



Tony and Ryan

By:

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You challenged me to step into a different type of writing shoes with this story. You gave me courage to get past my fears; you gave me loads of patience, time, and hand holding and even a kick in the pants to get my head out of my ass. Never once did you lose your faith in me, even if I did at times lose it in myself.

This story is for you for no other reason than because I love you.

CHAPTER ONE

"Where ya at, Big Guy?" the sleepy voice whispered from under the blue feather comforter. Wide ocean-blue eyes peaked out from under the darkness of the covers blinking against the bright rays. A content moan escaped his lips when he located his lover.

Tony—his Big Guy—stood in all his glory, without a stitch of clothing on. He looked out the bay window in the hotel room, his eyes glued to the amazing deep orange sunrise over Napoli Italy, right over the ocean, and right outside their room. "I'm here," the raspy voice said.

Ryan raked his slender fingers through his black wavy hair and sighed. "You okay."

"Never better, baby."

Ryan reached an arm from under the warm blanket, felt around for his discarded pillow, and smiled when his fingers made contact. Fluffing up the down pillow, he curled onto his side and watched his big man with a contented moan. He never tired of staring at the one person responsible for making him happy, for pointing out that love didn't always have to hurt. The absolute best part,— was that all six feet four, two hundred and seventy-five pounds of hot Italian man belonged to him!

Ryan smiled. He loved being in love he loved being loved and loved loving. Hell, he loved the love thing. Period. "Seeing something out there?"

"There's nothing in this world that can compare to a sunrise in Napoli—a blast of orange above that deep blue sea. I didn't want to miss seeing the colors dance across the waters. I began my days this way when I lived here. I was no more than a child then. "

"Nothing?" Ryan questioned, his full pink lips set in a pout.

Tony turned and smiled. "You're in a league of your own, babe."

"So you keep saying. Come tell me again." Ryan flipped the comforter back and allowed Tony a glimpse of what lay hidden beneath. He patted the empty space beside him. "'Your baby is lonely.

Tony's black eyes sparkled with lust. His smile grew, and Ryan's heart swelled with love. "I think I know what'll chase the loneliness away."

Ryan knew the effect he had on his lover. He slowly licked his lips and purred when Tony's eyes glazed over, his cock hard, dripping, and pointing its way to its destination. He could do no more than gasp when Tony leaned over him on the bed using his body to pin him down. It wasn't as if he was a small guy himself. Nevertheless, Tony treated his six foot, hundred and eighty pound frame almost as if he were no more than a sack of potatoes. Ryan moaned at the touch of Tony's fingers through his shoulder length hair.

"So soft," Tony murmured against Ryan's lips. Tony's tongue demanded entrance into his mouth and Ryan met his lover's fervor in blinding passion with a low moan. As Tony's fingers carried on with their journey, down the sides of Ryan's body, stopping here and there to either tickle or caress, Ryan lost himself and trembled in pure need.

"I love the way you shiver for me, baby," Tony whispered. He gathered Ryan into his big arms and kissed the top of his head. "Is this better?"

He pressed himself closer to Tony's body in response. Better didn't quite explain what those hands did for him. "It's goin' away. Keep chasin'." Ryan squirmed and let out needy moan.

"Greedy, brat. I know what you need."

"Yeah you always know," Ryan panted. He wrapped his arms around his big guy's upper body. "Please, I need you."

Tony's need shone bright in his black eyes. His lopsided grin caused Ryan to melt under the man he loved. Tony ran his big hands gently down his back. "'Listen to you. The little noises of pure need escaping your lips makes me want to amuse us like this for hours. I want to drive you crazy with need until you beg me for release. Damn you're so hard for me already." Tony rubbed his hand against Ryan's hard cock.

"Oh God! Please," Ryan cried out in urgency.

With a devilish grin Tony said, "my pleasure." He licked and nibbled at the soft flesh between Ryan's shoulder blades. "I love the taste of you, baby."

"Don't stop tastin', Tony, those lips are hot, and I need 'em. You're heating parts up, keep goin'." Nothing in the world could compare to what his lover made him feel, both in and out of bed.

"Yet you shiver each time," Tony whispered into his ear before he licked the lobe.

"Remember the first time we made love? It gets more intense each time we make love. Each passing second makes me want you more than I did before. You keep lighting my fires, Big Guy, don't ever stop." He drew a sharp breath when his big guy bit his nipple. God! He couldn't get enough of the man's touch!

"We should get you pierced. That would be beyond hot, love." He nibbled and licked again.

Ryan moaned. "With as sensitive as my nipples are, my dick would never deflate if I had them pierced."

Tony's tongue glided down Ryan's flat, hard stomach, stopped near his bellybutton, and nibbled the area right below it. "And here too. We can get this pierced and then your dick too and hook up a chain up bellybutton to cock."

Ryan's breath caught in his throat. "Huh?" All he heard was dick, piercing, and chain. His heart pounded.

"Ever hear of sounds?"

"Oh hell no!" Ryan began wiggling his way out from beneath him. "I'm drawing the line right here. We aren't going to fool around with any kind of wand things to stick anywhere in on or around my dick! Let me up. Pierce my dick and bellybutton! Have you lost your ever-loving mind?"

Tony bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. "But, baby, it'd be hot." He grabbed Ryan's wrists in one hand and raised them above Ryan's head. "I hear the orgasms are intense when sounds are involved."

Ryan struggled to break free, his long lean legs moving side-to-side trying to offset Tony. "Are you serious? You really want to try that?" He shuddered and then suddenly stilled. "Ouch, Big Guy. Just ouch."

Tony looked straight into Ryan's blue eyes. "We'll discuss that another time. I think I'd like to explore using sounds at least once with you."

"With me?" Ryan paled and looked up into Tony's black eyes. "With me? Are you saying there have been others? Or are you looking for someone else to amuse yourself with?"

"Not a chance, boy." Tony licked the area behind Ryan's left ear and grinned. "I told you that day I admitted how I felt about you what I wanted. Only you, baby. Even if you refuse to try new and exciting toys, I'll only ever want you." He leaned into Ryan, licked his lips, and moaned, "I want you."

With a contented sigh Ryan relaxed. "You have me."

Without breaking contact with his skin, Tony reached under the pillow and grabbed the lube. Ryan let out a breath of anticipation. A month ago, their HIV tests arrived in the mail with green lights. To hell with those rubber things, he wanted to feel skin on skin.

Tony squeezed a glob of lube onto his fingers and leaned down for a sweet kiss. "Back or stomach?"

"My Big Man of so many words!" Ryan shouted out in glee upon feeling Tony's finger press against his hole. "Uhh, that feels fantastic." He knew he must look like a wonton with his legs spread as far as they could go but he didn't care. He needed to feel more of his lover's touch. "I love your kisses and your hands. Yeah there!" He lost himself when Tony licked the inside of his thigh. "I want to see your eyes as you fuck me. But since you're down there..."

