler agreed with a smile.

Ryan smiled at the mischief in Tyler’s eyes. He always loved to watch Tyler and Tommy interact. They still acted like children at times, and it brought out all Tyler’s boyish features. Not for the first time, Ryan wondered about Tyler’s past and the mischief he must have gotten into as a small child. Even with his horrifying upbringing, the spunky and feisty child could not be diminished; it only grew with him into adulthood. Ryan was so grateful that Tyler’s dad hadn’t been able to destroy him.

34

AFTER the patrol car had picked up Midas, Ryan turned to Tyler. “White Dragon? That cocaine?” Tyler nodded his confirmation, and Ryan smirked. “Interesting art of persuasion you have there, Tyler.”

“Well, I go with whatever works, and dangling him over the edge of the building worked.” He smiled back impishly.

“Do these ideas just occur to you out of the blue?”

“Pretty much.” Tyler grinned.

“And what a wonderful idea it was,” Tommy pitched in. “One that you can bet will be back to Bree and down to IA by quitting time this evening.”

Tyler just shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“You know, it’s too bad about Midas. He really had some good information at times.”

Tyler laughed. “Yeah, and other times he had us chasing wild dogs in the park at midnight.”

Tommy shot him a look. “That was one time, Tyler.”

“What about the alligator in the basement on Third Street? Or the Rottweiler in the penthouse on Summons? Or the time we took a dip in the ocean when it was forty-three degrees out. Naked,” Tyler returned with a smile.

Tommy laughed and rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay, so maybe his information wasn’t always that... reliable.”

“I’d say. The only good bust we really got out of him was the Nickelson bust, and I think that was more dumb luck than anything.”

Tommy was smiling mischievously at him now. “You can’t forget about the Jillian twins he set you up with.”

Tyler shot him a dirty look. “Shut up, Tommy.”

Ryan, who’d been following the conversation with an amused expression, raised an eyebrow. “Jillian twins?” he questioned.

Tommy’s smile was bright, and his eyes twinkled playfully, while Tyler did his best to avoid Ryan’s questioning look by glaring at his partner.

“Thanks, Tommy. Remind me later to tell Sara about the twins, their sister, *and* the hooker on Main Street.”

Tommy’s smile fell, and his eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

Tommy groaned. “You would.” He moaned. “But that’s not fair. Sara doesn’t have as good a sense of humor as Ryan does.”

Tyler just smiled at him wickedly as he held the passenger door open. “See you at the pizza shop,” he told him with a smirk as he climbed in.

Tommy stood outside the door with his mouth hanging open. He shook his head and scrambled into the back of the SUV. “No way am I letting you tell this story by yourself if you’re gonna jazz it up for Sara.”

Ryan laughed as he got in the driver’s side.

“Jazz it up?” Tyler turned in his seat innocently. “Have I *ever* jazzed up a story?”

“Yes,” came the unanimous reply.

Tyler rolled his eyes heavenward and sighed loudly, a smile eating the corner of his lips.

“Twins, Tyler?” Ryan questioned, pulling the TrailBlazer out into traffic.

Tyler looked over at him. “I had nothing to do with it. Midas told us about a supplier coming into town who was hosting a big party. Midas said he knew of a way we could get in.”

Tommy was laughing in the backseat as he picked the story up. “Yeah, so the next thing we know, Tyler’s got blonde twins on his hands. I swear I thought those girls were gonna have their way with him right there on the marble floor. As it was, they had him pinned to it with their hands down his pants.”

Tyler was turned in his seat, watching his partner with an amused smile. “Let’s not forget their sister Barbie, who was doing a decent job of trying to extract your tonsils with her tongue while on the leather couch in the den.”

Tommy’s face sobered a little. “You can’t tell her that part.”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “She knows you can’t always be married while in our world. She knew it when she married you,” he argued playfully, already knowing better than to tell Sara.

“Yeah, and I remember how well Ra’shel took it when she found out you had to date some bimbo to get to a pusher. If memory serves me right, you ended up with eighteen stitches and an egg the size of a tennis ball.”

Ryan frowned. He knew it was sometimes necessary for Tyler to play single while deep undercover. It could sometimes mean the difference between life and death. He didn’t love that aspect of Tyler’s job, but he trusted Tyler, and he was content knowing that it was him that Tyler came home to at night. As long as Tyler wasn’t having sex with other people, Ryan could handle the show he had to put on now and then. But he knew that Tyler went out of his way to avoid telling Ryan when he was forced into a situation Ryan wouldn’t exactly be thrilled about. Now he wondered if this was why.

Tyler was shaking his head at his partner. "Sara's not Ra'shel, Tommy," he replied quietly.

"Yeah, I know. I'm sorry, Tyler."

"Don't be. And you already know I won't tell Sara. You're right. She doesn't handle it like Ryan does. I was just picking on you."

Tommy laughed. "Which you do well, by the way."

"Years and years of practice."

"Tell me about it, runt," Tommy teased playfully.

Tyler smiled, and Ryan laughed at their exchange.

35

"MAY I take your order?" the young man behind the counter at the pizza restaurant asked.

"I need to talk to Bruce Miller. Is he around?" Tyler asked.

The kid nodded and hollered back over his shoulder. "Hey, Mr. Miller, some people here to see you."

A man in his forties came out of the back room, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. He looked between the three men, his face expressionless. "Can I help you?"

"Bruce Miller?" Tyler asked.

The man nodded, and Tyler motioned to a booth. The man followed, and the four men slid in, Miller and Tommy on one side, Tyler and Ryan on the other.

"Who're you?"

"Midas Jennings told us you may know someone who can put us in touch with Harry Jackson," Tyler told him, getting right to the point.

Miller looked between the three men and then met Tyler's eyes. "Might. What's it to you?"

Tyler held his badge in his cupped palm. "About seven to ten for drug trafficking," he deadpanned, eyes meeting Miller's.

The man looked around nervously. "Put your badge away before you scare away my customers," he hissed at Tyler.

“You want to cooperate, or should I stand up and yell ‘raid’?”

The man glanced around again. “Fine, just put it away.”

Tyler pocketed his badge while the man played with the chain on his bracelet. “You gonna arrest me?”

“Depends on what you have to offer and how willing you are to cooperate.”

“What exactly do I have to do?”

“First, you can put me in contact with Harry Jackson, or at least someone who can. We’ll talk about the rest later.”

The man narrowed his eyes. “And you’ll let me go?”

“I’ll let you live,” Tyler replied evenly. “Now, what can you give me?”

The man swallowed nervously again. “The man’s name is Pete Marrow. He’s Jackson’s right-hand man. He pretty much runs Jackson’s business.”

“Which is?”

“Export, imports. He imports cocaine from South America and then exports the money back. He has someone there that launders it.”

“You’ve got pretty good info for just being a friend to this guy Pete. What’s the deal?”

Miller sighed as his fingers worked the placemat in front of him. “Jackson and Pete are my suppliers.”

“Where can I find Jackson?”

Miller shook his head. “Don’t know. He’s been here and there since his house was raided the other day.”

“You expecting a shipment any time soon?”

“Yeah, but Pete’ll deliver it. Jackson’s been preoccupied these days hunting after some cop he wants dead.”

“What’s the word on that?” Tommy asked from Miller’s side.

Miller shrugged. “Apparently the guy’s good, keeps giving Jackson the slip. And Jackson’s pretty mad, ’cause every guy he sends out, the cop manages to evade and capture. It’s pissing him off.”

Tyler and Tommy exchanged a look, and then Tyler leaned forward in his seat, clasped both hands in front of him, and looked

Miller in the eyes. "Okay, here's the deal. You want immunity, you help us take down Jackson," Tyler told him firmly.

Miller's chest heaved as he sighed heavily. He leaned back in his seat, considering. "What're we talking?" he finally asked.

"We get Jackson. You get a clean start. Jackson hears about this in any way, I'll make sure you spend a lot of time behind bars."

"And if I say no?"

Tyler shrugged. "I bust you right now for possession with intent to sell, along with your counter boy for the sale of an illegal narcotic, and I shut your business down."

"How do you even know I've got anything here, let alone have sold it?"

Tyler smirked. "Wanna go over the setup? Since we've been sitting here, four different guys have come in and out and exchanged a wad of cash for a pizza box. They didn't give their name for pizza pickup, and the pizza box wasn't heavy enough to contain a pizza. Not to mention there was a lot more cash there than \$8.50 for your large pizza. You got two Dobermans tied up out back and two more running around in the back of the restaurant. Little piece of advice, dead giveaway. Not to mention a health department no-no. Tommy?" He looked at his partner, his eyes dancing with amusement. Ryan was watching him with wide eyes, wondering how he'd seen all that in the short amount of time they'd been there.

Tommy turned his head toward the man next to him. "You got two guys at the back, both reading the paper, packing heavy sidearms under their jackets. My guess would be 357s. I'm thinking they don't have concealed weapon permits either. And let's not forget the counter boy packing a pistol under his shirt. My guess is the kid isn't even eighteen. Oh, and he's stoned. Enough evidence to make a bust, scare away all your customers, and put you and your boys away for the next three years. What do you think, Tyler?" Ryan was staring at Tommy now, while Miller was rubbing his temples.

"Oh yeah, at least," Tyler agreed.

"I won't go to jail?" the man inquired, looking at Tyler skeptically.

Tyler shook his head. "I can guarantee you a clean start. However, to do that, you'll probably have to spend a night in jail."

“Why?”

“You don’t want Jackson and Marrow thinking you sold them out, do you? We take you down with everyone else, they think you get a hotshot lawyer, and he gets you sprung with probation.”

“Nuh-uh, I’m not selling Marrow out. Jackson, fine. He’s a jerk anyhow, but not Pete.”

Tyler tipped his head. “What’s the deal between you and Marrow?”

“He’s my best friend. There’s no way I’m selling him out. I’d rather go to jail.”

Tyler worked his jaw at the impasse, considering his options. He glanced at Tommy, who lifted a hand slightly, telling him to make the call.

“Will Pete talk to us?”

“Him and Jackson are pretty tight. I couldn’t be sure. He’s been upset with Jackson over this cop-killing deal though. He’s afraid he’s screwing with the cops too much, especially after their inside man got busted. Jackson keeps telling him not to worry, he’s got another.”

Both Tyler and Tommy’s eyes shot up with the new information, and they looked at each other in concern.

Miller continued on, not noticing. “But Pete’s still mad. Says they’re supposed to be avoiding the cops, not inviting them over for supper, which is pretty much what they’re doing with all the screwups their boys have made lately. Why don’t they just hang up a sign that says, ‘Cop-killer’s here. Bust me’?”

Tyler’s lips twitched up at the corners. “You know who the inside man is?” he questioned.

Miller shook his head.

“How tight are you and Pete?”

“Tight.”

Tyler sighed and rubbed his eyes. Then he reached over and pulled a pen out of Ryan’s shirt pocket. He flipped the placemat over and wrote out his number with his left hand. When he was finished, he tore the number off, slid it over to Miller, and handed Ryan back his pen.

“Talk to your buddy. Find out if he’s willing to cut a deal. Then call me.”

Tyler motioned to Ryan, and they slid out of the booth.

Miller looked up at him. “I can’t guarantee this won’t get back to Jackson if I talk to Pete.”

Tyler nodded his understanding.

“If he says no, what happens to me?”

“Depends on what you’re willing to do. If you’re still not willing to roll, then we can’t cut a deal. However, I can’t argue with your loyalty, so we’ll call it even.”

“You won’t bust me?”

“You had some pretty good information. That’s worth a trade.”

AT THE TrailBlazer, Tommy looked at his partner. “If he’s got another inside man, we’re in serious trouble.”

Tyler nodded. “Yeah, I know,” he said quietly. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Me neither. It certainly puts us at a bigger disadvantage. So, what d’ya think?”

Tyler rubbed his head, a headache forming. “I think it’s time for a nap. I’ll worry about the rest later.”

Tommy nodded. “Alright. I’ll go update Jack.”

36

AN HOUR after they got home and Ryan got Tyler into bed, Tommy was pulling into their drive. Ryan just looked up from his book as Tommy tapped once on the door and pushed it open.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

Tommy sat down on the couch beside him with a sigh. His look said it all.

“That good, huh?”

“Tyler still sleeping?”

Ryan nodded.

“Good, I wanted to talk to you without him overhearing. Hang on.” Tommy got off the couch and quietly went to Ryan and Tyler’s bedroom.

Tyler was lying on his side, asleep. Tommy pulled the door shut quietly and returned to Ryan, sitting back down beside him.

“What’s the matter?”

Tommy sighed. “I just finished talking to Jackson. He called Tyler’s line at work. He was livid because he sent that guy to bring Tyler in and Tyler got the best of him. He said that next time, he wouldn’t get so lucky, and if Tyler didn’t cooperate, he’d use people that he cared about to get his attention.”

“Tyler’s going to love that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy agreed. “He’s in a lot of trouble, Ryan. More than he’s letting on.”

Ryan ran his fingers through his hair, his eyes full of fear and concern as he watched Tommy.

Tommy rubbed at his eyes. “The problem is, Jackson’s got connections. I mean, he covered his tracks with Ra’shel and Brina’s deaths; we never even had a lead until Peters screwed up. Not one. And now we find out there’s a second leak? We’ve got our hands tied, and that’s exactly where he wants us.”

“So Tyler gets screwed?”

“Tyler’s smart. And he’s good at this game. He’s one of the best Navy SEALs in the world. And I’m not just saying that. He’s one of the best the Navy has ever produced, and they have that on paper to prove it. It’s what happens if Jackson makes good on his threat to use someone against him that has me worried.”

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked.

“If Jackson grabs one of us, Tyler will cooperate no matter what that means. No matter what it costs him. Including his life.”

Ryan’s world tilted and spun as he registered what Tommy was telling him.

“I’ve got an idea, but I need your help. But no matter what, you cannot tell Tyler.”

Ryan nodded. He trusted Tommy fully, and when it came to Tyler, he knew that besides himself, no one loved Tyler more than Tommy did.

“I’m going to put a tracking device on him, but if Tyler knows he’s wired and they grab you too, he’ll ditch it the moment he’s told to if he thinks you’re in danger. He won’t risk your life for anything. He’ll do anything to save you, and Jackson knows that.”

“Is he really one of the best SEALs in the world?” Ryan wanted to know.

Tommy nodded. “He really is. In all honesty, I’m surprised the Navy let him go. I wouldn’t be surprised if they tried to get him back if they ever really need him. He’s that good.”

Ryan absorbed his words, in awe at the knowledge and at the same time, terrified. He just hoped that they could catch this guy before he caught Tyler and Tyler had to prove just how good he was.

37

“RYAN, Tyler, so good to see you again,” the maître d’ at their favorite restaurant greeted the couple as they walked in.

They returned the greeting, shaking his hand, and the man led them to a table between the fireplace and the window overlooking the city twenty stories below. “I’ll send Stephanie right out. She’ll be so happy to see you,” the man said, his accent thick, and then he smiled and quickly walked away.

Ryan’s hand settled on Tyler’s knee under the long tablecloth just as Stephanie appeared. “Hey, boys, how are you tonight?” she asked. Stephanie, in her sixties, always waited on Tyler and Ryan and enjoyed them quite a bit, especially when Tyler flirted with her. His smile always made her day.

“Good, thanks, and yourself?” Tyler asked her.

“I’m good. I’ve missed you boys. You haven’t been in in a while.”

“We’ve missed you too,” Tyler told her, smiling warmly.

“Thought you forgot about me,” she told them, caught up in Tyler’s smile.

“Heck no, we couldn’t ever forget about you.” Tyler’s smile was enchanting, and she melted into his blue eyes. Ryan watched it happen with a fond smile.

“What can I get you boys tonight, or do you need a few minutes to think it over?”

Ryan looked at Tyler, and Tyler shook his head. Ryan smiled. “I think we’re ready. Tyler’s starving tonight, and I’m pretty sure he wants the steak and lobster.”

She laughed. “Don’t you ever feed the boy?”

Ryan laughed. “I feed him all the time. I’m just not sure it does any good.”

Stephanie chuckled. “And how ’bout you?” she asked Ryan.

“I’ll have the crab legs.”

“Baked potatoes and sour cream for you boys?”

“Of course,” Tyler answered.

“And what kind of dressing for your salad?”

“Ranch,” they both answered.

Stephanie smiled as she gathered their menus. “Did I ever tell you how perfect you boys are for each other?”

“I think you may have mentioned it once or twice,” Tyler said with another smile.

“And I’ll bring you a Mountain Dew, and Ryan, you want an iced tea?” she asked. They both nodded. “Any wine?” she asked.

“Sure,” Ryan told her with a smile. “Surprise us.”

She smiled. “That I can do.”

After she left, Ryan squeezed Tyler’s knee. “How many Mountain Dews have you had today?” he questioned jokingly.

“You don’t want to know,” Tyler answered with a smile.

“Probably not,” Ryan agreed, his eyes on Tyler. “You look incredible,” he told him softly. He hadn’t been able to take his eyes off him.

Tyler always looked good, no matter what he was doing or what he was wearing. Tyler was the type of person who could crawl out of

bed looking gorgeous. His blond hair was perfect, with every strand falling into place naturally. His features were drop-dead gorgeous and his body tanned and fit. One would think he'd be in the movies, not one of LA's finest.

Tonight, his eyes were a deep blue, brought out by the royal blue long-sleeved dress shirt he was wearing. Around his neck, he wore a black tie, and his black pants accented his hips and waist and made Ryan's mouth water. He had entertained thoughts of skipping dinner and taking Tyler straight to bed. The only thing stopping him had been the fact that Tyler had been starving and threatening to eat through the kitchen table. He was, however, looking forward to divesting Tyler of each article of clothing one by one later.

Tyler smiled at Ryan. "You're pretty amazing yourself," he told him. Ryan had changed his clothes for dinner and now wore a red long-sleeved dress shirt with a black-and-red-checkered tie. The red in his shirt accented his brown eyes, which were gazing at Tyler full of love.

"So, what's the story with these twins?" Ryan asked with a sly smile.

Tyler choked on his Mountain Dew, which Stephanie had dropped off moments earlier. Ryan lightly patted him on the back. "Breathe, Tyler," he teased, laughter in his eyes. "Did you think I was going to forget?"

"Not hardly," Tyler snorted. "You never forget anything."

Ryan smiled. "So?" he prompted.

"Babbette and Bambi," Tyler told him with a smirk.

"You're kidding? That's their names?" Ryan was looking at him incredulously.

"Yep, and they looked about what you'd picture them to be too. Blondes, chests out to here." Tyler demonstrated by holding his hands in front of his own chest. Ryan laughed at his demonstration and sat back in his chair, watching Tyler tell his story. "And they had the combined IQ of a goat."

Ryan chuckled again. "Did they really pin you down and try to have their way with you?"

Tyler nodded, his eyes light with amusement. Ryan loved to watch Tyler tell a story; he was so expressive and animated. "The guys couldn't believe that I'd actually turned down the offer of a threesome

with two beautiful women, which of course they were adamantly suggesting. And don't get me wrong, there was a time before you I probably would have taken them up on their offer," he added with a mischievous grin. Ryan rolled his eyes. Of that, he had little doubt.

Tyler continued, his eyes twinkling. "Then there was Tommy's date, Barbie, the twins' sister. She was pretty much attacking Tommy on the couch, so I thought I'd help him out. Next thing we know, all three girls are there and trying their best to get our pants off."

"How'd they manage to get you on the ground?" Ryan raised an eyebrow inquisitively.

Tyler blushed. "One of them dropped their purse." He stopped at the look he was receiving from Ryan. "Yeah, I know. Classic," he said with a laugh. "As soon as I bent to retrieve it, they both were on me and unbalanced me. You should have seen the look on Tommy's face."

"I can only imagine," Ryan said with a laugh. "You have the most interesting days, Tyler. I swear my days are completely boring compared to yours."

"How can you say that?" Tyler argued. "You get to save people's lives, have the fast pace of the emergency room, and I know you get all kinds in there."

"This is true," Ryan agreed. "But I don't have blonde twins trying to have sex with me on the floor of the ER, or men trying to pick me up at bus stops, or hookers propositioning me. Which reminds me, tell me about this guy trying to pick you up. What'd you do with his number?" Ryan asked with a smile.

"Why, you want to call him?"

Ryan laughed. "Maybe. Let him know that the gorgeous blond at the bus stop is mine."

Tyler smiled, his eyes sparkling with happiness at Ryan's possessive tone.

They smiled up at Stephanie as she placed their salads and breadsticks on the table. "Thanks, Stephanie," they said in unison. She grinned at them.

"Nother soda, Tyler?" Tyler nodded, and she ran off to fetch it while Ryan rolled his eyes.

"I swear you're gonna be on one hell of a caffeine high later."

"If I have any hopes of keeping up with that hungry look in your eyes, I think I'm gonna need it," Tyler told him.

Ryan laughed, pouring dressing on his salad. "So, how do you and Tommy see all those things?"

"What things?"

"At the restaurant earlier. I mean, all I saw was some guys come in and buy pizza. I never noticed the dogs, and the guys at the back table just looked like two guys reading the paper eating pizza. Of course, after Tommy mentioned it, I did notice the bulge of the kid's gun, but the only reason I noticed then is because I see you with a gun under your shirt every day. However, I wouldn't be able to tell what type of gun by the bulge."

Tyler shrugged. "It's one of the first things they taught us in the Navy, to observe everything around us. SEALs pushed it even further, and ever since, it comes naturally. We could walk into a building, and Tommy and I could tell you within the first thirty seconds every available exit, the easiest and quickest to get to, and the amount of time to get to it. We also note any suspicious person and if they're carrying a weapon, the amount of any money exchanged, and the best possible way to clear the area without getting anyone killed."

Ryan looked at him. "You're kidding."

"It was vital to our survival during our SEAL days and the hot zones we were in. Today, it comes in handy as a cop."

"Impressive, Ty." Ryan's eyes were wide in amazement. Tyler just shrugged nonchalantly. Ryan raised an eyebrow. "So, how would you clear this room? And where are the exits, without looking? And is anyone, besides you, carrying a weapon?"

Tyler smiled, his eyes never leaving Ryan's face as he responded. "Through the kitchen would be the safest and quickest way to clear the room, and it would provide the most cover, as long as it wasn't blocked. It's through the door over your right shoulder, sixty feet, southwest. Besides the entrance we came through, there's a fire exit along the west wall, around the last southern pillar, which escapes into the stairwell, and a second over my right shoulder, twenty feet, near that trickling white fountain. It escapes into the hall we entered through. And there's a man near the table at the front, and a couple five tables over, who are carrying concealed."

Ryan looked completely stunned as he looked around the room. He then turned back to Tyler with his eyebrow raised. Tyler took a sip of his wine. "Did I pass?" He smiled.

Ryan laughed. "Wow!" He took a breadstick. "So, how exactly *did* you send one of your Academy instructors to the psych ward?"

Tyler shook his head, a playful smile on his face. "No one can prove it was entirely our fault," Tyler denied. "I maintain he was already losing it *before* us."

"Hmm, now why don't I believe that?" Ryan asked, laughing.

Tyler managed to look offended, causing Ryan to laugh even more. "It wasn't just one thing. It was an assortment of *little* things that led up to the big thing." Ryan rolled his eyes at Tyler's emphasis of the word "little." He'd seen Tyler's *little* things. Nothing Tyler ever did was *little*.

"Exactly how little, Ty?" he asked, sipping his wine. Tyler was swirling his around in his glass.

"Oh, you know, little. Red paint bullets in the weapons that were supposed to contain blanks, an *accidentally* discharged grenade, snakes in the pits on the obstacle course, fully dressed department store mannequins that were rigged up to scream on the practice range, two naked hookers in the man's bed... you know, little things." Tyler smiled at Ryan's wide-eyed look.

Ryan found himself speechless as he stared at his lover. He wondered how the hell Tyler had managed not to get himself expelled. Finally, he found his voice. "So if those were little, how big exactly *was* the big thing that finally sent him over the edge? And how do you *accidentally* discharge a grenade after a career as a SEAL?"

Tyler smiled. "You know, accidentally," he maintained, eyes sparkling with humor.

Ryan shook his head again. "So, the big thing?"

Tyler took a long drink from his wine before he sat it on the table. "Well, you see, there was this bus." Ryan automatically groaned. Tyler's tone and story setup were enough for him to know that his lover was probably really lucky to not be in jail.

"And the instructor had this really nice apartment in the center of campus." Ryan was shaking his head as he sat back and watched Tyler with a smile. "He'd been out to get Tommy and I since day one and

made our lives as miserable as he possibly could. Apparently, he rang out about halfway through BUDS, so he automatically disliked anyone with a SEAL background. So, he pissed us off, we pissed him off. No one really liked him, not even the other instructors. He was an idiot and an asshole, and he had an ego the size of Texas. He thought he was better than everyone else, and he was always trying to get someone fired, take over someone's position, or get a cadet thrown out for no reason. He even planted dope on Tommy and I and about six other cadets, trying to get us thrown out, but it backfired on him big time. They were going to fire him for it, but his uncle worked in the mayor's office at the time, and the disciplinary board was afraid to take drastic measures. So, Tommy and I decided to take matters into our own hands. We took some of the naked photos we had of him—"

Ryan held up his hand. "Naked photos?" he questioned in disbelief.

"Well, yeah. You never know when you're going to need them for blackmail. We even had some with him and the two hookers." Tyler smiled, and Ryan shook his head, his expression amused. "So we found our favorite, and one of our buddies, who's real good with an air sprayer, painted it onto the side of the Academy bus. The entire length, from one end to the other, was completely painted with him butt ass naked... well, except for his hand on his dick."

"Oh God," Ryan groaned. "Tell me you didn't."

"He had it coming," Tyler said with a shrug, his voice full of innocence. "Then I borrowed the Academy chopper and hoisted the huge naked lieutenant up on top of his apartment building."

Ryan's eyes were large and incredulous as he watched his lover.

"You can imagine the ruckus that followed in the morning as cadets and instructors began assembling on the quad. Even the instructors were laughing so hard they were doubled over. When he came out, it took him a moment to actually turn and get a good look at himself, but when he did, he completely froze for an entire minute. He didn't move at all, and the courtyard grew really, really quiet waiting for his reaction. Most of them were trying so hard to contain their laughter that they couldn't stand still. And then, he just exploded. He went completely nuts. He was ranting and raving, and then he ran at Tommy and I and tackled us both. Most suspected us, but they didn't have any proof, and I really don't think they cared all that much."

Ryan shook his head and watched his lover in amazement. Stephanie arrived with their dinner just then, and Tyler grinned broadly, digging into his steak and lobster. Ryan was still looking at him in disbelief.

“What?” Tyler asked innocently, crushing the lobster claw with the lobster crackers.

“How can you say that you weren’t directly responsible for his breakdown?” Ryan asked him, bewildered.

“Because nobody can prove we were. And like I said, he was already losing it before us. We just helped him along. And besides, it wasn’t permanent. He recovered.”

“You are horrible,” Ryan told him, unable to keep the smile from growing across his face.

Tyler grinned.

“So, what about the other three instructors? The one with gray hair and the two that retired?”

Tyler laughed. “You know. Little things,” he told him with a smile.

38

AT HOME, Ryan led Tyler into the living room and pulled him down onto the couch with him. He watched Tyler loosen his tie and unbutton his top button.

“You have a good time tonight?”

Tyler nodded. “Yeah, thank you, Ryan. I had an incredible time.”

Ryan smiled and wrapped his arms around Tyler. “Good, I’m glad.”

“When do I get dessert?” Tyler looked over his shoulder and wiggled his eyebrows.

Ryan laughed. “In a few minutes. I want to talk to you first.”

Tyler turned sideways so he could look at Ryan. “What’s up?”

“I’m worried about you.”

“Because of Jackson?” Tyler asked.

“Well, yeah, there’s that. But no, it was a comment from earlier today that got me thinking.”

Tyler looked confused. “What?”

“What went on with you and Ra’shel? How’d she give you stitches?”

“She didn’t. The doctor at the emergency room did.”

“You’re impossible, you know that?” Ryan asked with amusement.

“I’ve heard that.”

Ryan rolled his eyes with a smile. “How’d you get hurt?” Ryan asked again, quieter this time.

Tyler looked at his fingers entwined with Ryan’s. “It wasn’t a big deal. She was upset, I forgot to duck, and she laid the side of my head open with a frying pan.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. “She hit you with a frying pan?” he asked, his voice full of shock and disbelief.

“Well, yeah, but it was my fault.”

“How exactly was it your fault?” Ryan demanded.

“I upset her. She thought I’d cheated on her. I was trying to be honest with her about what had happened, but she got upset. I should have ducked.”

“She shouldn’t have swung in the first place.”

Tyler looked at him. “She didn’t mean it. She felt bad afterwards.”

“Yeah? How afterwards?” Ryan wanted to know. He’d seen it all too often. Contrary to popular belief, men weren’t the only abusive ones. They were abused more often than most even realized. Even by their female partners.

“When I came home with stitches. She stormed off after she hit me. My head was laid open pretty good, so I drove myself to the hospital and got it stitched up. It wasn’t a big deal.”

Ryan shook his head. “Tyler, it was a big deal. She hurt you. It still upsets you, I can tell.”

Tyler shrugged. “No, not really. I’m okay.”

Ryan sighed, staring at him. Unfortunately, Tyler couldn’t see that he had been a victim, because it had always been that way. From

the time he was little, he had been brainwashed to believe that he deserved to be hurt.

Sometimes when they argued, despite knowing that Ryan would never raise a hand to him, Ryan could see the fear in his eyes, and it always broke his heart. “Is that why you don’t tell me when things like the Barbie twins happen?” he asked quietly, already knowing the answer.

Tyler shrugged. “I just don’t want to upset you.”

“Tyler, you could tell me you cheated on me and I wouldn’t slam you upside the head with a frying pan. We may argue and fight, we may even shove each other around, but I could never intentionally hurt you.”

Tyler looked him in the eyes. “I know,” he whispered.

Ryan smiled a little sadly. He knew Tyler wanted to believe that, but he also knew that past experiences made it hard for him.

“I trust you, Tyler. I know your undercover life requires you to do certain things. I’m not saying I love that aspect of your job, but I understand it. I know you love me. I’m the one you come home to at night. I’m the one who holds you in my arms and makes passionate love to you. I’m the one who knows you. Tyler Zachary Michaels. Not Tyler Jacobs, the made-up narcotic dealer.” He paused. “*I am* the only one making passionate love to you, right?” he asked with a smile, pulling Tyler close to him and holding him, his chin on Tyler’s head.

“Love? Yes. Sex....” He drifted off, biting his lip, trying to keep the smile away as Ryan pushed him back to look at him.

“You imp.”

Tyler laughed. “Yes, Ryan, you’re the only one. I swear.”

Ryan smiled and pulled Tyler to him again. “Good.”

39

RYAN trailed his fingers down Tyler’s soft cheek, along his jaw, and toward his ear. He gently cupped the back of his neck as he leaned in close, his lips just brushing Tyler’s.

And then they were wrapped around each other, hands yanking at the now-constricting clothes. Their lips parted, and their tongues dueled for dominance.

They quickly divested each other of their clothes, and Ryan pulled Tyler into his lap so that he was straddling him. Tyler's forehead fell against Ryan's, his face flushed, and they gazed at each other for long minutes while they slowly rocked against each other. Ryan's hand slid around their rock-hard cocks, twisting as he stroked.

Tyler groaned.

They both oozed pre-cum, and Ryan slid his fingers through it, coating them. Tyler bit his lip as Ryan's finger slid over the tip of his sensitive organ, and he moaned from deep in his throat, his eyes closed.

Ryan watched him, his eyes full of hungry lust. He slid his slick fingers under Tyler, along the crevice of his ass, until they found his opening, and he pushed. Slowly. Gently. Tyler moaned again, his forehead still resting against Ryan's. He pushed down against Ryan's hand, and Ryan slowly entered his body.

But Tyler wanted more. He squirmed, panting now as Ryan bent his finger and searched for his prostate. When he brushed against it, Tyler gasped. Need and heat filled him. He pushed harder against Ryan's finger.

Watching Tyler's face, Ryan slid his finger in and out, his pace keeping rhythm with his hand still stroking their cocks together, twisting as he slid his hand up and down the now-slick hardness between their bodies.

"Please, Ryan!" Tyler begged, his voice no more than a whispered gasp. Ryan smiled. He pulled his finger out, more than happy to oblige. Tyler quickly scooted forward on his lap, and Ryan angled his body, guiding himself into Tyler's tight warmth.

He pushed himself into Tyler at an agonizingly slow rate, taking his time to let Tyler adjust around him, both of his hands on Tyler's hips, guiding him, not allowing him to push down onto his lap as he knew Tyler so desperately wanted to do.

Finally fully seated on Ryan's lap, Tyler moaned again. For several seconds, Ryan held Tyler still, enjoying the sensation of his hot tightness around him, as deep inside Tyler's body as he could be. Tyler

opened his eyes, his gaze locking on Ryan's. His eyes were as deep blue as Ryan had ever seen them. They sparkled with desire.

Ryan lifted up on Tyler's hips, and Tyler moved up, pulling himself slowly off of Ryan. As he slid down, engulfing Ryan once again, Ryan angled himself. As Tyler settled back in Ryan's lap fully, Ryan's cock bumped against Tyler's prostate. Tyler moaned again, and his eyes closed once more. He lifted himself again, his pace quickening.

Ryan controlled the speed, his hands on Tyler's hips, slowing him when he felt Tyler's breathing begin to hitch. Tyler would groan with need as he did. After a few slow thrusts, Ryan sped them back up again. He repeated this over and over until Tyler was desperate. His eyes flew open, his hands fisted in Ryan's hair, and he brought their mouths together in a bruising kiss.

Ryan released one hand from Tyler's hip and settled it around Tyler's oozing cock. It pulsed in his hand as his fingers wrapped firmly around it. Tyler moaned into their kiss, and he picked his pace up. Ryan let him this time.

He met each one of Tyler's thrusts with his own, slamming into Tyler, against his prostate. Between the thrusts against his prostate and the hand sliding up and down his cock, it didn't take long to send Tyler over the edge. He pulled back from the kiss and gasped, his forehead resting once more on Ryan's. His whole body went rigid as his orgasm exploded from him. That was all it took to pull Ryan over the edge of the abyss right behind him. He shuddered, pushing as deep into Tyler's body as he could go as his orgasm tore through him. Pulsing. Throbbing. He spilled into Tyler as Tyler constricted around him. Tyler moaned again as the warmth flooded him, and he sank bonelessly into Ryan's arms.

For long moments, all they knew was the feeling of sheer bliss as they stayed wrapped in each other's embrace as one.

40

OVER breakfast the following morning, Tyler's phone rang. He picked it up, glanced at the number, and then thumbed it on.

“Pete says he’ll meet with you, but he’s not promising anything,” Bruce Miller told him, skipping the pleasantries.

“When and where?”

“My restaurant, three a.m. You’d better uphold your end.”

“If I don’t come out of your restaurant with bullet holes, we’ll talk about my end. Until then, just consider yourself grateful that you’re not behind bars.” Tyler disconnected the phone, sat it down on the table, and picked his fork back up.

“Miller’s friend gonna come through?” Ryan asked, watching Tyler push his scrambled eggs up onto his toast.

“Hard telling. He’s willing to meet me at three a.m. but isn’t promising anything. Hell, for all I know, it’s a setup.” Tyler shrugged, taking a bite of his cinnamon toast and eggs.

Ryan frowned at Tyler’s nonchalance. “But you’re going to go anyway?”

Tyler nodded. “It’ll be okay. I’ll take backup.”

Ryan rolled his eyes at Tyler’s interpretation of the word “okay.” They seemed to have very different definitions of certain words.

“Want to meet me for lunch today?” Ryan asked, picking up his coffee.

Tyler looked up. “Sure, where?”

“You choose,” Ryan offered with a smile.

“Call me when you’re ready to go and I’ll let you know then,” Tyler suggested.

“Deal. You gonna be good today?” Ryan teased.

“Aren’t I always?” Tyler asked, picking up their plates and taking them into the kitchen. Ryan snorted his reply as he took a drink from his coffee.

Tyler sat down on Ryan’s lap, straddling it, a smile on his face.

Ryan sat his coffee down and brought both arms around Tyler’s waist. “Well, I tell you what. You stay out of trouble, and I’ll take you on a date tonight before your meeting.”

Tyler’s eyebrows shot up. “Where we gonna go?”

“Surprise. But you have to be good. That means no stitches, no broken bones, no concussions, no trips to the ER, no gunshot or stab

wounds, nothing that requires heavy duty narcotics to keep you from being in pain, no poisonings, no dog bites, no snake bites, no allergic reactions, no near decapitations, no sprains, no strains, no dislocations, no anything else that I may have forgotten to mention. Got it?"

Tyler smiled at his lover and nodded. "Got it," he breathed as he leaned down and captured Ryan's mouth with his own. Ryan leaned into the kiss, pulling Tyler closer to him, his hands exploring Tyler's back. When they finally broke for air, Tyler's eyes sparkled with the intensity of his love. He leaned his forehead against Ryan's and sighed contently.

"Maybe I should just call in and spend the day with you in bed," Tyler teased.

"Hmm, don't tempt me," Ryan responded with a groan. "If I didn't have surgery at nine, I'd lock you in our bedroom and force you to follow through on that suggestion."

Tyler smiled and kissed Ryan on the nose. Then he pulled back and glanced at the clock. "I guess I should get going. Call me and we'll figure out lunch," he told Ryan, stealing another kiss.

"You got it. It may be late. I won't be out of surgery until around eleven, and then I have a consult. Probably around one." Ryan squeezed Tyler to him, embracing him, enjoying the feeling of Tyler wrapped in his arms. And then he released him and let Tyler get to his feet.

Tyler grabbed his long-sleeved blue denim off the back of the couch where he'd thrown it that morning and pulled it on over his black T-shirt and gun holster, leaving it unbuttoned, just as Cole Rainer knocked on the front door.

"It's open, Cole," he called as he pulled his shoes from the hall closet. Cole let himself in and walked over to Tyler, who was lacing his shoes. Ryan stood near him.

"Hey, guys," he greeted them.

"Hey, Cole," Tyler said, standing up.

"Sounds like you had quite the afternoon yesterday. By the way, IA's not exactly happy with you trying to throw your informant off a building," Cole warned him with a grin.

"I didn't try to throw him off," Tyler corrected, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "I merely showed him the world from eleven stories up."

Cole chuckled. "Kinda sounds like the explanation your partner was trying to give. He explained to them that had you *tried* to throw him off, you would have succeeded."

"So true." Tyler laughed. "So I take it Regina's on a witch hunt again?" he inquired.

"Oh yeah, big-time. She spent all yesterday afternoon drilling your informant just looking for the gasoline to burn you at the stake with. She was trying to keep it quiet so no one would warn you, which of course means we all know. You better watch your back today, pal."

"Thanks for the warning."

"No problem. What're your plans for today?"

"I've got some paperwork I have to finish up and a couple reports to file. And I'm sure Bree's gonna want an explanation for Midas sitting in lockup still. I was supposed to let him out last night, but I forgot." His eyes twinkled, and they both knew he hadn't forgotten. "Ryan and I are going to go to lunch this afternoon, so why don't you take Trixie out to that new restaurant she's been wanting to go to?"

"Hey, yeah. Good idea. Thanks, Tyler."

Tyler smiled. "No problem. Gotta run." He kissed Ryan and was out the door, hoping to avoid Internal Affairs for the rest of the day. He really didn't feel like having it out with Regina Carter again so soon.

41

RYAN was in his office talking with Dalton and Cole when Tyler arrived later that afternoon. They all looked up when he walked through the door.

"Well, you look like you're still in one piece," Ryan said, looking Tyler up and down as he sat on the couch.

"Yeah, well, I've been doing nothing but sitting behind my desk all morning."

"I knew there had to be a reason," Ryan responded as he, Dalton, and Cole all laughed. Tyler rolled his eyes.