"Spoiled, brat."

Ryan smiled. "Yours."

"And don't you forget it."

"Never."

Tony slid to the edge of the bed and brought Ryan with him. He looked into his glazed over eyes and groaned with need, "Need you, baby."

Ryan stared hard into his lovers lust ridden eyes. His cock begged for attention, it was harder than marble, the pressure hurt, and he needed release. No longer capable of simple breathing, he panted with need.

"I love the way your eye's dance. Does that feel good, baby, when I squeeze your dick this way?"

"Mmm, good." He felt the pressure building in his balls and spread his legs wider bucking against the fingers trying his best to have Tony go deeper so he could hit that..."Oh shit! Yeah, right there, lover. Do it again," Ryan moaned as Tony's finger found the magic spot.

"Greedy, boy, you are. Are you ready for more?"

Ryan moaned. Tony's finger found the target again. The deeper he went, the louder Ryan whimpered. He shifted to allow Tony better access. "More, Big Guy. I need more. I need you." He panted through the bliss of Tony's exploring fingers stretching him and making him full.

"You're so tight, baby. Made just for me. I love you."

"I love you back," Ryan murmured. Tony's gifted fingers pegged his prostrate. "Tony!" he whimpered and wiggled his ass. His eyes flew open and Tony winked with a silly grin on his perfect lips. He leaned up to capture Tony's mouth with a deep-seated kiss that stole his breath away. Ryan grew dizzy and laid his head back, his whole body tingling with ecstasy.

"Are you okay, Ry?"

Ryan tried to form a word that came out alien. He nodded instead and smiled at his lover. "That kiss had me on the brink of losing what small amount of control I have. I wanna come with you inside me." He let out a small groan at the loss of Tony's fingers. He eagerly watched his lover grab the bottle of lube and spread it over his hard-as-steel dick. So lost in the moment and the pleasure Tony delivered the coolness of the gel at his puckered hole about undid him. "Ohmigod! Please, Tony, inside me. Deep, please."

"Now, baby," Tony, said, lining his cock up to Ryan's sweet hole.

Ryan held his breath, anticipating the ecstasy at hand. "Oh yeah!" He groaned at the initial intrusion. Tony pushed in slow, gave him a moment to adjust and catch his breath. He exhaled through the sharp burning pain and breathed a sigh of relief when the

pain gave way to deep pleasure. He looked up into his man's eyes, saw raw, undying love, and wanted to cry from the happiness. He'd never felt this good, never felt such a deep pleasure before making love with his big sexy Italian. With each thrust from his lover, his heart beat hard. It felt as if it would come out of his chest. He let himself go, felt himself flying into a distant sky. Finally, he felt complete.

"So tight, boy, so damn hot, and tight." Tony leaned down and stole another kiss.

"Need you," Ryan whispered, out of breath.

"I'm right here."

"Harder, lover, not gonna break. Need to feel you deep." Having his lover so close to him, this deep sent him over the edge. He grabbed the side of the bed and let his man take him to heaven.

"Hold on, baby." Tony pushed harder, went deeper, and pegged Ryan's hole until Ryan felt he'd explode from the shivers coursing through his body. Ryan whimpered and opened his legs wider, urging his man to take him deeper.

"Ride with me, come with me," Tony said into his ear.

The sound of his lover's voice sent him over the brink. Ryan's hips arched up, he flew over the edge and cried out.

"Yeah, that's it, boy. Let it go," Tony grunted, sweat dripping down the sides of his face. "You're mine, Ryan, all mine!"

"Yours, oh hell, Tony, oh yeah!" Ryan rode the wave, lightheaded and out of breath, he rode his man like a cowboy breaking in a new horse.

Several minutes later Tony found his voice. "You waited for me this time," he said panting behind a smile. Gently he pulled out of Ryan and fell on the bed trying to catch his breath. "You're gonna kill me."

Ryan giggled, flipped over onto his stomach, and rested his chin on Tony's broad chest. "Wow, I went to heaven."

Tony looked into Ryan's eyes and winked. He placed a gentle kiss on his nose and swatted his bare ass. "This is heaven being here with you."

"I love you, Tony."

"Ditto that, kiddo."

"Stop calling me a kid, I'm not a kid." Ryan nibbled at Tony's nipple and scooted toward the edge of the bed. "I was never a kid, you know that."

"You're ten years younger than me, that makes you a kid in my eyes."

* * * * *

Tony pulled Ryan back and held him close, cuddling, loving; he never wanted to let him go. Fifteen years ago, his lover of two years died during a police raid gone badly. He swore off love forever, until he met Ryan, his best friend's kid brother.

"In my life, age doesn't mean a thing," Ryan said cuddling in closer.

He knew that to be fact. Not one of the four O'Brien guys had the opportunity to experience a carefree life.

Life had cheated them from birth, took their parents from them almost nine years ago, and then almost cruelly gave them back. Torro quite literally took guardianship over his three younger brothers while leading a double life as a United States Undercover Agent for a private sector known only as the UFIO.

The creator and director of the UFIO unit, Mike Young, tried to kill Ryan's baby brother, Tanner, by shooting him twice at close range. Carl, the group's self appointed leader, Torro's partner and life long friend flew them safely to Italy and out of Mike Young's reach. They almost lost Tanner, who's known as TJ on the flight from Nebraska to Italy, due to blood loss, in an attempt to get as far away from the mad man as possible. Months passed before the kid regained his strength. Though physically TJ healed, his emotional well being was something of another matter. The small band of runaways worked daily trying to figure out a way to stop Mike and his crazy idea of controlling the crime-ridden world using experimental drugs and physical abuse.

That's what made this trip that much more special to Tony. Two years ago, the team of them renovated the nine apartments and moved in. Each one or two bedroom apartment came outfitted with furniture and an operational kitchen and bathroom. The

backyard had a pool, a Jacuzzi, and a view of the ocean. It was a perfect set-up for this group of runaways, they were secluded and left alone. Although he and Ryan shared an apartment, they almost never had enough time alone as they were surrounded by the others. Privacy was hard to come by. It wasn't unusual to have one or the other knocking on each other's doors at all times of the morning or night. And that's if they were lucky. If the doors were unlocked the others walked right on in. Tony chuckled remembering a time or two that he and Ryan had been caught in the act and how red his boy turned each time.

Torro, Ryan's oldest brother, and his wife Liz, who were expecting their first child, kept a strict schedule on the younger boys due to the horrific treatment handed to them in Mike's care. They needed structure, guidance, and patience to overcome the abuse they underwent that still haunted them in their dreams. Without the strict schedule the younger boys found themselves in situations they could not control, including themselves.