"IA find you?" Cole asked.

"Yeah, they grilled me for the better part of two hours. Then Jack chewed me out because I didn't let Midas out of lockup." Tyler stopped and grinned impishly. "He's going to be even more pissed when he finds him still sitting in a cell and his paperwork lost." The others couldn't help but smile at Tyler's expression. "I guess Midas is still complaining about police brutality. He even had some all-righteous public defender in last night to see him. He wants to sue me, Tommy, and the department for unlawful arrest."

Ryan frowned. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Tyler shook his head. "Only thing he could try to get me for is threatening to drop him off the building, and he'd have to prove it. The arrest was perfectly warranted. I'm not too worried about it. If I worried every time someone threatened to sue me or press charges against me, I'd have an ulcer by now."

"If you didn't threaten to drop people off buildings, you wouldn't *have* to worry about it," Ryan pointed out.

"Hey, you were there. *I tried* doing it the easy way." Tyler smiled, and Ryan rolled his eyes. "He's just miffed because I took away his informant status. And, of course, left him locked in a cell for two days. He'll get over it."

Ryan shook his head. "Don't you think you should let him out before you catch real trouble?"

Tyler shrugged. "I could, but what fun would that be?" He smirked at Ryan. "Besides, he's safer sitting where he is right now. Jackson finds out he told me the truth, he'll go after him," he pointed out.

"Then why don't you just tell Jack that?" Ryan questioned.

"Where's the fun in that?" Tyler's eyes twinkled.

Cole and Dalton laughed while Ryan shook his head with a smile. "So where do you want to go for lunch?"

"The Taco Barn, I'm craving tacos," Tyler said with a gigantic smile.

Ryan laughed, standing up. "I swear, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were pregnant, the way you eat."

"Never know, maybe I am."

Ryan, Dalton, and Cole all laughed. Ryan put his hand on Tyler's back and steered him toward the door.

"Tacos it is, then, baby. Then we'll stop and get you a pregnancy test," Ryan told him with a smile.

42

DURING lunch, Tyler's cell phone rang. He sighed unhappily, sat his taco down, and wiped his hands on his napkin before checking the caller ID and answering it. Ryan laughed at his expression.

"Michaels."

"Detective Michaels, this is Officer Lotab. Commander Nickels wants to see you in his office right away," the female voice informed him.

Tyler stifled a groan. "Well, tell him I'm at lunch and I'll be there when I can," Tyler told her, trying to clamp down on his sarcasm. It was no secret that there was no love lost between him and the commander, but Tyler tried to remember it wasn't Officer Lotab's fault either.

"I'll let him know, Detective. But he doesn't sound very happy."

"He never does," Tyler responded. "I'll be there within the hour," he told her, and disconnected the call.

Ryan took in the weary look on Tyler's face. "What's wrong?"

"Commander Nickels wants to see me," Tyler told him, picking his taco back up.

"You gonna get suspended?"

Tyler shrugged. "Probably."

Ryan sighed. "What is up with the two of you, anyway?"

"We've never gotten along. I can't remember why, except that he's an idiot."

Ryan shook his head.

“What’re your plans this afternoon?” Tyler asked.

“I’m taking you out. My schedule is clear for the rest of the day.”

Tyler smiled. “Want to go to the station with me? I’ll see what Nickels wants, then we can call it a day.”

Ryan nodded. “Sure.”

Tyler picked his phone back up and dialed Cole to let him know that he was free for the rest of the afternoon. After that, they headed for the main headquarters.

Once inside, Tyler scanned them in with his swipe card and they took the elevator up to the commander’s office.

Ryan smiled. “Good luck,” he told him as he sat down in a chair outside the office and listened to Tyler grumble under his breath all the way into the room, leaving the door open.

“Detective Michaels, so good you could finally take the time to come see me. I hope I wasn’t interrupting anything,” Commander Nickels said sarcastically from behind his desk.

“Just my lunch,” Tyler responded, just as sarcastic.

“It sounds like you’ve had a busy couple of days. Your informant’s down in lockup all upset because you threatened to drop him off of a building, his public defender is threatening the department with a very hefty lawsuit, and IA says you took cocaine out of here without proper clearance. Is this true?”

“Is the cocaine missing?”

“That wasn’t the question,” the commander growled from behind his desk.

Tyler stared him down.

“Did you take the drugs out of here?” he asked again slowly, pronouncing every word.

Tyler refused to answer, knowing that no matter what he said, Nickels would only hear what he wanted anyway.

Nickels got up out of his chair and crossed in front of his desk, getting in Tyler’s face. “I find out you took those drugs out of here, and I’ll bust your ass myself. I’ll be more than happy to make sure you get your cell back in the California State Prison, and I’ll inform your old cellmate myself that you’ll be making an appearance. I have it on good

authority that he has a score to settle with you.” Nickels’ eyes gleamed as he tried his best to intimidate Tyler.

Tyler never even blinked, but it took every ounce of self-control that he had not to punch his commanding officer.

“I want you to submit to a drug test,” the commander threw at him out of the blue.

“What?” Tyler faltered, his voice disbelieving.

“You heard me. My theory is you took the drugs out of here for your own personal use.”

“I took a half mil of coke out of here for my own personal use? That’s a pretty bad habit. Although, I’m curious, how do you explain my using them if they’re still here?”

“I don’t need to explain it. You’ll do as I say, and I say you’re getting tested.”

“I’m a Narcotics officer, you twit. I’ll pop positive, and you damn well know it.”

Nickels grabbed Tyler’s shirt. “That’s not my problem. It’s yours. I want you tested,” he repeated. “That’s an order.”

“Take your hands off me,” Tyler told him, his voice low and very clear on what the outcome would be if he didn’t comply.

Nickels shoved him slightly but dropped his hands. “You heard me, Michaels. You’re being tested.”

“Fine. Anything else, *sir*?”

Nickels smiled sadistically. “And we’re not talking some piss test either. I want your blood.” Nickels picked up the phone. “I took the liberty of arranging a drug test right now.” A minute later a man entered, carrying a bag.

“You sorry son of a bitch,” Tyler growled. “You know damn well that you can’t have me tested by anybody other than the department physician or the hospital. You’re gonna get busted for this.”

“I’m the commander, I make the rules.”

“You’re so full of shit, and you know it.”

“Sit down, Michaels, or I’ll take you down and force the test on you.”

Tyler raised his eyebrow. "You seriously want to try that?" he dared him.

Nickels advanced on him. "I'll pistol-whip you so fast, you won't know what hit you. Now, sit your ass down before I suspend you for disobeying a direct order, and just for something to do, I'll suspend your partner too. What's it going to be?"

Tyler muttered under his breath but sat down as directed anyway. The man poked and prodded him for a good five minutes before he finally was able to find a vein, but not before he shrank back in fear from the look Tyler was giving him. Finally the man finished, capped the blood, and left.

"Anything else, sir?" Tyler ground out.

"No, you're dismissed."

Tyler spun on his heel and stepped out of the office, slamming the door behind him so hard that the glass in the windows rattled.

Ryan raised his eyebrows as he stepped up next to Tyler. "He really hates you, doesn't he?" he asked as they walked down the hall. He took Tyler's arm and eyed the quickly forming bruises on his inner arm. He shook his head with a sigh and released him.

Tyler nodded. "Always has. I take it you heard everything?"

"It was hard not to. His walls are paper-thin, the door was open, and he screamed at you the entire time you were in there."

Tyler spotted Jack storming toward them, an angry look across his face. "You too?"

Jack nodded with a sigh. "What'd he say?"

"Wanted to know about the drugs and Midas."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Nothing."

Jack nodded. "Wait for me."

"I'll be in the lounge," Tyler agreed.

Tyler was sitting at a table, rubbing his temples, when Jack walked in.

"So, what'd he say?" Tyler asked.

Jack glared at him. "That you had a drug test and he's positive you'll pop positive."

“Yeah, I heard that too.” Tyler leaned back in his chair.

“I told him he was insane, that of course you would, and it wouldn’t stick, so he agreed to check the levels. You’ll test clean on the levels, right?”

Tyler’s look of malice caused Jack to hold up his hands in surrender. “Sorry, Michaels, I had to ask.”

“You should know better than to ask. The only way I’ll pop dirty on levels is if he fucks with the results. You do know he used his own physician, right?”

Jack narrowed his eyes. “No, I didn’t hear that part. Son of a bitch. He can’t do that.”

“I told him that, but you know Nickels.”

Jack sighed. “I’ll call the chief,” he told him. Then he glared. “Why the hell is Midas Jennings still sitting in my lockup?”

Tyler’s face changed to a look of pure surprise. “Is he? That’s strange. I thought I released him.”

Jack slapped his hand onto the table, leaning toward Tyler. “Cute, Michaels. I told you to release him yesterday. And then again today. Imagine my surprise when I walk through holding this afternoon and see him still sitting there. I ask an officer about it, and they’re just as surprised as I am. Seems they don’t have a file on Jennings. Where is it, Michaels?”

“Oh, I’m offended, sir. You think I’d purposely lose his file?” Tyler was deliberately acting too innocent.

Jack glared at him. “Yes, I do.”

Tyler nodded and then smiled. “It’s in your top left desk drawer.”

“My top left drawer is locked, Michaels.”

Tyler smiled as he stood up. “Yeah, I know. It’s a very interesting lock too.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “I’m releasing him.”

Tyler shrugged. “Sure, if you want Jackson to pop him. No skin off my nose. He did sell me out for five grand, might be kind of rewarding. Either way, I’m out of here.”

Jack sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Fine, I’ll sit on him for as long as I can. Just stay on your toes, Michaels. Between Jackson, IA, and Nickels, you’re in for one hell of a bumpy ride.”

“Same ol’, same ol’. Don’t forget to have undercovers cordon off the area around Miller’s tonight.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “I’ll be there with them. I’m not taking any chances. You need someone on Ryan while you’re gone?”

“If you’re going, he can wait with you. That okay with you, Ryan?”

Ryan nodded.

“Works for me,” Jack agreed. “We’ll meet in the deli parking lot at 2:30, that way you have time to get wired.”

“I’ll see you then,” he agreed, leading Ryan out the door and to the elevator. Inside, he turned to his lover. “Okay, I’m all yours.”

Ryan put his hands on Tyler’s hips and pulled him closer to his own body. “No, you’re always all mine. It’s just sometimes I have to share with the rest of LA.”

43

WHEN they got to the car, Tyler handed Ryan his keys and watched the scenery as they drove. Ryan loved to surprise Tyler, and it made Tyler happier than he’d ever been. Ryan loved him with all that he was, and some days, that scared Tyler. Some days, he was afraid to feel the full effect of Ryan’s love, for he feared that if he did, it would be snatched away from him, leaving him with nothing but a gaping hole in his heart. He didn’t always believe that he was deserving of the love that Ryan gave to him. He’d been taught from a young age that he was worthless and undeserving of any kindness. Ryan was trying to change that, to show him that he *did* deserve love, but it wasn’t always easy. Sometimes, past demons were just too hard to ignore.

“What’re you up to?” Tyler inquired, his blue eyes full of curiosity as Ryan pulled the car onto the drive of a private airfield.

Ryan just smiled. “You’ll see.”

Tyler undid his seatbelt and climbed out. Ryan came over to his side and handed him his denim shirt, then took him by the hand, leading him onto the airfield, where a sleek silver jet stood waiting.

Tyler's eyes widened with admiration. "Oh my gosh, Ryan, that's a Falcon ten."

Ryan nodded, a twinkle in his eyes. "Yeah, I know. I've heard you admire them before."

A man came out of the office, a clipboard in hand. "Great to see you again, Dr. Douglas." He smiled warmly, offering Ryan his hand. Ryan shook it with a smile of his own.

"Afternoon, Mr. Phoenix. Thanks for meeting us." He motioned to his lover. "This is Tyler."

"Ah, Detective Michaels. I've heard so much about you. It's good to finally meet you."

Tyler shook the man's outstretched hand, taking him in. He was an older gentleman with softly graying hair, a gentle smile, and the look of an honest man.

Tyler motioned toward the jet. "She yours?"

Mr. Phoenix nodded proudly. "She sure is. She's the best in my fleet."

"She's beautiful. What else do you run?" he asked enthusiastically.

Ryan watched him, a smile across his features.

"I have three other Falcons. A two-thousand, a nine-hundred and a fifty. Two Citations, a III and VII, and a Learjet."

Tyler's eyes grew wider. "The Citation's a good bird too. Especially the VII. She give your Falcon a run for her money?"

Mr. Phoenix nodded. "That she does. But the Falcon still upholds her reputation." He winked at Ryan and then smiled as he handed the clipboard over to Tyler. "Sign here."

"Huh?" Tyler asked, looking at him blankly. Ryan's smile widened as he watched his lover. Mr. Phoenix's did too.

"Your name. Sign here. She's all fueled up and ready to go."

Tyler was still staring at Mr. Phoenix, not fully comprehending the situation. The old man's eyes twinkled as he watched the young man stare at him with dazed blue eyes.

Tyler looked down at the clipboard in his hands, the words on the paper leaping out at him. Flight plans and a preflight checklist awaited his signature. He glanced at Ryan.

Ryan shrugged. "You always said you wanted to fly one," he told him with a smile.

Tyler couldn't respond, not quite believing what he was being told. He looked at Mr. Phoenix, his mouth dry. "You're gonna let me fly her?" he finally asked softly, his voice full of awe.

"Of course I am. You're a pilot, aren't you?"

"Well... yeah." Tyler was still trying to catch up to the conversation. He was overwhelmed with emotions and the full amount of Ryan's love.

"Dr. Douglas tells me you flew in the service?" he both stated the fact and questioned curiously.

Tyler nodded, his gaze going toward the jet as he answered quietly. "I was a Navy SEAL, but I also trained as a helo and fighter pilot."

Mr. Phoenix was clearly impressed. "Did you see combat?"

Tyler nodded, looking back at him. "My SEAL team was on the ground in several hot zones, but while we were between missions, my best friend, who's trained as a navigator, and I were deployed to a naval carrier to fly a fighter jet for an air raid. Twice. We were the only ones close enough able to respond in their time frame, so they sent us in."

Ryan and Mr. Phoenix were both watching him as he spoke. Ryan wore a smile of pride, Mr. Phoenix one of respect and admiration.

"I'm impressed, young man. What a remarkable past. What's your rank?"

"Lieutenant."

Mr. Phoenix's eyes held their admiration. "You must have been a young LT. You don't look all that old now."

Tyler smiled. "Older than I look, but yes, I was young. I was twenty-one."

"Wow, you *were* a really young lieutenant. Did you go to the academy?" Mr. Phoenix guessed.

Ryan smiled proudly. "Tyler graduated from Annapolis. Top of his class."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Mr. Phoenix said with amazement. "Young cadet, I take it?"

Tyler nodded again. "Very long story. You know the service pretty well. Did you serve?"

Ryan noticed the slick change of subject and lifted his eyes, appraising his lover.

Mr. Phoenix was nodding. "Navy. Captain in 'Nam. Two tours. Honorably discharged in 1972," he told them proudly.

"Wow, now *that's* impressive," Tyler said in admiration.

Mr. Phoenix smiled. "I tell you what, young man. You and I will have to sit down for dinner some evening and exchange stories. Betty and I'll have you boys out to the house. She'd love to see you again, Dr. Douglas."

"Ryan, and we'd love to," Ryan agreed with a smile.

"Great!" Mr. Phoenix smiled back. "I'll call Betty while you're gone and we'll make plans. Now go have a good time. Skies are clear, you shouldn't have a problem," he told Tyler.

Tyler took the pen Mr. Phoenix was holding out to him and signed his name to the clipboard, tore off the top page, and handed it to Mr. Phoenix. Mr. Phoenix took it with a smile.

"She's all ready. Take care, and have a good time."

Tyler and Ryan nodded, and Ryan put his hand on the small of Tyler's back and pushed him gently toward the plane, reveling in the look on Tyler's face.

Tyler circled the outside of the plane, checking her over, and then they climbed aboard the Falcon. Tyler pulled the stairway in, securing it, and then slowly made his way to the cockpit, Ryan on his heels. In the doorway, he stopped and looked around in admiration.

"Wow," he whispered. He turned to look at Ryan, a step behind him, his eyes wide and bright. "Thank you," he said quietly, shaking his head, unable to find any other words to show his gratitude. He didn't need to. Ryan could see it written all across his face. He pulled Tyler to him.

"You're very welcome," he whispered against Tyler's ear.

Ryan gently pushed Tyler into the pilot's seat, and Tyler donned his headset and motioned for Ryan to do the same before running through the preflight checklist. When he was done, he glanced over the flight plans. He looked over at Ryan.

“Why’re we going to San Jose?”

Ryan smiled. “Surprise.”

Tyler grinned, curiosity in his eyes. He relayed with the tower and requested clearance for takeoff. Ryan watched him settle into the cockpit naturally.

“Alpha twenty-nine, you are clear to taxi to runway two, heading south,” the control tower came over their headsets.

Tyler adjusted a few levers, turned a few knobs, and then steered the Falcon to the instructed runway. When they got to the end, Tyler pulled it into a turn and braked, then went over his checklist once more.

He pushed the microphone on his headset closer to his mouth. “Alpha twenty-nine requesting permission for takeoff on runway two, heading south,” he relayed.

There was a pause and a crackle, and then the tower came back over their headphones. *“Alpha twenty-nine, you are clear for takeoff on runway two, heading south.”*

Tyler released the brake and turned the Falcon, positioning it at the end of the runway. Once there, he glanced over at Ryan with a smile. “You ready?”

“Oh yeah,” Ryan nodded, his eyes on Tyler.

Tyler made a few more adjustments and then pushed the thrust lever forward, increasing the engine speed. They glided down the runway, picking up speed quickly as Tyler continued to push the lever forward. Ryan split his attention between Tyler and the scenery as they sailed down the runway. He glanced over at Tyler just in time to see him pull back on the controls and lift them into the air. Ryan felt his stomach drop as the feeling of floating overtook him. He grinned at his lover.

Tyler looked over at Ryan and took in his expression. “This is so cool!” Tyler exclaimed.

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, it is. I can see why you love it so much.”

As they leveled off into the clouds, Tyler smiled and nodded toward the horizon. *“This is why I love it so much,”* he said as he adjusted the plane so they were heading north toward San Jose.

Ryan looked around at the breathtaking panoramic view that surrounded them. "Man, it's amazing," Ryan said quietly. "It's nothing like flying commercially."

Tyler shook his head. "Nowhere close," he agreed. He glanced over at Ryan. "So how do you know Mr. Phoenix?"

"His wife was in a car accident last year. I was her surgeon."

Tyler nodded knowingly. "I figured as much," he said with a smile. "He had that look."

"What look?"

Tyler shrugged. "The look of a man who owes you his life."

Ryan shook his head with a smile. "They stop by now and then to see me. She's the one who bakes all those fantastic cookies."

Tyler's eyes lit up. "Really?"

Ryan laughed. "Yes really. And yes, she knows how much you like them. In fact, the last batch she baked specifically for you after you broke your ribs. She wanted to cheer you up."

Tyler smiled. "She did."

"Hey, I meant to tell you that when we get back, we can swing by the hospital and I'll take your blood," Ryan told him.

"Why?" Tyler frowned, not enjoying the thought of being poked again. His arms still hurt from the last time.

"In case Nickels does try to screw with you. I'll have it documented," Ryan told him.

"He'll just say I flushed it."

Ryan shook his head. "You can't flush it that fast, not out of your blood. You don't need any more trouble, and if we have it documented at the hospital, it should go in your favor."

Tyler nodded as he agreed, although hesitantly.

Ryan smiled sympathetically. "I promise to be gentle, and I won't get anywhere near where that idiot gouged you before," he promised him, turning Tyler's arm in his hand once again, frowning at the dark bruising. "You should have made him stop. I would have come in and finished it."

Tyler shrugged. "I'm alright. Besides, the further you stay from Nickels, the happier I am."

Ryan sighed but let it drop.

It wasn't long before they descended slightly to circle over San Jose, awaiting clearance to land. Soon they were descending through the clouds, and Ryan heard the landing gear come down at about the same time he saw the airport coming into view. Tyler lined the jet up with the runway, listened to the tower giving him instructions, and watched his display all at the same time.

The runway came up beneath them faster and faster, and then they felt the touch of the wheels as they connected with the runway. The engines whined as Tyler began to slow them down.

Following the instructions over the radio, Tyler pulled the jet around in front of the maintenance crew, who met them as he lowered the steps to the tarmac below.

After picking up keys to their rental car, Ryan turned to Tyler. "Ready?" he asked.

Tyler nodded and curled his fingers around Ryan's as Ryan took his hand. "You know you spoil me?"

Ryan smiled. "Of course I do. You deserve nothing less."

44

AS THE hockey arena came into view, Tyler looked at Ryan, his eyes wide. Ryan smiled, slowing into traffic. A few minutes later, he pulled the car into the parking garage and found a parking spot.

Outside the car, Ryan produced two tickets, his brown eyes shining happily.

Tyler looked at him in shock. "The Sharks are playing the Red Wings tonight," he stated, his voice awed.

Ryan smiled. "Yeah, I know."

"You got tickets to see the Red Wings?" he asked in complete admiration.

"Well, they are your favorite team."

Tyler stood facing Ryan, his eyes wide and full of love. He was incapable of producing words as the overwhelming feeling washed over him.

Ryan smiled at him gently. Tyler's utter astonishment was written clearly across his face, and it made Ryan's heart swell with happiness.

Finally, Tyler found his voice. "You are so awesome, Ryan."

"Yeah, well, it's easy to be when I have you to spoil," he told him, leaning in and kissing Tyler gently. "Come on, let's go." He pulled Tyler's hand, and they headed for the stairs.

"Thank you, Ryan."

"You're welcome, Tyler."

TYLER watched with excitement as the NHL teams slid around the ice. The crowd yelled and chanted around them. He was in awe at how much Ryan had done for him. He'd always admired the Falcon ten and had wanted to fly one for quite some time. It had been a dream come true to actually sit in the cockpit and lift that baby into the air. And now they were watching his favorite team of his favorite sport go head-to-head with his second-favorite team. He didn't really think the night could get any better.

At intermission, Ryan handed Tyler a beer and looked at him curiously. "If the Wings had offered you a spot, would you have taken it?" he questioned his lover.

Tyler wasn't just good at playing hockey; Tyler was brilliant. A few years ago, he'd played in the minors, and from there, an NHL team had tried to draft him. However, Tyler loved his job and had never intended to make a career out of the minors. He had only agreed to play on LA's team for the remainder of the season while their star center was out for reconstructive surgery on his knee. Ryan knew Tyler had been torn when Tampa Bay had offered him a position. He had seriously considered it. Ryan often wondered if he ever regretted turning them down.

Tyler settled in his seat, his eyes lingering over the ice. "I don't know, but probably not. I'm happy as a cop. I make a difference on the streets. I'm good at what I do."

“You’re good at hockey too,” Ryan pointed out. “A lot of these guys make a difference in people’s lives.”

“Yeah, they do. But would I?” He looked over at Ryan. “Every ounce I get off the streets is one less for some kid to die on. I made the right decision. I still get to play, and that’s all that matters. I have both.”

Ryan nodded, understanding. Tyler still played with his friends and on the PD’s league. In the long run, maybe that was all that really mattered—doing what you love and having fun while doing it.

The third period ended, with the Red Wings winning three to two. It was an incredibly close game, and Tyler’s face was flushed with excitement and pure happiness. He turned to Ryan, his eyes saying it all. Ryan smiled and tugged on his arm.

“Come on, I got another surprise.”

Tyler’s eyes lit up. “Another one? What more could you possibly do for me?”

Ryan smiled brightly. “You’ll see.” He led Tyler downstairs, where a man was waiting for them.

“Dr. Douglas?” Ryan nodded. “Right this way.” He led them down a corridor and to a room where a group of people Tyler instantly recognized was waiting.

“Tyler!” Brian Bossel grabbed him and pulled him into an enthusiastic hug. Brian played center for the Red Wings. He had also been on Tyler’s SEAL team. “Man, it’s good to see you!”

Tyler’s smile widened. “Yeah, you too. You guys played great tonight,” Tyler told him. The other four players in the room greeted him then. They were all guys that Tyler had met at a hockey camp for kids with cancer, one that Brian had also attended. Tyler had been playing for the minors at the time, and his team had been there the same week as some of the Red Wings. Brian had introduced them, and they’d quickly become friends. They kept in contact as much as their schedules allowed.

“Well, we’re not done playing yet,” Brian told Tyler as he picked up a bag by his feet. “So lace up,” he said, handing the bag to Tyler.

Tyler wrinkled his forehead and unzipped the bag, peering inside. He turned to Ryan, the question written clearly across his face.

Ryan shrugged. "Mr. Phoenix had to make a run to San Jose earlier, so I asked him to drop off your stuff." He smiled at the look on Tyler's face. "However, keep in mind, you're still on restriction."

Brian jabbed Tyler. "Yeah, Ryan says we have to take it easy on you. What happened?" he asked, motioning Tyler and Ryan toward the door.

"Had a bust go bad a few weeks back and got stabbed." Tyler shrugged as they headed toward the ice.

Brian and the others stopped and turned to look him up and down. "Are you okay?" Brian asked, his eyes narrowed in concern.

"Yeah, I'm fine. It wasn't that bad."

Ryan rolled his eyes. Brian looked at him knowingly. "He's downplaying, isn't he?" Ryan nodded. "Haven't changed much, have you, Tyler?"

It was Tyler's turn to roll his eyes. He sat down on a bench and pulled his skates from his bag.

As Tyler laced up his skates, Brian turned to Ryan. "So how close did he cut it this time?"

Ryan had straddled the bench beside Tyler, watching him lace his skates. He glanced up at Brian. "He was about fifteen minutes away from bleeding to death. The stab wound itself wasn't all that bad. He took it in the stomach, but it missed everything major. But he'd lost quite a bit of blood by the time Tommy dragged him into the hospital, which put him in jeopardy. Then, of course, he left the hospital AMA that night, ran off after the guy, and ripped his stitches back out."

"You really *haven't* changed, have you, buddy?" Brian raised his eyebrows at Tyler, who just shrugged, an amused expression on his face. Brian looked at Ryan again. "Did he ever tell you about the round he took in the leg while in combat?"

Ryan shook his head, glancing between Tyler and Brian. Tyler shook his head with a sigh.

"That figures," Brian told him. "He doesn't much like the story because he figures he should have done something differently, although there was nothing he could have done. He went above and beyond. And has the medal to prove it. He and our CO had gotten separated from the rest of us during an ambush and were unable to regroup. Our CO ended up dying from his injuries, yet Tyler managed to bring him back despite

his own injuries, dragging him through the desert for two days while bleeding massively. It ended up slowing Tyler down considerably, but he's a stubborn one. Gets back to camp and he's more worried about Sam's family than the fact he was delirious with fever from the infection in his leg. If the shape he was in hadn't been so completely obvious, he probably wouldn't have even mentioned it. He didn't stay down for long at all, and within days he was given a commendation, promoted, and put in charge of our team. Then they sent us off on a recon, limp, stitches, antibiotics, and all."

Ryan was looking at them in astonishment.

Tyler shook his head, laughing. "It was just a flesh wound; you make it sound as though I'd gotten half my leg blown off. And none of you would have left his body out there. His family deserved better than that. *He* deserved better than that."

"You had a through-and-through with two days of sand in it from the desert. Tell me that's a flesh wound, Ryan."

"Sounds to me like you're probably lucky to still *have* your leg, Tyler. I wouldn't exactly call it a flesh wound."

"Thank you!" Brian said triumphantly. "Now, we gonna skate?"

Tyler nodded and slid his denim shirt off and then pulled off his gun holster. He placed his shirt, holster, and gun in his bag and pulled his hockey stick out. Ryan stood up and leaned over the partition. Tyler stepped out onto the ice and turned to him while the rest of the guys swept around them.

"Thanks, Ryan."

"Anything to see you smile."

"You should have brought your skates."

Ryan shook his head. "I prefer watching you play. I can play with you anytime."

Tyler leaned in closer, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "You sure can. In fact, maybe you can play with me later."

Ryan reached out and slapped Tyler on the butt. "Go play, you imp."

Tyler laughed and skated away while Ryan watched him with adoration. Tyler was always impressive on the ice. He was quick and graceful on skates and had an incredibly accurate shot. Ryan watched

Tyler skate, turn, and shoot the puck toward the goal. Ryan smiled proudly, happy seeing Tyler so relaxed and carefree.

45

RYAN pulled the car into a restaurant parking lot and looked over at Tyler, who was watching him with incredible blue eyes. Ryan lifted his eyebrows in question.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Ryan smiled. “You hungry?”

Tyler nodded.

“Good, come on.”

“You were impressive as always on the ice tonight, Tyler. I think the guys were really hoping you’d change your mind,” Ryan said as they walked toward the restaurant hand in hand.

“I had a great time. You really went to a lot of trouble to put this together. Somehow, ‘thank you’ just doesn’t seem like enough.”

“Seeing you smile is all I need,” Ryan responded, slipping his arm around Tyler’s waist.

After they’d placed their order and their waiter, who had spent five minutes hitting on Tyler, had gone, Ryan looked at Tyler, his brown eyes curious.

“So, let me get this straight: you dragged your dead CO through the desert for two days with a bullet wound, infection, and fever?” Ryan asked in awe.

Tyler broke his breadstick in half. “Sam didn’t die ’til the second day. He took three rounds of sniper fire in the back and side, saving me. I didn’t see the guy. All I saw was the blur from the side as Sam dove into me and knocked me to the ground, covering me with his body. I didn’t have time to assess him, didn’t know how bad he was hit, I only had time to move. We were being pinned down by enemy fire, so I shouldered my rifle, snagged him by his coat, and crawled out on my belly, pulling him alongside me. That’s when I got hit. I felt the bullet

tear through my leg, but I couldn't stop. If I had, we would've been killed, they weren't taking prisoners. I found cover and got my first good look at how badly he was hit. I did the best I could with my field pack, but deep down, I knew it wasn't going to be enough. He regained consciousness on and off, and when he was lucid, he talked about his family." Tyler's gaze was far away as he remembered. Ryan took Tyler's hand in his.

"He finally ordered me to leave him, to get myself out, but I wouldn't. You don't leave one of your team behind no matter what the cost. By the next morning, he was no longer lucid. I tried my best to keep him alive. I hoped we'd make it back to base by nightfall. I just kept telling myself that if I got him back quickly, they'd be able to save him. The sun was *so* hot. I went as fast as I could, but it seemed like he just kept getting heavier and heavier. My leg throbbed and wouldn't stop bleeding, and we were nearly out of water. Then a sandstorm hit. God, you can't see two inches in front of your face when the sand is whipping around like that, but I couldn't stop, I *had* to get Sam back. I tied my field jacket around his head, threw him back over my shoulder, and moved on."

Tyler took a drink from his soda and sat back in his seat. Ryan was watching him, fascinated.

"It couldn't have been much past noon when, in this loud, clear voice, he ordered me to stop. It took me by surprise because he'd been so delirious up until that point. I set him down and pulled my jacket off his head. He looked at me with these clear blue eyes, and then he smiled. He said, 'Tyler, you've been a better friend than anyone I've ever known, and you're a remarkable SEAL. I'm proud to have you on my team, and I know you'll lead these men just as well as I have. Now, leave my sorry ass behind and save yourself. You look like shit. That's an order, Michaels.'" Tyler smiled, remembering his CO's last words, and Ryan found himself smiling with him.

"Of course, I went on to disobey those orders, but I highly doubt he would have been surprised. He just smiled as I shook my head, and then he closed his eyes, took one last breath, and he was gone. I don't know how long I sat there, trying to get him back. I was a mess. He was the first on our team to die. The first person really close to me that we'd lost, and I felt like it was my fault. As if I hadn't done enough. I couldn't help thinking about his family and what they were going to do

without him. But, finally, I picked him up and went on. By the next morning, I was so disoriented that I started to wonder if *I'd* make it out alive. At one point I thought about just sitting down and letting whatever happen, happen. But I've never been much of a quitter, so I just kept going. I made it to the outskirts of our camp before noon, and I don't really remember too much more beyond that. Spotty images. I do remember the soldiers—Army, I think—taking Sam from me, pulling my field pack and rifle from my shoulder, and setting me in a jeep. Then my team was there, bombarding me with questions, and I remember Tommy squatting next to the jeep and pulling me into his arms. I remember looking into his relieved, green eyes, and that was it. The last thing I remember was him catching me and holding me as I completely fell out of the jeep and his voice telling me that everything was going to be okay, that I was safe. Shortly after, they promoted me to lieutenant and put me in charge of my team.”

Ryan was leaning forward in his seat, watching Tyler, enthralled by the story he was telling. Their waiter came with their food, and Ryan's mind wandered to news reports he'd heard all those years ago about two Navy SEALs in a war zone Ryan couldn't even remember, separated from their unit, missing in action, and feared dead. Then, a few days later, the reports had come back about how a young, injured SEAL had made it back to base with his commanding officer's body, despite his own condition and the sandstorm that raged around them, which had been slowing down the search and rescue units.

He remembered how he had been drawn to the story, how it had stuck in his head for such a long time afterwards, and now, looking at his lover, he realized why. It had been meant to stick in his head, for it was a story that affected him in more ways than he had ever realized all those years ago.

That story was his future.

46

THE sleek, silver jet sailed down the runway, gathering speed, and then the nose lifted gently into the air, the back tires cleared the runway, and she was airborne.

The aircraft glided through the darkened night sky as Tyler made her climb to their cruising altitude. The landing gear came up and locked into place, and finally the nose leveled, settling into a cruising pattern.

Tyler turned on the automatic pilot, leaned back in his seat, and stretched. Then he turned to Ryan with a grin.

“Wanna join the mile-high club?”

Ryan’s eyebrows lifted at the suggestion, and then he tilted his head as if considering. “I don’t know. Depends. Are you already a member?” His voice was silky and his eyes dark with lust.

Tyler laughed, got out of his seat, and deposited himself in Ryan’s lap. Ryan’s arms came up and encircled Tyler, his hands settling on Tyler’s sides.

“Actually, no, I’m not. I was saving myself for you.”

Ryan smiled before leaning forward and attaching his lips to Tyler’s neck. Tyler moaned and tipped his head back, giving Ryan better access.

Ryan’s hands slid down, and he grasped Tyler under the legs, pulling him to his own body, and he lifted them both from his chair, never breaking contact with Tyler’s neck.

As Ryan carried him from the cockpit, Tyler turned his head and captured Ryan’s mouth, which Ryan willingly met and dove into his warm depths. He ran his tongue around Tyler’s mouth, stroking Tyler’s own tongue with his as he laid him down on the leather couch in the cabin, his own body covering his lover’s.

Ryan pulled his mouth away a fraction of an inch, and his lust-filled brown eyes met Tyler’s dark blue ones. “We’re not going to crash, are we?” he questioned, his voice soft.

“I hope not,” Tyler responded just as quietly, trying to bring Ryan back down for another kiss.

Ryan’s look said it all, and Tyler laughed. “We’ll be fine, we’ll just make it quick.”

And that was all Ryan needed to hear. His mouth seized Tyler’s again, and his hands roamed his lover’s body. He pushed Tyler’s denim shirt off his shoulders and onto the floor, where his gun and holster soon followed.

Tyler unbuttoned Ryan's jeans while Ryan pushed Tyler's T-shirt up, his mouth latching onto a nipple. Tyler groaned and pushed up into Ryan, simultaneously working Ryan's jeans down. Ryan found the button on Tyler's jeans, slid it open, and pushed them down as his mouth traveled down the hard abdomen. Tyler moaned and moved beneath him.

Ryan slid back up Tyler's body and cradled Tyler's head in his hands, looking intently into his blue eyes. Their mouths met again, and Ryan's hands entangled in Tyler's hair as he kissed him. Tyler caressed Ryan's sides, his body flushed and intense beneath Ryan.

Ryan leaned over the side of the leather couch, snagged Tyler's bag, and dragged it over closer to them, where he could unzip it. Tyler watched him curiously, his eyes intense and full of need. Ryan smiled and produced a bottle of K-Y Jelly.

Tyler laughed. "You really came prepared, didn't you?"

Ryan smiled. "A date with you isn't complete until you're sated and content in my arms," Ryan told him, moving over him and kissing him once again.

Moving deeper into the kiss, Ryan coated himself with the lubricant. Then, tossing the bottle aside, he leaned over Tyler, met his eyes, and began slowly pushing into Tyler's body. Tyler moaned and met his thrusts.

They moved together on the couch, their touches tender and loving at first, and then frantic and lust-driven as they approached the peak of ecstasy.

Ryan's head dropped to Tyler's chest, and he panted hard, caught up in the bliss. Then he gathered Tyler in his arms and pulled him close. He didn't think there was any better feeling in the world than holding Tyler in his arms.

THE all-night deli was bustling with activity as Tyler and Ryan pulled into the parking lot. Jack quickly got Tyler and Tommy wired, and then Tyler squeezed Ryan's hand and smiled his reassurance.

"It'll be okay," he told him.

Ryan just nodded, a lump in his throat, and then they watched them go.

Jack smiled, clasping Ryan's shoulder, but he didn't look so sure of things himself. Ryan raised his eyebrow, and Jack sighed.

"This guy has us all on edge," he admitted. "I know they're well trained for this, but...." Jack trailed off as he pulled into traffic.

"Something could still go wrong," Ryan supplied.

Jack nodded.

They listened to Tommy and Tyler's conversation about the hockey game and the Falcon over the transmitter while they waited for their backup to move into position.

Jack parked across the street from the restaurant and pulled out a pair of night-vision binoculars and his two-way radio. "Is everyone in position?"

"Roger, Captain. Unit three in position."

"Unit six in position."

"Unit two in position."

"Unit four in position."

There was a pause, so Jack clicked the two-way button. "Where's unit one?"

"Unit one here, Cap. We're pulling into position now. We had to circle the block."

"Is your position overrun?"

"No, just being cautious. Had too many people around at the time."

"Unit five?"

"In position, Cap'n. Three men just walked into the back of the restaurant. No sign of Jackson."

"Alright, keep watching. Michaels and Carmikael are in position. Keep your eyes open, boys and girls." Jack set the radio down, picked up his cell phone, and speed-dialed Tyler's two-way number.

"Michaels, we're in position."

"Roger. We comin' in?" Tyler asked over his wire, leaving his phone on his hip.

“Loud and clear,” Jack responded. “Be careful. Jones said they saw three men enter the back of the restaurant. Jackson wasn’t one of them.”

“I doubt he’s stupid enough to show, although I dare him to. There’s a bullet in my gun with his name on it.”

“Michaels,” Jack warned, shaking his head.

“Just stating the facts, sir.”

“I’m gonna pretend I didn’t hear that.” Jack shook his head and glanced at Ryan. Ryan smiled.

“Think this guy Pete will bite?” Tommy asked Tyler as they walked toward the restaurant. Around the perimeter, several eyes watched them.

“I hope so. However, I have a feeling he’s not here because he’s considering rolling on Jackson.”

Tommy stopped and grabbed Tyler’s arm, turning him. “You think we’re being set up?”

“I’d count on it.”

In the car, Jack sighed and ran his hand over his face, mumbling under his breath.

“Then why the hell are we here?” Tommy demanded.

Tyler shrugged. “What if he does roll? I’m supposed to hide at home under the covers just in case the big bad wolf is out there?”

“The big bad wolf wants you dead, Tyler. What part of that don’t you get?”

“I get it just fine, Tommy,” he responded. “But we’re not going to bust him until I play his game. You know that.”

The two stood locked in a determined staring contest, their bodies tense. Around the perimeter, the eyes watched keenly.

“Hey, they gonna come to blows?” Jake Thompson’s amused voice came over the radio. “Cause if they are, my money’s on Michaels tonight. He’s probably pissed as shit and ready to take someone out after his encounter with both Nickels and Carter today.”