Next came Ryan who became the group's resident doctor, computer programmer, and vet. TJ followed Ryan in the birthing order. At just 19 the boy had experienced more hell than any one human should ever have had to. He was also the sharp shooter, the trained assassin, and all around bad boy, no thanks to his brutal past in Mike's hands. TJ had a rough time of things; losing his memory was a small part of it.

The last O'Brien boy, thirteen-year-old Richie their little soldier that sometimes drove them all up and over all the walls they could see. He insisted that Mike was his father and often threatened to expose them. It wasn't the boy's fault his memories left him. Mike's sick sense of humor destroyed him. The kid knew only what Mike wanted him to know and nothing they did brought Richie back to who he was before Mike played God. For that reason, Richie had to be on a strict schedule that allowed him no freedom at all at any point. There had been times that Tony found himself debating on shipping the boy back to Mike and let him deal with the little shit, especially the times the kid took matters into his own hands and did all he could to push Ryan and Tanner over the edge with his sharp witty tongue.

Next came Benny, TJ's best friend, who had been not only TJ's pillar of strength but also his constant companion through all the good and bad times. The boy took care of TJ, as TJ did him. Until recently TJ's fiancé, Nicole had run off with them, hiding from not only an abusive father but from Mike's long arms. She and TJ tried to find a way to mend their broken relationship but it became too much for her. With a new identity, and a scholarship to Oxford, she left them six months ago hoping time away would do them good. Since that time TJ grew more quiet, more reserved, and harder.

Mike continued to hunt for Tanner and Benny, his best friend, thinking the rest of them died at Tanner's hand.

Tony hugged his boy to him thinking of the fun they would have on their short retreat. They needed this time away. They deserved it. He looked at Ryan's playful eyes, and felt the heat travel through his body. He wished they could stay right where they were forever. No more worrying about Mike and his band of robots looking for them, no more worrying that Richie would find a way to fuck them all up, and no more sadness and pain in the eyes of the one he loved. His lover had been through too much in his life, even losing his first boyfriend to a rival gang in Chicago some years ago. Ryan's zest for life died the day Paulie did. That is until he met Tony. To hear the story as Torro told it made Tony value his love even more.

"We need a shower, Tony, so we can get an early start."

Tony peeked his eyes open, coming back to the present. "You serious?"

Ryan grinned and playfully swatted Tony's bare ass.

"Oh you, brat! That's it, now you're gonna get it," Tony said lunging for his lanky lover. He missed and the next thing he heard was a loud thunk and Ryan yowling from somewhere beside the bed. He couldn't hold it back; his laughter rang out deep and loud. One second Ryan was standing there the next down he went. Tony caught sight of his lover's long arms and legs fighting with the white sheets that had him trapped.

"Oww."

Tony wiped his eyes and looked over the side of the bed. "Why are you on the floor?"

Ryan fought to untangle his legs from the sheets that hung off the side of the bed. "Cause my ass is hot and it's cooler down here? What the hell do you think I'm doing?"

Tony pulled the sheet from between the mattress and grinned. "There, you're free."

Ryan looked up at Tony, his hair in his eyes, his lips pouting. "Oh, that's how it is? Fuck me and dump me? I feel used."

"Not on your life, kiddo. Now come 'ere and gimme a kiss. Didn't you say something about an early start and all that?"

Ryan found his foot and stood with a lopsided grin. "Yes and a full day of shopping. I have a list from Liz and believe it or not TJ." He leaned over his lover and placed a gentle kiss on his lips, licking and nibbling. "Umm, I love it when you purr."

"I don't purr, I growl," Tony said grinning and reaching for him. "And we have to get ready now? Or..." Tony pulled him down onto his lap, held the back of Ryan's head, and kissed him deep.

"Um, huh?" Ryan mumbled. He loved kissing this man, loved to submit to his tongue and expertise. "I love your taste."

Tony chuckled, "shower, you, and me."

"Shower." Ryan wrapped his arms around Tony's neck and pushed himself closer into Tony's strong hot body. His dick hard and dripping and feeling so damn good, so good he felt as if he were flying. "Holy shit! This is cold!"

"Are you listening to anything I'm saying?" Tony said standing behind him in the shower adjusting the water temperature.

"Yeah. Dammit, Ton, how in the hell did we get in here?"

"Magic. Come 'ere so we can get clean."

CHAPTER TWO

"Stop growling," Ryan said in Tony's ear later that morning.

They walked the streets of Napoli, sightseeing and shopping until Tony wanted to scream. "Ryan, my arms are full. My stomach? Not so much. If we don't stop at one of these little cafés and fill me back up, I'm gonna quit."

Ryan eyed the shops across the way. Each one of them looked as if they had been there since the beginning of time. Certainly, the lovely rustic buildings must have been right where they were at the turn of the century. Everything was so pastoral and had a medieval ambiance to it, almost romantic even in the daylight hours. The cobblestone streets busy with the happy tourists coming and going. The air even smelled of fresh bread no matter where they walked. "We just ate breakfast." He eyed a small café and it had a few empty tables and chairs. Maybe a cup of Italian coffee was in order. Besides, his big guy did need to eat.

"Four hours ago," came the growly reply.

"Let's go there." Ryan pointed to a café. A gay friendly café! "Look at the table cloths. They're amazing!"

"Let's just keep going," Tony responded. Judging from the happenings going on at the sidewalk gay friendly café it would be anything but a nice peaceful lunch. Tony looked and saw the small flags on the corners of the white cloths. "Ry, let's just keep going." It wasn't that he was uncomfortable with who he and Ryan were—that they were gay. That had nothing to do with it. It was those damn American men and the shit they were giving the other men who were sitting at the tables trying to enjoy a nice meal with each other. He didn't want his boy hurt like that; he wouldn't let him hurt like that. Besides, he promised Ryan's brothers that he'd protect him with his life, and no one would hurt him if he could help it.

He wasn't afraid of those ignorant brainless American's. In fact, he didn't know the meaning of the word fear. That is until he allowed himself to love Ryan. That was when his whole outlook on life changed. He had someone to live for now. He had someone that needed him, and he'd be damned if he allowed bigots like those primates hurt his boy. "Let's not, we'll find someplace else," he said eyeing the guys. The one with the tattoos seemed to be the one leading the other idiots. Just wonderful!

Ryan grabbed a hold of Tony's big forearm and started pulling him towards the café. The kid was just about bouncing with each step. "Come on, lover, this is where I wanna eat, and look, open tables!"

Tony groaned, "Ry, let's at least take the bags to the car." Maybe those fools would leave in the meantime.

"Oh come on. There's lots of room under the tables. What's wrong with you? You just said you were starving, and I think I heard your stomach growling. Well, here we are, food just minutes away. Besides," he said, wiggling his eyebrows, "you need your strength for later."

Tony could have sworn the kid was floating, and that ass, it was wiggling like no one's business. "Baby, I'm hungry for something else."

Ryan turned and giggled. "Horn dog. Now come on. We still have Liz's list to do today."

"I still don't understand why Torro can't bring her here for a small vacation and get that list themselves." Tony caught up with him, keeping his eyes glued to the Americans picking on the patrons. That they were being ignored seemed to piss them off more. Dammit, he was gonna have to step in it and shoo them off if management didn't. Being a trained killing machine for the good ole' U.S. did have its advantages.

"Cuz Liz is due soon. Besides we managed to get five extra days out of them for agreeing to shop." Ryan cracked up. "Just don't tell anyone I would have done it for free."

"Twelve more days. That's twelve more days in bed. Just you and me, boy, and that ass is all mine."

"Greedy man, so not into sharing me."

Tony growled, "not ever. You're mine."

Ryan smiled at him. "Always. Now come on. I can taste that pasta from here, and oh the bread. It just melts in your mouth with the butter."

Tony saw his pink tongue already licking those kissable lips and moaned. This was gonna be a long day.

"Finally, I didn't think we'd ever get back."

Ryan yawned and opened the door to their hotel room with the key. "Um, nap time," he said walking like a zombie to the bed.

"Yeah, don't worry I'll grab the bags!" Tony said standing at the open trunk looking at all the bags. "Did we buy a small store?" he mumbled as he began grabbing for handles.

By the time Tony unloaded the car Ryan was dead to the world. The kid pulled off all his clothes, crawled on the bed, and went straight to sleep. Tony looked at the time. He looked forward to this night for the past six months but he needed a beer first. He scribbled a note for Ryan just in case he woke up, covered him with the extra blanket, and left the room.

Ryan's eyes flew open, his heart pounding in absolute fear at the unexpected forcefulness of someone's hands yanking him off the bed. For several moments, his mind froze in alarm and disorientation. What in the hell was going on? Realization hit him like a brick to the side of his head. This wasn't Tony playing a game. "What the fuck!"

The fear in his voice sounded strange to his ears. Someone grabbed him around his neck and forced him to his feet. His heart pumped erratically and panic set in. He looked around the room at the group of men surrounding him. "The café," he yelped as the guy holding him tightened his hold.

"You fuckin', fag! Think you're someone special don't ya. Teach you to grin and mind someone else's business you fucking fruitcake faggot!"

The guy with the tattoos all over his arms and neck grabbed Ryan's head in a vice hold tighter and drug him across the room. He tripped but the guy held him tighter and before he had a chance to gain his footing, he felt himself being propelled towards the bathroom door. He squeezed his eyes shut just as the guy rammed his face into the mirror. Glass shattered all over him and instant pain shot through his skull rendering him immobile and fighting to keep the dizziness away. He would not pass out and let these monsters kill him without a fair fight. He yelled out in pain when he felt the guy throwing him head first into the door again. Fire shot straight to his head bringing tears to his eyes and screams from his throat. Blood poured from his nose and down his throat hitting his stomach like acid. On the third impact he was let go and fell to his knees choking on the blood rushing down his throat. Fear took over. There would be no way he could win this fight. They had the advantage. But he would not go down without a fight! He had a life to live. He had someone to live for. Slowly he stood, holding his hand over his broken nose and as soon as he did someone grabbed a hold of his hair.

"You like cock, fucker? Take this!" someone yelled behind a laugh. Ryan's last bit of breath left him from the kick to his kidneys, he fell forward to his hands and knees gasping for air when he heard a swooshing sound seconds before something hard smashed into the back of his head. He dropped to his side holding his head and felt the warm blood flowing down into his eyes, down his nose and onto the carpet below.

He could hear them, but they were too far away to understand what they were saying. It took effort to lift his head to his attackers to beg them to stop the onslaught. Stop it did not.

"Oh God, please don't. Please," he cried out as the hard object caught him between his shoulder blades.

"Get the fucker!"

"Kill the cock lover!"

"Fucking, queer! Where's your body guard now?" one shouted behind an evil laugh that caused Ryan to shudder.

He fought to keep conscious; he wouldn't let them beat him. He could beat them if he could just stand up. He heard them laughing and taunting him, daring him to get to his feet. He met that challenge merely to be grabbed from behind with his arms locked behind his back in a painful hold. Trying to dislodge the grip did nothing but anger the guy holding him.

"You fucking homo sonofabitch!" the guy roared in Ryan's ear. The grip tightened, followed by a sharp stabbing pain in his lower back. Ryan felt what he thought to be a knife, being shoved into his lower back. The sharp pain about turned his legs to gel. His eyes grew large in shock at the realization that the guy holding him up stabbed him. All at once, his body began to shake, and he broke out in a sweat. Tears from pain and frustration fell down the sides of his face. He understood they were there to kill him and no amount of pleading would save him.

This was not happening to him, it couldn't end this way! He didn't want to die, not yet. He grew dizzy and started gasping for air, pleading with the one's who watched in awe for help.

He pleaded with them— with all four of them but all he saw looking back could only be described as pure hate glaring back, mocking him. Someone forced him back to his feet and held him up, choking him. He begged with his eyes for help as he dropped to his knees.

It went on forever. He had no clear conception of the time, but with each second that passed pain followed. "Please help me," he cried. "Please don't kill me." *Tony, please help me! I don't want to die!*

"Kill the fucking fag!"

"Yeah, kill him!"

The last conscious thought Ryan had was of Tony telling him he loved him.

The four guys beat Ryan unconscious, and left him for dead. Written in Ryan's blood on one wall of the hotel room in big letters was one word. "Fag."

CHAPTER THREE

Tony saw the lights of the ambulance from the street and thought nothing of it until he saw how close they parked to the room he and Ryan were staying in. His heart began thumping and sending the blood to his head too fast. Something serious happened. He felt the adrenaline wake up and roar through his body urging him to hurry up. The closer to the motel he got, the more nervous he grew. Oh God, no! The ambulance and fire truck did indeed park on the sidewalk at their front door!

Maybe something happened to the sweet old couple that stayed in the room next to theirs. Maybe one of them had an accident, or maybe someone got hurt in the pool area. It had to be a false alarm; they were on vacation for Christ's sake! Nothing bad happened on vacations!

Nevertheless, it did. He felt it now— the feelings of dread and fear circling him like a shroud, suffocating him. He ran, knowing deep in his heart it was his boy— and it wasn't good.

He had to look at the numbers on the other doors he had to be sure. He wanted this to be anything but what it was. He tried swallowing the lump in his throat, telling his mind his boy was fine. Someone needed Ryan's help; he must have called the emergency number.

Dread slapped him in the face. His door stood wide open, with the police and firemen standing at the entrance looking into the room. Tony glanced around, hoping to see Ryan among the other guests who stood around talking to each other in low whispers. He wanted to ask what had happened but the words died in his throat. He knew.