There was a volley of replies, each putting their money on one of the two detectives. Ryan and Jack laughed.

Jack finally thumbed the connection.

“Michaels just informed Carmikael that he thinks they’re being set up,” he told his detectives, looking over at Ryan.

“I coulda told you that,” Thompson came back. “This guy ain’t gonna roll on Jackson. People are too afraid of him. But if Michaels don’t play their game, we’re never gonna catch this guy.”

Jack thumbed the connection again. “You and Michaels sharing a brain tonight? That’s exactly what he just said.”

“Just makes sense, sir,” Thompson came back. “Looks like Carmikael is backing down.”

In the parking lot, Tommy sighed. “I hate it when you’re right.”

Tyler looked over Tommy’s shoulder toward Jack’s parked car. “Sometimes, I do too,” he said with a sigh.

They crossed the remainder of the parking lot and opened the door to the restaurant. Miller met them.

“You alone?” he asked, looking over their shoulders, peering into the darkness.

“No, we brought the Vienna Boys’ Choir with us. We’re going to take them out for ice cream when we’re done,” Tyler retorted sarcastically.

Tommy glanced at his partner with a smirk.

Miller glared as he ushered them inside. “Funny.”

“I thought so.” Tyler shrugged. “Now, is your friend Pete here, or are we wasting our time?”

“Hey, Pete, those cops are here,” Miller called, not taking his eyes from Tyler’s face.

The door to the kitchen opened, and two men came out. Tyler’s eyes hardened as one of them stopped directly in front of him, a smirk on his face.

Tyler’s left fist came up, connecting with the man’s jaw fast and hard, which sent him sprawling backward. The man’s partner pulled a gun, and he aimed it at Tyler’s head at the same second Tommy pointed his gun at him. Tommy threw a questioning glance at Tyler, who watched with hard eyes as the man on the floor recovered from the sudden blow and picked himself up.

In the car, Ryan and Jack waited impatiently. The sound of fist upon flesh was unmistakable. Whose fist had connected with whose

flesh was the question running through their minds. Jack's fingers gripped the radio in his hand as he waited for a sign from inside, ready to have backup roll.

Back in the restaurant, Tyler glared at the man he had just decked, who simply smirked at Tyler. Tommy's eyes roamed between the three men, his gun steady on the man with the gun pointed at his partner's head while that man looked between his buddy, Tyler, and Tommy, his gun inches from Tyler's temple.

"I suggest you remove the gun from my partner's head," Tommy growled.

In the car, Jack sighed, thumbing his handheld radio. "Be ready to roll on my command. Someone pulled a gun."

The man Tyler had hit nodded to his buddy. "It's okay, Pete. I think I deserved that one. You can put the gun down."

Pete slowly lowered his gun and put it away. Once it was away, Tommy lowered his but didn't holster it.

"What the hell was that about?" he questioned his partner.

Tyler shrugged. "He's lucky I only hit him. I was considering putting a bullet through his head. He's the asshole who tried to gut me."

Tommy glared at the man. "You're the asshole who stabbed my partner?"

The man turned to Tommy, his smile sick. "So what if I did?"

"How's life in prison for the attempted murder of a police officer sound?" Tommy threw back.

"Now, boys," Pete interrupted. "Arguing isn't going to get us anywhere. Besides, you want our cooperation, you're going to have to forgive Mr. Antoine here for the negligent injuring of Detective Michaels."

Tyler snorted. "We have high hopes, don't we, Pete?"

"You want my help, my boys stay safe."

"Oh, he'll be real safe in an eight by eight cell. Steel and concrete on all sides, he won't have to worry about anything getting in there. He'll just want to watch out for the community showers."

"You really don't want my cooperation, do you, Detective Michaels?"

"I'm to believe you're actually going to roll on your boss?"

Pete shrugged. "I'd roll on my own mother for the right price."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to hear about the abnormal relationship you have with your mother. Just tell me where I can find Jackson and who he has on the inside of the PD."

Pete smiled. "Oh, I can tell you where to find Jackson." Both Miller and the man Tyler had punched leveled their weapons at the duo. Out of the back came two more men holding Uzis.

Tyler exchanged an I-told-you-so look with Tommy while Miller took Tommy's gun from his hand and motioned for Tyler to pull his shirt back.

Tyler complied, albeit stubbornly, revealing his gun. Miller pulled it from his holster.

"I told you this wasn't a good idea," Tommy told him.

Tyler nodded. "So you did. Hey, Pete, you might want to tell your boys that automatics are illegal here in America."

Pete punched Tyler, snapping him back into Tommy.

"Hey!" Tommy protested, catching Tyler.

Pete settled his gun on Tyler's forehead, and Tommy wrapped his arm around Tyler's waist, preventing him from lunging at Pete. Blood trickled from the corner of Tyler's lip and down his chin.

"You might want to keep Detective Michaels under control—unless you want his brain splattered all over you. Now let's go, Jackson is waiting."

In the car, Jack groaned, muttering to himself. "All units, move in. Silently. Michaels has a gun to his head."

Ryan looked at Jack, who was gnawing on his knuckles.

"Dammit, they walked right into it."

"Tyler knew what he was doing," Ryan pointed out as Jack moved the car so he could see the back of the restaurant.

"I swear, one of these days, I'm gonna have a heart attack with all his stunts. And that mouth." Jack looked over at Ryan. "He's funny as hell, has more wit than anyone I know, not to mention he's a sarcastic smart-ass, and it's going to buy him real trouble one of these days."

Ryan sighed. "So I keep telling him."

Jack smiled. "And yet it does neither of us any good."

Kneeling beside the car together, which Jack had angled slightly to protect them yet give them a clear view of the restaurant, they watched the dark figures of the Narcotic unit surround the building.

The back door of the restaurant opened, and four dogs ran out into the yard.

“Shit,” Jack exclaimed, thumbing his radio. “We got dogs,” he hissed into the radio.

The dogs began barking and tearing through the yard, heading for the surrounding police.

“Tranq them,” Jack hissed. Tyler and Tommy had warned them about the dogs, so they had come prepared with tranquilizer darts.

Suddenly, shots were fired out the door, and the officers hit the dirt.

Over Tyler’s wire, Pete could be heard cursing Tyler out.

“Dammit, Michaels. I swear you are nothing but a thorn in my side,” he growled angrily as he ground the gun just beneath Tyler’s skull into the back of his neck. “Tell your boys to drop their guns.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then I have Bruce and John blow your partner away. If you cooperate, they’ll leave him locked in the restaurant in the condition he’s in now. Your choice, of course.”

Tyler sighed and exchanged a look with Tommy as Pete pushed Tyler out the door.

“Get your hands up on your head where I can see them,” Pete instructed, watching as Tyler complied.

“Hold your fire. They’ve got Michaels as a hostage,” Jack instructed his officers, his own gun drawn, waiting.

“Stand down,” Tyler instructed the surrounding officers.

The visible officers seemingly relaxed their stance. Those that were out of sight held their ground.

All eyes were glued to Tyler, waiting for his next move.

Ryan’s heart was thudding painfully in his chest as he watched the man grind his gun nervously into Tyler’s neck. His stomach churned with fear, yet Tyler looked completely calm as he stood waiting for the men to decide his fate.

Tyler heard the door close, and he turned his head slightly. All five men were now outside behind Tyler. Tommy was shut inside the restaurant.

Tyler turned his head to where he had seen Jack's car. He nodded slightly, knowing Jack would catch it.

At the car, Jack thumbed his two-way radio. "Be ready, boys and girls. Michaels is going to make a move." As he took his finger off the button, he spoke to Ryan. "Let's just hope he doesn't get shot doing it."

Ryan's eyes were glued to Tyler, his heart in his throat as he silently agreed with Jack.

Pete nudged Tyler forward. "Walk slowly to the gray Civic and open the door," he instructed.

Tyler took one step forward and then threw himself to the ground and rolled back into Pete's legs, at the same time hissing into the mike taped to his chest.

"Shoot the bastard."

Pete's legs were knocked out from under him as Tyler barreled into him.

The other men stood frozen for a split second, their eyes wide in surprise and then fear as they realized they were sitting ducks.

The police rushed in.

Two of the men tried going back into the restaurant, only to have Tommy's foot connect with the first one's chest as the door was opened, sending him back into his buddy. They both hit the ground.

Tyler and Pete were struggling on the ground, a mass of flailing limbs. Knees, fists, and elbows connected anywhere they could land a jab.

Police surrounded the men, guns drawn, and all but Pete stopped their fight for freedom as they surrendered their weapons and raised their hands. Pete, however, continued to struggle with Tyler as Jack and Ryan approached them.

Suddenly, Tyler twisted beneath Pete, wrapped his leg around the other man's body, and sat up. Kicking Pete back, he lunged forward and grabbed a fistful of his hair, and his left fist connected solidly with the other man's face. Then he twisted Pete onto his belly, jerked his arm behind his back, and leaned on him.

Tommy quickly got Pete handcuffed, and other officers moved in and hauled him to his feet while Tyler glanced up at his partner with a lopsided grin.

“You were right, it *was* a bad idea.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “*Now* you listen to me.” He reached down and clasped Tyler’s hand and pulled him into a standing position. “You okay?” he asked with concern, handing his partner his gun.

Tyler nodded, wiping his blood from his face with his sleeve.

“You sure?” Tommy narrowed his eyes.

“Just sore,” Tyler assured him as he put his gun in his holster.

“So what’s your next brilliant plan?”

“Thought I’d let you figure out the next one. You don’t seem to like mine very much.”

“Not when the end result is one of us getting shot, beaten, or stabbed, I don’t.”

Ryan and Jack laughed at the exchange as the four of them walked toward Tyler’s car. Once there, Jack turned to Tyler and clasped him fondly on the shoulder. “Glad you’re still alive, Michaels.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tyler agreed with a smile.

“I’ll take your partner to his car. Go home and get some rest,” Jack ordered him.

Tyler nodded and pulled his shirt up, and Tommy pulled the wire from his chest and stomach. Then he leaned against the car and watched his partner and captain cross the street to Jack’s car.

He turned his head toward his lover as Ryan stood in front of him.

“You knew this was a setup from the beginning, didn’t you?” Ryan accused him.

Tyler rubbed his neck as he sighed. “Pretty much,” he answered truthfully. “I didn’t really think Pete would roll on Jackson, but it was a chance worth taking if he had.”

“That chance was your life, Tyler.”

“They were never going to make it out of there with me. I was actually surprised they tried. That they didn’t figure I’d have backup.”

“They have an inside man. They probably assumed if you had backup, it would have come across the wire.”

Tyler's face lit up, and he smiled at Ryan. "Which means the leak isn't in our department. We didn't go outside Narcotics with this op. Oh, Jackson's gonna be pissed." His grin grew wider.

"Which means he'll take it out on you."

"Yeah, but it's so worth it. I wish I could see the look on his face when he realizes we've got Pete in lockup."

Ryan shook his head. "You're enjoying this a little too much, you know."

Tyler smiled. "He started it."

Ryan rolled his eyes with a laugh.

48

RYAN watched Tyler through the two-way mirror overlooking the interrogation room. Tyler and Tommy were questioning Pete Marrow, who was being anything but cooperative. He was leaned back in his chair, a smug expression across his features, and he watched the two detectives with dark, arrogant eyes.

Tyler and Tommy were seated at the table across from him. Tommy held a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand, and he sipped it, regarding his partner out of the corner of his eye.

Tyler sat next to him, grinding his jaw, and his eyes burned in anger. He tapped his foot against the floor in irritation as he thought about strangling Pete. At least Ryan was sure that was what he was picking up from his lover's body language.

Next to Ryan, Jack was rubbing his temples wearily. With a sigh, he reached behind him and turned off the video surveillance into the adjoining room. Ryan raised his eyebrow in question.

Jack leaned his head against the glass tiredly. "At least if Tyler kills him we won't have it on video," he answered the unasked question. He put his hands in the pockets of his black dress pants and turned slightly, leaning his hip against the two-way mirror.

"I give Tyler thirty more seconds before he shoves his chair back and jumps to his feet. Carmikael will be right behind him, shaking his head and ready to pull his partner off before things get bloody. Before

Carmikael can grab him, however, Michaels will be halfway across that table, threatening Marrow with certain death, and if Marrow has any sense, he'll be pissing his pants."

Right on cue, Tyler ran his fingers through his hair, sighed deeply, and then slammed his hand down onto the table, standing up with such force that his chair slid across the floor. He threw himself across the table, where he snagged Pete by the collar.

Tommy was up half a second after him. He shook his head with a sigh, but by the expression on his face, Tyler's outburst had been predicted.

"And here I thought Tyler was unpredictable," Ryan commented with amusement.

"Oh, he is. Usually. But when it comes to interrogation, he only has so much patience."

They both watched Tyler step to the side of the table and pull Pete with him, wiping the smug expression from his face.

"I want the name of Jackson's inside man."

"Look, Michaels, I give you his name and I'm as good as dead, and nothing you do is going to prevent it." Marrow met his eyes.

"You're going to spend an eternity in prison, you know that, right?"

Marrow smirked this time. "That's where you're wrong. I'm loyal to Jackson. He'll have me out of here by sundown, and there's nothing you can do about it."

Tyler's right fist bunched tighter in Pete's collar as his left fell. Tommy stepped into him and grabbed his wrist, whispering into his ear.

Tyler sighed but let his hand fall. However, he didn't release Pete. Instead, he pulled him closer.

"I will find Jackson, and when I do, I won't bother arresting you. I'll just throw your bleeding and broken body into the ocean for the sharks to feed on. You'll wish I had killed you."

As he shoved Pete away from him, the flash of fear in the drug dealer's eyes was unmistakable, but as Tyler walked away, Pete glared at his back bravely.

“Jackson isn’t going to stop, Michaels. And every wrench you throw in his plan is only one more way he’s going to find to torture you before he actually kills you. Your life is over. You’re just prolonging the agony.”

Tyler had stopped to listen to Pete, but didn’t turn around. When the man was finished with his threat, Tyler continued to the door, knocked on it twice, and, once the door was opened, left the room without a backward glance.

Tommy waited for the door to close before he slowly turned to Marrow. Pete took an involuntary step back and watched him apprehensively as Tommy moved closer.

Nose to nose, Tommy growled his warning. “Stay the hell away from my partner. And you can let Jackson know that if he doesn’t back the fuck off, I will personally break every bone in his body *before* I shove my nine up his ass and pull the trigger.”

Pete swallowed before responding boldly. “You’d be smart to stay the hell out of it. Jackson doesn’t want you or anyone else. Just Michaels. You mind your own business; you’ll live to see tomorrow.”

“Tyler *is* my business.” Tommy shoved Pete and turned toward the door.

“Your loss,” Pete threw at his back.

Tommy turned and nailed him on the jaw with a right hook, and then, without a word, he turned and walked away, while Pete held his jaw as he hit the ground.

49

RYAN sat outside the commander’s office. He could see Nickels pacing through the large window as he berated the three officers standing in front of him. Tyler stood with his back to Ryan, watching Nickels pace, his hands clasped tightly behind his back. Tommy and Jack stood on either side of him, their stances identical to Tyler’s.

Ryan couldn’t see Tyler’s face, but he could imagine that his jaw was set, and the muscles were probably twitching as he slowly ground his teeth. He imagined the blue gaze had deepened as he stared stonily

at his commanding officer, the only two outward indications that he was majorly pissed off.

From the ranting over the past twenty minutes, Ryan had gathered that Nickels was irate about the way the Jackson bust had gone down. He had pretty much chewed out the entire department and was now taking his aggression out on Tyler, Tommy, and Jack.

“And furthermore, Michaels,” Nickels was yelling, “you’re suspended until further notice.”

“What?” Jack and Tommy both asked at once. Tyler just rolled his eyes, unfazed by the outburst.

“On what grounds?” Jack demanded.

“He tested dirty. Grounds for immediate dismissal.”

“There is no way I popped dirty.”

“You calling me a liar?” Nickels demanded, getting in Tyler’s face.

“Yes.” Tyler didn’t blink.

Nickels grabbed Tyler by the front of his shirt and shook him. Hard.

“Get your hands off him,” Jack ordered harshly.

“Or what?” Nickels asked, turning to look at him but not releasing Tyler.

“Or I’ll call the chief and have your badge so fast your head will spin.”

Nickels released Tyler at the threat but didn’t back off. “You’re suspended,” he repeated. “Indefinitely.”

Jack shook his head. “I’m afraid not, Commander. I have a signed affidavit stating that Michaels tested clean the same day you had him tested.”

Nickels’s eyes grew extremely dark as he glowered at Jack.

Jack wasn’t fazed, however, as he continued, his face straight. “I sent him to be tested myself after you tested him with someone other than the department’s doctor. With your and Michaels’s past, I wasn’t taking any chances that you might be a bit biased in this case.”

“How dare you go behind my back! You had no right.”

“Actually, Nickels, I did. You acted out of pure animosity toward Detective Michaels when you had him tested. I wouldn’t have had a reason to go above your head, except you didn’t use the department’s physician, or the hospital’s. Instead, you used someone not approved by the department. Therefore, I called the chief and requested Michaels be tested again that same day. He approved the request, and I sent him to Riverside Memorial to be tested. The chief and I both decided not to use the department’s physician until our leak is found. The results of his test were sent to both Chief Parker’s office and myself, and they were signed by two attending physicians, a resident, the lab, and the chief of staff, all of whom witnessed the draw, per my request. Chief Parker also asked me to inform you that, should the test you drew come back in any different manner than what mine did, you will be put on report and your position reviewed. I guess I must have forgotten to mention it earlier. Sorry.”

The chill in the room was palpable as Nickels glared at Captain Bree and his two subordinates.

Finally, he smiled haughtily. “That’ll be all, Captain. You and Detective Carmikael are dismissed. Detective Michaels, I would like to speak to you privately.” He walked calmly to his desk and sat on the edge, waiting for the two men to comply.

Tommy and Jack didn’t budge. Nickels raised an eyebrow. “Last I knew I was still your commanding officer.” The threat was clear to all ears.

Tyler turned slightly to the two men and nodded. Tommy and Jack gave him sympathetic looks, glared at Nickels, and then retreated from the office, where they joined Ryan in the hall.

“The nerve of him,” Jack growled as he dropped himself into a chair beside Ryan. “I am so glad you had Tyler re-tested. I cannot believe he tried to pull that shit. He could lose his badge for this.”

“Something tells me he’s beyond caring, Captain,” Tommy told him from the other side of Ryan. “Oh, great,” he groaned as he watched Nickels cross the room and close the shades and then slam the door.

“So what exactly is the story with those two?” Ryan questioned.

Tommy shook his head with a sigh. “I don’t think anyone really knows. It’s pretty much always been like this. I can’t remember them ever getting along.”

Jack nodded, agreeing. "From the first day Nickels transferred, he and Michaels just collided. It was like a train wreck. Looking back, I truly believe that Michaels was the only one of us who actually saw through Nickels and saw him for what he really is: a snake."

"So if everyone hates him, why is Nickels still here?" Ryan questioned.

Jack shrugged with a sigh. "No one has had a good reason to fire him yet. Not that Michaels hasn't tried," he added with a smirk.

50

INSIDE the office, Tyler watched Nickels warily as he crossed the room and stopped inches from him. The evil glint in Nickels's eye was unmistakable.

"You may have saved yourself this time, but I am going to bust your ass so far and so hard you won't even remember your own name when I'm finished with you. They should have thrown away the key when they locked you up for beating your wife."

Tyler's features were stony. It took every ounce of control he had to restrain himself from hitting the overbearing, egotistical man. Instead, he took a deep breath before he trusted himself to speak. "What do you want, Nickels?"

Nickels smiled, the corners of his lips twitching up in evil malice. "To see you suffer," he answered easily.

"Why?" Tyler challenged him.

Nickels grabbed his jacket and brought them so close that Tyler could feel Nickels's hot breath on his face. His fists curled, and his eyes darkened. "Hit me. You know you want to."

Tyler's eyes remained hard as he refused to give in to Nickels's ploy.

"Oh, come on, you know you want to. I know you know about Ra'shel and me."

Tyler's eyes narrowed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

“Oh, come on, you can’t be that blind. You were never there. I was.”

Rage burned through Tyler as Nickels’s words hit him full force. “You? It was you?” he whispered, agony and disbelief filling him, stunning him with their impact.

“Of course it was me,” Nickels laughed arrogantly. “She was great, wasn’t she? She sure knew how to please a man. But then you had to go and get her killed.”

Nickels’s face contorted with anger and hatred as he backed Tyler into a wall. Tyler went easily, still disbelieving the truth in the brutal words. He stared in shock, unable to form a coherent response.

“Why weren’t you there? If you had been there that night like you were supposed to be, like you had promised to be, they wouldn’t be dead. They’d still be here. Why did you let them die?”

Anger and pain coursed through Tyler. His body shook with grief as he stared at Nickels, unable to comprehend that it was Nickels to whom Ra’shel had turned. And then Tyler realized that if it had been Nickels she had been having an affair with, then it had been Nickels who had beaten his wife. Rage boiled, and his entire body trembled, and then Nickels’s final jab sent him over the edge.

“She was so terrified of me that she let you go to prison, but don’t worry. I made her suffer.”

Tyler’s fist came up so fast Nickels didn’t have a chance to block it. The hard uppercut cracked across the man’s jaw. Nickels fell back a step, and Tyler never paused. His fist slammed across Nickels’s cheek powerfully.

Nickels stumbled back in surprise, but he recovered quickly. He returned a punch of his own, connecting with the side of Tyler’s face near his left eye.

In the hall, the fight became apparent as the struggle reached Jack’s, Tommy’s, and Ryan’s ears. They ran to the door and pushed it open, where they found Tyler and Nickels exchanging powerful blows with deadly precision.

After a moment’s shocked hesitation, the three dove into the room to separate the two men. Tommy pulled Nickels away from Tyler, while Ryan grabbed Tyler. Jack stood in between the four men, looking bewildered and angry.

Tyler struggled against Ryan, intent on causing Nickels great physical harm. Ryan tightened his grip. He had one arm around Tyler's chest, the other securely around his waist, and he held Tyler firmly against his own body. "Stop it, Tyler," Ryan hissed in his lover's ear.

Tyler pushed against Ryan's grip. "Let me go," he demanded.

"No, Tyler, calm down," Ryan growled back, refusing to relinquish his hold.

Nickels fought Tommy for only a second until Tommy squeezed the arm he had wrapped around Nickels's throat, effectively cutting off the other man's airway. Nickels instantly relaxed.

"What the hell is going on?" Jack demanded.

"Michaels is trying to get his ass thrown in jail for assault again," Nickels snarled, his voice scratchy from being restricted. His dark eyes blazed with victory.

Tyler lunged against Ryan's arms, but Ryan pulled him back, increasing his grip. His muscles strained around his struggling lover.

"You son of a bitch," Tyler growled as he lunged again. Ryan knew that if Tyler wanted to, he could break his hold within seconds. However, Tyler had never used his SEAL training against Ryan. He refused to implement anything that could cause Ryan harm.

Jack glanced at Tyler, eyes quickly assessing, and then back to Nickels. "Somehow, I doubt your innocence in this, Nickels."

Nickels shrugged out of Tommy's grip. "Doesn't really matter what you think. I'm your commanding officer, and I demand that you arrest him."

Ryan looked at him in complete disbelief while trying to restrain Tyler, who fought him madly every time Nickels opened his mouth.

"Knock it off, Tyler," he hissed.

Jack was shaking his head. "No," he refused the order. "I have no grounds."

"My telling you to is grounds enough!" Nickels shouted at him. "But you want more, ask him who threw the first punch."

Jack shook his head. "I don't care who threw the first punch. You're just as at fault."

"Do you want to lose your job?" Nickels bellowed. "I swear you will go down with him!" he threatened.

Jack held his ground. Nickels turned to Tommy, who shook his head and held up his hands.

Nickels finally yelled out the door, "Melrose, get in here!"

Officer Melrose appeared at the door, apprehensively looking at his commanding officer.

"I want you to handcuff Michaels, take him to holding, and then book him for assault."

Jack spun on Nickels. "You touch him and I will have the chief down here so fast your head will spin into next Friday."

Nickels paled slightly at the threat but refused to relent. "You do, and you can have the cell next to him," he muttered. "Melrose, you heard me. Unless you want to be suspended for not following a direct order, I suggest you move."

Melrose hesitated, staring at his commanding officer with wide, uneasy eyes. "Now, Melrose," Nickels ordered.

Melrose awkwardly slid his gaze to Tyler, who had finally stopped fighting Ryan and now stood stoically in his lover's firm grip.

Sighing, Tyler made it easier on the young officer. "It's okay," he told him quietly, his voice reassuring.

"You don't get the prisoner's permission first, Melrose. You're never going to make it as a cop," Nickels taunted.

"Shut up, Nickels," Jack growled.

Swallowing, Melrose stepped over to Tyler and whispered an apology as he turned him around.

Ryan raised his eyebrows at his lover. Tyler just shrugged.

Melrose handcuffed Tyler while Nickels haughtily read him his rights. Tyler stood impassively. As Melrose turned to push Tyler out of the room, Tommy stood in front of them, blocking their way.

"Get out of his way, Detective," Nickels growled.

Tyler leaned close to Tommy's ear. "Don't worry about it. Just call the chief. And whatever you do, don't leave Ryan's side." Tommy nodded, stepped out of the way, and watched as his best friend was led off. After they'd gone, Jack stormed from the room with Ryan and Tommy in tow. Nickels smiled at their retreating backs.

Jack punched the speaker on the nearest phone and dialed the chief of police's office. "This is Captain Jack Bree. I need to speak to

Chief Parker right away,” he told the receptionist after she had answered.

“Just a minute, Captain.”

“What can I do for you, Jack?” Parker’s friendly voice came over the line just moments later.

Jack skipped the pleasantries. “Nickels just had Michaels arrested.”

“*What?*” the chief yelled through the phone. “On what charge?”

“Assault. Nickels has been reaming my entire department out all day over the Jackson case and has taken most of it out on Michaels. Nickels kicked Carmikael and I out of the room, and the next thing we know, they’re exchanging blows. Nickels says Michaels threw the first punch, but I hardly doubt he was standing there innocently when Michaels decided to deck him. If he did at all.”

“No, more like Nickels baited him. I’ll be right there,” the chief said with a sigh.

Jack turned toward Tommy and Ryan. “Let’s go make sure Tyler doesn’t accidentally trip and split his head open.”

51

CHIEF PARKER pushed through the doors angrily. The double doors swung open so hard that they slammed into the opposite wall simultaneously and shuddered under the impact.

“Why’s he still locked up?” he demanded, looking at Jack accusingly.

“This cell was the new top-of-the-line model we just had installed, the one with the special lock. Nickels took the key, and no one can find the spare,” Jack explained patiently. He was just glad that the chief was on their side.

“Nickels isn’t in his office,” the chief of police growled. “Although that doesn’t surprise me. He knows his ass is in boiling water. Michaels, can you pick this lock?”

Tyler nodded.

“Good, then come do it.”

Tyler pushed himself to his feet and moved over to the door, where Tommy handed him a set of lock picks. It didn’t take Tyler long to pop the lock and slide the door open.

The chief’s eyebrows rose as he appraised Tyler and his lock-picking ability on an otherwise impossible lock to pick. He’d heard about Tyler’s expertise in this area, but he’d never witnessed it. “Is there a part of your past that I’m not aware of?”

Tyler’s eyebrows went up fractionally, and an enigmatic twinkle came to his eyes, along with a devious smirk, but he didn’t answer the question as he moved down the hall.

Parker slid his questioning look to Tommy. “Carmikael? What are you two hiding?”

Tommy managed to look shocked. “He’s the expert at picking locks. How’d I get dragged into this?”

“Because one of you is never far from the other. Haven’t been since he was in diapers, as far as I’ve heard. What were you doing while he was picking the locks? Holding the flashlight?”

“Well, yeah, I *do* do that.”

“Not now. Then,” the chief pretended to chastise as they made their way to booking. His amusement was clear, as was the twinkle in Tommy’s eyes.

“When, then?”

“When you two were kids and he was learning to pick locks.”

“How do you know he didn’t learn it as an adult? A lot of cops can pick locks, you know.”

“*That* wasn’t a simple lock. *That* was supposed to be an impossible lock to pick, which is why we had it installed in the first place. *That* little craft he showed back there took years to perfect. I’ve seen cops pick locks, and not one of them did it with the skill, speed, or perfection that he just did. He didn’t just pick that up, he’s been doing it for years. So my question is where he learned it, and why?”

Tyler laughed as he pulled open the door, but he didn’t offer the chief an answer. “Well, Carmikael?” The chief smiled.

“Why am I the one being interrogated? He’s the one you’re accusing of an illicit past.”

“First, I’m accusing you both of an illicit past. Second, you’re easier to extract the truth from.”

Tyler’s eyes were alight with amusement as he leaned against the wall in booking. Ryan and Jack were watching them with great interest.

Tommy pretended to be astonished. “How did I get an illicit past along with him?”

“I told you already, you two are joined at the hip.”

“There were a few years that we were several thousand miles apart, thank you very much.”

“When?” he asked, doubtful.

“I started college two years before he went to Annapolis,” he pointed out.

“You went to a community college,” the chief threw back, smile in place.

“Then he went to the Academy. I was still in Nevada until I joined the Navy.”

“You’re going to tell me he managed to have a criminal career while in the Naval Academy?” The chief raised his eyebrows, challenging Tommy.

Tommy was silent. He slid a look to Tyler, who only raised his eyebrows, a smile quirking the corner of his lips.

“So, what did you two do? Boost cars? B & E? Come on, you can tell me.”

“I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.” Tommy strove to sound innocent.

“Mm-hmm, you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

Tommy smiled.

Tyler collected his things from the very apologetic officers at the booking counter, who hadn’t wanted to book him in the first place, and the chief asked if any of them had seen Nickels.

They all shook their heads, and the chief sighed, turning to Tyler, who was attaching his gun holster to his jeans.

“What happened, Tyler?” he asked, his eyes serious and concerned once again.

All eyes were upon Tyler as he shook his head.

“Who threw the first punch?” the chief pushed.

Tyler hesitated. “I did,” he finally answered.

Ryan narrowed his eyes at his lover. Nickels had said as much, but he had held out some hope that Tyler hadn’t intentionally decked his commanding officer.

“May I ask why?” Parker treaded carefully.

Tyler shook his head as he shifted uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

Chief Parker looked Tyler up and down. He had grown quite fond of Tyler in the last few years. He knew something was bothering him, but he didn’t have any idea what it could be. He also knew better than to push it when the young man had his jaw set as he did now. Finally, he sighed. “Alright, Tyler, but we will talk about this later,” he told him, leaving no room for argument. “I’m going to go find Nickels. But Tyler—” He grabbed Tyler’s arm, and Tyler looked up, meeting two concerned hazel eyes. “If Nickels decides to pursue these charges, you’re going to have to level with me, or I won’t be able to help you.”

Tyler nodded slightly, and then the chief turned and headed for the door.

52

RYAN could tell something was seriously bothering Tyler. Everything about him was off, from the way he carried himself to his demeanor. Whatever it was Nickels had said or done had pushed Tyler to the edge.

“What’s up with Tyler?” Zack Williams asked, eyeing Ryan.

They were standing beside Tyler’s car outside of an apartment building, waiting for Tommy and Tyler. The pair had received an anonymous tip about Jackson and had been asked to meet the caller at their apartment. Detective Zack Williams and his partner Detective Mandy Watson had decided to tag along as backup and sit with Ryan in case it was another setup.

Ryan shook his head with a sigh. “I have no idea.”

“I heard Nickels busted him for assault. What’d he do?”

“He punched Nickels.”

Mandy and Zack's eyes widened, and smiles lit their faces at the thought of Nickels finally getting what he deserved and Tyler being the one to deliver it.

"No way," Mandy and Zack chorused.

Ryan nodded, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the Mustang. "Yeah, but when we got in the room, Nickels was giving as good as he was getting. After we separated them, Nickels had Tyler arrested. The chief wasn't too happy."

Zack was shaking his head. "I can imagine. The chief loves Tyler, and Nickels is an ass. Those two have never gotten along," he remarked. "I'm actually surprised it took Tyler this long to deck him."

Ryan laughed. "That seems to be the general consensus."

Mandy leaned next to Ryan. "Nickels likes to rile Tyler up. It seems to be his favorite pastime," she told him. "But normally Tyler lets it roll off of him. So whatever it was this time, it must have been pretty big," she observed, leaving them all to wonder exactly what Nickels had done.

TYLER knocked on the door of the apartment, his partner beside him. The door opened slightly, and a nervous figure poked his head into the hall. He looked back and forth quickly and then opened the door further and ushered the pair inside.

In the room, Tyler and Tommy spread out in case it was an ambush, and as they did, a gunshot rang out, and a bullet whizzed by Tyler's head. They dove to the ground, rolled, and returned fire.

"SHOTS fired. I repeat, shots fired. Requesting immediate backup. Over," Zack relayed over the mike, which he had pulled through Tyler's open car window.

"All available units, proceed with caution to 118 Jenkins Road. Shots fired. Undercovers on location."

Mandy was quickly moving toward the building, her gun drawn. She suddenly stopped and broke out into a grin.

Tyler and Tommy were dragging a lone handcuffed man out of the building.

Soon, police cruisers, undercover cars, and ambulances screamed into the parking lot. Nickels and Jack stepped out of two separate vehicles and both stormed toward the four officers and Ryan.

“Shit,” Tommy muttered. “Tyler, cool it.”

“Michaels, I thought I told you no dead bodies?” Jack yelled.

“Why’re you looking at me? My partner has a gun too, you know.”

Tommy stepped between them. “They fired first, Cap’n. Another half an inch and Tyler’d have a bullet in his head. As it is, I’m surprised he doesn’t have a bald spot where the bullet nearly creased him. It came that close.” Tommy’s eyes were intense as he defended his best friend.

Jack was about to respond when Nickels pushed past him and got an inch from Tyler’s face. Tyler didn’t move, his eyes full of defiance.

“I thought I had you arrested, Michaels?” Nickels snarled.

Jack grabbed Nickels’s arm, trying to divert his attention. “The chief released him, Commander.”

Nickels shook Jack off. “I want him in handcuffs, and in custody,” he ordered thickly.

No one moved.

Nickels growled. “Fine, I’ll do it myself.” He grabbed Tyler’s arm, but Tyler yanked it free.

“Don’t touch me,” he hissed vehemently.

“You want to take another swing at me?” he egged Tyler on.

Tyler clenched his fist, but Tommy put a restraining arm around his chest. “Let it go, Tyler. Come on. The chief can deal with him.”

Tyler let out an exasperated breath but turned to leave. Nickels cursed loudly and slammed into him, knocking Tyler to the ground. He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his jacket pocket and grabbed Tyler’s arm, yanking it behind his back. Tyler spun around, knocking Nickels off of him.

“You’re under arrest, Michaels,” Nickels yelled as he lunged for Tyler again. Tyler rolled out of his way and sprang to his feet. Nickels was up a half a second later and threw a punch at Tyler’s head. Tyler quickly ducked. As he came up, he returned the blow, connecting with the side of Nickels’s face. Nickels swung again, this time hitting Tyler in the jaw.

Jack, Tommy, and the other officers finally shook themselves from their stupor and threw themselves into the fight, separating the two men.

As Tommy gathered a struggling Tyler into his arms, a black sedan pulled up to the scene, and Chief Parker climbed out. His face contorted in anger as he quickly made his way to Nickels and Tyler, who were both being restrained.

“Tyler, go back to the station and fill out your report,” he ordered gently but sternly.

Without relinquishing his grip on Tyler, Tommy pulled him toward the car. The chief turned to Nickels.

“As for you, you are on suspension until further notice.”

“Me?” he thundered incredulously. “He assaulted me!”

Parker turned to Jack. “Who assaulted whom?”

“Nickels assaulted Michaels, sir, and every officer here can vouch for that,” Jack replied, wondering what was going on with half of his best team.

Parker turned back to Nickels. Nickels shook his head in disbelief, rage in his voice. “But sir, I was trying to place him in custody.”

“You’re going to be the one in custody if Michaels decides to press charges. As for your accusation of him assaulting you earlier, you don’t have any witnesses. It’s your word against his. In fact, the witnesses I do have say they entered the room to see you hitting Detective Michaels.”

Nickels fumed, his dark eyes raging as he watched Chief Parker get into his car.

“This isn’t over,” he muttered.

53

TYLER sat slumped on the couch in the living room with an ice pack over the bruises on the left side of his face. Ryan sat beside him, watching him silently. His mind wandered over the last few hours. Tyler’s fight with Nickels, his ultimate arrest, their second fight—none

of it made sense. Sure, Tyler had a hot head, got in more fights in a month than most people did in their entire lifetime, he could be insubordinate and was known to fly off the handle and start fights. However, Ryan was nearly positive that Tyler would not hit his commanding officer without being provoked. It just wasn't Tyler. There had to be more.

They were both startled out of their thoughts by the ringing of the phone. Tyler picked it up.

"I killed her slowly," Jackson's taunting voice came over the line.

Tyler froze, and the color slowly drained from his face. Ryan, who had been watching him intently, mouthed "What?" Tyler couldn't answer. He was caught up in the haunting voice that suddenly played over the line.

"Tyler!" she screamed. Fear and desperation rang sharply in that one word.

"Ra'shel," Tyler whispered, his voice breaking as agony claimed him.

With that, Ryan was on his feet, vaulting over the back of the couch and lifting the other extension to his ear. His blood chilled at the desperate sounds playing over the line. Ryan swung around, wide-eyed, to stare at his lover, who was withdrawing before his eyes.

"Tyler!" Ra'shel screamed in agony for her husband. "Oh God, help me. Please don't! Oh God, no, my baby. Please," she whimpered softly.

The line went dead.

Ryan watched the phone drop from Tyler's numb fingers. Ryan slammed his extension down and rushed to Tyler, who was shaking uncontrollably on the couch, staring with vacant eyes.

"Tyler, look at me!" he urged, his eyes deep with concern. "Come on, Tyler, look at me."

Tyler just sat and rocked himself on the couch, unhearing. Ryan picked up the fallen phone and disconnected it with his thumb, setting it on the table beside them. Then he gathered Tyler in his arms and held him to his chest as he rocked.

For the longest time, Tyler shook against Ryan's chest, his breathing erratic. Ryan stroked his hair and he held him tightly to his chest, trying to offer comfort and love as the tears finally spilled over.

What seemed like an eternity later, Tyler fell asleep against Ryan's chest. Ryan shifted Tyler's weight to lie on the couch, and he lay down behind him, wrapping his arm around him, offering him love and protection as best as he knew how.

SOME time later, the phone woke them both. Startled, Tyler reached for it before Ryan could stop him.

"You do realize that it's your fault Ra'shel died, don't you? I loved her, and you took her from me. If you had been there that night and taken her dancing like you had promised, they'd still be alive," Nickels's voice accused him.

Tyler's skin was cold and clammy as the words registered in his emotionally exhausted mind.

"Hang up, Tyler," Ryan whispered, watching him anxiously while Nickels continued with his malicious words, aimed at destroying Tyler. But Tyler sat frozen, Nickels's words immobilizing him.

"She was so happy you were taking her out, finally giving her some attention, and what did you do? You forgot! *You* killed her. If you had gone like you had promised, you could have saved them. How do you live with yourself knowing that it's your fault your wife and child are dead?" Nickels demanded.

"Fuck you, Nickels," Tyler whispered harshly.

"You're just as responsible for their deaths as if you'd killed them yourself. And for the rest of my life, I'm going to make you pay for taking her from me. I hope you know that she loved me more. And once that baby was born, she was going to run off with me. We were going to dump you with the kid and leave. But then you had to go and kill them."

The line went dead, and Tyler sat staring at it. And then he got off the couch and headed for the door. Ryan followed him.

"Where you going Tyler?" he asked, his voice leery.

"To kill Nickels."