No! He needed in the room; he needed to see for himself what happened.

"Whoa. You can't go in there."

Tony looked at the young officer standing in the center of the doorway— his name tag read Officer Lucian— and shook his head. He didn't understand what the man meant. Tony wiped his upper lip and looked over the younger man into the room. He drew a sharp breath and muttered in disbelief. "Ryan?"

"Do you know him, sir?" the policeman asked him in Italian.

"Do I...yes, I mean if it's my...oh God! Is it Ryan? He's about six foot, black hair, kind of on the thin side. I wasn't gone for long. He fell asleep and I locked the door. It's not him right?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, there you are!"

Tony wasn't paying attention. All he heard was "I'm sorry." He looked back at the officer, trying to keep his calm. "Is he...?" He refused to finish that sentence. His lover, his baby, was not dead! He wasn't! God was not this cruel!

"They're working on him now. Do you know him, sir?"

"He's my boyfriend," Tony answered, looking into the room. "I love him. Tonight I arranged a nice dinner for us and I bought him a ring. He has to be okay." He knew he was rambling but he didn't care.

"I'm sorry, sir. The boy is in bad shape. They are helping him now."

Tony closed his eyes in despair. "God, please no. Spare him please let him be alive. Don't take him away from me like this."

"Tony, we called the police as soon as we heard Ryan yelling for help. Henry tried to help him, but couldn't open the door. It was locked. Those men who did it. We could hear him crying for help, screaming at the top of his lungs, and begging them to stop hurting him. Oh, dear, I'm so sorry. My Henry pounded at the door and I raced to phone for help almost immediately. By the time help came it was too late. The police had to break the door down. We gave our statements and good descriptions. I'm sure they'll be found. We called for help almost immediately."

Tony looked down at the older lady in shock, shaking his head in denial. His baby was okay. He wasn't hurt. He turned back to the scene and saw the blood on the wall. He saw the word written there in what must be his lover's blood. "Oh, God, please no. Please, I gotta go in there. He's mine, that's my baby in there."

A lifeless figure lay on the floor in the middle of six medics, all of them on their knees working at saving a precious life. Tony held his breath when one moved to the

side, giving him a glimpse of his boy's bloody body. Dedicated medical professionals doing all they could to save a life of someone they'd never met. Tony's hand came up to cover the sounds trying to escape his mouth. His stomach turned itself inside out. "Oh no! No, baby, no! Don't hurt him!" He tried to get past the officers holding him back. His whole world started to spin too fast; he had to hold onto the men holding him for support.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to step to the side. We're getting him ready for transport."

His feet suddenly sunk in six feet of concrete, unable to move even a step. He stood at the door trying his best to get in the room and see for himself. He gasped at the scene before him. He'd seen this same situation many times in his past, working with Mike, great men taken down before their time.

Tony took several deep breaths, forcing his mind to focus; he had to hold it together for his baby. "Is he gonna be okay?" He looked down at Ryan, who had a tube in his mouth and a bandage wrapped around his head that was filling with his blood. "He's my life."

"We're doing what we can for him, sir."

"E.T.A.— seven minutes. He's ready for transport."

"Where are you taking him?"

"Clinica Mediterranea," one of the paramedics said.

"Is he alive? Tell me that at least," Tony asked in Italian. He didn't even realize they were speaking Italian, it could have been Chinese for all he knew. His whole mind was centered only on Ryan.

"Yes, sir, but he's critical. We must go now."

Mindlessly, Tony followed behind the bright lights and screaming sirens of the ambulance, coming to a sliding stop into an empty parking space near the emergency doors. He was numb with fear and dread. Several times he grabbed his cell phone to call Torro but his fingers refused to hit the send button. Maybe he wouldn't have to call anyone. Ryan just needed to be cleaned up, that's all.

He jumped out of the car and ran to the ambulance as the paramedics lowered the gurney to the ground. "Oh, baby, please be okay," he whispered. "He's gonna be okay, right?"

"We'll do all we can, sir. Please step to the side," the young paramedic said.

Tony grabbed the side of the gurney trying not to break down. "What's that in his mouth?" he asked looking at the breathing tube.

"Sir, please follow the nurse inside. She'll help you."

"But what if he wakes? He'll be afraid. I should be there with him."

"Sir, please."

Tony nodded and stood helplessly to the side as they rushed off with Ryan's life in their hands.

Once he gave Ryan's insurance information to the kind lady in the office he found a seat off in the corner. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his tear-stained face hidden in his hands. His head pounded so hard it felt as if it would explode with the next thump of his rapidly beating heart. How did he fail Ryan this way? Why did he leave him alone? Ryan trusted him to keep him safe, and he failed him. He failed all of them.

The call he made to Torro was the absolute worst call he ever had to make. It damn near killed him to tell him that Ryan was rushed off to surgery. He didn't tell Torro about the blood, about how much of it he saw, or how lifeless Ryan looked lying on the floor, or the condition of his lover's body. He simply said to come and come fast.

Tony paced the three and a half hours it took for Torro, TJ, Carl, and Benny to get to the hospital. They found him smoking, with tears running down his face, right outside the emergency room doors. He didn't see them running to him or hear them calling out his name. All he kept seeing was Ryan's bloody, lifeless body until he wanted to scream and kill someone.

He knew exactly who did this to them. The old couple said they heard American voices yelling and laughing through the walls. He knew who they were and he would hunt them down like the animals they were and he'd kill them with his bare hands. They

would suffer a long and painful death by his bare hands. Before a one of them could draw their last breath, they'd know the same pain his baby did—the same fear and hate—just like his baby did. That was a promise.

"Tony! Focus here! What the fuck happened to my brother?"

"He uh," Tony wiped his eyes and looked up to the dark sky. "Jesus, T, he's hurt bad. I'm so damn sorry." He looked to Torro, hating that he failed his friend, but hating worse than that was that he had failed Ryan. "Torro, my baby's in there somewhere trying to hang on." He pointed to the ten story building and nodded. "The blood, his blood, so much of it. Shit! I need him! Don't take him from me, not now!" he wailed. Tony felt the ball in his throat explode as he fell to his knees, the deep pains of anger, helplessness, and sadness eating at him until all he could do was yell out in misery.

"Oh fuck," TJ said, looking down at his godfather. "Where is he?"

Torro knelt down and took Tony in his arms, holding him through the deep, never-ending sobs that tore through his body.

"I'm sorry, T. I promised you I would take care of him, and I didn't. I failed him, I failed all of you. He's so hurt. I saw him laying there, all I could think about was how much I love him, and I couldn't lose him, not when I just found him." That image would be one he would never forget.

"What in fucksake happened?" Carl asked.

Tony took several minutes to steady his breath. When he answered his voice was low and broken. "We stayed out all day shopping and hanging out. When we got back to the room he was tired and wanted to take a nap before dinner, so I let him sleep. I left him there alone. I didn't think anything would happen to him. He was asleep, for God's sake. I locked the door and left him. I went to have a beer, and when I got back he was...there were EMTs all around him."

"What happened? Who did this to him and why?" TJ questioned.

Torro helped Tony to his feet and led him to a concrete table. Tony leaned against it and lit a cigarette. "Four guys beat him almost to death. Those fuckers took a bat and...they hit him with it. They left it beside him. The damn thing was covered in my

boy's blood. The police took it. "He couldn't stop thinking about that goddamn bat and where they used it on Ryan's body. He tried to control his breathing. He had to hold on just in case Ryan needed him.

"No! Oh fuck no!" TJ yelled.

Benny put his hand on TJ's shoulder. "He'll be okay."

"Finish, Tony." Carl said.

"Why?" Torro questioned, his voice almost a whisper.

Tony rocked in place unable to process what he needed to. He knew he had to keep himself strong for his boy, but the only thing he kept seeing was the way Ryan looked lying on the floor of that motel room. He looked at Torro for help, for forgiveness because he was almost at his end.

"Tell me why they did this to my baby brother. What in the name of God caused this to happen to him? Did he say something, do something, what did he do?"

Tony looked at Torro and shook his head. He knew the pain he saw in Torro's eyes, was the same pain in his own. "He didn't do anything. He never does anything. Ryan wanted to have lunch at a cafe, a cafe that catered to the gay community. These four American guys thought it'd be a good time to hang out and harrass the patrons. Management ignored them and I chased them off. I don't even know how they found the motel we're staying at. And it's not like I had to physically hurt them, I just told them to leave, they said a few things and left. There's an older couple staying in the room next to us and they heard the American accents then saw them running from the room. I know they did it cuz of me, they hurt my baby—because of me!"

"Holy shit." Torro sat beside Tony taking deep breaths. "People beat my baby brother because...?"

"They're small-minded idiots." Benny piped in sadly.

"They left him for dead. In his blood on the wall they wrote one word. 'Fag'. They beat my baby's head in with a goddamn bat as if he were an animal at slaughter. They stabbed him and beat him until he lay a bloody fucking mess. They tried to kill him

because he loves a man. I'll kill those sonsabitches if it's the last fucking thing I ever do."

"Did you tell the cops?" Benny questioned.

Tony wiped his eyes and took a deep breath. "They questioned me about the cafe and the men I ran off but because I didn't witness what happened to Ryan...They want to talk to Ry, but...Jesus he's not even awake to talk. He's still in surgery. When I saw him lying there, he looked so pale. I thought he was dead, I thought my boy was dead." He looked up at the dark sky and tried to hold his breath to stop the damn tears from coming.

"I'm going to see if there's an update," Carl said, walking off towards the ER doors.

"Torro, TJ, I'm sorry." Tony wiped his swollen eyes on his shirtsleeve and took a deep drag off his cigarette.

"It's not your fault. You didn't do it," Torro said, trying not to let his tears fall, sniffeling and wiping his nose on his shirt.

"It is though! I was supposed to protect him," he replied angrily. "I promised you I wouldn't let anything happen to him, and now look! He could die..."

"No! Don't say it. Dammit, Tony, don't. Ryan's a fighter. He's gonna be okay," TJ said, now on his knees in front of Tony. "He has a lot to live for. He won't go out this way. Tell me where those fuckers were. Where did you see them?"

Tony shook his head. "It's my fight. I'll track everyone of them down, and I'll make them pay for this on my own."

"He's our brother, my blood, Tony. Don't exclude us. We love him too."

"Now is not the time!" Torro growled. "Our brother is fighting to live. We will see him well first, then we go after the fuckers who did this. We go, Tony, as a team, like we have done everything else. We all love Ryan. We'll do this for him together as a family should."

"Hey guys! The doc wants to talk to you!" Carl stood at the automatic doors, waving them over.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Your relation to the patient please?"

Tony looked at the young doctor standing at the nurses' station, his heart in his throat. "I'm his boyfriend," he answered looking closer at the name tag on the lab coat the man wore. "Doctor Gallo. I'm listed on his emergency contact card. If you'll..."

"Anthony Ferrari?"

"Yes, this is Tony. Are you gonna tell us how Ryan is or what?" TJ barked.

The doctor looked down at his clipboard and signaled for the nurse to open the emergency doors. "Follow me, please. We will go someplace more private, gentlemen."

Carl, Torro, TJ, and Tony followed the doctor quietly down the long wide hallway, their eyes darting from side to side, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ryan in one of the many rooms. They stopped at the end of the hallway and followed him into a large room with tables and chairs along the walls.

"Please sit. Would you care for a coffee or a soda?"

"No, please doctor. Ryan?" Tony asked. He didn't want to eat or drink anything until he saw his boy with his own eyes.

The doctor sat and placed his hands on the desk. He red-rimmed eyes shut for several long seconds, and when he opened them he told them what they didn't want to hear.

"Ryan's out of surgery, gentlemen. I will not lie to you. He's in bad shape. He is suffering from a severe concussion that resulted from at least two direct hits from a blunt object to the back of his head. His upper intestine was damaged and his lung collapsed due to a sharp object, a knife wound from the looks of it. We had to insert a tube to reinflate it so when you see him please don't let it upset you." He paused and took a sip from his coffee cup. "I'm sorry, sirs, but Ryan fell into a coma during surgery. We had to put him on a respirator, simply due to the stress on his lungs."

"God no!" Tony cried out. "He's gonna be okay, right?" Not his baby! His baby was fine and this was a trick. Ryan loved to play, he loved to laugh. Dammit!

"He's in recovery now. Of course, his chances improve every twelve hours."

"What are his chances now? Is there brain damage? How long will he be on that respirator? I don't want to know his chances twelve hours from now!" Torro snapped.

"I understand you are upset, but please know we are doing everything we can for that young man. If I begin to give my patients chances of survival rates they become nothing more than a number. Yes? That young man in there is alive. His will to live is greater than his will to die. If you are looking for percentages, if I had to rate his life in that matter, he has a forty percent chance of surviving through the night."

"Forty percent? That's it?" Benny asked. TJ looked at him with a silent warning before settling back in the chair.

"Can I see him?" Tony asked.

"Once we move him to I.C.U. you can. You are American's yes?"

"Yes, sir," Torro answered.

"Generally I do not allow this, but I will permit one of you to be with him at all times. I do not believe the nonsense that the patient does not know what is going on. That young man in there knows, and he needs his loved ones nearby. I feel I must warn you. He's been beaten badly. His face is swollen, he has four broken fingers on his left hand, and his right wrist is shattered. We had to put it in a cast after we rebuilt it. Yes?"