"Tyler, come on. Snap out of it. You know you can't kill him," Ryan said calmly. He reached out to touch Tyler's arm.

“Who says?” Tyler growled as he spun around and glared at Ryan. “I’m going to fucking break his neck.”

Ryan looked into Tyler’s eyes. In his state of mind, he wouldn’t put that past his lover. “Tyler, calm down. You’re not going after him. That’s murder.”

“So?”

“Think about it, Tyler. You’re a cop. You can’t just go and murder someone.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re being irrational, that’s why not.”

“I’m not irrational.”

Ryan sighed. “You’re not going.”

“And you’re going to stop me?”

“If I have to.”

Tyler raised his eyebrows at the challenge and moved toward the door. Ryan moved to intercept him. He didn’t know what had Tyler so riled up, but he knew that Tyler could seriously harm or possibly kill the other man in the rage he was in now. Tyler tried to push past him, but Ryan firmly held his ground.

“No, Tyler. Go sit down and we’ll talk about it.”

“There’s nothing to fucking talk about.”

“Sure there is. Let’s start with why you want to kill Nickels so bad.”

Tyler tried again to push past Ryan. When that didn’t work, he tried force. He grabbed Ryan by the front of his shirt, but Ryan pushed his hands off. Tyler grabbed again, but this time Ryan grabbed him and brought them face-to-face, swinging Tyler around and pushing his back into the door.

“Get the fuck off me, Ryan.”

“Calm down first.”

Tyler pushed Ryan, causing Ryan to lose his grip as he stumbled back a step. Tyler turned and grabbed the door, but Ryan dove for him and pushed him into it before he could get it open. He knew if he let Tyler go, Nickels was as good as dead. He grabbed Tyler around the chest and forced him to the ground.

“Knock it off,” he hissed.

“Get off me, Ryan. You can’t keep me here.”

“I’m not getting off you until you knock this shit off and calm down,” Ryan snapped back. Again, Ryan was aware of how easy it would be for Tyler to revert to his training and break free, but deep down, Ryan knew that Tyler would never resort to that type of force with him, no matter how angry he was.

“Fine, I’m calm,” Tyler snarled.

“No, you’re not.”

Tyler took several deep breaths and calmed himself down, so Ryan cautiously let him up. Once on his feet, Tyler glared.

“What the fuck do you care?” he hissed, his mouth one step ahead of his brain.

Ryan took a step back and held up his hands in defeat. “Fine, Tyler. Go. Go kill him. Go to prison. Permanently this time, and forget everything we ever had. Go fucking kill him because that will bring your wife and daughter back. I’m sure killing Nickels is the way to hurt Jackson. Remember him? The person who murdered your wife and child? The person you should reserve this anger for? Not some two-bit slime trying to piss you off enough to get you to do something stupid so you get your ass thrown off the force, or better yet, in jail again.” Ryan’s eyes were full of fire, and Tyler flinched at his words. “Maybe what we have isn’t as important to you as it is to me. But dammit, Tyler, don’t you fucking tell me that I don’t care.”

With a deep breath, before he said something he might regret as his anger and frustration built to the boiling point, Ryan pushed past Tyler and stormed out the door, slamming it behind him. He sat down on the porch steps and waited for his anger to subside. He startled slightly as Tommy sat down beside him.

“You two trying to see how loud you can get before the neighbors call the cops?” he teased.

Ryan smiled shakily.

“You okay?” Tommy asked seriously.

Ryan shook his head.

“What happened?”

Ryan took a calming breath while rubbing both hands over his face. “He wanted to go after Nickels. He was going to kill him, Tommy, he had that look.” He looked over at Tommy, and Tommy nodded his understanding. “When I stopped him, he went ballistic. I ended up physically having to restrain him. When I let him up, he wanted to know why I care if he kills him.” Ryan shook his head. “I’m just so tired of this mess.” He ground the palms of his hands into his eyes, his head aching.

Tommy nodded and sighed. “I know. This case has been frustrating for all of us, and I think sometimes you get the brunt of it. Especially with Tyler’s temper and his refusal to leave you alone.”

Ryan shrugged, rubbing at his forehead. “I know he’s just worried.”

Tommy looked at the street in front of him thoughtfully. “What did he tell you about the night Ra’shel died? Do you know where he was?”

Ryan nodded. “Chasing a lead. Jackson.” Ryan looked at Tommy, and he saw the pain in his eyes. His heart ached at the pain they all must have suffered.

Tommy let out a deep breath. “They were supposed to go on a date. They were celebrating because they’d just found out they were having a girl. They had been having so many problems, Tyler wanted to try to put the spark back in their marriage. Ra’shel came over to our house to get ready. Sara did her hair. Ty was supposed to pick her up at our house, but he never showed. She finally gave up and said she was going home. That’s the last time we saw her alive. She never made it home.” Tommy paused, swallowing. He glanced at Ryan, his hands clasped over his knees.

“Jack called me about two hours later and told me she’d been admitted to Riverside and that they couldn’t find Tyler, that he wasn’t responding to his calls. I called him over and over again. He finally picked up, and I told him what I knew. I met him in the ER. He was pale and shaking, and his eyes were bloodshot. The fear was written all over him. He’d remembered they were going out, because he was wearing a black suit. I remember his tie was loose around his neck. It was blue.” Tommy’s voice was soft and his eyes unfocused as he remembered that day as though it were yesterday.

He shook himself a little, getting back on track. “He wouldn’t listen to anybody. Just pushed past them and flung the curtain open. Then he just stopped, his hand still on the curtain, and he wavered slightly. I peered around him and nearly passed out. I could not believe what I was seeing. There was no doubt that she was dead. I looked over at Tyler, and the look on his face will be imprinted in my mind forever. He was just standing there, his mouth slightly open, his eyes huge, his expression horrified. And then he freaked. He just pushed past a doctor who had moved to block his view, shook off another who was grabbing for him, and sat down on the bed and pulled her into his arms. He kept begging her to wake up. He kept telling her how sorry he was that he’d forgotten, but would she please, please wake up.

“I couldn’t move. I was frozen to the spot, watching my best friend beg his dead wife to wake up. I remember the doctors were talking to me, asking if he was allergic to anything, and I think I responded. A nurse had sat beside him and was speaking quietly to him, and then he nodded to her and let her pull Ra’shel out of his arms. I pulled him to his feet and just held him, and then suddenly he turned to the doctor and asked about his baby. We went to the NICU and got our first look at Brina. My God, Ryan, she was so tiny, and there were so many tubes, but she was beautiful. She looked so much like him. He didn’t leave her side for that day and a half that she held on, and he held her as she died in his arms.

“I thought he’d go under then, sitting there so despondent as his baby girl slipped away in his arms. He was so lost, but somehow he kept going. We buried them two days later on a beautiful October afternoon. During that time, he dealt with his dad rejecting him all over again, Ra’shel’s parents bashing him because he hadn’t been there to save her, and the police investigation in full swing around him and, at times, pointing at him. After Brina died, they dragged him in for hours and hours of questioning. His mind was a mess, and he was having trouble remembering where he’d been and what he’d been doing. It took us days of backtracking for him to remember exactly where he’d been, times, places, and who he’d talked to. He’d taken Ra’shel’s car, not his own, so we couldn’t trace him through his LoJack. Then it took us even longer to track down his informant to collect a statement. Finally, around the same time we tracked him down, we found a credit card transaction from a gas station in the same area Tyler had been and

were able to get a video of Tyler at the station, which cleared his name.” Tommy paused with a sigh, staring for a moment at nothing.

He began again a second later, his voice soft with emotion. “He hadn’t eaten or slept since before Ra’shel had died. Kept saying there was too much to do. First, it was keeping vigil next to Brina, and then it was the funeral arrangements. At the funeral, as we stood there and watched them being lowered into the ground, I saw him take a step toward the grave, and in that moment, I knew exactly what he was going to do. He’d lost everything. Everything, but me. I put my hand around his arm because I knew without a doubt that he was seriously considering jumping in after them. After everyone had left, he stood there, just staring at nothing, and then finally, he dropped to his knees and cried. I sat next to him and pulled him into my arms. I couldn’t get him to calm down. It felt like my heart was being ripped out of my chest. They were the most anguished cries I have ever heard. He started mumbling about it being his fault and that he should have been there. I tried to calm him down, I told him it wasn’t his fault, but I don’t think he heard me. He kept saying he wanted them back. He wanted them back so much that it hurt. He just wanted to touch her, to hold her one more time. To tell her that he loved her, and that he was sorry he hadn’t been there. He finally just passed out in my arms. Lack of food and sleep had finally caught up to him. I took him back to my house, and when he woke up, he kept begging me to tell him that it was all just a bad dream, that they were still alive. He said he should have been there, but instead, work had gotten in the way again, and he’d been out chasing a lead. He said work always got in the way, and now they were dead because of it.”

Ryan looked at him, tears in both of their eyes. Tommy went on. “When he met you, he promised himself that he would never let that happen again. That no matter what happened, he would always put you first. So that’s what he’s been doing. It’s been more important for him to keep you safe than to go after this bastard. And on top of that, Ryan, I think he believes that if he can protect you, like he couldn’t them, that it will somehow make all the pain of that night go away.”

A tear slipped down Ryan’s cheek as he listened to Tommy. The anguish in Tommy’s eyes broke his heart. He didn’t know how any of them had made it through such a tragedy. But he was positive that somehow it had made them all stronger.

54

WHEN Ryan came back in, Tyler was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, with his head in his hands. Tommy had come to check on Tyler, to see what the fight with Nickels had been about, but he told Ryan he'd come back later, when things had settled down.

Ryan sighed as he quietly knelt down next to Tyler.

Tyler looked up, exhausted. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Ryan reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind Tyler's ear. "Don't be. I can't even imagine what you're feeling right now."

"I would have killed him."

Ryan shook his head, running his fingers through Tyler's soft, blond hair. "No, you wouldn't have. I wouldn't have let you."

Tyler nodded slightly, and Ryan helped Tyler off the floor. He led him to the couch and gently pulled him onto it.

"Talk to me, Ty. Tell me what's going on. What did Nickels say to get you so riled up?"

Tyler rubbed the back of his neck, and then he sighed. "He said that if I had gone with Ra'shel like I'd promised, she wouldn't be dead right now, and Ryan, he's right. I should have been there. I promised to take her dancing, and I didn't. And because I didn't, they died." He broke off and shook his head before he whispered, "And to know that she begged for my help the whole time they hurt her..." He trailed off, the pain overwhelming. "I should have been there."

Ryan rubbed Tyler's back. "No matter how hard you try, you can't change what happened, Ty. Fate dealt you a terrible blow, but you have to accept it," he told him gently.

"Ra'shel was having an affair with Nickels."

"What?" Ryan asked, astounded.

"It's what we were fighting about."

"He told you they were having an affair?"

Tyler nodded. "I think he thought I knew, or at least suspected. But, although I was fairly certain she was having an affair, I never once suspected Nickels." Tyler shook his head. "He wanted me to hit him,

but I was too stunned to even move. So he kept goading me. Telling me how it was my fault they died. If I'd been there, they'd still be alive."

Ryan was watching Tyler as he spoke. His eyes were haunted, and they held so much pain that it made Ryan's heart ache. To know that Nickels had deliberately inflicted this pain upon Tyler made him so angry that the edges of his world began to redden. "So what made you finally hit him?"

"I realized that he was the one who'd hit her. And that it was because of him that I ended up in jail. I knew what he wanted. He wanted me to lose my temper, and I didn't want to give him that. But when he told me how he had her so terrified that she'd let me go to prison, and how he'd made her suffer, I snapped."

Tyler scrubbed at his face with both hands. "I don't know what to feel, Ryan. Why the hell would she turn to him, of all people? She knew how much I hated him." He shook his head in disbelief. "I'm so mad at her, but at the same time, I hurt for her. For what she went through. For not being there when she needed me the most. Isn't it wrong to be mad at someone who's dead?"

Ryan squeezed the back of Tyler's neck gently. "She betrayed you, Tyler, and you have to deal with that anger somehow. It's not wrong to be mad at someone who has died. It's part of the grieving process."

Tyler rubbed at his forehead again. "If only I'd been there."

"To do what, Ty? Die alongside them? He was hell-bent on hurting you. You might not have been able to save them."

"I could have tried."

"And you probably would have died doing so. Tyler, you can't do this to yourself. You can't chase after what-ifs. You can't change the past no matter how hard you try. No matter how many times you ask yourself why you didn't do something, the outcome is never going to change. You need to move forward, Ty."

Tyler sat quietly, absorbing Ryan's words. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. "There are days that I think about how big Brina would be now, or I'll close my eyes and hear a baby crying, or a child playing, and I can't help but think of her. And those moments make it so hard to move forward. I just don't get why she had to die. Why'd she die, Ryan?"

Ryan sighed. "Are you looking for a moral answer, or a medical reason?"

Tyler shrugged.

"Medically, Tyler, she was just born too early. Morally, I don't have the answer."

"They should have done something," Tyler whispered.

"Tyler, I read her charts. There wasn't anything anyone could have done. You can't do this to yourself. You just have to accept that it was the way it was supposed to be."

"How can I accept that? I did this to them."

Ryan shook his head. "No, Ty. Jackson did. You need to stop blaming yourself."

Tyler laughed bitterly. "How can I? I pissed off a madman. I forgot to take my wife out dancing, and when I wasn't where I should have been, he raped, tortured, and murdered her. And if that wasn't bad enough, not even two days later, my actions resulted in the death of my innocent baby. And the worst part is, I could have prevented it. I should have been there, and because I wasn't, I will never hear my little girl say 'daddy'. How can I not blame myself for that?"

"Would you change shooting Jackson's brother?"

Tyler closed his eyes, defeated. "No," he whispered.

"Was there any other way to save Lani?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Tyler, he wanted to hurt you. If you had taken her dancing that night, then he would have found another day or another way to kill her. Or maybe he would have grabbed you both and forced you to watch as he killed her. Could you have handled that? Could you have handled watching him rape and murder your wife?"

Tyler shook his head and closed his eyes tightly. The thought of that happening overwhelmed him.

"Then it's time for you to accept that what happened was awful, cruel, and wrong, and even though the man that did this to you was out to seek revenge, you couldn't have prevented it. You couldn't have stopped it. And you can't change it."

Tyler sighed deeply.

"I'm sorry that you had to go through this, and I'm sorry life has been so hard on you." Ryan gently tucked a strand of blond hair behind Tyler's ear.

Tyler shrugged. "It hasn't always been hard," he told him. "After I got shot and met you, my life really started to make sense. I felt whole. Complete. And I felt love like I've never known. I've never loved anyone as much as I love you. And despite how awful I feel right now, I love you more."

Ryan smiled and took Tyler's hand in his own. But then he frowned, Jack's words ringing strongly in his ears. "How'd you get shot?" he asked.

Tyler shook his head. "What?" he asked, thrown off guard by the question.

"How'd you get shot?" Ryan repeated slowly.

"When?"

"The day we met."

Tyler's face paled. "I—a perp. You know that."

Ryan nodded his head slowly. "Yeah, I know *who* shot you. How?"

"Where is this coming from?"

"Why won't you answer the question?"

Tyler shook his head. "I don't remember."

"You sure?"

Tyler looked away, and it was then that Ryan realized that he *did* remember. His heart thudded quickly in his chest as he pushed Tyler for answers. "You didn't pull your weapon. You knew he was going to shoot you, yet you did nothing to stop it. Why?"

"I hesitated," Tyler murmured softly.

"You never hesitate, Ty. Tell me the truth," he urged gently.

Tyler's chest heaved as he considered his options. His voice was soft when he finally spoke. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love you," Ryan told him just as softly.

Tyler sighed in resolve. "I was going to pull, but then I thought how easy it would be to stop the pain. I knew where his gun was trained; if he pulled the trigger, Tommy wouldn't wallow in guilt. I looked over at Tommy, and I saw his absolute horror at my hesitation. I realized in those precious seconds that I couldn't put him through my

death, through the same thing I'd gone through with Ra'shel and Brina, but before I could pull, my chest exploded in pain. I never heard the gunshot."

Tyler refused to look at Ryan as Ryan watched him, his gaze troubled.

"How long have you remembered?"

Tyler sighed. "Quite a while."

"How long?"

"About three months after our first date."

Ryan ran his hand over his face. "Why didn't you say something?"

Tyler finally looked at him. "Say what? That I remembered how I got shot? That I had a death wish? For the first time in a long time, I was actually happy. Could you have handled knowing that the reason I nearly died was because, instead of defending myself, I was busy thinking about how easy it would be to end it all?"

Ryan sat still, watching him. After a moment, he spoke, his voice leaving no doubt that he was certain of his feelings. "I've loved you from the moment that I first laid eyes on you, Tyler. It would have been a shock, yes, but I wouldn't have stopped loving you," Ryan told him firmly.

"How was I to know that?" Tyler asked him softly. "How could I risk losing you? I didn't want to die anymore. I wanted to live, for you, for us, but would you have believed that?"

Ryan sighed and shook his head. "I don't know," he answered honestly. "It would have taken awhile to get past, I guess." He rubbed his neck as he absorbed Tyler's words. "Was that the only time?"

"Only time what?"

"That you were suicidal?"

Tyler sighed deeply, contemplating his answer. "After Brina died, I had moments that I didn't want to deal with the pain anymore, and I thought about ending it all, but that day I got shot was the last time I felt that way. I had seen what it almost did to the people that loved me the most. And shortly thereafter, I fell in love with you, and that blanket that had sorta descended upon me lifted, and I felt happy again."

“Nobody ever diagnosed you with post-traumatic stress?” Ryan asked. Ryan’s minor was in psychology, his second love after surgery, and his medical mind could not process how anyone could have overlooked all of the symptoms Tyler must have been displaying, especially after hearing Jack and Tommy recount Tyler’s reaction to Ra’shel and Brina’s deaths. Hearing it from Tyler just cinched it for him.

Tyler shrugged. “The department psychiatrist mentioned it, but I have a way of making people believe what I want them to, so I fudged every session I was forced into after that.”

“You conned a psychiatrist,” Ryan stated in awe and disbelief.

Tyler shrugged.

“Why?”

“I didn’t want the attention, and I didn’t want to be benched behind a desk. I needed to be out on the streets. If they had taken that away, I probably would have pulled the trigger myself. I needed the mind-numbing stress of active duty.”

Ryan nodded. Knowing Tyler the way he did, he understood that. It didn’t make it right, but as he had already stated, they couldn’t change the past. “You going to be okay now? With Nickels?”

Tyler nodded. “You’re more important than anything, Ryan. I just lost my head for a minute, but as always, you set me straight. And by the way, I know you care. And I am sorry.”

Ryan pulled Tyler closer and squeezed him tightly. “I know, baby,” he whispered against his ear. “Just don’t shut me out. Let me help you. Even if it’s only by listening.”

Tyler nodded, and Ryan moved his lips against Tyler’s and kissed him passionately. For long moments, the whole world disappeared, and it was just the two of them.

55

RYAN and Tommy watched Tyler get out of his car and cross the street to an old, abandoned movie theater in a run-down part of town where he was supposed to meet a dealer. It was going on two in the morning,

and the streets were darkened and deserted. The only light came from a few streetlamps whose bulbs hadn't yet been broken.

Tyler and Tommy had been trying for months to bring down the supplier of the dealer Tyler was meeting, but it had been a long, difficult process. The dealer had been jumpy and cagey, not trusting too many people. It had taken quite some time, and a lot of effort on Tyler's part, to get the man to trust him enough to sell to him. Tyler knew they still had a long way to go, as he hadn't even been introduced to the supplier yet, and it didn't sound as though he would be any time soon. Busting dealers and suppliers wasn't always a quick job. Sometimes, it took months of effort and hard work to bring them down. This was proving to be one of those times.

The door to the theatre opened slightly, and they watched Tyler slip inside.

"NORTON," Tyler greeted the man in front of him.

"Glad you could make it, Jacobs," David Norton responded, referring to Tyler's undercover alias as he shook his hand.

Tyler followed the dealer to a nearby counter, where a briefcase with several white bags lay.

"This is my best seller. What do you think?"

Tyler looked at the cocaine on the table. "Where do you get it?" he asked, his eyes roaming over the white powder.

"My supplier has it imported. We sell only the best. Go ahead," Norton urged him.

Tyler scooped a small amount into a vial, shook the vial, and watched the liquid turn blue. Finally, he looked over at Norton. "How much?"

"Ten G's for what you see, and more upon request."

Tyler considered the offer.

He finally nodded and set down the bag that he had brought with him. He counted out the large bills and handed them to Norton, who nodded his approval. Then they put the cocaine into Tyler's bag.

As they stepped out onto the street, Tyler spotted Nickels as he got out of his car and headed in their direction, a feral look in his eyes.

“Shit,” he muttered softly. He turned his head toward Norton, who eyed him apprehensively.

In the car, Tommy sat up and leaned closer to the window. “Aw, shit,” he groaned. “This is not happening. He’s gonna blow it.” They could only watch as Nickels approached Tyler.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” Nickels asked, smiling.

Tyler shook his head, his glare penetrating.

Nickels’s grin only widened at Tyler’s disdainful look.

“What’s in the bag?” he inquired, almost conversationally.

Tyler glared, hoping beyond hope that Nickels wouldn’t refer to him by his last name or status.

“Nothing of your concern, I’m sure,” he responded flippantly, his eyes like daggers.

“Oh yeah? I think it *is* my concern, since you not only assaulted me, but busted out of my jail.” Nickels pulled his gun from his holster and pointed it directly between Tyler’s eyes.

Tyler sighed in frustration.

“Put the bag on the ground and put your hands on your head. You too.” He twitched his gun slightly, his eyes on Norton, who was watching the exchange with a worried eye on Tyler.

Tyler mumbled to himself but did as he was told, knowing Nickels wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him. Norton followed suit.

Nickels bent down and unzipped the duffel bag. His eyes became large and round, and he grinned as though he’d just found gold. “Well, well, seems as though my suspicions were correct. You *are* a junkie. You’re under arrest. Put your hands on that wall and spread ’em.” Nickels waved the gun at Tyler and glared at Norton. “You too.”

Tyler shot Nickels a look that clearly said he’d pay, but he complied with the order. He put his hands on the brick wall and spread his legs while Nickels searched him, pulling his gun from the waist of his jeans.

“Get out of the car,” Tommy told Ryan.

“Huh?”

“Get out and argue with me. We need to get Nickels’s attention before he blows Tyler’s cover.”

Ryan and Tommy got out of the car, each slamming their door loudly.

“You bastard!” Tommy yelled at the top of his lungs. “You fucked my wife, didn’t you?”

“Well if you knew how to please her, you wouldn’t wonder, now would you?” Ryan shot back.

Nickels turned to see what the yelling was about, and his hesitation cost him. Tyler spun and knocked the gun from Nickels’s hand, and then he tackled him, taking him to the ground. He grabbed his gun and shoved it under Nickels’s neck.

“Get your men and get out of here,” Tyler warned Norton.

“You sure?” Norton looked concerned for Tyler, but at the same time, he couldn’t risk getting caught in a deal should the place suddenly swarm with cops.

“Yeah, I got this,” he assured him. “I don’t need any witnesses.”

Norton hesitated, and then nodded with a sick smirk. He opened the door to the theatre and called for his men, and they quickly got into their cars and pulled away.

Tommy and Ryan made their way cautiously over to Tyler. Tommy, gun in hand, quickly checked the building to make sure it was empty before he returned to Tyler, who had Nickels on his feet, pressed against the building, gun still in his neck.

“We clear?” Tyler asked without taking his eyes off the commander, who was fresh off his suspension.

“Yeah, we’re clear,” Tommy told him, holstering his weapon.

Tyler didn’t remove his gun. “Of all the fucking stupid ideas. What in the hell did you think you were doing? Were you trying to blow my cover, or just get me killed?”

Nickels smiled. “I knew you were dirty. I just needed the proof. So I followed you, and now I have it. Not only are you under arrest for assault, but now I’m adding resisting arrest, along with possession of a narcotic with intent to sell. *And* if you don’t remove your gun from my neck, we can add assault with a deadly weapon.” An evil glint appeared in his eyes, and he smiled wickedly. “Although, you just attacking me should be enough to hold up in court on a deadly weapons charge. It sucked, didn’t it? How you got sent up the river for beating your wife

because of that mere technicality? Too bad for all that training, huh, Michaels?”

Tyler released the safety on his gun with his thumb.

“Tyler!” Tommy warned him lowly, and Ryan watched in dread. Tyler’s right hand was fisted in Nickels’s shirt, and his left pushed his gun into the bony spot in the front of Nickel’s throat, his gun sideways, his elbow out.

“How ’bout I just pull the trigger and end your sorry excuse for a life and we can just make it murder, you sorry son of a bitch.”

“Tyler, back off,” Tommy warned him.

Nickels grinned. “I knew you were a junkie, just like that cheating wife of yours.”

Tyler’s eyes burned raw rage, and Ryan sighed, hating Nickels for pushing him when he damn well knew Tyler could blow his head off.

“She was not,” Tyler hissed.

“You wouldn’t know; you were never there,” Nickels taunted him.

Tommy and Ryan could see Tyler begin to tremble and knew if they didn’t talk him down fast, Tyler might very well pull the trigger.

“Tyler, put it down,” Tommy begged him softly.

Nickels continued, seemingly unfazed by his predicament. “You did know she was going to have my baby, didn’t you?”

Tyler shoved the gun harder into Nickels’s neck, and Ryan groaned.

“I had warned her against the abortion when we found out it was mine and not yours. I told her there would be consequences. I wanted to see the look on your face when you realized it wasn’t yours.”

Tyler kned Nickels in the groin. When he doubled over in pain, Tyler’s gun hand crashed down on the back of Nickels’s skull, sending him to his knees.

Tommy and Ryan stepped forward to stop him, but Tyler was faster. He threw Nickels the rest of the way to the ground and shoved the gun into his temple. “You fucking son of a bitch.”

Nickels’s eyes were psychotic as he continued to push Tyler. “That’s when I decided to put the fear of death into her. I beat her so badly she couldn’t stand. I told her she deserved what I was doing, and

you know what? She believed me. It was probably a lot like when your daddy used to tell you how you deserved it when he beat you. I've read your file. I know all about how he beat you. Did he tell you deserved it while he was kicking the shit out of you? You believed him, didn't you? You believed him because it was true, wasn't it, Michaels?"

Ryan's eyes widened in horror, and Tommy didn't wait for Tyler's reaction, he just kicked Nickels where he lay on the ground. Nickels grunted but grinned at Tommy.

"He deserved it, and you know it." Tommy's eyes darkened, and Nickels grinned as he continued to mess with Tyler's head. "They say that abuse runs in the family. Tell me something, would you have abused your little girl too?"

Tommy and Ryan both knew that was the last straw. They could see Tyler begin his drawback ever so slowly on the trigger.

"Don't do it, Ty, he's not worth it," Tommy pleaded.

"Not worth it? He beat Ra'shel. I spent six months in prison because of him." Tyler's finger had frozen on the trigger, and Tommy took advantage of that split-second hesitation. He tackled Tyler, knocking him off and away from Nickels, trusting that Tyler would automatically relax his grip on his gun.

Tyler's gun went flying with the impact, and Nickels jumped to his feet and retrieved it. He aimed it at Tyler, whom Tommy had pinned to the ground. Ryan didn't know whether to be relieved... or terrified.

"Get up, Michaels," Nickels ordered him.

Tyler didn't move. Tommy got off him and stepped in front of Nickels, his eyes accusing and full of disgust. "He was undercover, and you nearly blew it. You could have gotten him killed!"

Nickels shrugged. "That'd be a loss. Tell it to the judge. Now, unless you want me to bust your ass along with his, I'd suggest you step back, Detective."

"You have no right."

"I will shoot you, Carmikael."

Tommy felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Tyler shaking his head.

"Forget it, Tommy," he told him quietly.

Nickels motioned with the gun. "Up against the wall, Michaels."

Tyler put his hands against the cool brick wall, closing his eyes. Ryan and Tommy could only watch as Tyler was arrested for the second time in a week.

Nickels searched him roughly, reading him his rights. Then he pulled his hands tightly behind his back and snapped the handcuffs into place. When they were on, he grabbed a fistful of Tyler's hair. He pulled his head back sharply and met his eyes, smiling sadistically. Tyler's eyes were cool and devoid of emotion. Nickels angrily slammed Tyler's head into the bricks.

Tommy rushed in and grabbed Tyler, pulling him away from Nickels. He held his dazed partner up around the waist as his head lolled.

"Keep your fucking hands off him. There is no way in hell you are taking him in." Tommy stole a quick glance at Tyler, who was blinking rapidly, unsteady on his feet.

"And why the hell not?" Nickels demanded.

"Because I don't trust you. For all I know, you'll kill him along the way. If he has to go in, I'll take him, but I'll be damned if I'll allow you to lay another finger on him."

Nickels shook his head. "And how do I know you won't flee?"

"I have no reason to flee. This is a bogus arrest, and you damn well know it. As soon as the chief finds out about this, your ass is gone. And when he hears it was you who framed Tyler and sent him to prison, you'll be heading that way yourself."

Nickels's face flared red. "I'll deny it."

"Go ahead and try." Tommy attempted to pick up the bag containing the drugs, but Nickels yanked it out of his hand.

"You don't get the evidence. You might try to dump it to clear his name."

Rather than argue, Tommy instead rolled his eyes and pulled Tyler toward the SUV across the street. Nickels called out behind them, "I'll be following you."

"You do that, asshole," Tommy snarled without turning.

Tommy put his hand on Tyler's head as he pushed him gently into the car. As soon as they were in, Tyler pulled his hands out from behind his back. One cuff still dangled from his wrist.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "You okay?"

"Oh, sure," Tyler answered, quickly popping the lock on the second cuff and dropping them into his lap. He then rubbed his head. He pulled his fingers away and looked at the blood on his fingers in confusion.

"Yeah, like I said, you okay?" Tommy repeated.

Ryan leaned over the seat and looked at Tyler's head while Tommy turned on the interior lights.

The cut was small and jagged and not overly deep, but it was bleeding freely, as most head wounds did. Tyler's eyes seemed focused, and he was conscious, so he sat back a little and just watched him, concerned.

Tommy took out his cell phone and called Jack and told him what had happened, then asked him to pick up Tyler's car. He didn't want to leave it in the area, but he didn't want to chance leaving Ryan alone either, and Jack had a spare set of keys. Then he dialed the chief.

"At three in the morning?" Tyler asked him as he realized whom he was calling. "Are you nuts?"

"He's the only one who can get you out of jail. Unless you want me to wait until morning."

Tyler grumbled, and Tommy smirked. "Besides, I wait until morning and he'll kick my ass."

The chief was outraged at Nickels's stunt and quickly promised to meet them at the station. He made Tommy promise not to let Tyler do anything rash.

"Are you kidding me?" Tommy laughed. "Why don't you just ask me to tame a lion? I'd probably have better results."

The chief laughed and disconnected the call.

Tyler glanced over at his partner as Tommy slid the phone back in his pocket. "You're supposed to behave until the chief gets here," Tommy told him with a smirk.

Tyler rolled his eyes and then sat quietly, looking out the window. Finally, as they neared the precinct, he sighed. "Don't mention Nickels and Ra'shel just yet," he told his best friend softly.

Tommy looked over at him. "What? Why not?"

"I just—" he broke off. "I can't handle anyone knowing right now. Please?"

Tommy sighed, running his hand over his face. "Ty—"

"No, Tommy. Just give me some time to deal with it before everyone finds out that Ra'shel was screwing Nickels. Do you have any idea how crazy that's making me?"

"I can only imagine," Tommy said with a sympathetic sigh. "Fine, but how long are we supposed to sit on this?"

"Just give me time to deal with Jackson first. Hell, it's been five years, a few more weeks really isn't going to make a difference."

Tommy pulled into the parking lot of the precinct and looked over at his partner. "Alright," he agreed as he opened his door.

Tommy and Ryan circled around to the other side of the car where Tyler was leaning against it, waiting. Tommy carefully looked at Tyler's bleeding head, his hands on either side of Tyler's face. Then he took the handcuffs Tyler dangled in front of him.

A grin quirked the corner of Tyler's mouth as Tommy shook his head at his partner with a roll of his eyes. He turned him around and locked the cuffs back into place. Then he leaned his forehead against the back of Tyler's head and sighed. "I'm sorry, buddy."

"Don't be," Tyler assured him.

They walked into the station with Nickels following them closely. The officers in booking just stood and stared as Nickels ordered them to book Tyler. Again.

"But sir—" one of the officers started to object.

"Don't 'but sir' me. You book Detective Michaels or I'll have you arrested and sitting in the cell next to him!" Nickels shouted. The officer looked between Tyler and Nickels, unsure of what to do.

Tyler sighed. "Just do it," he told him softly, unwilling to involve anyone else in the conflict. The officer swallowed hard and then nodded, and Nickels growled about everyone waiting for Tyler's

approval while they began the booking process. Nickels watched like a hawk.

Moments later, the door to the office flew open, and the irate chief appeared in the doorway, fuming. He was still in his pajamas and bathrobe. Nickels paled.

“Officers, please place Commander Nickels in custody.”

“You can’t do this, Phil,” Nickels protested violently.

“Can’t I? You stalked, assaulted, and harassed Detective Michaels. And you interfered with an investigation. You’ve got twenty-four hours to cool off. And consider yourself back on suspension.”

The chief turned to Tyler and looked at his head in shock. “Jesus, son, what the hell happened to your head?”

Tyler felt his forehead gingerly and winced. “I hit a brick wall,” he muttered.

“Make that forty-eight,” the chief yelled over his shoulder. “Go home and get some sleep, son. You three can fill me in tomorrow afternoon.”

Tyler nodded carefully, mindful of the pounding in his head, and headed for the door. Tommy and Ryan followed closely, watching Tyler with unease.

Three steps outside the precinct, Tyler sagged. Both Tommy and Ryan rushed forward to grab him.

“M’okay,” he muttered, straightening himself.

Tommy and Ryan helped him to the car anyway.

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“ARE you kidding me?” Tommy asked in disbelief. “He’s only been suspended for four days.”

Jack rubbed his head. “Phil has started the paperwork to have him investigated, and possibly dismissed, but he has rights. And unless somebody”—he slid a sidelong look at Tyler—“decides to come forward and tell the board what he knows, our hands are tied.”

Jack, his wife Jenny, Tyler, Ryan, and Dalton were all sitting around Tommy and Sara's table playing cards late Saturday evening. Jack had just gotten off the phone with the chief, who had called to let him know that Nickels had been reinstated as of that moment and that Tyler should probably avoid him at all costs.

Tommy had talked Tyler into at least confiding in Jack about Nickels and Ra'shel. Jack had been livid and wanted Tyler to report it right away, but he couldn't argue with Tyler's need for time to process everything before the entire department found out.

All eyes fell on Tyler. Tyler sighed, shaking his head.

"What proof do we have? It's his word against ours, and he wasn't Miranda-ed at the time. Not to mention that Tommy and Ryan can't exactly be considered impartial witnesses. His lawyers will argue that."

Tommy and Jack exchanged a look before Jack sighed. "Damn, he's right."

Tommy rubbed his head in frustration, and then he looked up quickly. "Your line was tapped when he called. It's recorded. There's proof enough that he was having an affair with her and that he's been harassing you."

Tyler shook his head. "He turned the tap off my line when he made that call. It was never recorded. I already checked."

Tommy looked at Jack. "I say we turn Tyler loose on him, wired. I'm sure if we leave them alone for ten minutes, we'll get all the proof we need."

"Or Nickels will be dead," Jack pointed out.

Tommy shook his head. "I think Tyler will get more satisfaction knowing all that will happen to Nickels while he's in jail, won't you, Ty?"

Tyler's eyes gleamed. Tommy looked at Jack. "See."

Twenty minutes later, there was a knock at the door, and Tommy got up to answer it. He came back into the dining room holding a package in his hands, looking slightly pale.

"What?" Tyler asked, looking up at him.

"It's for you," Tommy told him, handing it over carefully.

"Is it ticking?" Tyler asked.

Tommy shook his head. "No, I already checked."

Tyler sighed and took the package from Tommy and slid it open carefully, checking the sides for a wire. All eyes were on him as he pulled out a stack of eight by ten photos and a note. Ryan watched as all color drained out of the normally tanned face.

Tommy rushed in behind him and immediately snagged the photos out of Tyler's hands. "Oh shit," he murmured quietly.

Jack was instantly beside them, looking over Tommy's shoulder.

Tyler rubbed his neck and nodded at Tommy, who was looking at him in question. Wordlessly, he handed the pictures to Ryan. Sara, Dalton, and Jenny leaned in.

Sara's startled gasp came from over Ryan's shoulder. The picture on top was of Ra'shel and Nickels having sex. The following was of Ra'shel and Nickels in the park. Ra'shel had a bright, happy smile on her face as they held hands. The next was of Ra'shel and Tyler. They were obviously in the midst of an argument, judging by the looks of anger across each of their faces. Ra'shel's hand was raised as though she had hit Tyler, and by the red mark across Tyler's cheek, Ryan was willing to bet she had. The picture following was of Ra'shel shooting up, a dazed, drugged expression on her face, and the one following could have only been taken during her attack.

The next picture was of Tyler at his trial. He had his head in his hands, and his attorney had his hand on Tyler's shoulder and was looking toward the judge in disbelief. The picture after that was of Tyler in jail. He had on a prison uniform, a white T-shirt and orange pants, and was surrounded by thirty leering men, all of whom had either bats or chains in their hands. From the bruises and cuts on Tyler's face and arms and the blood staining his shirt, Ryan was guessing they had already used them.

The last picture was of Ryan and Tyler. They were standing on a sidewalk in the city. They were facing each other, talking. Ryan had his hand on Tyler's shoulder, and Tyler was leaning into his touch. Ryan looked angry, and Tyler just gazed up at him with a hurt expression. Ryan tried to remember where it had been taken, but he kept coming up blank.

He laid the pictures down in front of him and looked up at Tyler, who was watching him with intent blue eyes. He handed him the note that had been enclosed with the photos.

~ I'm getting bored waiting and irritated by the way you continue to slip out of my men's grasp. I cannot afford to lose any more men to you, so I have decided that the time has come for us to meet at last and end this once and for all. Should you disagree with my decision, the penalty will be severe.

I do hope you're enjoying the photos I've enclosed. Can you imagine the others I have? Look at how happy your commander made your wife, and how upset and angry you made her. It's no surprise, really. You make everyone in your life hurt you.

I'll be in touch tomorrow evening at 11:00pm. The trace will be off your line, and you'll be alone. If you don't meet me within a half hour of my call, one of your friends will die. ~

~ H. Jackson

"Man, this guy is nuts!" Dalton exclaimed.

Ryan nodded in agreement, his stomach twisting in agony.

Tyler rubbed the bridge of his nose and exchanged a look with his partner.

"Damn, Ty," Tommy said quietly. "Well, there's our proof," he muttered.

"Only that they were having an affair. It doesn't prove he was beating her."

Tommy scrubbed at his face. "Man, he's been watching you for a long time," he said softly.

Tyler nodded, sitting back in his chair with a resolved sigh.

"Now what?" Tommy looked at his partner.

Tyler just looked at him, and Tommy shook his head slowly, his eyes closing as the fear washed over him.

"You're going to give yourself up to him, aren't you?" Ryan asked in horror, watching the exchange.

Tyler slowly nodded as their eyes met. "I'm sorry, Ryan, but I'm out of options," he told him quietly.

Ryan's world tilted and pitched as the bottom dropped out from beneath him. His eyes were pained as he took in his lover's face. Tyler took his hand gently and held it, having no words to offer him.

57

"DID you know Ra'shel was having an affair with Nickels?" Tyler asked Sara as they finished their card game.

Sara looked down. Tyler narrowed his eyes.

"Did you?" he asked again. The others were watching her as well.