"Doctor, does he have brain damage?" TJ asked, wiping the tears from his eyes.

"There is activity. We didn't find blood on the brain, and that's a good sign. As far as the damage from the concussion, we won't know that just yet."

"Then why is he in a coma?"

"A coma can happen due to a traumatic experience. We have seen this before. Generally the patient comes around after a few days."

"I want to see him please," Tony whispered.

"Yes, of course. Please follow me."

They stood at the door staring at the still figure lying alone on the hospital bed. None of them took notice of the room itself. They didn't see the pictures on the walls or

the chairs that lined the back wall. They didn't see the window that allowed the moon rays in. All they saw was Ryan and the machines that almost surrounded his bed, all of them connected to him by wires and tubes, keeping him alive.

"Holy fuck! Dammit," TJ said, not waiting for the others. He stood over his brother, looking at what they did to him. "Ry, I'm here. It's gonna be okay. Right? You're gonna beat this shit and be okay." He watched the way Ryan's chest rose and fell in time with the respirator. "He doesn't deserve this, not him. He's the gentle one, always looking for that damn silver lining. He's the one that keeps us together as a unit and now he's lying here on this damn bed, trying to live. It's not right!"

Torro placed his hand on TJ's shoulder and gave it a light, reassuring squeeze. "No, he doesn't. He looks bad."

"I'm gonna kill who did this."

"Not here, bud. Not in front of him. He needs to work on getting better so we can take him home."

Tony stood in the corner of the room alone, feeling like a stranger who didn't belong. He blamed Ryan's current condition on his inability to take care of him. He had broken his promise, failed all of them, and now he couldn't bear to face them. He didn't want to see his lover bruised up and broken.

The sudden urge to run out of the room, out of the hospital, and straight to the place he'd seen those punks, hit him like a ton of bricks. Images of them using that damn bat on Ryan's head made his heart pump faster. He'd break off their fingers and shove them up their asses, then he'd cut their hearts out. Maybe at that point he'd be able to take a breath without wanting to break down sobbing like a kid.

"Tony, come 'ere man," Torro said, looking at him.

"He's gonna hate me." The damn tears wouldn't stop rolling down his face. He stopped trying to wipe them away—it was useless. "I failed him, ya know. I promised to protect him, and I let him down. I never let anyone down before, T. I don't know how to do this. This is a different hurt from the kind I felt being Mike's henchman. Is this

payback for what I did back? I don't know how to do this. Ryan opened up a part of me that I didn't know existed, and it's me now, and I can't do this."

TJ made his way to Tony gently held his chin in his hand and pulled his face up to look at him. "This is not your fault. We don't blame you. My brother loves you and he's gonna need you and your strength, as I needed you in Chicago. You believed in me when no one else did. You held me when I needed a human's touch. You gave me the power to deal with the hell we lived in. You taught me how to find an inner peace so that I could face Mike and cope with his abuse.

"My brother needs you. He needs your love and he needs to know that you're here on this side fighting for him to come back to us. Let the anger go, Tony, for now, and make my brother okay the same way you did me." TJ laid his hand on Tony's shoulder. "Please? Bring my brother back to us." TJ looked back at Ryan. "I think you're the only one who can."

Tony took a few deep breaths and grabbed his godson in a fierce hug. TJ was right, a pity party this was not. This was about the power of love and the fight to live. "So smart. You're so smart, kiddo. I love him, and if I have the power in me, I'll bring him back to us." Tony felt the anger dissolve and leave him. In its place determination thrived. He would find a way to bring Ryan back, and once he did, those punks who hurt him would pay with their lives.

First things first.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tony kept a bedside vigil beside Ryan for three days and nights, refusing to leave other than to smoke. He showered, ate, slept, and held his baby's hand on very little sleep. He lived on coffee and fast food, thanks to Benny, who kept everyone fed, coffee'd up, and in smokes. The others slept at a nearby hotel, often staying away for a few hours at a time.

Carl took matters into his own hands after talking to Tony the second day and disappeared. None of them knew where he went and no one asked.

"He's well enough to take the tube and respirator out today, Mr. Tony."

Tony turned away from watching the sun rise in the sky and smiled at the nurse he'd come to like. She had a way with his lover that none of the others did, always so very careful and always making sure Ryan was as comfortable as she could make him. "Yeah? He's okay to breathe on his own? That's my boy. He's gonna be fine." He knew Ryan listened to him everytime he spoke.

He told his lover about events and feelings in his life that no one knew about him. Tony never shared any of it with anyone before Ryan. He spoke of the trips he wanted to take with him, the places he wanted to show him, the things they would do as a couple.. He spoke of their future because they were meant to have that future, the two of them--together.

No one in Tony's past held onto his heart the way his boy had. He never gave it to anyone before, not in this way, and he found that he liked it this way just fine. God, what would he do if his boy didn't want to come back. Or couldn't?

Ryan had been determined to get Tony to admit to him how he really felt about him. No matter how many times Tony tried to tell the younger man it'd never work, Ryan would retort with how it could. Finally, after he could no longer avoid his own feelings, he told Ryan exactly how he felt. He smiled thinking about that day and how Ryan bounced around for days afterwards once Tony had admitted his true feelings. His proud Ryan had the patience of Job, the pride of a lion, and the heart of cupid himself. And

yes, he was very stubborn, and all of those reasons added up to why he loved Ryan so damn much.

"His brothers will be back soon. Will you wait for them please? They'd like to be here."

"I'm waiting for the doctor now. The sooner the better. He's ready. Now we pray he wakes from his sleep."

"He will. Won't you, baby? You're missed, and you know it, so you keep fighting and hurry back to me."

"What about us?" Torro said from the doorway.

"Oh, and them too. Your brothers miss you." Tony winked at them and eyed the bags in Benny's hand.

"Food?"

"Food," Benny replied handing him a bag and a fountain drink.

Tony sat at the small round table off to the corner of the room and opened the bag. "They're taking that tube out of him today. Right, Nurse Costa?"

"Hello, sirs. Tony is right. We are waiting for the doctor now."

"He's going to be okay," TJ said, standing over Ryan, gently holding onto his hand.

"He will be improving. No machine to breathe for him, now his brain must tell his lungs to work. Does he have the same pretty eyes you do?"

"Ryan's are better; they dance," Tony answered before TJ opened his mouth.

"Oh, for the love of Mary's dancing shoes, Tony. Do you have to get all gushy?" Benny complained.

"Hello all."

They all turned to see Ryan's doctor at the door holding a file. "You heard the news, correct? Today we are taking him off the machine. He is ready to do this on his own."

"Don't hurt him," Tony said. "He's had enough hurt."

"Oh no, sir. He will not feel a thing," the doctor said calmly.

Shortly after the doctor took Ryan's vitals a team of nurses and another doctor gathered around Ryan's bed.