Sara reddened. "Not until it was already too late," she told him quietly. "You'd already been released from jail when I found out. I honestly didn't think you were going to take her back. I mean, you'd filed for divorce. I just couldn't see what good it would do by telling you. I didn't want to hurt you anymore. Then she got pregnant and she begged me not to tell you, to ruin your new beginning."

The vein in Tyler's temple was throbbing as he glanced at his partner. "Did you know?"

Tommy shook his head. "This is the first I'm hearing that Sara even knew," he said, looking at his wife.

"If I would have told you, you would have told Tyler."

"Damn straight, I would have. She cheated on him. With someone who hates him, no less, and got pregnant with his child. He deserved to know that."

"I didn't know about the baby," she insisted. "She never said anything."

"Did you know she was on drugs?" Tyler questioned her.

She shook her head.

Tyler sighed, rubbing his head. "Was she still seeing him?"

Sara hesitated.

Tommy groaned. "Oh Sara, how could you?"

Tears sprang to her eyes and ran down her face. "I didn't find out until the night she died. She was angry. That's when she told me that she—" she stopped, cutting herself off, her eyes wide.

“That she what?” Tommy wanted to know.

But it was Tyler who answered, his voice quiet. “That she was going to run away with him after the baby was born.”

Everyone turned to look at Tyler, their eyes wide and mouths open, stunned.

“You knew?” Sara whispered in shock.

“Not until recently. Nickels told me. Why didn’t she want the baby?” he asked softly. The hurt was obvious in his voice, and Ryan guessed not just from his wife considering abandoning their child, but from the resurfacing pain of his own mother abandoning him.

Sara shook her head. “She did, but Nickels didn’t want to raise your child. He promised her they’d have more.”

Tyler rubbed his head. The others watched him in concern. “So she was just going to run out on her?”

“That’s what she said, Ty, but I don’t know if she really would have when the time came. She was so happy about Brina. I couldn’t see her just giving her up. Or you, for that matter. She was devastated when you filed for divorce.”

“She had a funny way of showing it,” Tyler remarked sarcastically. “She was so devastated, I spent two nights in jail.” He looked at Ryan. “Wanna know how Brina was conceived?” he asked almost angrily.

Ryan was watching him, concern written across his features. Tyler didn’t wait for a response. “She said I raped her.”

Both Ryan and Dalton’s jaws fell, and they stared at Tyler in shock.

“But Tyler didn’t,” Jack interjected quietly. “She was angry over a fight they had and wanted to hurt him, so she pressed charges against him. Two days later, she recanted. I made her do time for filing a false police report.”

Ryan shook his head, exchanging a look with Dalton. Then he looked at Tyler.

“A month later, she found out she was pregnant. That was the one and only time we’d had sex since my release from prison. We hadn’t even been living together. I’d moved out after I was released. We got

back together three months after she found out she was pregnant. I thought things were getting better. Obviously, I was wrong.”

Everyone was watching Tyler, no one quite sure what to say.

LATE that night, Ryan cuddled Tyler close to him in bed. The moon shone on them brightly, and they both lay awake staring at it.

“I can’t lose you, Tyler,” Ryan whispered into his lover’s soft hair.

Tyler sighed. “I know, Ryan, but I don’t have a choice. I don’t know what else to do. If I don’t do what he says, someone will die, and we both know he’s not bluffing.”

Ryan swallowed hard. He knew what Tyler was saying was true, but he didn’t have to like it. “What do we do?” he asked, his gut twisting painfully.

“We’ll figure it out, Ryan. No matter what I say, Tommy won’t be that far behind. It’ll work out.”

“Will it?”

“It has to.”

58

“I HAVE to go, Tyler. There’s a multiple trauma en route to Riverside, and they don’t have enough attendings. I’ll only be a couple hours,” Ryan told him as he grabbed his bag and pulled its black strap over his shoulder. He looked apologetically at Tyler, not wanting to leave him, but he was left with little choice.

Tyler’s eyes widened in alarm. “Like hell,” he told him, getting to his feet. “You’re not going alone. I have a meeting in an hour with Jack, but I’ll drive you and have Cole meet us.”

Tyler slid on his shoes and picked up his cell phone. Then, Ryan slipped his arms around Tyler’s waist and pulled him against his chest, absorbing the warmth of Tyler’s body. He leaned down and captured Tyler’s mouth, then looked into his eyes.

“I love you, baby.”

Tyler smiled. “I love you.”

On the drive to the hospital, Tyler took Ryan’s hand in his own. “Tommy will be waiting for you and Cole around ten. Sara’s already at her mom’s, and we sent four officers with her,” he told him.

“What if this doesn’t work, Tyler?” he asked around the lump in his throat.

Tyler sighed. And then he shrugged, pulling into the hospital drive. “I don’t feel much like dying today, so I guess it’d better.”

Ryan looked at Tyler while Tyler parked the car. His stomach twisted painfully. He cupped the back of Tyler’s neck and looked at him for a long moment before he kissed him on the forehead. “Be good.”

Tyler smiled. “Always”

Ryan smirked, kissed Tyler gently, and then got out of the car. Tyler followed him, and together, they entered the hospital and waited for Cole’s arrival.

BY NINE o’clock, when Ryan and Cole hadn’t returned or called, Tyler was in a full-out panic. At the hospital, all they found was Cole Rainer unconscious in Ryan’s bathroom in his office.

After speaking to the officers assembled in the waiting room, he returned to Cole, who was still unconscious in the emergency room. Dalton assured him that he’d be fine, watching with worried brown eyes as Tyler paced the confines of the emergency room in agitation.

Suddenly, Tyler turned sharply on his heel and left the room without a word. Dalton chased after him. He grabbed Tyler’s arm just above the elbow, turning him back toward him.

“He’ll be okay,” Dalton assured him, his voice soft.

Tyler met his eyes. “I didn’t want to put him through this. I wanted to keep him safe. I did everything I knew how to keep him out of this, and it still wasn’t enough. How the hell is he going to survive if he’s forced to watch them kill me?”

Dalton touched Tyler’s cheek lightly, unable to imagine life without the young blond who made everyone’s day just by walking into

the room. The thought of Tyler's pain, and what he still faced, made his stomach churn in agony. "Then fight, Ty. Fight and survive. I know you can."

Dalton tipped their foreheads together, his hand on the back of Tyler's neck. Tyler sighed.

"You'll take care of him, right?" Tyler's voice was soft, accepting of what his future might hold.

It was Dalton's turn to sigh, but he nodded. "Always, Tyler, but you promise me you'll fight the best that you know how." He gently guided Tyler's head so their eyes met and held eye contact with him.

Brown bore into blue, and after a moment, Tyler swallowed and nodded.

"I promise, Dalton," he whispered.

TYLER paced the living room, back and forth, up and down, practically wearing a path in the reddish rug in the center of the hardwood floor. His eyes watched the clock on the wall as the seconds ticked slowly by.

He jumped as the phone rang. He rushed to it, scooping it up. The caller didn't wait for a greeting.

"Do I have your attention yet, Michaels?"

"He had better be okay," Tyler growled into the phone, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"Oh, he's just fine, aren't you, Dr. Douglas?"

"I'm fine, Tyler," came Ryan's soft reply, as if he'd been on the line all the time. Tyler felt the immense relief rush through him and the anger surging all at the same time.

"Jackson, this is between you and me," he ground into the phone. "Leave him out of it."

"I'm only ensuring your cooperation. You haven't exactly been accommodating in my attempts to kill you. We could have avoided this, but you didn't want to cooperate. So now, you do what I say, and Dr. Douglas doesn't get hurt. You screw up, he dies."

"If you touch him at all, I'm going to feed you your balls."

Miles away, forced to listen on the other end of the extension, Ryan felt a cold shiver run down his spine at Tyler's tone.

"He's fine, Detective. More than I can say you're going to be. Meet me in ten minutes at the docks on Baltimore Harbor. Pier 14. Come alone, Michaels. You know the drill." With that, the line went dead.

59

COLD anger coursed through Tyler as he made his way to the large yacht illuminated by the bright moonlight. He hesitated as Ryan was pushed into view, flanked by Jackson and two of his men. Their guns glinted in the moonlight.

"Glad you could join us, Detective Michaels."

Tyler didn't trust himself with a response, so instead he stayed silent, glaring at Jackson.

"Come over here, and do it slowly," Jackson ordered impatiently.

Tyler moved as he was instructed until Jackson motioned for him to stop, five feet from them.

"Take out your gun by the trigger guard and place it on the dock to your left. No sudden moves," Jackson instructed him.

Slowly, Tyler removed his gun from his holster and placed it on the dock.

"Any other weapons?"

Tyler's glare was penetrating, never once leaving Jackson's face as he removed his backup nine millimeter from his ankle holster and then the holster itself, letting them drop to the dock beside him. He then pulled out the knife he had tucked in his boot.

Ryan watched in desperation. Tyler had a dangerous gleam in his eyes that made him uneasy.

As Tyler complied with his orders, Jackson's smirk grew. "If you're wired, I suggest you remove it now," he ordered.

No one missed Tyler's hesitation, but then he took out his wallet and dropped it on the dock with his guns. Ryan looked at him

quizzically. No one had told Tyler about the trace, and it wasn't visible anywhere in Tyler's wallet. Tyler met his eyes and shrugged. The slight grin at the corner of his mouth meant only for Ryan was unmistakable.

"Now strip," Jackson ordered, and his smirk grew.

Tyler stood still, refusing to budge. Jackson raised one eyebrow and tilted his head, challenging him without words.

"It's not even forty degrees out," Tyler argued, hesitating for time. He'd kept his actions slow, hoping to buy Tommy and Jack time to find them, but he knew time was running short.

"And your point would be?" Jackson questioned.

"Shoved up your ass in a minute," Tyler growled in return.

Ryan lifted his eyebrows at Tyler's flippant remark and watched as Tyler pulled his shirt over his head. He then kicked off his shoes and socks and unbuttoned his jeans, sliding them down over his hips, and stepped out of them.

Tyler's eyes were dangerous as he watched Jackson, who continued to smirk.

"Now, how about a swim?"

Tyler shook his head. He knew that Jackson was playing a psychological game with him. Forcing him into the water at this temperature would shock his system. Despite his cold water Navy SEAL training, the cold would still chill him. He also knew that Jackson thought it would give him an edge in whatever game he had planned. He figured he'd let him believe that.

"It wasn't a request, Michaels. Get in the water. Now!"

Tyler sighed but looked at the edge of the dock where Jackson was pointing his gun.

"We're going to board the yacht and go a mile east. You get to follow. You have fifteen minutes to make it to the yacht, or I shoot your boyfriend. With your SEAL training, I doubt that will be a problem. Will it?" His look was penetrating.

"You're fucking psycho," Tyler responded.

Ryan turned to Jackson, his eyes wide in terror. "What the hell are you doing? You'll shut his system down. It's too fucking cold."

Jackson grinned. "With his SEAL background, I highly doubt I'll kill him that quickly. As for what I'm doing, why don't you ask your boyfriend?"

Ryan narrowed his eyes and turned to Tyler. Tyler sighed deeply and looked to the sky before meeting Ryan's eyes again. "He thinks he's going to break me," he answered quietly.

Jackson laughed gleefully. "You see, everyone else has failed. Now it's my turn to try and break the man otherwise impossible to break. I figure I have an advantage. I know which buttons to push," Jackson told him haughtily. "And I have you."

Chills ran down Ryan's spine. "What do you mean, everyone else has failed?" Ryan demanded.

Jackson looked at Tyler. "Oh, I see," he said with a smile. "You haven't told the man you claim to love more than life itself about your past."

Ryan watched Tyler's eyes narrow. Hatred poured out of him in waves as Jackson let out a bone-chilling laugh.

"Well, we'll just have to make sure he hears all about it, won't we, *Lieutenant* Michaels? Now, get in the water. You're trying to buy time, but it won't work. I've been screwing with your signal; your boys are chasing their tails right about now. They won't be in time to save you. But you have three seconds to save Dr. Douglas."

Tyler's gaze darkened. He exchanged a glance with Ryan and then dove cleanly into the water.

RYAN'S eyes were glued to the dark water. He sighed with relief when he spotted Tyler swimming strongly toward the large yacht. When he got close, Ryan stepped out onto the stairs and leaned down. Tyler grasped his hand. It was shockingly cold against Ryan's skin, and Ryan frowned, worried.

He pulled Tyler out of the water, and they met each other's eyes. Tyler's skin was gray in the moonlight, and his lips were blue. Ryan rubbed his hands briskly up and down Tyler's arms, and then he pulled him against his chest. What worried Ryan the most was that Tyler wasn't shivering. He was certain hypothermia had begun to set in.

“How was your swim, Michaels? Refreshing, I hope,” Jackson said from behind them. “You made it faster than I thought you would. Impressive.”

“Just what I wanted to do,” Tyler said sarcastically as he pulled away from Ryan. “Impress you.” He caught the fatigues that were thrown at him and lifted his eyebrows.

“Thought we’d reminisce about your Navy days,” Jackson told him with a smile.

Tyler bit his tongue, cutting off the reply that was on the verge of spilling forth as he pulled the green khaki pants up over his wet boxers and attempted to button them, but his fingers were numb. Ryan turned and helped him, his worried gaze settling once more on Tyler’s face.

As he watched Tyler pull the olive green shirt over his head, Ryan was sure that Jackson had lost his mind.

“Surprised you didn’t get dog tags too,” Tyler muttered.

Jackson reached into his pocket. Ryan looked over at him. Dangling from his hand was a set of dog tags. The man really was psychotic.

Tyler shook his head, his expression incredulous, but caught the dog tags that were being tossed to him. He cupped them in his hand. Ryan saw his jaw tighten, and for a moment, they made eye contact before Tyler turned his gaze on Jackson.

Jackson’s expression was especially malevolent under the light of the full moon reflecting off the ocean around them. “I went to a lot of trouble to set this up. I researched every nook and cranny of your life. Now put them on,” he ordered, his voice low and cold.

Tyler did as he was told, sliding the silver chain over his head and around his neck. Jackson then motioned to his men, who pushed Tyler toward the stairs.

60

TYLER’S arms were handcuffed tightly behind him as he and Ryan were shoved into the living area of the yacht.

“I’m sorry,” Tyler whispered.

“Hey, what’d I tell you?” Ryan whispered back. “We’re in this together. And I’d much rather go through it with you than have you do it alone.”

Tyler swallowed the lump in his throat. He knew what was in store for him, and in no way did he want Ryan to witness it.

Next to him, Ryan could feel Tyler’s body begin to tremble as he began to warm up slightly. He glanced at Tyler again, worried. His face was still ashen, his lips still blue, and his actions were sluggish.

When Tyler heard the door slide open, he immediately turned his head. His jaw dropped open slightly. Rage burned through him like fire, and without hesitation, he tackled the man who had entered, bound wrists and all.

Three of Jackson’s men moved in to grab Tyler, who had managed to slip out of his handcuffs and wrap both hands around the other man’s neck. Ryan gasped in surprise as he saw whom Tyler was trying to strangle.

Nickels.

Suddenly, everything became clear. Nickels had been the leak. He was the reason all the investigations had hit brick walls.

He had set Tyler up.

Nickels’s smile was mocking as he patted Tyler on the cheek. Tyler’s eyes burned as he threw one man off of him and decked another.

A gun crashed down on the back of his skull, and Tyler hit his knees.

Tyler was quickly thrown to the ground, and it took all of them to pin him there. A knee shoved into his back, a gun was placed to his head, and still Tyler struggled, nearly breaking free, until Jackson reminded him that Ryan was in the room as a hostage.

Nickels looked at the handcuffs, one still dangling from Tyler’s wrist.

“You morons!” he criticized. “I thought I told you he’s an expert at picking locks. Get some wire,” he ordered. “And search him better. He obviously stashed something to pick the lock with.”

One man disappeared down the steps while the others searched Tyler again, but nothing was found until Nickels stormed over, twisted

Tyler's right wrist at a painful angle, and discovered the small piece of wire slid under the top layer of skin on Tyler's palm.

Ryan's eyebrows went up fractionally, and Nickels chuckled. "I'll give you credit, Michaels, you never cease to surprise me."

Moments later, the man was back with a roll of silver wire. The remaining handcuff was removed and wire was wrapped around Tyler's wrists, binding them together tightly.

Ryan's stomach rolled when Nickels produced a syringe.

Tyler turned his head and glared at Nickels, his eyes burning with unmasked hatred and rage.

Ryan could only watch in horror as the contents of the needle were injected into Tyler's neck. Tyler groaned from the floor. Ryan's eyes lingered on the strained face for a long moment before he glared at the rogue commander.

"What the hell did you give him?"

"Symaline," Nickels stated, watching Ryan's face for a reaction.

His words had the desired effect as Ryan paled dramatically. Ryan looked at Tyler, who was beginning to writhe on the floor, his body twisting in agony as the effects of the drug burned through his system.

Ryan had read articles on the drug. It had been designed as biochemical warfare to be used during torture, but never had he seen the effect of its use, as it was illegal in the U.S. His mind whirled as he remembered the contents of the article.

Jackson's men hauled Tyler to his feet. He faltered slightly, and the men had to support his weight from either side while Tyler struggled to find his footing.

"Lock them in a room," Jackson ordered his men, turning to confer with Nickels.

Ryan jerked his arm away from the guard who held him by the elbow but obediently walked down the corridor he was being prodded along. At an open doorway, he was pushed inside. Tyler was thrown in after him. Ryan turned quickly and caught him before he could fall. Arms around his chest, he lowered Tyler to the floor as the door was pulled shut and a lock clicked firmly in place.

Ryan pushed his fingers to the side of Tyler's neck, counting the erratic pulse, one eye on his watch, the other focused on his lover's face. The pain Tyler was in was clearly reflected there.

"Do you know what you were given?" Ryan asked, rolling Tyler to his side and working the wire from his bleeding wrists. Blood streaked up his arms.

Tyler nodded, and Ryan paused. He glanced at his lover's face.

"Have you been given it before?" he asked, his voice faltering.

Tyler hesitated and then nodded again.

Ryan's heart sank. He knew that Symaline would cause extreme pain. It could also cause cardiac complications, especially in high doses. His stomach ached with the knowledge.

Pulling the wire free from Tyler's wrists, he carefully checked them over. He was relieved to see the cuts were superficial. He then pulled Tyler up and held him so that his back was against his chest.

He stroked Tyler's damp hair with one hand and rubbed his chest with the other, trying to warm him. Tyler was still extremely cold to the touch, which would make the effects of the Symaline all the worse, as his system was already in shock. Ryan was beginning to see the full scope of Jackson's plan, and his heart constricted in fear.

He felt Tyler's body spasm, and he tossed his head against Ryan's shoulder, squeezing his eyes shut. He writhed and groaned, and his face became red as the pain coursed through him.

He spoke quietly to Tyler, even though at some point, he was sure Tyler couldn't hear him anymore. And he continuously monitored his pulse.

Finally, blessedly, Tyler's eyes rolled to the back of his head and he lost consciousness, the body's way of saying he'd had enough.

TOMMY picked up Tyler's guns, holsters, knife, clothes, and wallet off the dock and stared at his captain, his friend.

"Now what?" he asked slowly, cradling the items against his chest.

"We hope Tyler's backup plan works."

"And if it doesn't?"

Jack chose not to answer. Instead, he stared out over the moonlit ocean, where the ship could no longer be seen.

61

THE door opened, and two men stepped into the room. They moved to get Tyler to his feet, but Ryan stood in front of them. The guards stepped back instinctively at the protective stance and hostile glare.

Ryan turned to Tyler, who had just moments before regained consciousness, and helped him to his feet, putting both of his hands on Tyler's waist to steady him. Tyler was still shaking from the effects of the drug, and he leaned on Ryan for support. Ryan slipped his arm around Tyler's waist, ignoring the two men, and helped him down the hall and up the stairs as instructed.

Jackson and Nickels met them at the top of the ship. A disturbing grin was on Jackson's face as he announced that they had reached their destination, and then he turned on his heel and led the way off the boat.

Ryan looked around. They were in a harbor, but nothing was familiar. He glanced at Tyler, who had pulled himself onto his own feet, and his hooded eyes were quickly taking in their surroundings, absorbing every detail. They were led to a car and pushed inside.

After a twenty-minute drive, they pulled up outside a large building and were instructed to get out. They were then led to a side door and ushered inside.

Their vision, now accustomed to the moonlit night, was assaulted by the bright high-pressure sodium lights that were hung every twenty feet across the spacious ceiling. The building was bare except for a few obvious torture devices, which made Ryan's stomach churn in pure agony. When they came to a halt in front of some long chains strung from the ceiling, he groaned, unable to contain his distress.

"I sure hope you've got a plan, Tyler," Ryan muttered next to his lover's ear.

Tyler glanced over at him, an apologetic look on his face. "Not one that's going to get us out of here anytime soon."

Ryan looked into his eyes, his heart beating wildly in his chest. Not one ounce of fear shone from Tyler. Instead, he looked calm, if not a bit bored.

He knew his own anxiety was written all over his face, but Tyler remained composed, even as two men pulled him away. Ryan's stomach lurched at the dispassionate look on his lover's face.

He could only watch as Tyler was stripped of his shirt and the chains were wrapped around Tyler's already raw wrists.

Ryan watched as Tyler cocked his head at Jackson rebelliously. A light flickered in his eyes, and Ryan knew then that Tyler wouldn't hold his tongue much longer.

He wasn't disappointed.

"You can't come up with anything more original than this?" Tyler taunted him, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "I pegged you for a bit of a more creative criminal."

Ryan muttered under his breath at Tyler's jab, although he hardly believed his lover would actually hold his tongue.

Jackson laughed. "Well, I could, but I've checked into you. You should be getting a strange sense of *déjà vu* right about now."

"Well, I would, but it wasn't your ugly mug I was looking at the last time someone tortured me. So see, you already screwed up." Ryan narrowed his eyes, but his lover barely paused before he continued. "If you wanted to make it more realistic, you could consider plastic surgery."

"Ah, no, Detective. I had a much better idea in mind."

Somewhere to their right, a heavy door slammed, and a man stepped out of the shadows.

Tyler's face paled. Then, suddenly, he struggled madly against the two men flanking him. They gripped Tyler's arms, attempting to pull him back under control, but Tyler's eyes were dangerous as he shook them off. Both men landed on the floor, and another rushed forward and jabbed Tyler viciously in the side with the butt of his rifle, stilling Tyler's struggles as he gasped and doubled over momentarily.

The other men got to their feet and roughly grabbed Tyler, whose eyes were focused on the man who had just entered the room. Ryan's eyes flickered back and forth between the two uneasily as the new man neared them.

“Lieutenant Michaels,” the other man greeted as though they were old friends. “You look surprised to see me.” He had come to a stop mere feet from where Tyler was being detained. He was taller than Tyler by about three inches, well-built and muscular. His dark hair was shorn in a military cut close to his head, and his dark eyes were appraising Tyler with great interest.

Tyler lunged for the man, only to be brought back fiercely by the men on either side of him. The man in front of him never blinked, seemingly anticipating Tyler’s attack.

“I cannot believe they let you back into this country,” Tyler growled, eyes burning with animosity and rage. He yanked his arms free of his captors but didn’t move to attack.

“They don’t know I’m here.”

“You’re gonna fucking fry when I get done with you.”

Ryan felt chills go down his spine at his lover’s tone. Pure rage poured from Tyler, and his words were clipped and dangerous.

“I seem to remember you saying the same thing when I slaughtered most of your team.” The new man’s voice was calm yet grating as he pushed Tyler for a reaction.

One wasn’t long in coming.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” Tyler growled, drawing it out into one long word. “You fucking set us up.”

“The price on your head was just too tempting, Michaels. I offered some of it to Carmikael after we captured you, but he just shot off a bunch of obscenities. I wanted to kill him along with the rest of your team, but I had my orders. You couldn’t save them, could you, Michaels? Although I admire your courage to try.”

Tyler was shaking his head. His eyes held a deep resentment. He lunged again, this time diving into the other man and taking him to the ground. It was only a moment before the others dove on Tyler and pulled him off and back. The other man slowly climbed to his feet, brushing himself off, seemingly unfazed.

Ryan stood quietly as he watched. He wished Tyler didn’t make it such a habit of stepping around certain incidents from his past. He realized that he still had a great deal to learn about his lover.

One thing was certain: Tyler was never boring.

Jackson smiled vindictively. "I see I've gotten your attention, Michaels. If only you could have seen the look on your face when Lieutenant Stevens walked through that door."

Tyler turned his head to look at Jackson, his expression returning to one of disinterest. "So what rock did you find him under?"

"Actually, he came to me when he heard I was hunting you. Offered me a price I couldn't refuse."

"You do know that he's going to kill you when he's done, right?" Tyler's words were cold and calculating.

Ryan didn't miss the flicker of fear that flashed in Jackson's eyes when he looked between Tyler and the lieutenant.

"Why would he do that?" Jackson finally settled his gaze back on Tyler. His voice contained a twinge of panic that neither Ryan nor Tyler had heard before.

Tyler shrugged. "Because you're expendable. He obviously used you to get to me, and now that he has me, what else does he need you for? That's his game."

Jackson swallowed and looked at the newcomer. Stevens shrugged, his gaze on Tyler. "Who says that's still my game, Michaels?"

"If it's not, I would find it really hard to believe. You sold out your country and your team, and then you swindled your way into mine. And then, just to get the lousy five mil that was on my head, you led us into enemy fire." Tyler smirked. "But did you get it?" Tyler's eyes were insolent as he provoked the other man.

Ryan swallowed, looking at his lover in shock. Five million dollars? What the hell had Tyler done? And did he really want to know?

Lieutenant Stevens's face was beginning to redden, and his body shook in anger. He growled from somewhere deep in his throat and signaled to the men holding Tyler.

The men on either side of him stepped back and yanked on the chains. Tyler was pulled into the air so that he was hanging by his wrists, his feet dangling inches off the ground.

Tyler's face remained perfectly calm, his expression never changing, as though he'd anticipated the move. Ryan never doubted that he had as he himself twisted against the men holding him. Tyler

looked over at him and shook his head slightly, stilling Ryan's struggles.

Stevens regained his composure as he pulled off his black leather gloves, considering the blond in front of him. "No, Lieutenant, I didn't get my five million dollars. I've been waiting a long time for this moment, to make you suffer for my loss." He stretched out his hand, and a black leather whip was placed in his palm. He calmly strode behind Tyler, his fingers caressing the braid of the whip.

Ryan watched him uneasily, his stomach in knots. A glance at Tyler's face showed no emotion; not an ounce of fear or distress emanated from him.

Stevens's arm rose up behind his head, and then he brought the whip down against Tyler's back, slashing it with a loud crack.

Ryan cringed, but he was amazed by Tyler's reaction. His eyes were stoic and his jaw set; no emotion crossed his face as he stared at the far wall.

"I am curious, though," the man said as his whip cracked down again. "How you escaped from the war camp, managed to find Carmikael, and got out without being caught?"

The whip slapped against Tyler's side, drawing a fine line of blood across the delicate skin. Ryan saw Tyler close his eyes, but still no sound escaped. His face remained expressionless. Ryan felt weak in his captor's unrelenting grasp as he was forced to watch his lover being brutally beaten. He pulled against their grip, but Tyler stilled him with another look.

"Well?" Stevens demanded as he again cracked the whip against Tyler's bleeding and abused back.

To Ryan's amazement, Tyler laughed. "You thought you were so smart, Tony. You thought you had it all figured out."

Stevens's eyes were full of malice as he hit Tyler again with added force. Tyler grimaced for only a second before quickly schooling his expression.

"What did I miss?" Stevens asked with mock amusement, his head tilted, waiting for Tyler's response.

"Let's go back. Picture it."

Stevens moved in front of Tyler, genuine curiosity on his face. The fingers of his left hand stroked the bloody leather strap of the whip in his hand as he nodded. “Okay,” he agreed.

Tyler turned his head, meeting the other lieutenant’s eyes. “Standing in the middle of the courtyard. To your right, up on top of the tower, two guards, right?”

Stevens nodded, and Tyler shook his head, his eyes dancing with amusement.

“Wrong. One guard, one spy I’d sent in to infiltrate long before you showed up and decided to turn traitor. To your left, the first building on the roof, three more guards, right?”

“Yours?”

“One of them.”

“You told me your two missing SEALs were MIA.”

Tyler shrugged. “I lied. I didn’t trust you.”

“What took them so long, then? You were there for a week before you escaped.”

“They didn’t have the information they needed. My orders were they were not to leave until they got that information. They were a bit surprised when we were caught by enemy fire, even more surprised to find you’d led us into it. They wanted to form a rescue team, but we couldn’t risk it. If we didn’t get that information, we couldn’t proceed with our attack and free that village. What choice did I have but to wait? Finally, one of my men got the information and cut me loose. I had them get Carmikael out, and then I went back for your sorry ass. I didn’t get you, obviously.” Tyler stopped and smiled. “But I did get your journal.”

Stevens’s eyes widened in surprise, then horror. “Son-of-a-bitch. That’s what happened to it.” His face paled as the consequences set in. “They know everything?”

Tyler nodded, a smirk at the corner of his mouth. “Everything. Much more than just my debriefing could have given them. You get caught in this country, Stevens, and you’ll be lucky to even *get* a court-martial before they throw you in front of a firing squad.”

Ryan was positive it wasn’t very healthy to egg the man on like Tyler was, but despite hanging from the ceiling in obvious pain, Tyler seemed to be enjoying himself.

The lieutenant growled and grabbed a cane from a guard, throwing his whip at him in anger.

But Tyler wasn't finished. "Oh, what, nothing to say to that, Stevens? You thought you had everything all planned out, didn't you? You were going to get your five million dollars and retire somewhere in the South Pacific. But then you underestimated us, didn't you?"

Ryan groaned and glared at Tyler for purposely goading a man who held his life in his hands, but Tyler chose to ignore his frown.

A sharp strike against his ribs with the cane drew an involuntary moan from Tyler's lips.

"But let me ask you this, Michaels? Did I underestimate you this time? Do you have some great plan that will snap you away from the clutches of death yet again? Mr. Jackson and I went to great lengths to prevent that from happening." His glare was penetrating, but Tyler looked unfazed. "You're pretty confident for someone who's about to die in greater agony than they've felt in a very long time. I'll have to do something about that. But first, I'm curious. Do you have a plan?"

Tyler tilted his head rebelliously. "If I do, you'll be the second to know." He gasped this time as the cane sliced down across his battered back.

Jackson turned to Stevens with worried, questioning eyes. Stevens shook his head, seemingly unfazed by Tyler's comment.

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Jackson. There is no way he'll escape from here. Not this time."

"You seem so sure of yourself, Stevens, but I've seen how Michaels works."

"Yes, and I've worked *with* him. I know how he thinks. He wouldn't do anything to endanger another life, especially one that he cares for as much as he cares for the doctor there. You followed the plan, it'll work. Trust me."

Jackson seemed unconvinced. "What about that five million dollars you both keep mentioning? Do you think the reward still stands? We could make a great deal off him."

To Ryan's utter amazement, Tyler laughed again. Ryan cringed and struggled as Stevens struck Tyler with the cane over and over again. Hard, crushing blows.

The anger coursing through the rogue lieutenant was apparent as he took it out on Tyler's battered body. Tyler was getting to him, although he was trying not to show it.

Another hard strike, and Tyler groaned and dipped his head to his chest in exhaustion. Ryan observed him, full of worry and concern.

Blood streamed down Tyler's chest and back, and bruises were quickly forming under all the blood. Tyler's usually tanned face was pale, and his chest heaved with exertion as he successfully attempted to get his emotions under control. His head came up while he waited for the ex-lieutenant's response.

Stevens turned to Jackson, ignoring Tyler. "I don't think we will be able to collect that money," he said tightly, his expression grim.

"Why not?" Jackson's confusion was evident.

"Because the ones who first offered me the reward are dead. Our friend here killed them all."

Jackson's eyes widened. "Michaels did? By himself?" His voice rang with utter astonishment. Ryan's face mimicked his expression as he stared at his lover in shock. Tyler met his eyes briefly.

Stevens nodded his head tiredly. "Unfortunately, yes, and with his bare hands, at that."

Jackson was shaking his head with a trace of fear that he hadn't shown in previous entanglements with Tyler. Ryan could see that the full sum of Tyler's abilities was beginning to sink in. "And we expect to keep him in confinement until his death *and* stay alive with only our small army?"

Stevens snarled at Jackson. "You're underestimating me again. We have our key to survival right there." Stevens pointed at Ryan. "Why do you think I told you to grab him first?"

Lieutenant Stevens turned away from the other man and smiled at Tyler, his expression anything but pleasant as he swung the cane at Tyler's body again, connecting over his kidneys.

Tyler bit his lip until it bled, but no sound escaped him, even as his face paled dramatically and he looked as though he were going to be sick.

"Why won't he scream?" Jackson demanded, turning angrily to Stevens.

Stevens just shook his head. "He never has. I told you it'd be a challenge to break him."

"No one can take this type of abuse. I don't understand."

"You're right, Jackson, you don't understand. Michaels isn't just anyone. He's a government-trained Navy SEAL. He's the best of the best. They train these men to withstand torture. They're the government's frontline defense against the enemy. Do you think they put just anyone on the front line? Or do you think they choose someone who won't crack under pressure? I told you this wouldn't be easy."

Ryan watched the exchange from a few steps away, his chest constricting with fear and his mind absorbing Stevens's words.

"Just like old times, isn't it?" Stevens asked as he resumed beating Tyler with the cane.

Tyler managed to grunt a response. "No, wrong atmosphere. I dare you to try to take me back over," he gasped through the fiery pain that consumed his body. His vision blurred as he struggled to detach himself from the pain.

Stevens shook his head, his expression locked. "No, this will work just fine."

"Oh, what, Stevens? You afraid of what they'd do if you stepped foot into their country again?" Tyler taunted him. He was rewarded with another blow of the cane across his lower back, which caused Tyler to recoil slightly, his eyes clenched in agony.

"How was I supposed to know they would blame me for their demise?" He looked at Tyler, taking in his expression. "I assume you had something to do with that?"

Tyler shrugged noncommittally. "I guess, in some small way, it could have had something to do with the fact that I told them that you led the rebellion of their troops. And I *might* have insinuated that it was you who helped me escape from their prison." The corners of Tyler's mouth twitched up.

Ryan closed his eyes briefly, distress washing over him. Tyler was enjoying tormenting his captor a little too much. He just couldn't seem to help the sarcastic retorts, no matter what physical harm would come to him.

He opened his eyes as he heard the crack of the cane against Tyler's ribs. He was certain he had actually heard the snap of a rib with

that blow, and from the way Tyler was doing his best to school his expression, he assumed that his guess was pretty accurate.

Tyler made eye contact with him momentarily. Ryan shook his head at him, while Tyler gave him a small, encouraging smile.

The two henchmen on either side of Ryan were holding his arms in a punishing grip. Every time Ryan moved, they'd tighten their bruising hold. Ryan knew his struggles were pointless, but it was driving him mad to just stand there and watch as they abused Tyler.

Whenever Ryan moved too much, Tyler would still him with a glare, and Ryan would sigh. He felt completely powerless. His body was heavy with distress, and his stomach was twisted in vicious knots, which made him feel sick and desperate while he witnessed the torture being inflicted on Tyler. He could do nothing to stop it, and it made his body nearly numb with fear.

Stevens circled Tyler, wanting to see his face, and then he growled and struck Tyler across his breastbone. Tyler groaned and dropped his chin, and his knees instinctively curled toward his chest in an effort to soothe the sharp pain.

"So what do you think, Michaels? Want to try a little waterboarding, or should we skip the faux drowning and go for the real thing?"

Tyler just raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, I see your point," Stevens continued as though Tyler had responded. "SEALs can hold their breaths far too long for that to be effective, and I might accidentally drown you before I realized it. And we both know I can't kill you just yet."

"We could try some electrocution," he continued. "More Symaline, or even a time-out in the box. I know how much you hated that one. But," he sighed dramatically, "that one isn't as fun for me. You just hold your breath until you pass out. No, I think I enjoy seeing you in pain the most."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "You really think you're going to break me?"

"One can try."

"Then you need to learn a new technique. One that you haven't tried on me yet. But I forgot," Tyler mocked, "you have no imagination."

Stevens's eyes darkened. "Release him," he growled.

The chains around Tyler's wrist were released, and he dropped to the ground, landing heavily. Lying partially on his side, he heaved several slow, deep breaths before he pushed himself up on his forearms, but he didn't move to attack.

This surprised Ryan until he realized that the two guards flanking him were holding guns at his sides. No matter what, Tyler wouldn't risk Ryan's life.

Stevens ordered Tyler to get up. He slowly and painfully pushed himself to his feet and followed Stevens and Jackson to a water trough.

Tyler remained impassive.

"Take him down," Stevens ordered. "And remember where the guns are, Michaels."

One of the men swung his rifle, connecting hard with the side of Tyler's leg, and Tyler hit his knees. His head was forced under the water.

As he went under, Stevens jabbed a metal rod into Tyler's side, and electricity jumped from it into Tyler's skin.

Tyler jerked and thrashed, fighting the guards, and Stevens hit him again. This time, Tyler managed to twist his arm around and throw a man off of him. He yanked his head out of the water and twisted, throwing the other man off of him as well.

But the others in the room were grabbing Tyler. His head was shoved under the water, and again he was hit with the electricity, and then, abruptly, his struggles ceased, and he went limp.

Ryan's heart pounded in his chest, and Jackson turned to Stevens, who was watching his watch. "Shouldn't you let him up?"

Stevens shook his head, unconcerned. "No, he's just slowing his system down so he doesn't use up as much oxygen as fast."

Jackson stared, his mouth open slightly in confusion.

Stevens sighed impatiently. "What part of 'highly trained SEAL' aren't you getting? This is what they do. They can swim under water for excessive amounts of time without gear, and now that he's not moving at all and without a doubt slowing his entire system down, including his heartbeat, he can go even longer. Curiosity has me

wondering how long that will be while he's continuously electrocuted." His grin was malicious.

"How will you know not to kill him?"

Stevens shrugged. "I don't. But I figure if I make an oops, the doctor there can bring him back around for us."

Ryan's heart beat wildly in his chest as he struggled hard to escape the men holding him. Fear overwhelmed him as seconds turned into minutes and still Tyler was held under the water, electricity burning his side.

And then Tyler threw his shoulder back, and the man holding him on his left went flying. He whipped his head out of the water, twisted quickly, and kicked the other man hard in the chest.

But instead of fighting, he fell to his back and gasped, choking out the water he had inhaled.

Ryan shook himself free of the men on either side of him and dropped quickly to where Tyler was gasping and coughing, scarcely able to draw a breath. He turned him to his side.

Stevens smirked. "Lock them up. Nickels has a phone call to make. Then we'll play some more."

As they were led from the room, Ryan heard Jackson's conversation with Stevens.

"It's too risky to keep him around like this. Not with every cop in Southern California out looking for him. We're going to have to proceed with the plan."

"Patience, Jackson. I told you this wouldn't be easy. We had him for a week in the camp. He was tortured twenty-four hours a day with just enough water to keep him alive and no food or sleep, and he still didn't break. I'm not killing him until I have the information I need. Without that information, there is no plan, just remember that."

"What about truth serum?"

"He'll block it."

"How?"

"He's trained to block it. And trust me, I've tried. He's good at blocking it."

"There has to be another way."

“Maybe, but I hate to resort to it unless I have to. I do not like torturing people that have not crossed me. Why do you think we never tortured Carmikael? I only cared to hurt Michaels, just as I do now. It’s way too much fun watching him bleed. I figure everyone has their limit. We just have to find Michaels’s.”

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TEN men followed them into the room. Seven of them threw themselves on top of Tyler, pinning him to the cement floor, while two more aimed their guns at Ryan. Another circled behind him and grabbed his arms and held him away from the struggle.

Ryan watched helplessly as one of the men produced another hypodermic.

“Not again,” Ryan breathed as the man sank the needle into Tyler’s exposed flesh.

Tyler lay still while the men got off him. When the last man was nearly to his feet, Tyler quickly grabbed his leg. He then swung his own legs around, wrapped them around the other man’s head, and in an instant, he had snapped the man’s neck.

Ryan watched in shock as the man dropped from Tyler’s grip, his expression vacant in death. Never before had Ryan seen Tyler use the training that had made him a lethal weapon, and it completely astonished him now.

Everyone in the room was frozen except for Tyler, who continued to move at lightning speed. As soon as the first man fell, Tyler was on his feet, and he grabbed for a second. His arms wrapped around the surprised man’s head, and he twisted. He too dropped to the floor.

The other men, shaking themselves from their stupor, leapt at Tyler. One of the men near Ryan ran out the door, and another joined the fight, leaving just one armed man on Ryan, whose eyes were wide as he watched the situation crest before him in shocked amazement.

Despite the drug coursing through Tyler’s system and the beating he had just taken, Tyler moved at an amazing speed and was quickly getting the upper hand in the fight against the six men.

Ryan had never seen Tyler fight the way that he was now. His skin prickled and his spine tingled as he realized that this was the Navy SEAL before him, not the cop.

Tyler tossed two men aside, and Ryan's eyes strayed to see if they were still alive. He was surprised to find they were, though unconscious near his feet. A sudden and fierce blow to the kidney dropped Tyler to his knees just as Nickels, Jackson, and Stevens ran into the room.

Stevens quickly crossed the space, and Tyler glanced up. He saw the foot coming at his head as Stevens spun, but before it could connect, Tyler grabbed his foot and twisted.

Stevens twisted with it, spinning his body and landing on his feet while Tyler sprang up and met the fight.

Jackson and Nickels aimed their guns, but Stevens waved them off. "No, no, I've always wanted to go one-on-one with him. Let's see what he's got left. But if he looks like he's going to win, or his hands get anywhere near my neck, shoot his boyfriend."

Tyler's eyes darkened, but he quickly stood down. Stevens shook his head in obvious disappointment.

"What, you aren't going to fight me now?"

"Not if that's the way you want to play. What, you can't stand thinking you might lose so you threaten the one person that I *will* kill everyone in this room for?"

Stevens shrugged. "Fine, I won't have him shot unless it looks like you're going to kill me where I stand, agreed?"

Tyler's eyes were hard, but he nodded his agreement. Spasms now wracked his body as he fought to control the drug in his system, as he had once been trained to do.

Stevens noticed and grinned. "You can't fight it, can you?"

Their eyes met, but Tyler didn't respond.

"That's why we used it. I remembered how much trouble you had with it last time. You sure you can fight me in your condition?" he pushed him.

Tyler blinked rapidly and fought to focus. The pain was nearing an unbearable level.

Stevens grinned. "And here I was hoping for an exciting fight. Why, with both of us with the same training, the same hand-to-hand combat skills, it should have been a fairly incredible fight, don't you

think?" Stevens continued to goad as he circled Tyler, forcing Tyler to turn with him. Stevens finally shrugged. "Oh well, it'll make kicking your ass that much more fun."

He suddenly and quickly spun completely around and brought his right foot up in a spin-kick aimed perfectly at the side of Tyler's head. Just before it would have connected, Tyler dropped down, slid himself around sideways, and kicked Stevens's other foot out from under him. Stevens started to fall but caught himself at the last second on his opposite foot.

As he balanced himself, Tyler sprang back to his feet, then planted his right foot and side-kicked Stevens hard in the chest with his left. Stevens flew back, and Tyler followed it up with a punch to the jaw and another to the side of his head.

He swung again, but this time Stevens blocked it. He grabbed Tyler's fist and twisted, hard, pulling Tyler around so that his back was against his chest, but Tyler simply hooked his foot around Stevens's ankle and pulled. As Stevens went down, Tyler twisted out of the other man's grip. Spinning himself back around, his foot caught Stevens in the chest, sending him sailing back. He landed hard, but just as his butt hit the ground, Stevens sprang back to his feet, ready once more to meet the fight.

The next punch Stevens threw was lightning-quick, but despite the incredible amount of speed behind it, Tyler was faster. He threw up his right arm to block it, catching the punch on his wrist. Another punch was already in the air, but Tyler's other wrist came up just as quickly. In the same move, Tyler slammed his face forward, head-butting Stevens with such force that the resounding crack was heard around the room and seemed to echo in the others' ears.

Blood sprayed from Stevens's nose, and he fell back a step in surprise. Tyler didn't hesitate. He followed through with an uppercut to Stevens's jaw. Ryan thought he would go down, but Stevens surprised him by implementing a spin-kick with amazing velocity.

Tyler took the blow across the jaw. It snapped his head back, and Tyler saw stars. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear them as Stevens came at him with a left hook. Tyler just had time to duck. As he came up, Stevens was following through with his right fist, and Tyler ducked again. This time when he came up, he punched Stevens hard in the chest, and the air went out of the other man in a rush.

Tyler didn't hesitate to aim a right hook at the other man's jaw, but Stevens blocked it, grabbing Tyler's fist in midair. Tyler countered, turning slightly and throwing up his elbow at an angle Ryan had thought impossible. It connected just under the other man's chin.

Despite the blow, Stevens was returning with a well-aimed punch to Tyler's head. Tyler twisted slightly and caught the blow with his opposite elbow. Nearly in the same move, he spun completely around, slammed his hand forward, and caught Stevens in the chest.

But before he could withdraw his hand, Stevens caught his wrist. He spun his own body, Tyler's wrist still trapped, and bent forward quickly, throwing Tyler over his back and into the air. He slammed Tyler down hard on his back.

The sickening thud that Tyler's body made when he hit the ground had Ryan cringing. By this time, both men were a bloody mess. The way they twisted and turned and utilized their entire bodies in their fight simply amazed Ryan. He was in awe of Tyler. He had seen Tyler fight, but this fight, against another man with similar training, blew Ryan's mind. He had never seen anything like it.

On the ground, Tyler was twisting in agony. For a split second, Ryan thought he was done. But then, as Stevens aimed a kick to Tyler's head, Tyler twisted out of the way and grabbed Stevens's foot and yanked him back so quickly that Stevens hit the ground on his back as well.

Rolling to his belly, Tyler groaned. His eyes on his opponent, he slowly pushed himself to his feet. He swayed sharply and took a couple of painful breaths as he waited for Stevens to get back up.

Stevens got to his feet just as slowly. He shook his head, blinking, as if to clear it. But then he smiled. Amusement and excitement glinted in his eyes. He was enjoying this.

He jumped in the air and twisted, swinging his foot around, but Tyler was ready for it. He simply ducked out of the way. He didn't counter this time—he just waited. He watched his adversary with an intense gaze, and as Stevens spun the other way this time, Tyler stepped back.

Finally, Stevens lunged forward, twisting at the last second, throwing an elbow up at Tyler's face. Tyler simply moved his head to one side, just dodging the blow. Enraged, Stevens spun completely around, throwing the opposite elbow up. Tyler jerked aside this time,

managing to deflect the blow with his own elbow, and as he did, he turned himself in the opposite direction and caught Stevens in the neck with his other elbow. As he connected, he came back around and threw a punch. Stevens blocked it.

Twisting back around, Tyler's right fist flew forward at amazing speed. His punch landed squarely on Stevens's already bloody and probably broken nose.

Stevens hollered in shock and pain. He staggered backward and Tyler was on top of him. He slammed his whole body into Stevens, sending him crashing into the wall behind him, Tyler's body pinning him to it.

Stevens grunted and countered by slamming both of his palms against Tyler's head, over his ears. Tyler pulled his head back in agony, giving Stevens room to grab him by the shoulders and pull him down into the knee he aimed at Tyler's stomach.

Tyler let out a strained groan as the wind rushed from him. He staggered back for a second, enough time for Stevens to aim a foot directly at the side of Tyler's face. The blow resonated around the room. Tyler flew backward, landing hard on the floor. Stevens rushed him, but Tyler somehow managed to regain his wits and spring back to his feet.

Stevens anticipated the move, however, and was already spinning for another kick. Tyler grabbed his foot just as it would have connected with his chest. He twisted it, hard, but again, Stevens spun with it. As he landed, Tyler's own leg came up and caught Stevens in the shoulder.

He didn't stop there, though. He pushed off Stevens's shoulder with his foot and completely left the ground. His opposite foot smashed Stevens squarely in the face—Stevens went down. Hard.

Tyler came down on top of him. But Stevens was ready for him. He grabbed Tyler and rolled, coming up on top. Tyler didn't even hesitate; he brought his leg straight up, between Stevens's legs, and lifted. The grunt that left Stevens was high-pitched.

Tyler lifted Stevens completely off the ground and over his own head. He followed the move, flipping himself end for end, coming up on top of Stevens. As he landed, Stevens's right arm was in the air. He caught Tyler on the side of the head, hard, and Tyler slipped sideways. Stevens took advantage of that split second and pushed Tyler to the side, getting to his feet, taking Tyler with him. But Tyler turned. He did

a one-eighty and stepped back into Stevens, his back to him, and Tyler twisted his entire body and swung it around. His left leg came up and connected powerfully with Stevens's head, snapping it back.

Ryan's eyes widened at the move.

Stevens fell back, landing hard, and Tyler hit his knees, breathing heavily as the pain overwhelmed him. His chest heaved as he struggled to get his breathing under control.

Nearby, Stevens lay stunned on the floor. The others looked at each other, apparent worry across their features. Finally, Stevens moaned slightly and got to his feet, testing his jaw. He stood in front of Tyler, looking down at him.

Ryan watched him, leery of his intentions. He was surprised to see the awed look he was giving Tyler as he looked him over.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Well I'll be damned, Michaels. You *are* as good as they say." He nodded his head, clearly impressed, and turned to the others.

Jackson shook his head and looked at Stevens, who was smiling in amusement. "What, that's it?" Jackson asked in disbelief.

"I told you he'd be feisty." Stevens shrugged as he wiped the blood from his face with his shirtsleeve.

"*Feisty?* He killed two of our men," Jackson sputtered in disbelief. "With his bare hands. With eight other armed men in the room. And took on six others, all while loaded on a drug you said would be so painful that he wouldn't even be able to stand."

"It *is* that painful. Even more so. Do you want to try it? I guarantee you'll be crying for your mommy in less than ten seconds and begging me to shoot you by twenty." Stevens looked at him, his expression unreadable.

"And then he kicked your ass," Jackson finished, ignoring Stevens.

"So he did," Stevens agreed. "So he did," he repeated, shaking his head as he left the room.

Jackson watched him in utter disbelief and then slowly followed him, gesturing to the others, who followed, dragging their dead comrades with them.

Ryan sank down next to Tyler, who was still breathing heavily, his expression pained as he stared at the wall. Blood seeped from cuts

on his face, back, sides, and chest. There was so much blood coating him that Ryan couldn't see where it was all coming from.

He lifted the front of his own shirt and wiped at Tyler's face, removing the blood the best that he could. He had one gash above his temple that bled quite freely, another across his eyebrow, one around his eye, and another over his cheekbone. Ryan sighed. "Can you hear me, Ty?" Ryan asked quietly.

Tyler blinked and turned his head slightly but didn't respond. His breath hitched in his chest, and he pitched forward. Ryan caught him, and Tyler groaned in his arms.

Ryan looked into his blue eyes, bright with pain, and affectionately smoothed blood-soaked blond hair away from Tyler's eyes and forehead.

"You didn't have enough problems? You had to go head-to-head with him?"

Tyler looked at him, his eyes pained but clear as he listened to Ryan's words.

"Don't do this to me, Ty. Don't make it worse for yourself than it already is," he pleaded in a desperate whisper.

Tyler's eyes closed, and his head fell back in agony. Ryan watched the muscles in Tyler's neck strain as he writhed against the pain that gripped him.

"God, Tyler, we have to get you out of here," he murmured just as a convulsion wracked its way through Tyler's misused body.

As the convulsion ended, Tyler slipped into unconsciousness. Ryan gathered his still-twitching body into his arms and held him.

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JACKSON and Stevens met them halfway across the floor as they were led back into the main room.

Jackson smiled. "Stevens is right, watching you bleed is great fun."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," Tyler shot back. "You might as well, because all too soon Stevens won't need you anymore, and he'll

bury your head in some northern California wilderness and feed the rest of you to the sharks.”

Jackson narrowed his eyes and punched Tyler so hard that his head snapped back with the sudden blow. Tyler slowly brought his head forward, coolly meeting Jackson’s glare. Blood dripped from his lip.

“I wouldn’t suggest doing that again,” Tyler said quietly, his voice low and dangerous.

Jackson’s eyebrow lifted at the threat, and he raised his hand again, but Stevens quickly grabbed his wrist.

“I suggest you heed his warning. He won’t hesitate to kill you, and it won’t take but an instant, I assure you.”

Jackson glowered as Stevens turned to Tyler.

“You’re not being very cooperative,” he told him. “When will you learn to just follow my rules?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Tyler mouthed off sarcastically. Ryan squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Someone must have forgotten to hand out the rule books, because I didn’t get my copy. Did you get yours, Ryan?”

Ryan shook his head, his fingers still pinching the bridge of his nose, his head bent and his eyes closed. A light grin quirked the corners of his mouth at Tyler’s insolence.

“We didn’t know we were supposed to be following a certain set of rules.”

Stevens backhanded Tyler, who fell into Ryan, who caught him and held him upright.

“You were always fun, Michaels. I’m glad to see your attitude hasn’t changed much. I guess you need a reminder of the rules that I set for you the last time.”

“Didn’t follow them then, what makes you think I’ll follow them now?”

Stevens shook his head and motioned to his men, who came and took Tyler from Ryan and wrapped a chain around his wrists again. Ryan was shoved into a chair, and his arms and legs were duct-taped to it. He watched in dread as Tyler’s body was once again suspended in the air. This time, he hung there limply, as Tyler had no strength left to struggle.

“Lieutenant Michaels.” Stevens sounded irritated, losing some of the calm, in-control persona he’d had. “Mr. Jackson is worried about our plan, and since your commander says that your police friends have followed our trail to the last harbor, I guess we need to speed things up. I’m going to let you hang there for a while so you can think hard about what it is that I want. I know you know why I’m here. You have a half hour to tell me what it is that I want to hear, or I’m going to change my plans. You can watch your boyfriend suffer as much as you have.”

Tyler’s eyes burned.

“But before I leave, Mr. Jackson doesn’t believe how painful Symaline is.”

Tyler raised his eyebrows but didn’t respond.

Stevens smiled malevolently. “So, I thought we’d show him.” Stevens jerked his head slightly, and two men grabbed Jackson.

Jackson’s eyes widened in abject fear as he stared at Stevens in shock. “What the hell are you doing?” he demanded as he was forced to his knees.

“Well, you see,” Stevens told him, crossing to stand in front of him, “you should have listened to Michaels. You cross me, and you pay the penalty. He should know. He’s crossed me twice now, and this is the second time he’s paying for it. You should have heeded his warning. But instead, you keep doubting my plans, judging my decisions, arguing with things that you don’t understand. So, in order to prove myself to you—and to prove how powerful this drug is—I thought I’d let you sample it. To be fair, since you’re not trained to withstand torture the way that Michaels is, I’ll only give you a tiny amount. Just a tiny taste of what Michaels feels when we inject him with this drug. Maybe then you’ll have a bit more respect for me, for this situation, and for him. Because if you don’t get it through your thick skull that he can snap you like a twig, then you’re going to foul up all of our plans that we worked so hard for. From the very beginning of this, you’ve underestimated him, and it has cost us quite a bit of time. Don’t forget, Jackson, you wouldn’t be able to seek your revenge against him had it not been for me. Now, if you continue to doubt me, to criticize me, I guarantee you, I will cut you to pieces and bury you in the desert. Are we clear?”

Jackson nodded fearfully, his eyes wide and terrified.

“Good, because this is your last warning.” He looked around the room. “This goes for all of you.”

Stevens produced a syringe with a very small amount of the fluid from his pocket. “I’d tell you this won’t hurt a bit, but I’d be lying.” He shoved the needle into the other man’s neck.

Within seconds, Jackson was groaning, moaning, and twisting on the ground in pure agony. Seconds later, the screaming began, growing louder and more agonized as the seconds passed. Every single person in that room was silent, watching Jackson scream and writhe on the ground. Tears streamed down his face, and his screaming only grew louder, more intense.

In shock, Ryan tore his eyes away from Jackson and looked at Tyler, who watched Jackson writhe on the ground impassively. Feeling his gaze, Tyler looked up and met Ryan’s wide-eyed look. He shrugged slightly at the questioning look he was receiving and then looked back at Jackson as Jackson began to beg Stevens, anyone, to end his life.

Ryan returned his gaze to Jackson, completely stunned at the amount of pain Tyler must have gone through and amazed at his reaction. More and more, the picture of Tyler’s past became clear as he continued to witness the events unraveling before his eyes.

Stevens turned back to Tyler. “I’m sure you’ll be more cooperative when I get back,” he told him quietly before he strode from the room in the superior gait he seemed to have about him. He motioned for the others to follow and to bring Jackson with them.

Ryan watched them go and then looked back at Tyler.

Tyler hung limply from the chains, his chin against his chest. Ryan wasn’t sure he was even conscious, not until he lifted his head and soft, pain-filled blue eyes met concerned brown ones.

“You okay?” Ryan asked, worry eating away at his stomach, fear making him feel heavy.

“Oh, dandy.” He looked around the room, and then he looked up the chains, studying them. Ryan followed his eyes and watched as Tyler gripped one chain and slowly hauled himself up it.

Ryan watched Tyler’s muscles tighten beneath the blood streaming down his arms as he climbed up the chain. When he was high enough, his bloodied and bare feet gripped the chain to help him along. Ryan cocked his head to watch Tyler climb hand over hand,

wondering what in the world he was up to, at the same time marveling at the strength his lover possessed. When most people would be curled in the fetal position, bawling from the pain penetrating through their battered body, Tyler was hauling himself up a chain for reasons known only to him.

Ryan's heart flip-flopped in his chest when the reasons became clear. The chains hung on a large S hook.

"Tyler, don't," Ryan called up to him, his voice ringing with panic.

Tyler had the courtesy to look at him before ignoring his plea as he slowly lifted the chains.

Ryan groaned, his heart thudding so quickly, he could hear it pounding in his ears. When the chains went, Tyler would fall fifteen feet to the unyielding cement floor below.

"Tyler, when we get out of this, you and I are going to have a long talk about listening," he hissed up at his lover.

Tyler looked at him again before he grabbed the hook in one hand, putting all of his weight on it so that he could slide the chains over the end of the hook.

Suddenly, the chains were sliding out from beneath him. Tyler felt himself falling, and then the ground as he slammed into it.

Pain and stars exploded around him in blazing agony, the air rushed from his lungs, and he was unable to breathe.

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TYLER didn't move.

"Tyler?" Ryan whispered loudly. "Tyler!" he tried again, louder.

Tyler flinched and slowly pushed himself onto his hands and knees, where he struggled to force air back into his lungs.

Ryan watched as Tyler began to panic in his stunned state.

"Slow down, Tyler. You got the wind knocked out of you. Just give it a minute, you'll be okay," he tried to reassure him.

Slowly, oxygen seeped back into Tyler's lungs, and he was able to pull several short breaths and then a deep, refreshing one. His body calmed, and he pushed himself into a sitting position and removed the chains from his wrists.

He slowly got to his feet, moved over to Ryan, and quickly set him free. Ryan stood and looked at Tyler critically.

"I can't believe you did that."

"It worked, didn't it?"

Ryan just glared at him.

Tyler smirked.

Ryan shook his head. "I cannot believe what I just saw with Jackson. How the hell do you do that?"

"Do what?" Tyler asked, looking around the room.

"Not scream like your body is being ripped to shreds."

Tyler shrugged and then hissed as a wave of pain swept through him. His left hand went to his right shoulder.

Ryan looked at him in concern. "What's wrong?"

"I can't move my arm."

"Now that surprises me." Ryan held Tyler's arm with one hand while he probed the muscle and bone expertly with the other. "So, you going to answer my question?" he asked as he felt Tyler's shoulder.

Tyler sighed. "Like Stevens said, I'm trained to withstand torture," he told him quietly.

"They train you to do that?"

Tyler nodded.

Ryan sighed; more answers would have to wait.

"This is dislocated, Ty," he finally told him. "This isn't going to feel too good," he warned him as he pushed Tyler up against the wall to support him. Then he manipulated his arm and set his shoulder back in its socket where it belonged.

Tyler moaned loudly, and Ryan held him upright while he caught his breath. Finally, he straightened himself and looked appreciatively at Ryan.

"Thanks."

"Any time. Now, *do* you have a plan?"

Tyler's eyes sparkled. Of course he had a plan. Tyler always had a plan.

Ryan watched Tyler still and then cock his head as if he were listening to something.

"I was hoping Tommy would be here by now," Tyler commented, looking around the large room again.

"How would he find us?" Ryan narrowed his eyes, not quite sure he wanted Tyler to answer that.

Tyler looked at him. "I swallowed a transmitter."

"You didn't."

"What else was I gonna do with it?"

"You'd better hope it passes okay."

Tyler feigned a horrified expression. "I guess we'll worry about that later."

Ryan shook his head. "So, what's taking them so long?"

Tyler shrugged and immediately groaned with the pain it brought. He rubbed his sore shoulder as he answered. "I'm assuming I'm being blocked somehow. Or they couldn't track it as well as I'd hoped. I really have no idea," Tyler answered as he moved toward the door.

"Or your stomach acid is digesting it," Ryan offered, following Tyler.

Tyler stopped and looked at him carefully. "I never thought about that."

"Obviously. Do me a favor, Ty."

"What's that?"

"Next time you decide to swallow something that's not made to be swallowed, ask me first, okay?"

Tyler grinned. "Sure thing. But in my defense, you weren't there."

Ryan shook his head with a smile. "What am I gonna do with you?"

Tyler just smiled and continued across the room toward the door. Ryan followed, his eyes roaming over Tyler's body.

Tyler crept silently and carefully, mindless of the bruises and gashes covering him. Blood dripped down his face and neck. His bare

chest was slick with blood, and bruises and welts marred him. The green khakis covered his lower body, but his feet were bruised and bloody as well.

Tyler paused at the door. "Ready?" he asked, hand on the doorknob.

"No."

Tyler smiled, pushed the door open slightly, and checked to see if it was clear before stepping into the hall. Ryan followed close behind.

Tyler stopped when he came to a room occupied by three men.

"Stay here," Tyler whispered.

"Tyler, they'll shoot you," Ryan whispered back.

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing. Watch."

Ryan *could* only watch as Tyler burst into the room, slammed two heads together, and slammed his own into a third before any of them could react.

Tyler pulled their handcuffs out, cuffed them to a beam, and then took their guns. He checked each clip, snapped the safeties off, and handed a gun to Ryan.

The room that followed had several men in it, and Tyler took them out just as swiftly as he had the others. Ryan watched his lover in complete awe.

Suddenly, Tyler spun around, his gun drawn. Ryan turned more slowly, wondering what Tyler had heard or sensed. He was surprised to see Jackson and Nickels step into the room, followed by Stevens, all of whom were equally shocked at seeing Ryan and Tyler before them and the men unconscious at Tyler's feet.

"I guess I underestimated you after all, Michaels," Stevens said as he motioned to Nickels, who pulled out his gun and aimed it at Ryan.

Tyler's expression was murderous, but he nodded to Ryan, who put his gun down. Tyler's followed. But as soon as it hit, Tyler pulled a second gun and shot Nickels in the wrist. The soon-to-be-ex-commander's gun dropped to the floor as he screamed in agony.

"You just shot your boss," Ryan pointed out, amusement lacing his voice.

"Oops," Tyler responded with a shrug.

By this time, Stevens had stepped up beside Ryan, and he snaked an arm around his neck.

Left with little choice, Tyler raised his hands and let Jackson, who looked shaken, pale, and ill, come forward and take the gun from him. At the very last second, he surged forward, knocked Ryan from Stevens's grip, and tackled both Jackson and Stevens.

Ryan scrambled to his feet and punched Nickels, who was reaching for Tyler. Nickels dropped to the floor. Ryan turned to help Tyler but was surprised to find a gun at his back.

"Uh, Tyler," he said surprised to find a new guy standing just behind him. The man motioned for him to move away from the trio. Tyler looked up at the tone in Ryan's voice and groaned, rolling off of the two men.

Then they were dragged down the hall.

Tyler looked at Stevens innocently when he saw the chains on the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I piss you off again?" His answer was the back of Stevens's hand cracking across his cheekbone. "I'm taking that as a yes," Tyler muttered as his fingers dabbed the sore spot.

With a murderous expression, Stevens ordered someone to get the chains back up, and soon, Tyler hung from them once again.

Stevens looked up the chains, following them to the ceiling. "I must say, Michaels, you never cease to amaze me. You always were clever. I must admit I was pretty jealous when I heard they declared you a war hero for your little act of bravery. I do want to know, though, Michaels. How *did* you pull off a stunt like that?"

Tyler looked at him with no sign of interest while Ryan eyed Tyler, once again lost along the road the conversation was traveling.

"Is this what you're really here for, Stevens? To ask how I got a commendation, and you got the United States' boot up your ass?"

Stevens growled as he punched Tyler in the chest. Hard. The air rushed from Tyler's lungs with the impact. "No, Michaels. You know exactly what it is I'm here for, so spill it." He waited, but Tyler remained silent. "Fine, if you want to play." He produced another syringe.

“Son of a bitch,” Ryan growled. “You’re gonna kill him if you give him anymore of that crap!” He struggled with the two men flanking him. Tyler looked over, trying to calm him.

Ryan met his eyes, and Tyler saw his fear.

Stevens glanced at Ryan. “Then make him tell me what it is I want to know.”

Ryan was torn as he looked between Tyler and Stevens. He knew beyond a doubt that Tyler would never tell him whatever it was he wanted to hear, but it didn’t mean he wouldn’t try to save Tyler’s life. “Tell him, Tyler,” he pleaded. “Please?”

Tyler shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry, Ryan,” he told him quietly.

Their eyes met and held, and Ryan could see the true depth of his apology. Ryan closed his eyes; the full awareness of Tyler’s dedication to his uniform washed over him. Tyler would rather die than betray his country.

When he opened his eyes again, Tyler was still watching him, concern in the blue depths. He never flinched as the syringe was pushed into his neck and the contents emptied into a vein.

Tyler’s eyes glazed over as he worked to block out the pain, as he’d once been trained to do.

“Oh no, you don’t get to disappear,” Stevens said as he spun his body completely around. His foot came up, and he caught Tyler hard across the cheek. Tyler’s head flung back. “You’re going to stay right here and feel the pain. Now tell me, what do I want to know?”

“I don’t know, how to properly baste a turkey?” Tyler provoked as he spit out blood.

Stevens punched him in the kidney.

“You mean that wasn’t it?” Tyler gasped. “Maybe you want to know why it is that you look like your mother’s dog.”

Stevens suddenly picked up a lead pipe and slammed it against Tyler’s back. The wind rushed from him as he bit back a scream.

“Damn, I could have sworn that was it.” Tyler’s voice was slurred and sluggish.

Ryan cringed as he watched Tyler twist violently in the chains as Stevens swung again, connecting with Tyler’s chest.

“You wanna play, Michaels? I’ll play.” He slammed Tyler across the back again.

Tyler’s eyes glazed over.

“I’m warning you, Michaels!” Stevens snapped. “I want that information!” He hit Tyler across the back once more. Tyler twisted once, and then his eyes rolled up.

“Snap out of it, Michaels!” Stevens ordered, slapping Tyler across the face. “Michaels!” he demanded as Tyler sluggishly brought his head around.

The voice sounded distant, as though in a tunnel, and then a bright light shone into his eyes. Tyler closed his eyes tightly, but the light still penetrated. His muddled brain heard the voices, but he could no longer comprehend what was being said. His head rolled lifelessly to his chest.

“Michaels? Michaels! Tell me what it is I want to know! I’m growing impatient.” Stevens grabbed a handful of Tyler’s hair and yanked his head back while one of his men shone a high-intensity light directly in Tyler’s face. “Open your eyes and look at me!” he commanded. “Michaels!” He shook him violently. Tyler’s eyes opened blearily, but then they rolled up once more.

Ryan struggled against the men flanking him, desperate to get to his lover’s side, knowing Tyler had been given too much of the drug. He kicked one man in the leg, and reflexively, the man relaxed his grip. Swinging his arm, he yanked it free and nailed the other man in the side of the face. He rushed forward but was tackled from behind and forced to the ground. Ryan lifted his head in time to watch Tyler’s eyes open slightly, but they weren’t focused.

Enraged, Stevens slapped Tyler across the face, and then he grabbed a handful of Tyler’s hair once more. His fist came back, and he punched Tyler hard across the jaw. Another fist landed in his stomach, followed by a second, then a third, and then another crossed Tyler’s cheekbone. Ryan struggled to get to his lover.

No one was prepared when the main door of the building was suddenly kicked in and police in full riot gear swarmed the building.

Tommy stopped in his tracks when he saw Lieutenant Stevens beating his best friend while he hung from the ceiling limply, his bare feet just brushing the floor. Against Tyler’s bare and bloody chest, the dog tags gleamed, and the only article of clothes on his body were

Navy-issue khakis. His heart thudded in his chest, and his mind unwillingly flashed back.

“Tyler,” he whispered.

Ryan heaved a sigh of relief as the men were roughly pulled from him. He jumped to his feet and rushed to Tyler’s side. Tommy met him there. Ryan’s fingers immediately went to Tyler’s neck, and Tommy met his eyes.

“What did they do?” he asked, his voice hard and dead.

“They OD’ed him on Symaline.”

“Oh shit,” Tommy whispered, and the fear flared full force. He put his hands on either side of Tyler’s chest and caught him as another officer lowered him gently to the ground.

Seeing Jack handcuff Stevens inches from where they stood, Tommy carefully handed Tyler to Ryan and then turned toward Stevens.

“You sorry son of a bitch.” Tommy’s fist connected with the side of Stevens’s face, and then he lunged for him, only to be caught by his captain and detained.

From the corner of his eye, Ryan caught the exchange while he gently lowered his unconscious lover to the cold, hard floor. Around him, officers were requesting paramedics. Shouts of “officer down” echoed in his ears.

“Funny, that’s what Michaels had to say when he saw me too,” Stevens was saying.

“You know him, Detective?” Jack asked, eyeing half of his best team.

“Lieutenant Anthony Stevens. This man is wanted by the United States Navy.”

“For?” Jack asked.

“Treason, murder, and conspiracy to commit murder, just to name a few.”

“And what does this have to do with Michaels?”

Tommy met his eyes. “That would be the conspiracy to commit murder part, sir.” He sighed, running shaking fingers through his hair. “It’s a long story, Captain.”

“I’m sure we’ll find the time.”

Tommy just nodded and went back to Ryan, who was instructing the paramedics and carefully rolling Tyler onto a gurney for transport. He was handed a stethoscope, which he put in his ears. Then he leaned over Tyler to listen to his heart, worried about the complications from the Symaline.

“He needs cardiac monitoring, and push up the oxygen to twelve liters a minute. Did you get a line in yet?” Ryan looked at the paramedic trying to access a vein in Tyler’s arm.

“In,” the EMT responded just as he pulled the tubing back and hurriedly hooked it to an IV tube he was being handed.

“D5W IV push,” Ryan instructed. “Keep it open. Push point four milligrams Narcan, wait three minutes, push one milligram. Get a second line started.” He checked Tyler’s vitals again. “We’re gonna need a medevac,” he told them as he shook his head at the vitals. The paramedics quickly radioed for a helicopter.

Tommy’s stomach flopped in fear. He met Ryan’s eyes for a brief moment, and behind the calm, professional exterior, Tommy saw the battle he was fighting with his own fear.

Tyler let out a low groan as consciousness slowly returned. Tommy squeezed Tyler’s hand within his own.

“You’re timing’s impeccable as always,” Tyler nearly whispered after he had fumbled to push the oxygen mask away from his face and focused on his partner.

Tommy grinned. “Yeah, well, they had a two-for-one donut sale downtown.”

“Aw, man, and I missed it?”

Ryan and Tommy laughed.

“Tell you what, baby.” Ryan leaned close to Tyler. “You hurry up and get better, and I’ll buy you a dozen of your favorite donuts.” Tyler smiled just before he slipped back into unconsciousness.

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AS THEY rushed into the ER, the cardiac monitors began to blare as Tyler’s heart raced dangerously, teetering on the verge of a massive

heart attack. His breathing became more labored, and his EKG was frightening.

Ryan ran his hand over his face. "Bring me a phone," he asked the closest nurse.

The phone was answered on the second ring.

"Dad?" Ryan asked, fear in his voice.

"Ryan, what's the matter?" Andrew Douglas asked, sensing something terribly wrong with his middle child.

"It's Tyler," he told him quietly. "We're faxing his EKG. Could you look at it?"

"What happened?" Andrew asked, panic rising in his voice as he raced toward the fax machine in his office. Ryan's father was a top thoracic surgeon in San Francisco and the top of his field in the nation. There wasn't anyone better.

"He was injected with several doses of Symaline over the course of only a couple hours, and electrocuted. His pulse is one-ninety-eight, his BP's one-ninety over one-fifty-five, and his pulse ox is sixty-five. He's on twelve liters of O2 a minute. I've pushed Narcan, D5W, and maxed him on lidocaine."

Andrew pulled the fax off of the machine, glanced over it, and ran his hand over his face. "Push another milligram of Narcan, open his fluids up, and watch those P waves and line segment changes. He's in V-tach and on the verge of VF. You need to get his pulse slowed down, and fast. He's sustained, but he's hemodynamically stable for the time being. IV push five milligrams Bretylium over the next eight minutes, but watch his BP. If you can't terminate V-tach, if you lose his P waves, or if he becomes unstable, you're going to have to convert with cardioversion, and you're going to be down to seconds."

Ryan repeated the instructions, the phone to his ear, and they watched the readouts for a change.

It seemed like forever before Tyler's pulse began to slow down, and Ryan felt himself able to fully catch a breath for the first time in the last forty minutes. He asked a nurse to fax another EKG as he spoke to his father over the phone.

Andrew pulled the next fax from the machine, his wife now standing over his shoulder, clinging to his arm as she watched her husband in terror.

Andrew let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "IV infuse the Bretylum at one milligram a minute. He's still on the high side, although there is a significant change," he told his son. "But I'm a bit worried about his left ventricular function."

"Is he in heart failure?" Ryan asked, his panic suddenly renewed. His eyes strayed to the readouts.

"As of this moment, yes, but let's get an echo and see what's going on before we panic. It could just be a side effect of the Symaline, the electrocution, or his V-tach. He could very well improve as he comes around. It's not necessarily permanent. Your mom called Max Merrill," he told Ryan, referring to their friend, who was a pilot. "He's waiting for us at the airport. She also talked to Jack. He'll pick us up at LAX. I'll do an echo when I get there."

"Thanks, Dad," Ryan said, relief in his voice.

"Anytime, son. I'll see you soon. I love you."

"Love you too dad," Ryan told him.

ANDREW breezed into the hospital, his wife at his side. They were immediately taken to Tyler's side in the CICU. Ryan was sitting next to him, holding his hand and stroking his hair, his eyes downcast and worried.

He looked up at his parents as they came into the room and were immediately at his side. Katie Douglas gasped at the sight of Tyler. He was bruised and pale. Steri-Strips, stitches, and gauze covered the cuts on his face, and he was hooked to many IVs and machines. Andrew shook his head in shock, his hands on his son's shoulders.

"What happened, son?" he asked quietly.

"He gave himself up to that lunatic to save me," Ryan whispered. "They tortured him."

Katie cried silently on the other side of the bed, holding Tyler's hand while she watched his chest rise and fall as the ventilator helped him breathe. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Since the very beginning, Ryan's parents had taken Tyler in and loved him as one of their own. They both hoped to fill the void in Tyler's life: his parents, one who abandoned him and the other who abused him so cruelly.

Andrew squeezed his son's shoulders.

"Were you there?"

Ryan nodded.

Andrew sighed deeply. His chest ached at the thought of what both men had gone through. His eyes skimmed the readouts beside him, and he moved over to the EKG and ripped off the newest report.

"This EKG looks better."

"He's still showing spikes, and his left ventricular function is still lagging."

Andrew nodded. "But it's an improvement. He keeps improving like this, and he'll walk out of here in a couple days with little to no side-effects, and it'll be all you can do to slow him down."

Ryan smiled, pulling Tyler's hand, encompassed in both of his, to his lips. He put his elbows on the bed and leaned his head against their hands.

"Has he been conscious?"

Ryan shook his head. "Not since they found us."

"Well, that might not be a bad thing. He needs to heal, and he can't do it properly if he's in pain. It'll just spike his heart rate back up, which at this point could throw him right back into V-tach. Did he go into respiratory arrest?"

Ryan shook his head. "No, but he was having trouble breathing, so we're assisting him. We're already weaning him down."

Andrew squeezed the back of his son's neck and leaned down closer to him. "He's going to be okay, Ryan. He's tough, and he's always been a fighter."

"I know, Dad," Ryan told him quietly.

"Let's get that echo, and I'll see what's going on. Katie, why don't you go get Ryan some coffee? He looks like he could use it."

Katie nodded, kissed Tyler, then her Ryan, and headed off to find some coffee. When she had gone, Andrew turned on the ultrasound for the echocardiogram and turned to Ryan.

"Okay, son, tell me what happened," he told him quietly.

Ryan sighed deeply and ran shaky fingers through his hair while his father exposed Tyler's chest and gasped. He glanced at his son, who

had tears in the corners of his eyes, and pulled him tightly to his chest. He held Ryan while he cried.

66

FORTY-EIGHT hours later, Ryan sat beside Tyler's bed in the hospital, now in a regular room, holding his hand. Relief etched his face as he watched Tyler sleep. He smiled fondly as he gently pushed a lock of clean blond hair away from Tyler's eye.

Tyler was going to be fine.

His cardiac function had improved greatly, his sinus rhythm had evened out, and his echo showed no permanent damage. Within thirty-six hours of the onset of heart failure, his left ventricular function had begun to show improvement. He was out of danger. His heart was recovering. Ryan's dad had been right. It was, thankfully, not permanent. It had just been a side effect of the overdose.

Beyond the initial problems with his heart, he was bruised, cut, had two fractured ribs, and his shoulder needed to be re-set again, and Ryan knew he would have nothing but problems trying to keep Tyler's arm in a sling. He sighed just thinking about it.

He had also sustained quite a severe kidney injury from all the blows he had taken to the back and side. They were hoping that once the bruising and swelling went down, and with patience and rest, the kidney function would improve over time.

Ryan's mom and dad had flown back to San Francisco that morning. Tyler had been extremely surprised to see them. He had insisted that he was fine and had convinced them that they should return home, since Katie had a big trial that afternoon.

They had wanted to stay, but Katie also knew how difficult it would be to reschedule the trial. They had promised to return over the weekend to check on them.

Ryan felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned his head to see Dalton pull up a chair beside him.

"You doing okay?" he asked, watching him in concern.

Ryan nodded. "Now I am," he told him quietly.

“You had me pretty worried. Not to mention him. He was going nuts,” Dalton told him fondly.

Ryan looked over at Dalton. “You saw Tyler after they grabbed me?”

Dalton nodded, his eyes scanning the readouts on the machines attached to Tyler’s body. Then he looked back to Ryan. “He came to the hospital looking for you. He found Cole unconscious in your bathroom. We sent him home a few hours later with a headache,” Dalton reassured him at Ryan’s questioning look. “He was more pissed off than anything. He was on the team that rescued you. So I know he’s okay. Tyler stormed out of here shortly after finding him, but I caught him before he could escape. He was upset because, despite his best efforts, he hadn’t been able to keep you safe. He was terrified of what would happen to you if they forced you to watch them kill him. Made me promise to take care of you. Of course I made him promise that he’d fight. I’m glad to see he did.”

Ryan nodded, his eyes distressed. “I’ve never seen anything like it. He barely flinched when they were torturing him. Never cried out, never begged them to stop. Instead, the twerp egged them on. You should have heard some of the remarks that came out of his mouth.” Ryan smiled. “He was either incredibly brave or incredibly stupid, and either way, I’ve never been so proud of him.”

A DAY and a half later, Tommy sat on the bed next to his best friend. “I’m going to pick up Sara tomorrow. She’s going crazy at her mom’s. Says she needs to see for herself that you’re okay. We’ll be by afterward so I can hear this story.”

Tyler rolled his eyes.

“Hey, you’re the one who managed to make the mortal enemies, buddy, not me.”

Jack laughed. “He’s got a point there, Michaels. I’ll come by tomorrow as well. Can’t wait to hear what you did this time.” He chuckled. “I’ll be at the station if you need anything. I’m sure the boys and girls will want to be updated. They were here for nearly fifteen hours straight until I ordered them to leave.”

Tyler smiled, and Tommy squeezed his hand.

After they had gone, Dalton and Ryan helped Tyler get dressed and then escorted him to Dalton's car.

Tyler rested his head against the seat on the drive home. "So how'd he grab you, anyway?" Tyler asked, his eyes closed.

"He was waiting in my office. Cole tried to stop him, but another guy came up behind us and knocked him on the head."

"I'm sorry I got you involved."

Ryan looked over at him. "Don't be. I'm not."

Tyler sighed and opened his eyes. "But you had to watch. You—"

"Tyler, stop," Ryan interrupted gently. "If you had to go through it, I'm glad you weren't alone."

Tyler just looked at him, but finally he nodded and closed his eyes again. Dalton and Ryan exchanged a look in the rearview mirror.

When the car slowed and Dalton shut off the engine, Tyler opened his eyes and grinned.

Ryan watched his face and smiled. Sometimes, all of Tyler's boyish features came out at once, especially when his face lit up just as it had then.

"Told you I'd get you donuts. I'll be right back."

"Besides," Ryan continued when he climbed back in. "You're gonna need your energy to explain who this Lieutenant Stevens is, why he wants you so badly, and what the hell you've gotten yourself into this time." Ryan smiled and then added as an afterthought, "Oh yeah, and why I never knew you were a war hero."

Tyler groaned and rolled his eyes as Dalton's mouth dropped open.

"War hero?" he asked.

Tyler just shook his head. "Figured you'd have an underlying motive."

67

THEY were halfway home when Tyler's eyes shot open and he stared at Ryan in horror. "Nickels," he gasped.

Ryan squinted his eyes in question and turned to look at Tyler. "What about him?"

"What happened to him?" Tyler's whole body was shaking.

Ryan frowned. "He escaped from the warehouse. Don't you remember Jack telling you?"

Tyler shook his head, his eyes wide. "He's still out there?"

Ryan nodded slowly. "They have an APB out on him, but so far, there hasn't been any sign of him."

"Where's your phone?" Tyler's voice was panicked.

Ryan unsnapped his phone from his hip and handed it to Tyler. "You okay, Ty?"

Tyler shook his head as he dialed the station and got Jack on the phone. "Where are Jackson and Stevens?" he asked as soon as Jack answered.

"What?" Jack asked, confused. "In holding. What's the matter, Michaels?"

"Make sure they're still there!" From the sound of his voice, Tyler was edging on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

"Tyler, calm down, they can't get out."

"Call down there," he pleaded. "Please," he added softly. Ryan was watching him worriedly, and Dalton was glancing at him in the rearview mirror.

Jack sighed deeply. "Okay, Tyler, hang on," he told him quietly.

Tyler fidgeted as he waited, barely able to stand the suspense. He had a terrible feeling that something was very wrong. A few seconds later, his fears were confirmed as he heard Jack sigh as he came back over the line. "They're gone, Tyler. I have no idea how, but they're not there."

Tyler's eyes met Ryan's, and then he closed them and shook his head. "I do. Nickels. Dammit! How the hell did this happen?"

"We don't know, Tyler," Jack replied softly. "We're calling in the guards that have been on duty right now, and I've got an APB out—"

"You know that isn't going to do any good. Dammit, Jack, they won't be found unless they want to be," Tyler interrupted him.

"Tyler—" Jack started to say, but Tyler interrupted him again.

“Just let me know if you find out anything. I’ll call Tommy.” He disconnected the call and dialed his best friend.

“They’re gone,” Tyler told him as soon as he answered, grinding the palm of his left hand into his eye. He’d already slid his right arm out of his sling.

“What? Who is? Jackson and Stevens?”

“Yeah.”

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, fear practically paralyzing him. “Where are you?”

“A few minutes from the house,” Tyler responded as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll meet you there,” Tommy promised him.

Tyler hung up and looked at Ryan, who was watching him in concern. Tyler was leaning against the door with the phone clenched in his hand and he was tapping it against his forehead in frustration.

Ryan reached over and pulled the phone away and took his hand into his own, squeezing gently.

“Ty?”

“How’d I let this happen?”

“You didn’t.”

Tyler let out an irritated breath. “I should have done something,” he said quietly.

“Like what? You were nearly dead on the scene, and you’ve been pretty much unconscious fighting for your life, ever since. What could you have done?”

Tyler rubbed at his face. “I’m just so tired of this game.”

“Me too, Ty. Me too,” Ryan agreed quietly.

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“SO WHAT does Stevens want, Tyler?” Tommy asked. “You can’t tell me that he risked everything coming back here because he’s still mad about his loss of money.”

Tyler sighed and sat down on the barstool at the kitchen counter. "What do you remember about the night we escaped as POWs?"

Tommy's face reflected pain as he remembered the night all too clearly. "Our guys came and broke me out of that cage. They said you were going after Stevens. I tried going after you, but they said you'd ordered them to get me out, and that's what they were going to do whether I liked it or not. And giving them that code so you'd know I couldn't leave them was rotten, by the way," he told his partner, a glare on his face.

Tyler just shrugged.

"Then you showed up with Stevens's journal, and you looked like hell." He paused. "Kinda like you do now." Tommy smiled mischievously.

"Gee, thanks."

"Well, you do." Tommy looked over at Ryan and Dalton. "Doesn't he?"

"More like death warmed over. But I've seen him worse," Ryan helped.

"This is true."

Tyler rolled his eyes as he slid the sling off of his arm and tossed it on the counter, stretching his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Ryan asked him.

"My shoulder's cramping up."

"Put it back on."

"Can't I just take it off for five minutes? My whole arm is going numb in that thing," Tyler complained.

Ryan sighed as he watched his lover. He knew this would be a problem. "You want it to get better?"

"Five minutes."

"Whatever, Tyler," he sighed, exasperated. Tommy and Dalton chuckled over the exchange.

"So he's pissed about the journal?" Tommy wanted to know.

"Well, yeah. Now he is." Tyler gave Tommy his best innocent expression. "He didn't know I had it until I told him."

“Only you could purposely piss off someone while they are torturing you.”

Tyler raised his eyebrows.

Ryan cut in. “You should have heard all the other comments he made.”

Tommy groaned. “I can only imagine. Tyler has a way of goading his attackers. I’m imagining his vocabulary was quite colorful, and you were thinking of strangling him yourself. Am I right?”

Ryan smiled and nodded, his eyes on Tyler. Tyler just shrugged.

Tommy looked at Tyler, confusion written clearly across his face. “So what does he want, then?”

Tyler sighed and was about to answer when there was a knock at the door. He pulled his gun and flicked the safety off with his thumb as he headed for the door. He looked at Tommy, who nodded from where he stood on the other side of the door, his gun ready. Dalton and Ryan stood behind him.

Tyler leaned forward to look out the peephole, but before any of them could react, the door came flying in. Tyler grabbed his forehead, stunned, as the door hit him square, and Stevens knocked Tyler to the ground. Tyler’s hand came up with his gun, but Stevens knocked it from his grip, pulled out a knife, and held it to Tyler’s throat.

“Put the gun down, Carmikael,” Stevens ordered Tommy, who held his gun at the back of Stevens’s head. Nickels, Jackson, and Pete Marrow had followed Stevens inside.

Tommy and Tyler’s eyes met. Tyler shrugged. “You know what I’d do.”

“And what would that be, Michaels?” Stevens snarled.

“I’d shoot you in the head,” Tyler responded evenly.

Stevens inclined his head slightly and moved his hand, which gripped Tyler by the collar, to the hem of his shirt. He pushed it up, exposing Tyler’s bruised abdomen. “Dr. Douglas, Dr. Parks, could you come here, please?” His eyes were dancing as he watched Tyler.

Ryan looked at Tommy, who nodded.

Stevens’s eyes gleamed as he kept them locked on Tyler. “Tell me, Dr. Douglas, what organ is this right here?” He pressed the tip of his knife into Tyler’s belly until he drew a fine line of blood. When he

didn't answer right away, Stevens growled and pushed the knife in a little deeper. "I'm waiting."

Ryan met Tyler's eyes. "His liver."

"Can he live without his liver?"

"No," Ryan answered softly.

Stevens smiled at Tyler. "You hear that? I keep cutting, and you die. It would be fun to see how long it would take for you to actually die though, wouldn't it?" Tyler didn't flinch as the knife dug deeper. "Do you want them to watch as you slowly bleed out without a damn thing they can do to stop it? What do you think, Dr. Parks? Would it be fun?"

"No."

"How long do you think he'd make it?"

Dalton swallowed, meeting Tyler's eyes. Tyler watched him calmly, and then Dalton shook his head. "Minutes. Maybe," he answered quietly.

Stevens glared at Tyler. "Are you going to behave?"

Tyler's eyes met Stevens's, daring him. "Shoot him, Tommy."

Stevens pressed the knife in further and dragged it sideways. Tommy's finger tightened on the trigger.

"I'm not kidding, Carmikael. I will cut him to pieces. Put the gun down."

"If you shoot him, he can't cut. Shoot him, Tommy."

"You shoot me, and they unload into the doctors. What's it going to be?"

Tommy's jaw twitched before he removed his gun and held it out to his side. Jackson took it from him.

Stevens got to his feet. "Get up, Michaels."

Tyler just glared, and Stevens kicked him in the side. "I said get up!"

Before he could kick him again, Ryan leaned down and helped him to his feet.

"You're really pissing me off, Michaels," Stevens snapped at him.

"There's something new," Tommy quipped.

“And you’re not far behind, Carmikael. So I’d suggest you shut the fuck up before I kill you alongside him.”

“Was that supposed to scare me, asshole?”

Stevens glared at him for a long moment before he turned back to Tyler. “Tell me!”

Tyler held his gaze. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I think you do.”

Before Tyler could move, Stevens had his arm around Ryan’s neck and the knife was centimeters from his cheekbone.

“You’re fucking dead if you don’t put the knife down, fuckhead,” Tyler growled as he took an angry step forward.

“Talk.”

“Not until you put the knife down.” Tyler’s eyes were locked with Stevens’s, and he showed no intentions of backing down.

Stevens lowered the knife. “So tell me.”

“Why now? Why after all these years?”

“Because, Michaels, you’re not the easiest man to get to. I’ve had to wait and plan. And plan I have. For years.” He glanced at Nickels, a sick smirk at his lips.

Nickels laughed, and Tyler looked over at him. His stomach suddenly gave out as he realized there was much more behind this than he’d ever realized. Tommy’s muttered “fuck” from beside him told him the same realization had just struck his partner.

“I set you up from the very beginning,” Nickels gloated. “Stevens and I grew up together. And we’ve remained friends, even after he was forced to stay out of the country. He talked a lot about you and the revenge he wanted to seek. So I got myself transferred to LA, and we started to fuck with your life. First, I made your life hell just by getting in your face every chance I got. Then I made sure you were never home, throwing every case I could your way, with the threat of ending your career if you didn’t comply. And then, I got sweet with Ra’shel. The more you were gone, the more she needed someone. She fell for me hook, line, and sinker. And what a sweet ride she was.”

Tyler ground his jaw, his fists clenched.

“Then I got her hooked on drugs. I’d hoped you’d notice, but I guess I had you so fucked up, you failed to see the downward spiral

your life, and your wife, were in. Then I got her pregnant, but the bitch went and aborted it before you could find out. So I beat the hell out of her. And I kept beating her, knowing that sooner or later, someone would report it, and you'd go down. When they busted you, I fixed it so they'd rush your trial. I convinced everyone that you were a threat, being a lethal weapon and all, and in order to protect Ra'shel, we needed to lock you up. Then I conveniently switched the paperwork and sent you to high-security." Nickels grinned viciously.

"Of course, I couldn't let you die in prison. I just wanted them to fuck you up. Daily. We paid quite well to make sure they didn't kill you. We wanted you to spend the full five years in that hellhole. But when it got too close, and you needed emergency surgery to save your life, we decided we needed to get you out. So I kicked the bitch's ass again."

Everyone in the room was still as they watched Nickels and Tyler. Tyler's eyes were dangerous.

"Then you shot and killed Jackson's brother, and I knew Jackson was hell-bent on revenge, so we brought him into it. We all knew that the best way to hurt you was to take out someone you loved. And what better way than to kill your wife and your child?"

Tyler lunged, but Stevens grabbed him and yanked him back. Stevens nodded for Nickels to continue.

"Of course, Ra'shel ran to me the night you stood her up. I knew then our opportunity had come. That the immense guilt you'd suffer would be enough to drive you over the edge. While I called up Jackson and Peters—who I knew were jonesing bad for Ra'shel—she dove into the drugs to calm down. I turned her into quite the junkie. I can't believe you didn't notice. Then we took turns at her. You should have seen the look on her face as we raped her over and over again. The entire time, we told her how it was your fault we were hurting her. That it was purely for revenge. And that when we were done, we'd kill her and your baby, just to fuck with your life."

Tyler's face was pale, and he looked as though he were going to be sick. Rage burned through him, and he shook in Stevens's grasp. His friends watched him anxiously.

"After she died, we paid Dr. Marnsteen a lot of money to make sure Dr. Brogman couldn't deliver the correct autopsy. He gave him some drug that induced a heart attack and delivered a fake so that her

true cause of death, and our part in it, couldn't be traced. And it was perfect, because it left you with no answers. For years," he ended with a smile.

The room was stunned into silence, each person's eyes on Tyler, waiting for his reaction.

"Sweet revenge, eh, Michaels?" Stevens asked, smiling. He released Tyler. "So, tell me, which one of us do you want to kill most at this moment? Me, who orchestrated the slaughtering of your entire team, or Jackson and Nickels, who raped your wife and killed her and your baby? Which, I guess, I orchestrated that too." His smile was malicious as he grinned at Tyler.

Tyler stood still. Their eyes locked for several seconds. And then he reacted. He slammed Stevens in the chest with both hands and knocked him back a step.

"Oh-ho, a rematch," Stevens gloated. "Let's see what you've got now that I've fucked you up." He aimed a punch at Tyler's head, which Tyler easily ducked. "Just remember our rules."

"Fuck you!" Tyler swore as he planted with his right foot and brought his left up and around, swinging it quickly and smashing his foot across Stevens's jaw. Stevens's head went back, and Tyler followed it up with a foot to the chest.

Angrily, Stevens grabbed Tyler's ankle and twisted, but Tyler twisted with it, spinning completely around, entirely airborne. He slammed his opposite foot hard across Stevens's cheek.

Stevens fell back, and Tyler landed swiftly on both feet just as Stevens swung again. As Tyler ducked, Stevens side-kicked Tyler in the gut. Tyler doubled in pain, the solid contact with bruises, cuts, and broken ribs excruciating.

Tommy attempted to join the fight, but Jackson's warning stopped him.

"You move, Carmikael, and I'll shoot the doctors. Just sit back and enjoy the show."

Tommy turned his head to him slightly. "You have no idea what you're dealing with, do you?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

“It means, asshole, that Tyler’s a world-class fighter. He can kill all of you without my help.” Tommy smirked slightly and turned his total focus back to Stevens and Tyler.

The fight was escalating between the two former Navy lieutenants, and despite Tyler’s extensive injuries and the pain that he must have been feeling, he was true to Tommy’s word and putting up an incredible fight.

He had Stevens’s back to the counter when, suddenly, Tyler’s hands came up and he reached for Stevens’s head. Stevens reacted quickly and threw his own hands up, blocking him, and he then pushed Tyler back sharply, following up with a kick to the chest. Tyler flew through the air, landing on his back on the dining room table. Stevens leapt on top of him.

“You fucking try to kill me again and I’ll have one of them shot, you get me, Michaels?” he snarled, his hands twisted in Tyler’s hair.

Tyler threw up both arms and broke Stevens’s grip. Then he grabbed Stevens’s collar and rolled with him. Stevens landed on the floor on his back, Tyler on top of him.

As he landed, Tyler delivered an uppercut to Stevens’s jaw just as Stevens’s knee came up and connected with Tyler’s groin. Tyler groaned and doubled over, and Stevens took the opportunity to throw Tyler off.

He hauled Tyler to a halfway standing position and delivered a spin-kick to the side of Tyler’s face. Tyler fell back, landing heavily on the hardwood floor.

Stevens dove at him, attempting to land on top, but Tyler rolled at the last second. As Stevens came down, Tyler threw his arm over, hitting Stevens in the back of the head.

Tyler was slower getting to his feet this time. His chest heaved with the exertion, and his eyes showed his pain as he swayed, waiting for Stevens to get back to his feet.

Stevens did, looking Tyler up and down. “How much more can you take?” Stevens asked him.

“More than you,” Tyler retorted as he threw another punch. Stevens was too slow to block it, and it landed squarely on Stevens’s nose, breaking it. Blood sprayed, and Stevens grabbed his face.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered, and then he choked on blood.

Tyler didn't stop. He swung again, connecting beside Stevens's right eye. Stevens fell back another step. Tyler grabbed him by his collar and brought his knee up hard in Stevens's gut, and then he punched him in the side of the head. Once, twice, and as he pulled back to swing again, he felt the barrel of a gun settle on the back of his head, and he heard the unmistakable sound of the hammer engaging.

"Hit your knees, now," Nickels ordered him. "Or I'll have Jackson shoot Carmikael just for something to do."

Tyler complied, dropping to his knees.

"Get your hands up on your head where I can see them, and then don't fucking move."

Tyler moved his hands up to the back of his head as he was instructed, but his eyes were on Stevens, who was wiping his face on his sleeve, glaring at Tyler.

Tyler's gaze was penetrating. "Thought you wanted to go head-to-head, you stupid fuck. But the going gets tough, and you have to have someone save your sorry ass? You always were a coward."

Stevens backhanded Tyler. "Shut up."

"You want me to shut up, fight me then, asshole."

Stevens hit Tyler again.

"You're such a chickenshit," Tyler pushed.

"Enough of the bullshit. I want my information. And I want it now. So you better start talking."

"Or what, you gonna kick my ass?" Tyler goaded him.

Stevens grabbed Tyler and hauled him to his feet. Tyler's hands dropped from his head, and Stevens slammed his back into the wall. "You don't talk, and I'll kill one of them. What's it gonna be?"

Tyler's eyes were hard. "Why now?"

Stevens didn't answer.

"There's no way you're working with their government again, so I don't get why."

"It doesn't fucking matter. Tell me what I want to know."

"Why? You're gonna kill us anyway, so why should you get anything out of it?" Tyler challenged him.

“Just you, Michaels. The rest of them can live. Even Carmikael. We’ll be on a plane before he can do anything anyhow.”

“There’s wishful thinking,” Tommy muttered.

“Do you *want* me to kill you?” Stevens asked, turning sharply.

“You think you can kill us both? ’Cause there’s only four of you, and Tyler already proved he can whip your ass, so these three won’t be anything.”

“If you seriously think you can take us all out before we kill anyone, you’re free to try.”

“I don’t think. I know,” Tommy told him. “And don’t worry. He will. I guarantee it.”

“Do you even know what I’m after?”

“No idea.”

Stevens nodded, his smile malicious. “I take it Michaels didn’t tell you he was a double agent then, did he?”

Tommy slid a look to Tyler.

“Son of a bitch,” Tyler muttered as he let out a deep and irritated sigh.

“What’s he talking about?”

Tyler shook his head.

“Oh, tell him, Michaels. Tell Carmikael why the general put a price on your head.”

“He already knows.”

Stevens inclined his head slightly and raised his eyebrows. “You told him you betrayed them, and that’s why they wanted to kill you?”

Tyler looked at Tommy. “It’s not what you think,” he told him quietly.

Stevens looked pleased. “You do know that I’m the one who sold the intel that busted your cover wide open, don’t you?”

Tyler lifted his eyebrows. “Now I do.”

Stevens smirked. “And then I pulled strings to get on your team when you missed your check-in. I told Admiral Burkhart that I’d heard a rumor that General Massau suspected you of being a double agent and that someone should go in to make sure it wasn’t one of your team who had sold you out. Of course he sent me.”

Tyler shook his head, closing his eyes.

“Now, where are my plans?”

Tyler shrugged. “I burned them.”

“You didn’t?”

“Okay, I didn’t.”

“What about the codes?”

“Those too.”

“I can’t believe you. How could you do that?” Stevens raved.

“It was easy. I poured gasoline on them and lit a match. Went up really—” Stevens’s fist connected with Tyler’s jaw with enough force that he hit the wall behind him and slid to the floor.

“You didn’t! I know you didn’t. You needed them to turn over to the U.S. government. You wouldn’t have burned them!”

Tyler coolly met his eyes from where he was sitting on the floor nursing his jaw. “Think what you want, but I still did.” His voice was void of emotion.

“So the government never saw them?”

“They never saw them, no.”

“Why wouldn’t you tell them? You wouldn’t keep that to yourself.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t tell them,” he shot back. “I just said they never saw them.” Tyler pushed himself to his feet and got in Stevens’s face. “But what I can’t understand is why?” He paused. “Why do you need those plans and codes? And what does it matter now that you’ll be shot if you step foot inside their border again?”

Stevens studied Tyler but didn’t answer his question. “So you memorized them?”

Tyler cocked his head again, ignoring the question. Realization dawned on him. “You want something that’s there. This wasn’t about revenge, it was about the map and the codes to whatever it is you need.”

Stevens snarled and backed Tyler into the wall. The knife came up, and he pressed it against Tyler’s neck. “I want those codes and plans, and I want them now.”

“You can want all you want, but I’m not talking.” Tyler felt the tip of the knife as it bit into his neck. He calmly met Stevens’s eyes.

“I will cut your head off if I have to. Slowly.”

“So do it,” Tyler shot back.

Stevens pressed Tyler into the wall, pulling the knife away from his neck, and drove it into Tyler’s left bicep. Tyler moaned.

“Jackson, put a gun to Carmikael’s head.”

“Gladly,” Jackson said with a smirk as he complied, engaging the hammer.

“Now you have until the count of three.”

The tension in the room was palpable. Ryan and Dalton looked between Tyler and Tommy, their hearts in their throats.

Tommy simply watched Tyler, his expression calm and unconcerned.

Tyler was staring at Stevens, his jaw set and his eyes hard. Ryan could see his brain working quickly as he considered his options.

“One.”

“Do you really think I’m going to comply, fucknut?”

“Two.” Stevens ground the knife deeper into Tyler’s arm and twisted it. Tyler looked as though he were going to be sick as he swallowed hard.

Stevens leaned into Tyler. “Your move, Michaels. What’s it going to be?”

Tyler looked at him, his eyes flashing. “I’m going to put a bullet in Jackson’s head if he doesn’t remove his gun before you finish ‘three’.”

Stevens laughed. “That’d I’d like to see. You don’t even have a gun,” he pointed out, shaking his head. “And although I know you can move fast, I doubt you can move *that* fast.” He paused. “But, okay.” He shrugged, unworried. “If you wanna play, I’ll play. Thr—”

And Tyler reacted.

In one move, he grabbed and twisted the hand that held the knife into his own arm, snapping his wrist, while at the same exact second, he twisted sideways and swung his elbow back and smashed it square

on Nickels's face, breaking his nose on impact. As Nickels went down, Tyler grabbed the gun from his hand.

As his arm came forward, he fired off a single shot, which nailed Jackson right between the eyes.

Anticipating the move, and at the exact same time Tyler reacted, Tommy grabbed Pete's gun arm and yanked it sideways across his own body, slamming his elbow back into Pete's face. Pete hit the ground, unmoving.

Dalton and Ryan blinked in surprise. It had taken less than five seconds for Tyler and Tommy to disable all four men. And they had moved in sync, as though they had known what the other was going to do and trusted that the other wouldn't fail. They looked between the two in shocked silence.

Tyler now had Stevens on his knees, gun pointed at his head. Stevens was holding his wrist, and they could see him contemplating his next move. But Tommy didn't give him the chance. He pushed Stevens face-first down onto the table, and, mindless of the rapidly swelling wrist, he handcuffed him. Stevens groaned in pain.

Then Tyler handcuffed Nickels and Pete.

Dalton and Ryan looked at each other, their eyebrows raised. Then they shook their heads, completely stunned.

Finally, Dalton pulled out his phone and called Jack, while Ryan walked over to where Tyler was standing, holding his arm. Blood seeped through his fingers.

Ryan gently pushed Tyler's hand away and pushed up his shirtsleeve so he could see the injury better. Blood pooled from the deep cut and ran freely down Tyler's arm.

Ryan looked at Tyler as he pressed a dishtowel to the wound. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

Tyler nodded with a sigh. They looked over at Dalton, who was kneeling over Jackson. Dalton shook his head. "And right-handed too," he exclaimed, clearly impressed.

"Tyler's an ace shot with either hand," Tommy told him. "He just prefers his left."

Ryan raised his eyebrows at Tyler, who simply shrugged.

“They can’t keep me, Michaels,” Stevens snarled, pulling their attention to him. “I know too many people, and when I do get out, be certain I’m coming after you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. But you seem to be forgetting there’s a firing squad with your name on it who can’t wait to get their turn at you.”

“Do I look worried to you, Lieutenant Michaels?”

“I’m not in the Navy anymore, Stevens,” Tyler said tiredly.

“That’s not what I heard.” This caused the others to look at Tyler in surprise.

Tyler wouldn’t meet anyone’s eyes as he frowned at Stevens. Stevens smiled knowingly. “They don’t know, do they, *Lieutenant*?”

Tyler ground his jaw, his eyes deep and penetrating, while Ryan, Dalton, and Tommy looked at him, then at each other, with identical looks of bewilderment.

Tyler sighed with relief when the police swarmed the house a few seconds later.

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RYAN, Dalton, Tommy, and Jack stood watching Tyler, waiting for an explanation after everyone had left.

“What?” Tyler asked, innocent mask in place. “Where’d you put the donuts?” He wandered over to the counter where the donuts were sitting in their box. Ryan cornered him as he removed a donut and dragged him over to the couch, where he pushed him down onto it. He pulled Tyler’s shirt off, and Tyler complained that he had to set his donut down.

Jack and Tommy gasped at the sight of the welts and bruises on Tyler’s chest and stomach. They had seen them at the warehouse, but somehow they looked worse now that all the blood had been cleaned off and the bruises had had a chance to show their colors.

Dalton sat on the other side of Tyler, and together they cleaned the blood from Tyler’s face, neck, arm, and stomach. The fight had

reopened all the Steri-Strips from his last round with Stevens, and a few new cuts now marred his skin.

Ryan sighed.

They stitched the deeper wounds and put gauze over them while Tommy and Bree watched over their shoulders. Tyler just closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the couch tiredly.

When they were finished checking him over, they all turned to him expectantly.

“You were a double agent?” Tommy asked, his eyes accusing.

Tyler sighed and rubbed at his head. “I couldn’t tell you, Tommy. You know that.”

“Just that mission? Or were there others?”

Tyler sighed. “There were others.”

“When did it start?”

“Two weeks before the ambush when I went MIA.”

“That was almost a year before,” Tommy said, astounded.

Tyler just nodded.

Tommy shook his head. “So what happened?”

Tyler rubbed his eyes. “I got double-crossed. Someone. Stevens,” he clarified with a shake of his head, now knowing exactly who it was that had set him up, “leaked the intel that I was a double agent. So I made a midnight dash from their compound.”

“The night you got shrapnel in your leg, escaping from the compound with their plans of attack?”

Tyler nodded. “About two seconds after I stepped foot in their compound that night, I realized someone found out that I was a spy. So I pulled their maps and all the info I could and busted ass out of there just as they realized I was going over the wall.”

“And thus the five million dollar bounty was born.”

Tyler nodded.

“Pretty nice setup. Throw you to the sharks, then collect the reward.”

Tyler rolled his eyes.

“Wait a minute.” Jack held up his hand. “Five million dollars? Someone put a five-million-dollar bounty on your head?” he asked in disbelief.

Tyler and Tommy both nodded. Dalton's and Jack's eyes were wide with shock.

"Damn, Michaels," Jack whistled. "You sure know how to make friends."

Tommy nodded his agreement.

"So, who is this Stevens?" Jack wanted to know.

It was Tommy who answered. "We had just finished a mission in a country that we can't name because our mission is still classified, and were headed back to base when brass called. They sent Tyler on a covert op. Alone. The rest of us were given very vague details of the mission, but it wasn't surprising, as it wasn't the first time brass had sent Tyler off by himself. And I guess now I know why," he added with a sigh. "Ty was the CO of our team, so he ordered us to dig in, said he'd be back in three hours."

Tommy glanced at his partner, who was rubbing the back of his neck.

"But Tyler missed his check-in. Brass called, and we didn't have confirmation from Ty yet either, so they said they were sending in Stevens. Ty made it back just before Stevens. He had a pretty serious injury. Shrapnel in his leg. And since we were still off-base, Stevens insisted we head back to have it treated. Stevens led the way. Everything went down bad." His voice dropped to a near-whisper, and he looked at Tyler.

Tyler rubbed his palms on his jeans and picked the story up quietly. "He led us right into enemy fire. They never had a chance. And all because he wanted that stupid bounty. He slaughtered twelve of our men because of me." Tyler's voice was thick with emotion. "It was a bloodbath."

Tommy leaned forward in his chair. "When it was all done, Tyler, Stevens, and I were all that was left standing. At first, we didn't think he had anything to do with it. But then he turned his gun on Tyler, and my blood ran cold. Tyler dove right into him, despite the gun aimed at his chest. The enemy pulled him off. I was going to let Tyler beat him to death. They took us to their village and strung Tyler up. The general wanted Tyler to suffer before they killed him, and they used me to keep him in line. We had two guys on the inside, which Tyler had placed quite some time earlier, and they tried to get us out, but Tyler had sent

them in for specific information and wouldn't let them leave without it, despite their protests."

Tommy looked at the others' incredulous expressions. "The war was about much more than just our lives. The information they finally acquired ended up saving an entire village. We don't go to war wanting to die, but we know it's a very strong possibility. Freedom doesn't come free. It comes with someone's ultimate sacrifice," he told them quietly.

"It was the middle of the night, days later, when they got the information and came and got me," Tommy continued. "Tyler wasn't anywhere in sight. They'd gotten to him a few minutes earlier, and he'd ordered them to break me out, and for me to follow his orders. To ensure that I would, he gave them a code only I could break for the rendezvous point. As much as I wanted to go back for him, I had to get them to safety. We escaped just after the moon had risen, and Tyler came along three hours later with Stevens's journal." He turned his head slightly to see Tyler's face. "So what else were you up to?"

Tyler stared intently at his thumbs. "I wanted Stevens. But he wasn't there." Tyler shifted slightly. "I found his journal, but when I picked it up, a bunch of charts and papers slid off the table. It looked like a counterattack: maps, codes.... I took them, memorized them, and then burned them. When we debriefed, I reported what I'd found and that I'd destroyed everything. I thought that would be the end of it. Now I want to know what the hell it is he wants so bad. And I can't help but wonder if that's what they were after all along? If that's what the attack on the village was all about to begin with, and not what we originally thought?"

Tommy's eyebrow quirked up thoughtfully.

"Michaels, is there any deranged person out there you *haven't* pissed off?" Jack teased.

Tyler looked up. "Can I get back to you on that?" His blue eyes sparkled playfully.

"You were the commanding officer of your SEAL team?" Dalton asked in confusion. Tyler and Tommy both nodded. "That means you outranked Tommy?" They nodded again. "How? Tommy's nearly five years older than you."

Tyler shrugged. "I joined the service a year before he did."

“That, and Tyler conned his way to lieutenant junior grade,” Tommy added with a mischievous smile.

“You did?” Ryan asked in surprise. Tyler rolled his eyes.

“Sounds like something he’d do to me,” Jack added.

“He did. He was only nineteen when he made ensign.”

“But I went to the Academy,” Tyler pointed out. “I graduated an ensign.”

“And made lieutenant junior the very same year,” Tommy argued. “The only promotion I won’t argue with was your promotion to lieutenant. You deserved that. And, you want to talk about con jobs, you graduated from the academy a year earlier than anyone *ever* has.”

“I had a government recommendation.”

“You conned your way to the top, Tyler.”

“Wait, you made ensign at nineteen?” Jack asked, the surprise showing in his voice. “How old were you when you enlisted?”

Tyler actually squirmed in his seat. “I was sixteen,” he finally relinquished.

Three jaws dropped. Even Ryan hadn’t known Tyler was only sixteen when he’d gone to the Academy.

“Hang on, you have to be seventeen to go to Annapolis,” Jack pointed out. “And it’s a four-year academy.”

“See?” Tommy pointed out. “He’s a con artist.”

“And where were you during this time?” Jack wanted to know, still trying to follow the conversation.

“At college. I joined the service a year after Tyler started the Academy.”

Ryan rubbed his neck, studying his lover. “What did Stevens mean when he said you couldn’t fight the Symaline, that you’d had trouble with it before?”

Ryan caught Tommy’s wince, and he turned to him, his eyebrows raised.

“When we were being held as POWs, they injected Tyler with Symaline to try and pry any information they could out of him. We’re trained as SEALs to block certain drugs, but Symaline is nasty, and Tyler was having a lot trouble blocking it. He reacted badly to it. They tossed him in with me while he was under the effects, and his heart was just going crazy. I didn’t think he was going to make it,” Tommy told

him. He glanced at Tyler. "I can't believe you had to go through that again," he said softly.

Tyler just looked at him quietly. Their eyes embodied their pain.

"You seriously can block certain drugs?" Dalton was asking, his eyes wide. "I'd heard of that, but I've never seen it."

"Mainly it's used for truth serum," Tyler told him. "But the technique is the same, and if you can pull it off, you can block other drugs as well."

The others were shaking their heads. Then Ryan rubbed his face. "What'd he mean you're not discharged? You said you were."

Tyler turned to him, his look debating, and finally, he shook his head. "No, actually, I never said that." He stopped and rubbed his eyes. "Tommy and I had a real hard time after our team was slaughtered. We pulled it off for a few more years, but finally, Tommy wanted to do something else. He gave me the option to stay in, but I'd follow Tommy to the ends of the earth, so we joined the academy." Tyler met Tommy's eyes. "But what I didn't tell you was that Admiral Burkhart asked me to stay on. He promised a lot of things, but your friendship meant more. But he finally made me a deal that I just couldn't turn down," he relented.

"And you never told me?" Tommy asked in disbelief.

"You would have been mad. We agreed we'd leave together. To start this life together. I reneged."

"What were the conditions?" Tommy wanted to know.

Tyler eyed him as he chewed on his lower lip, and then he sighed. "I look things over for them, run numbers, break codes. Every so often, I run training for the West Coast SEALs." He paused. "And I still take missions," he practically mumbled. Tommy frowned.

Tyler rubbed his hands along his jeans, his heart pounding and his stomach twisting as he watched Tommy work through the information. He knew he was starting to put the pieces together.

"So you're active?"

Tyler rubbed his neck. "It's complicated," he told him quietly. "But not like you're thinking."

"You've been keeping this from me?" Ryan asked, anger coating his words.

Tyler swallowed and looked at his hands. "I'm sorry, Ryan."

“Sorry?” Ryan asked in disbelief. “You’re still in the Navy. You led us all to believe that you were discharged. Instead of you telling us yourself, we have to find out from some nutcase that you’re still enlisted. And you’re *sorry*?” he asked incredulously.

Tyler was still looking at his hands. “I don’t know what else to say, Ryan,” he told him softly.

Ryan shook his head at his lover. The anger and hurt that Tyler keeping this from him caused was almost unbearable. His head spun with disbelief that Tyler could keep something this big from him for all these years. He couldn’t comprehend it.

Tommy was staring at his partner. “What part of the government were you a spy for?” he asked quietly.

Tyler looked over at him. Their eyes met.

“Fuck, Ty! You’re fucking CIA!”

The room stilled, and everyone’s eyes widened. But Tyler didn’t move to deny it. Instead, he sighed deeply, his head dropping. He ran both hands over his head and then rubbed at his eyes with the palms of his hands.

“What the fuck, Ty?” Tommy demanded, jumping to his feet.

Tyler glanced up at him.

“You going to say anything?”

“I’m not exactly sure what to say,” Tyler admitted quietly.

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“Honestly? I don’t know.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I cannot believe this, Tyler. Hearing that you’re still in the Navy was bad enough, but now this? What else are you hiding? For heaven’s sake Tyler, we’ve been friends for almost all your life, and you keep something this fucking big from me? What the fuck?”

Tyler was squeezing the bridge of his nose. He shook his head. “It was classif—”

“Don’t you dare give me that fucking ‘classified’ bullshit,” Tommy interrupted. “We’ve been through way too much shit, classified or not, for you to pull that one on me, so fucking try again.”

Tyler had his feet on the coffee table, his knees pulled up, and he was rubbing his temple with his left hand.

Tommy sighed, rubbing at his own head. "So that's where you're active," he said, more quietly. "You're an active CIA agent. Still. To this day."

Tyler nodded.

The others were staring at him, shock written across their features. Ryan could scarcely believe what he was hearing.

"How?" Tommy asked, already knowing the answer as the picture became clearer. Things started to make sense and fall into place.

Tyler sighed. "Most of the time, they tie it to the PD so everyone thinks I'm simply on a case. No one has ever been any the wiser, and my cover remains intact. Although there were a few times I'd thought you were working it out," he told his partner quietly.

Tommy nodded. "Yeah," he agreed, rubbing his jaw. "But you always joked it off so easily, I never pushed. It all makes sense now, though. But why, Ty? Why keep it from me? Why not just admit it?"

Tyler shook his head. "By then I was in too deep. I didn't want to chance your reaction."

Tommy rubbed the bridge of his nose, deciding by the look in Tyler's eyes, and the exhaustion and pain set across his features, to let it go for now. But he knew they'd finish it soon. "So let me get this straight. Twelve years ago, the CIA recruited you as a spy, and you've remained on their payroll ever since. You never took a discharge from the Navy, are still an active CIA agent, taking missions here on homeland soil, and I'm gonna guess abroad as well, because I know of at least three times you've left the country in the last year alone, even if Ryan doesn't, and yes, I know I just got you in trouble, but I'm pissed as shit at you right now, so ask me if I care. I'm also guessing that you are probably still attached in some way, shape, or form to a SEAL team. You lied to even me, your best friend, about who you really are. And *then*, the night we're escaping as prisoners of war, you go *back* inside to kill the man who set us up in the first place, stole his journal—which he had no idea you'd had until recently, when you decided you'd fuck with the man who held your life in the palm of his hand—stole some maps and codes, memorized them with that photographic memory of yours, and then burned them. And now today, you still have whatever information it is that he wants implanted in that memory of yours, and Stevens is willing to kill you for it?"

Tyler just nodded.

“And what would you have done had he used Ryan against you?” he asked simply.

Tyler looked up and met his eyes. “Lied my ass off.”

“That’s what I thought.” Tommy nodded. “So what’s your plan now?”

“Plan?”

“Yes, Tyler, plan. A four-letter word that means a method for accomplishing an objective. You want to know what it is Stevens wants, and if I know you as well as I like to think I know you, you won’t let it go until you find out.”

Tyler ran his fingers through his blond hair. “If I go now, he’ll have someone on me in a millisecond. We wait.”

“We?”

“Yes, we, as if you’d ever let me go alone.”

“Back to a country whose military leader would love to see your demise ten times over? Not a chance. Fine, we wait. For how long?”

“Til the time is right.”

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“CIA, Tyler?”

Not long after the door had closed and everyone had gone, Ryan rounded on Tyler, incensed. “Why must you always lie to me?”

Tyler looked up at him, his blue eyes filled with pain and exhaustion. “I didn’t lie to you,” he responded quietly.

“Yes, you did. Why is it that I keep finding out I don’t know much about you at all? Why can’t you just be honest with me?”

“It’s not always that easy, Ryan.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I thought it was good to learn something new about your partner as you grew together?”

“This isn’t a game, Tyler! You conveniently left out the fact that you are still in the Navy. That you are still assigned to the SEALs. That you’re a fucking CIA agent! That the United States government still

owns your ass. Don't you think that would be something that I'd like to know? For Christ's sake, Tyler, you told me you were discharged."

"No, Ryan, I didn't. I never said that," Tyler calmly denied as he met his gaze. "I never told you that. You assumed that."

"You never corrected me. Besides, what else was I supposed to think? From the way Tommy talked about it, and you never once said anything different."

"Did you ever see my discharge papers? Tommy has his framed on his wall along with a picture of our team. I have the same picture, but no papers. Didn't that strike you as odd?"

"You're making excuses now."

"No, Ryan, I'm just pointing out that you're right, I never corrected you, and yes, I knew you assumed that I'd been discharged, but at the same time, you never flat-out asked, so I never flat-out lied."

"When will you trust me enough to talk to me?"

"I do trust you."

"No, you don't. You conveniently leave out everything of importance in your life, and I don't find out unless it's by accident or someone else spills your story first. Or you find your ass in way too deep and you need my help to bail you out."

"That's not fair, Ryan."

"Isn't it? No, Tyler, what isn't fair is you hiding your past from me."

"I don't hide it from you."

"You don't? How about your dad, Ty? How did I find out you were abused as a child? Or that you spent six months of your life in prison? Now that's a little something, as your boyfriend, I would have liked to have known."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Jesus, Ty! No, it wouldn't have. But it would have been nice to know. Or how about knowing that your wife cheated on you and abused you? And don't you dare try to deny that," Ryan cut Tyler off before he could voice the objection that he'd opened his mouth for. "And what about the fact you had a daughter? Don't you think I would have liked to know that you were a dad? That you brought a child into this world, and that when she was ripped out of your life it devastated you? Nearly destroyed you? And now I find out you're still in the

Navy, have been for the last *seventeen years*, and that a fucking country put a fucking price on your head. And when I didn't think anything could top that, I find out you're CIA. God, Ty, have you any idea what that means to the rest of us? You're a fucking spy! A spy, Ty! And I didn't even know! What next, Tyler? How do you think it makes me feel to know you don't trust me enough to tell me what's going on with you?"

"I do trust you, Ryan."

"Do you, Tyler? You say you do, but it sure as hell doesn't look like it from where I stand." Ryan shook his head and walked to their bedroom.

Tyler stood staring after him. He ran his fingers through his hair. Then he slid down the wall, coming to a rest on the floor. He pulled the dog tags out of his pocket and let the chain intertwine through his fingers, watching them as they dangled from his hand, swaying gently. His mind went back, deep into the woods where he had lost his team, his friends.

He heard the gunfire and the screams and watched in horror as his friends dropped. He saw himself return fire on an unseen enemy, lying on his belly in the dirt, tucked in the grove of trees, his rifle in front of him.

When the firing ceased, his head swiveled for Tommy, fearful that he had fallen too. The relief that flooded through him as he found him in a similar position, alive, nearly overwhelmed him. Their eyes held for several seconds.

He watched himself as he made his way toward his fallen comrades, trying in vain to keep them from dying.

His eyes rested on the brown gaze of his friend Ethan.

"Ethan, don't do this! Come on, stay with me!" he pleaded, searching for a wound. Ethan smiled up peacefully as he reached his bloodied hand for Tyler's face.

"It's okay," he choked. "It was good, wasn't it? We did good." And with that, his eyes closed and Tyler's fingers wrapped around his.

"Yeah, buddy, real good," Tyler whispered.

It was then that he looked up to see Stevens aiming a gun at his chest. Anger and hatred welled up in him, and he threw himself at Stevens.

His mind flashed forward to the office the day he'd requested his discharge.

"You're a good man, Michaels. And a damn fine agent and SEAL. Maybe the best this country has ever seen. I hate to lose you. I have an idea that can give us both what we want. You up for some negotiating?"

Tyler remembered his heart soaring at the proposition and listening to the offer Burkhart had laid out for him. He had been torn when Tommy told him he was leaving. Tyler hadn't wanted to leave the Navy, but at the same time, he couldn't imagine staying on without him.

So when Tommy mentioned becoming a narcotics cop, knowing Tyler had often thought of it, he had easily agreed. And it was the best decision that he had ever made. He just hadn't been ready to leave the Navy or the CIA. He didn't know if he ever would be.

Tyler leaned his head against the wall and cupped his hands against his face, the tags dangling from his hand as he remembered.

"Michaels!" the voice called. He opened his eyes slowly, trying to look around. His body ached, and he was cold. He was lying in a cold, damp cell, and he was covered in dry mud and blood. His arms and feet were tied with rope that itched and burned his raw wrists and ankles. His eyes focused on the familiar voice. A man leaned down toward him as he focused through the throbbing of his head and the fog that encased his vision.

"Ethan?" His voice was cracked and dry. He must have been hallucinating. Ethan was dead. He'd seen him die, felt the life drain from him as he held him in his arms. "What's going on?"

Ryan stepped out of the bedroom just in time to see Tyler shudder involuntarily as he remembered a past well-hidden. He paused at the sight of Tyler sitting on the floor, his knees to his chest, naked from the waist up, his body a mass of welts, cuts, bruises, and stitches. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and his eyes were squeezed shut behind the hands that dug at his head. His dog tags hung loosely from his left hand, where Tyler had the chain wrapped around his three middle fingers.

Ryan knelt beside Tyler and gently touched his shoulder. "Tyler?" he asked quietly, concern in his voice.

Tyler turned his head and focused on Ryan. "I'm sorry, Ryan," he whispered.

"You okay?" Ryan asked as he helped Tyler to his feet. Tyler swayed slightly, and he held him against his own body. Ryan answered himself. "No, of course you're not. You've been tortured, beat, whipped, caned, stabbed, cut, electrocuted, nearly drowned, injected with a painful stimulant, strung from a ceiling, beaten with a pipe, chased by psychos, and yelled at by the man who loves you more than life itself. How could you be okay?"

"I'm sorry," Tyler repeated as Ryan led him to the bedroom and sat him down on the bed. "I should have told you."

"Yeah, well, I've had time to think about it, and I realize that I knew you were going to be difficult when we got involved. I chose to deal with that. And, as bits and pieces of your past slowly made their way into the light, I accepted that was just you. You run from your problems and try to pretend they don't exist instead of facing them and dealing with them. It's just hard sometimes, Tyler. Not knowing who you are. Not knowing what twist this story our lives have become will take from one minute to the next. But at the same time, I've accepted it. I know it's not about trust. And, when I really think about it, you tell me a lot. And when things start to go down, you normally come clean. Normally," he stressed. "And the times you don't, I realize that you think you're protecting me, or maybe sometimes yourself. You think that if I know whatever it is you're hiding, I'll leave. But, Tyler, I'm not going anywhere. I've made it this far. And let me tell you, a lot of the stuff I've heard is shocking. I'd like to say I don't think much could shock me anymore, but I think I'd be wrong. Every story I hear, everything I learn, seems to be just as horrible or worse than the first, and sometimes I wonder how you survived. And when I think about it, I can almost see why you don't like to talk about it."

Tyler was looking at him sadly. "It's no excuse, Ryan. I'm still a horrible boyfriend."

"No, Ty, not horrible. A pain in the ass maybe, but not horrible." He smiled, and Tyler smirked at him. Ryan tucked a strand of hair behind Tyler's ear. "We'll be okay. I've got a lifetime to discover your secrets. It'll be an interesting trip. But what I can't understand is why you wouldn't tell me you were still in the service, or that you're CIA. It just doesn't make sense. I mean, I know your career is top-secret, and

you can't divulge information about certain aspects of it, but to hide the whole thing? Why the secret? That I don't get. So I'm assuming there's more."

Tyler stared at Ryan in surprise. Ryan smiled. "I've got you pretty figured out, Michaels. And it wasn't hard once I'd calmed down. You only hold back what has hurt you more than you're willing to admit, or that which could hurt someone else. So, I'm guessing something happened that you were trying to protect Tommy from, or else you would have told him years ago. And I don't think you would have kept it from me. So what were you trying to protect him from?"

Tyler shook his head, surprised. And then he sighed. He looked at Ryan. "Ethan," he finally whispered.

"Ethan who?"

"Roberts. He was on our original team."

"Your team's dead, Ty," Ryan reminded him softly, having met the two remaining men that Tyler had sent in as spies, one being Brian Bossel, who therefore missed the bloodbath set up by Stevens.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. I watched him die while I held him in my arms," Tyler told him softly. "That was one of the hardest things about taking a new team, after they all died. It just wasn't the same. Couldn't be the same. I mean, from the beginning, we worked with those guys. They were our friends, our family. Everything we did, we did it together. We trained together, lived together, fought together, and when we were in the field, we moved as one. We knew what the other was going to do before they actually did it. So after the ambush... the four of us tried, but it was never the same. Brad took his discharge the following year. Tommy, Brian, and I made it three more before Brian left to pursue his dream of playing pro hockey and Tommy mentioned narcotics, but I couldn't leave the past behind. It was the one thing I'd ever done that I was good at. That I succeeded at. That I was someone when doing. When Burkhart asked me to stay on, I wasn't able to say no. I didn't tell Tommy at first because I felt like I was betraying him, and I knew he needed time to adjust. I had planned on telling him before I went wheels up. I figured he had a right to know."

Ryan knew from hearing Tyler and Tommy talk that "wheels up" was SEAL-speak for an overseas mission.

"When I got my orders, my CO asked if I thought Tommy would go in with me. I was going in solo, and the only other person they

would consider sending in with me, and the only other person I was willing to trust my life to, was Tommy. But then he got pretty sick, and I couldn't bring myself to ask him. So I decided I'd tell him when I got back."

Tyler looked at Ryan. He got off the bed and left the room, and came back carrying a picture. He crawled onto the bed next to Ryan and gathered the blankets in his lap. He studied the picture for a moment. Ryan sat up and leaned over Tyler, his chin resting on his shoulder.

"It wasn't even a year after Tommy's discharge. I got sent into the same country that put the bounty on my head on a covert op. But since my cover had been blown, they couldn't know I was there."

Tyler's fingers brushed over the picture of the sixteen men in fatigues. A backdrop of desert surrounded them. They all looked tired, but happy. Ryan smiled at the picture of Tyler. He always thought Tyler looked good in uniform.

"So which one is Ethan again?"

Tyler pointed, and Ryan's gaze fell upon Ethan. He was about the same height as Tyler, dark hair and olive eyes. He had his arm across Tyler's shoulders, a big smile on his face.

"So he's alive?"

Tyler nodded.

"Then what's the problem?"

Tyler looked at Ryan. "Ethan and Tommy...." His voice trailed off, and he sighed. "Were lovers."

Ryan started. He looked at Tyler in shock. "They were what?"

Tyler rubbed his head. "Lovers."

"Tommy's gay?"

Tyler shrugged. "Bi"

"And I never knew this?"

Tyler shrugged again. "Tommy never cared about the sex of a person. From early on, he had boyfriends and girlfriends, he was just more careful about not flaunting the boyfriend part. He fell for Ethan hard, and so losing him nearly destroyed him. After Ethan died, or at least after he *thought* Ethan had died, Tommy said he couldn't bring himself to fall in love with another man again. He said he couldn't be with another man and not think of Ethan. I figured he just needed time,

but then he met Sara and fell head over heels for her. He never told her. He didn't know how she'd react."

"But she's fine with us," Ryan pointed out.

"He knows that now, but how do you tell your wife something like that after all this time?"

"You've got a point." Ryan hesitated. "Did Ra'shel know about you?"

Tyler shook his head. "I mentioned something about it once, but it pissed her off. I think she broke every lamp we had in the house. That's how I got this scar," he said as he twisted a little and pointed to a scar on his side, just above his hip. "I ducked most of them, but that one... I didn't twist out of the way in time, and the lamp shattered. It wasn't pretty. So I kept my mouth shut after that."

Ryan sighed deeply and rubbed his head. Someday, he and Tyler would have to have a long talk about Ra'shel and Tyler's life together.

"What about you and Tommy?"

"What about us?"

"Did you ever have sex with him?"

"You should know the answer to that," Tyler said softly, a touch of hurt in his voice.

"Yeah, well, some of the things I thought I knew about you turned out to be the edited version."

The flash of hurt in Tyler's eyes was unmistakable. He quickly got off the bed and left the room.

"Great," Ryan muttered. He shook his head and followed after him.

He found Tyler standing in the living room, staring out the window, still clutching the picture of his team.

"My plane was blown up over the jungle," Tyler told him softly without turning. "They were flying me over the drop zone, and I was going to jump in. It was a night jump, so all we had to rely on for visual was our radar. We knew it was risky because we didn't have air clearance, but we were just skimming the outer territory, and we were at high altitude, they couldn't have seen or heard us from the ground. The pilots spotted the incoming missile on our radar. Mike put us into a dive, but it was a heat-seeker. He dropped the tanks, put in a mayday to our base, but a second missile was already in the air. The first hit the

tanks; the second came after us. Mike and his co-pilot, Steve, weren't going to bail because I hadn't jumped yet, and even if I jumped when they did, I was still in danger of being hit by debris when the plane blew. When the pilots are ejected, they're thrown up and away. I'd be under it. Mike told me to jump and said he'd maneuver away from me. But he didn't have enough time. We all knew it. So I pulled their release and dove out the open cargo door. The missile hit a second later. I'd thrown myself into a dive, trying to distance myself from the blast, and separated just enough that I wasn't killed by the explosion. The blast and debris threw me even further. Luckily, I was hooked up to an FF2, because I was knocked out before I could open my chute."

Ryan watched Tyler stand unnaturally still, caught up in the memory. His heart beat quickly in his chest as he envisioned Tyler's past and the story he wove.

"I woke up in a dirt cell, bound hand and foot. Someone kept calling my name, and when I focused on the voice...." Tyler trailed off. "It was Ethan."

Ryan's eyebrows rose, and Tyler ran his hand through his hair as he turned and leaned against the wall to face Ryan.

"He'd deserted. He'd known about the ambush. Stevens had gotten to him, and the money won him over. I couldn't believe he'd set Tommy up like that. He said the deal had been that Tommy didn't get hurt. That no matter what happened, they didn't touch him. He said he was tired of the missions, tired of our government, tired of the orders, just tired. He thought he was being offered a better life."

"He sold you out too, Tyler," Ryan pointed out softly.

Tyler just shrugged, but Ryan could see the pain Tyler still carried. "So what happened next?"

"He turned me over. There was still the bounty."

"Thought you'd killed them?"

"I just killed the boys Stevens had the deal with. The general still wanted me dead." Tyler's fingers were drifting over the picture as he focused on it. "It took me a couple days, but eventually I escaped, got the information I needed, found the pilots, and we fled for the border. When I debriefed at the Pentagon, I left out mention of Ethan."

"Why?"

“Can you imagine how you’d feel to find out someone you loved and cared for set you up, betrayed your team, and sentenced them to death, all so they could collect the bounty on your best friend’s head?”

Ryan sat quietly, his stomach rolling at the life Tyler had lived, the things he had seen, and the pain he had experienced.

“It was better he thought Ethan died a hero.”

“Is it?”

Tyler ran a hand through his hair.

“Don’t you think he deserves to know? And not only know about Ethan, but why you kept your status from him? That was a big secret, Ty, and he has no idea why you kept it from him. Can you imagine what he must think? Put yourself in his shoes. What would you want?”

Tyler sighed and sank down on the couch. “To know the truth.”

“So tell him the truth.”

“He’s going to hate me.”

“Tommy could never hate you, Tyler.”

“Don’t count on it.” Tyler reached for the phone.

“Ty, it’s three o’clock in the morning.”

“Exactly. His reflexes are slower at three AM. I have more of a chance of survival.”

Ryan shook his head and watched Tyler dial the phone.

“And no, I’ve never had sex with Tommy.”

“Ty—”

Tyler held up his hand and shook his head.

Ryan sighed, an ache forming in his stomach. He watched his lover, trying to absorb the fact that he was a spy. That he worked for the CIA. His stomach did another flop.

“Hey, sleeping beauty, you up?”

“No. Tyler, what time is it?”

“You mean you don’t know? Darn, and I called to see if you knew.”

“Funny, Michaels. You’d better be bleeding.”

“That could probably be arranged. Hey, get up, I’m coming over.”

“Why? You okay?” Alarm suddenly made its way into Tommy’s voice, overriding exhaustion.

"I'm fine. We need to talk. Get up, I'll be there as soon as I'm dressed."

"Fine," Tommy responded with a sigh, knowing better than to argue with Tyler. He'd just come over and bounce on him until he got up anyway.

Tyler set the phone down and looked at Ryan's amused face. "Will you come with me?"

Ryan nodded, and Tyler got up from the couch. Ryan grabbed his arm. "I'm sorry, Tyler."

"Don't worry about it. It's me who should be sorry." Tyler ran his hand through his hair and looked at Ryan. "You're right, it was a big secret. And of anyone, you're the one who had the right to know the most. And I really am sorry you had to find out the way you did."

"Are you sorry that I found out the way I did, or that I found out at all?"

Tyler sighed. "There have been many times I've wanted to tell you, and almost have, but I just never knew how to broach it after such a long time of hiding it. And since the whole thing is highly classified anyway, I just always used it as an excuse to keep you in the dark. But honestly, Ryan, I'm glad you know."

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"SO WHY did you drag me out of bed at three in the morning?" Tommy asked as he sat on the couch, staring at the bundle of nerves pacing nearby. "Sit down, Tyler, you're making me nervous."

He looked at Ryan, who was sitting quietly nearby. "Shouldn't he be sleeping?"

"Should be," Ryan replied. "But you know how Tyler is."

Tommy rolled his eyes as he nodded. He watched Tyler sit down and look completely uncomfortable. "You okay?"

Tyler shook his head.

"What's wrong?"

Tyler rubbed his head just above his eye and looked at Tommy. "I lied to you."

“Yeah, I know. Big-time. But are you saying there’s more?”

Tyler nodded.

Tommy sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Great,” he muttered.

“Where’s Sara?” Tyler asked.

“At her mom’s. I’m picking her up tomorrow. Now spill it.”

Tyler sighed deeply. “When the CIA sent me wheels up on my first mission after you were discharged, I was going to ask if you wanted to go with me. Burkhart didn’t like the idea of sending me in alone, but he didn’t trust anyone but you and me to complete the mission, and I didn’t trust anyone else with my life.”

Tommy was watching him as he spoke. Tyler was rubbing his hand nervously, a definite sign that he was distressed.

“But you were sick, and I couldn’t ask you. So I decided to tell you when I got back.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Tyler got up and started pacing again. Tommy and Ryan watched him.

“Because while I was on the STV—”

“You went back?” Tommy interrupted, jumping to his feet. “With a five-million-dollar bounty on your head? You went back without me?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Are you insane? You could have been killed!”

“I know, but—”

“You should have said something, Tyler! I would have gone with you. You walked into a death trap without backup. What were you thinking?”

“You were sick.”

“So? You’ve covered my ass sick, tortured, shot, stabbed, nearly dead—”

“Okay, fine,” Tyler interrupted. “I should have asked. But I couldn’t, and if I had to do it over again, I still wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

Tyler hesitated. He took a breath and let it out slowly while he ran his fingers through his hair.

"I was doing a HAHO barely inside their territory without clearance. We were shot down, and I was taken into custody. The man who grabbed me—he was—" Tyler stopped and looked Tommy in the eyes. "It was Ethan, Tommy." The agony in his voice was clear.

Tommy punched him. Tyler didn't even have time to react. He landed on his back, and Tommy straddled his chest, his hands fisted in Tyler's shirt, glaring at him angrily.

Ryan pulled Tommy off. Tyler hadn't even bothered raising his arms to defend himself, which made Ryan worry that Tyler thought he deserved it.

As he slowly got to his feet, Tyler shook his head to let Ryan know it was okay. Ryan backed off just a step.

"Ethan's dead, Tyler," Tommy snarled as he faced Tyler. "How could you even say something like that? He's dead!"

"I thought so too, Tommy," Tyler responded quietly. "He died in my arms, remember? Or at least I thought he did."

"He's dead, Tyler. This isn't funny."

"Does it look like I'm laughing, Tommy?" Tyler asked him. "Why the hell do you think I've kept it from you for this long? I couldn't tell you."

"You're lying!"

"I wish I was." Tyler lowered his voice and took a step closer, but Tommy instantly tackled him. Both of them went sailing across the room. Tyler's back hit the counter hard, and then he went down. He let out a gasp, and Ryan was there, pulling Tommy off again.

Tyler leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, his eyes clenched tightly as he breathed through the pain. Long seconds ticked by. Ryan and Tommy watched him.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," Tyler finally told him, his voice cracking.

"You should be sorry, Tyler! I can't believe you would say something like that. Why would he fake his death?" Tommy asked in disbelief from where he was being restrained by Ryan.

Tyler bit his lip. "Because he deserted, Tommy," he said quietly.

Tommy lunged, and Ryan brought him back. “Son-of-a-bitch!” he snapped at Tyler.

“I’m sorry, Tommy,” Tyler repeated.

“He wouldn’t have. He wouldn’t have set us up.” However, from the sound of Tommy’s voice, Ryan could tell that the depth of the conversation was beginning to sink in and that Tyler’s words were beginning to make sense, although he was trying desperately not to believe them.

“Yeah, that’s what I wanted to believe too. He told me that he’d only agreed on the condition that you didn’t get hurt. That they had to spare you. He still loved you, even all that time later, but he just couldn’t take it anymore, Tommy. We were all tired. We’d been on nonstop missions for over a year before the STV goatfuck. But the thing was, we loved what we did. But not him. Somewhere, he stopped loving it. Stopped agreeing with our government. He wanted out, saw a way, and took it,” Tyler’s voice was soothing as he tried to make Tommy understand.

Ryan couldn’t believe Tyler was actually trying to justify Ethan’s actions for Tommy, but that was just like Tyler. To take the hurt away from others, no matter what the bastard he was defending had done to him.

“Not that way.” Tommy was shaking his head in denial.

“I’m sorry. I really am. This is why I didn’t tell you before. I didn’t want you to have this memory. But now I realize that you deserve to know. To know that he’s still alive.”

Tommy had calmed, but he was still shaking his head. His body trembled against Ryan’s. “He wouldn’t have,” he whispered.

Ryan released Tommy and backed off, silently watching.

As Tyler stood, he met Tommy’s eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Tommy took a deep breath and sat down on the couch. “So am I,” he whispered. “Why, Ty?”

Tyler sat down beside him, facing him. “I don’t know, Tommy. The war, the missions, the stress. I guess it got to be too much for him. When Stevens approached him with the offer of splitting the reward, he couldn’t turn it down. But he made them promise you wouldn’t get hurt. And they upheld their end.”

“But I did get hurt, Tyler. I hurt every second I watched them hurt you.”

Tyler didn't say anything.

“Where is he now?”

“Somalia, last I checked.”

“Are you keeping tabs?”

Tyler nodded, chewing on his lower lip.

“What'd you tell the government?”

“That I was shot down and imprisoned. I didn't tell them about Ethan.”

“Why not?”

“I couldn't do that to you. Didn't want you to find out. Had I told them, you would have found out.”

“He was your friend too, Tyler.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tyler whispered. The pain in his voice was evident.

“So you dealt with it all by yourself? You never told anyone?” Tommy asked him.

“I had the chance to spare you from it. I took it.”

Tommy rubbed his eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“For trying to spare me that pain. I'm glad you told me, though. It still hurts, but not as much as what he did to you does. He sold you out, Tyler.”

“He sold us all out.”

“You're the one they tortured, the one they wanted to kill,” Tommy pointed out.

“But I'm not the one who's dead.”

Tommy and Tyler's eyes met as they shared the pain of a night that should never have been.

Tommy sighed. “I'm sorry, Tyler. Did I hurt you?” Concern filled his eyes.

“Nah, I'll live. I bounce, remember?”

Tommy laughed and pulled Tyler close to him. Tyler laid his head on his chest, welcoming the darkness that surrounded him.

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“TY?” TOMMY asked softly as Tyler completely relaxed against him. He looked over at Ryan. “He just passed out.”

Ryan was on his feet and over to Tyler in an instant.

Tommy pushed Tyler gently against the back of the couch, and Ryan pulled open his eyes.

“What’d I do to him?” Panic began to set in.

“You didn’t do anything, Tommy. He’s fine,” Ryan told him calmly. “The night just caught up to him. I’m actually surprised he made it this long. Only thing he’s been going on for the last five hours is adrenaline.”

“But his injuries. I hit him. I hurt him.”

Ryan looked up from taking Tyler’s pulse and met Tommy’s eyes. “Don’t do this to yourself. He’s just exhausted,” Ryan told him softly.

Together, they moved him to the bedroom, where Ryan finished examining him.

“So he’s going to be okay?” Tommy asked again when Ryan had finished.

“Yeah. He just needs sleep,” Ryan told him. He looked at Tommy, who was sitting on the other side of Tyler. “What’s a HAHO?”

“A high-altitude, high-opening parachute jump. It’s dangerous because you’re jumping from an airplane at thirty thousand feet, but it’s the only way to come in silent so people on the ground can’t hear or see your plane.”

“Even more dangerous when the plane you’re jumping from blows up?”

Tommy nodded. “He’s probably lucky to be alive. I’m surprised the explosion didn’t kill him. He must have been far enough away. The pilots must have maneuvered before it exploded.”

Ryan shook his head. “He said he pulled the pilots’ release before he jumped. He didn’t think they’d make it if he didn’t. Said he put himself into a dive to separate from the plane, but the explosion and debris still hit him. He was knocked out.”

Tommy’s eyes were wide as he shook his head. “Sounds like something Tyler would do,” he told him. “Then, yes, he’s very lucky to be alive. The blast alone could have killed him, or the debris could have torn a hole in his chute, if not ripped him to shreds. It could have dislodged his oxygen. If he was unconscious hitting the ground, there’s no telling where he landed or how....” He trailed off, lying down next to his best friend.

“What’s an FF2?” Ryan questioned him. “He said he was lucky he was hooked up to an FF2 because he was unconscious before his chute deployed.”

Tommy nodded. “It’s an automatic pressure-activated ripcord. It’s set to deploy your chute automatically once you hit a preset altitude because it’s common to lose consciousness due to the lack of oxygen, especially during a HAHO. But even with the FF2, Tyler got lucky in so many ways that day it’s not even funny. Remind me to yell at him again in the morning,” he said tiredly, closing his eyes.

Ryan agreed with a little laugh, his eyes heavy as he lay on the other side of Tyler. He glanced at Tyler and Tommy. Tommy had an arm protectively around his best friend.

Ryan smiled and closed his eyes as well. Sleep took only minutes to consume him.

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“I HEARD what you did,” the voice behind them said. Tyler and Ryan were standing in the cemetery, visiting Ra’shel and Brina’s grave. The October evening was warm, the sun just beginning its descent to the other side of the world.

Tyler and Ryan turned, and Ryan watched Tyler’s face pale.

“Warren,” he said quietly, the surprise showing in his voice along with the pain. Tyler turned slightly toward Ryan. “Ryan, this is Ra’shel’s dad, Warren Gray. Warren, Ryan.”

Warren reached out his hand and shook it warmly. "Nice to meet you, Ryan."

"Likewise."

Warren nodded and turned back to Tyler. "I heard that you found the people responsible for Ra'shel's and Brina's deaths, and the man who really was hurting her."

"More like they found me," he told him quietly. "But we do have them in custody. Well, except one."

Warren nodded. "I heard you killed him." He paused. "Thank you." His voice was strong with emotion. And then he sighed. "I also heard why they were killed, and even though they didn't want to tell me, I found out that Ra'shel was having an affair with one of the men who killed her. The man who was hurting her. That wasn't easy to hear. But it made me realize that I owe you an apology."

"No. You don't."

"Yeah, I do. I said a lot of things to you, but I realize now that you were just as much a victim as they were. Even more so, in Ra'shel's case. And even though you obviously knew she'd been unfaithful, you still continued to love her, and I thank you for that. For loving her. And for giving us Brina, even if it was only for a short time."

Tyler didn't know what to say, so he didn't say anything.

Warren took in the bruises and cuts on Tyler's face, his expression concerned. "Did they hurt you badly?"

Tyler shook his head. "Not as much as they did when they took Ra'shel and Brina from me."

Warren nodded. He glanced at the grave that contained his child and grandchild and then looked back to Tyler. "You were a good dad, you know," Warren told him softly. "I saw you with her. You wouldn't leave her side. I know she knew she was loved. More than anybody could have ever loved her."

A single tear streaked down Tyler's cheek. And Warren stepped forward and cupped his shoulder. "Thank you, Tyler," he told him again. And then he turned and walked away.

Tyler watched his retreating back for several minutes.

"You okay?" Ryan asked as he wrapped his arms around Tyler from behind.

Tyler looked off into the setting sun. “Yeah, I think I am.” He smiled, and for the first time, he sounded convincing.

“He’s right, you know.”

“About what?”

“You were a good dad.”

“I wanted to be.”

“You were,” Ryan whispered again. He kissed Tyler’s temple, flooding Tyler’s body with warmth.

Tyler looked down at Ra’shel and Brina’s grave and smiled.

EPILOGUE

RYAN reached behind Tyler, who was leaning against his chest, and grabbed the ringing phone off the table behind the couch.

Tyler turned the volume down on the TV while Ryan glanced at the caller ID and thumbed the talk button with a smile. “Hey, Dad,” he answered, smiling at his lover, who turned in his lap to see Ryan. Andrew and Ryan had always had a close relationship, and Ryan often talked with and confided in his father.

“Hi, Ryan! How’re you boys doing?” Andrew asked cheerfully.

“We’re good. How’re you and Mom?”

“Mom’s still working hard on her big case, so she’s pretty tired, but doing good. I’ve only been working about forty hours the last couple weeks, so I’ve been doing quite a bit of golfing, so of course I’m happy. How’s Tyler feeling?”

“Better. All of his stitches are out, his bruises are fading, his ribs are healing, and his cardiac rhythm’s been normal.”

“That’s great! Things weren’t looking too good for a while there, he had me pretty worried. I’m glad to hear he’s coming around. How’s his kidney?”

“His creatine levels are dropping, but we haven’t seen much improvement.”

“He doing okay otherwise?”

“Yeah, he is,” Ryan told him, moving a blond lock affectionately behind Tyler’s ear.

“What about you? How’re you doing?”

“Much better. I’m just relieved he’s going to be okay.”

“It must have been hard having to watch him suffer like that. It’s not something you can just forget.”

“No, it’s not,” Ryan agreed. “I think in a way it’ll always be there, but he’s alive, and really, that’s all that matters right now. The rest I just try not to focus on.”

“Even if you try not to, I’m sure you still do. You watched the man you love get tortured. I can’t even begin to imagine what that was like. You try to pretend that you’re not hurt by what happened, it’s going to eat you up. Don’t try and be tough for him, son. That’s not what he needs. And you don’t need to fall apart in a few months because you haven’t dealt with what happened yet.”

Ryan was quiet for a moment, stroking Tyler’s soft blond hair with his fingers. Tyler’s intent blue eyes watched him as Ryan considered his dad’s words. Uninvited pictures of Tyler hanging from chains, beaten and bloody and on the verge of losing his battle with consciousness, accosted his vision.

“It’s not that easy, Dad,” he finally sighed.

“You’re right, it’s not. But you need to deal with it. You know you do. I didn’t put you through all those years of medical school so you can ignore your own symptoms. Go talk to someone, and take Tyler with you.”

Ryan smiled at the order he heard in his father’s tone. His lips twitched up at the corners. “Okay, Dad,” he finally agreed.

“Good,” Andrew responded, his tone lighter. “Your sister, her mother-in-law, and your mother’s best friend are planning an anniversary party for us in a couple months. Kelly’s going to send out the invitations, but I thought since I was calling to check in, I’d give you a heads up. Plan to come up for the whole week. We’d love to have you.”

“Sounds like fun, Dad. We’ll be there.”

“You going to tell your friends this time?”

Ryan mentally sighed, knowing exactly what his father was talking about, but he questioned him anyway, stalling for more time to find his answer. “Tell them what?”

“Don’t be coy, Ryan, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Are you going to tell your friends that you’re gay? Or are you going to continue to pretend Tyler is someone other than who he is?”

Ryan cleared his throat. He could feel the way his heartbeat was picking up nervously and the cold sweat as it glistened on his forehead and back. Tyler looked at him curiously but didn’t say anything.

“I don’t know, Dad. I....” He drifted off, unable to explain how he felt when he thought about telling his childhood friends that he was gay. He remembered the one kid in class who had come out and the ridicule he’d faced after that. He knew that he shouldn’t worry about what others thought, but it wasn’t as easy for him as it was for Tyler.

Tyler had never cared much about what others thought of him. He told Ryan he refused to be anyone other than who he was, regardless of what people thought. That if they didn’t like him for who he was, then they weren’t worth the trouble. Ryan wished he could be like that, but it wasn’t always easy.

He’d known in high school that he preferred men to women, but after his friend Steven had come out, and the rejection he had received from some of their friends, Ryan knew he couldn’t ever tell them. He knew now, as an adult, that he shouldn’t care what they thought of him, but he did.

By the time he’d met Tyler, he had been practicing at Riverside for several years, and although he had dated men and no women, the only people who knew he was gay had been his closest friends.

But then Tyler had come along. Tyler with his easygoing, couldn’t care less what people think, secure in himself and his sexuality attitude, and Ryan had found himself able to open up for the first time in his life. To truly accept who he was.

Yet sometimes, the fear was still overwhelming, and he found himself still hiding their relationship from certain people. Especially when it came to Tyler’s job. He was terrified of the reaction Tyler could receive.

He knew that he hurt Tyler by refusing to always admit their love, especially back home, yet Tyler had never been anything but supportive of Ryan’s decision, even if Ryan could see the hurt in his eyes.

He didn’t want to hurt Tyler. He wondered if he could finally change that.

After Ryan finished talking to his dad, he set the handset on the table beside him and rubbed Tyler's cheek affectionately.

"Mom and Dad are having an anniversary party in a couple months," he told him.

Tyler smiled. "Kelly's doing?"

Ryan laughed. "How'd you know?"

"Cause it sounds like something Kelly would do. I'm glad. Your parents deserve a party to celebrate."

"They want us to come up for the whole week. You're gonna have to tell all the bad guys they have to play nice that week so you don't miss it."

Tyler laughed. "I'll let them know. I'm sure they'll be more than willing to accommodate."

Ryan snorted. "Seriously, though, you gonna have a problem getting it off? You've taken a lot of time lately."

"I have never had a problem getting it off," Tyler told him indignantly. Ryan rolled his eyes with a laugh. "Nah, it won't be a problem. I'll clear it on Monday," Tyler assured him.

"You sure?" Ryan asked skeptically, remembering the last time they were scheduled to take vacation. Nothing ever seemed to go smoothly where Tyler was concerned.

Tyler just smiled, and Ryan couldn't help but wonder what would happen to delay their departure or hold Tyler up all together.

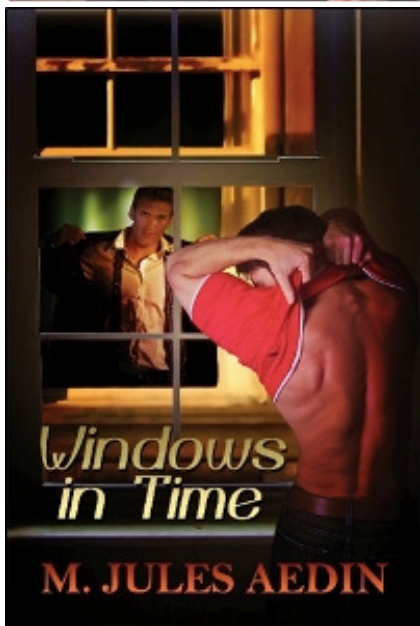
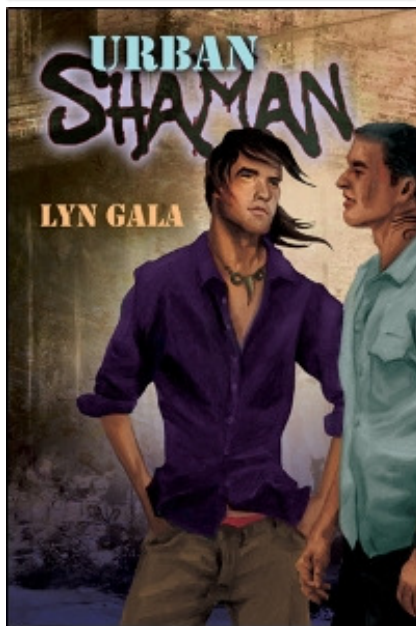
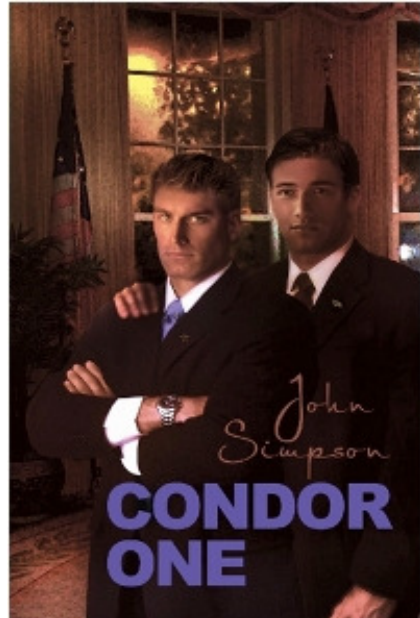
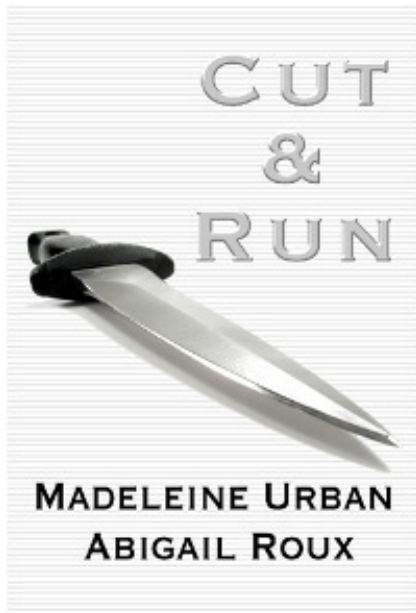
As Tyler turned the sound back up on the TV, Ryan's thoughts turned to his friends back home. He looked at his lover's blond head as his fingers brushed through the soft hair, and he made up his mind not to deny Tyler to them any longer.

He just hoped that when the time came, he would be able to follow through.

J.L. FARNSWORTH lives in a tiny little, blink and you'll miss it, country town in Michigan's thumb with her husband, Bob, two daughters (a teen and a five-year-old) and their pug, who thinks he's one of the kids. The voices in J.L.'s head are never quiet, as she is always writing something in there, and has been for as long as she can remember. When she's not coaching soccer or running her girls here, there, and everywhere, she writes those stories down. Besides writing, she loves the beach, the mountains, traveling, and the zoo—and getting lost in a bookstore for hours.

You can contact her at j.l.farnsworth@hotmail.com.

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