The four of them stood off to the side and watched the team while they worked on Ryan. It seemed to take forever in Tony's head but once the doctors and nurses stopped talking amongst themselves his heart started to race. They prodded and poked and examined his boy for another thirty minutes and all he could do was stare. He didn't want to miss a thing. Inside his heart he was truly hoping his baby would open those sparkling eyes as that tube came out. He watched two nurses stand at Ryan's shoulders and hold him firmly to the bed, he watched the doctor begin to remove the tube and when Ryan gagged, Tony's whole body tensed up. His hands fisted up through no power of his own when he took a deep breath.

"It's okay," Torro said. "They aren't hurting him. I think they pulled the tube out of his throat."

Several minutes passed before the doctor looked over at them with a smile. "He's doing it. Come here and see this."

Tony almost ran to Ryan's side, his black eyes large and unmoving. The bruises on Ryan's face still stood out, marring his perfect features, and his lips were dry and chapped, but at least that damn tube was gone. He paid attention to Ryan's chest and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it rise and fall without the machine's help. "Now you just need to open those baby-blues."

Tony heard moans coming from Ryan's throat and jumped up off the cot, almost falling on Ryan's bed. It had been two days since the doctor took the respirator away yet Ryan still slept, lost in the coma. He took his Ryan's hand and rubbed it, wishing that he could take the pain from his baby. He'd have given anything if it had been him lying there in that bed. "I'm here, baby. I'll never leave you again."

"Tony, hurt."

Tony's heart jumped out of his chest. He held Ryan's hand a little tighter without meaning to and moved in closer. "Ryan? Oh, thank, God. Baby, look at me. Let me see those magic eyes."

"It hurts, Tony. Please stop it."

Even with a raspy, pain-filled voice, Tony had never heard anything that breathtaking before. It was like fresh rain falling onto the hot desert bed. "I know, baby. Can you please look at me? I'll go get someone to give you something for the pain. Please look at me first." He had never felt as excited as he did now. Well except for the time when he and Ryan finally made love, but right now he wanted to jump up and down in happiness.

Ryan moaned and opened one eye. A mere second later he opened the other one. Tony saw the pain in his eyes, but his lover was awake. He finally woke up! "I've missed you, Ryan. You finally came back to me."

Ryan blinked a few times and tried to look around the room. "What happened? Where am I?"

"I got you, babe. It's gonna be okay. Don't try to talk."

Ryan tried to move and cried out in pain. He moved his hand to his chest as if he could stop the pain inside. "Was there an accident?"

The door opened and nurses surrounded the bed, all of them talking at once. They almost had to shove Tony to the side so they could get at Ryan, but Tony refused to leave his lover's side. Finally, they ordered him to stand over in the corner and out of the way or he'd have to leave the room. He watched Ryan with an eagle's eye as they examined, poked, and prodded the only man he had ever allowed his heart to love.

He called Torro to let him know Ryan was awake. They cried and prayed together.

"How long has he been awake?"

Tony didn't even hear them, never mind see them come in. Torro, TJ, Benny, and Carl all stood beside him trying to see over the doctors and nurses that still surrounded

Ryan. "Right before I called you. They won't let me near him yet, but he's awake. He came back."

"He came back for you, Tony."

Tony looked at TJ with a small smile. "He came back for all of us."

"It is good to see the young man again. Yes?" The doctor smiled and looked at the five anxious faces waiting for an update. "I'm happy to report that Ryan does not show signs of brain damage. He is able to tell us his full name, the president of your country and ours." The doctor smiled and nodded his head. He pushed his glasses further up his nose and looked back to the files on his desk. "He does not remember the attack or the events that led up to it. He does remember all of you. He knows where he lives and his birth date."

"That's all good news, right? Well other than the small issue, that he can't remember the attack. Will he remember that?" Benny questioned.

"This is a common problem when a person suffers from a severe concussion. He may not ever remember it, but he may. It will come to him in pieces, maybe in a dream. I've had my nurse print out some literature for you to read about his condition. I would ask that you read it over and come to me with any questions. It will have a list of things for you to look for in the long run, maybe for a few weeks."

"When can he come home?" Tony asked.

"I would think in the next couple days, as long as he continues to improve. Of course, he will need a follow-up visit with his own doctor. A head injury can cause more problems if not handled right."

"Thank God," Carl said with a sigh.

"We would prefer to keep him in I.C.U. one more night and tomorrow and the next day in his own room for observation."

"So you're saying he's gonna be okay, right? Like he'll be who he was before this mess?" Benny questioned.

"The literature you will get will help you to understand what all of you are facing over the next several months. Ryan is a strong young man, and he will recover, but it will not be overnight. He has a bumpy road to travel now. He'll need your patience, your guidance, and most importantly, your love."

"He'll have that and then some, doc," Tony said, his voice strong for the first time in days.

"Do you need anything?"

"No," Ryan snapped. "I don't need a drink, I don't need anything to eat, and I don't need another fucking blanket! I need peace, or is that too fucking much to ask for?"

Ryan, who sat at the patio table in their backyard, ignored Tony's sharp intake of breath. He knew he pissed the guy off, but he didn't give two shits. He ignored the hurt in Tony's dark eyes, just as he ignored all of them.

His entire mind focused on that night, that night he told them he couldn't recall, the pain and humiliation still so fresh in his mind that it made it feel as if those bastards attacked him an hour ago. And this was every fucking waking moment. The visions refused to stop assaulting his head. All he could see were their mocking faces laughing at him as that bat found its way to the back of his head and body. All he heard were their sneers and nasty remarks about his sexuality. When he ate all he could taste was his own blood going down his throat. All he felt was that damn knife driving itself deep into his body- not once- but twice- leaving ugly scars behind to forever remind him. He felt the kicks that robbed him of air and the punches that stung his already broken body. His damn chest hurt with every breath he took. He was afraid of his own fucking shadow, and he wanted it all to just stop.

"Ry, take it easy, huh?" TJ said from somewhere behind them.

"Fuck off!" he yelled. "Can you tell me why in the hell we have to live here in this commune? I can't even take a piss without them knowing about it," he snapped, glaring at Tony, who took a deep drink from the beer he held in his hand to keep his words quiet.

"Well, I guess I'll head to the house. See you all at dinner." Benny got up and walked away, sullen and pissed off.

"Gee, was it something I said?" Ryan's snappy remark cut through all of them like a knife.

"Ry, come on. Enough."

"Go to hell, Tanner."

"Ryan, let's go on in. We'll watch a movie or something. You need to rest."

Ryan raised his scared brow, and leered at Tony. "What the hell does it look like I'm doing right now? This is all I ever fucking do!"

"You've only been home a few weeks. It's gonna take a little time, and before you know it..."

"Yeah, well it is what it is." He'd never felt this angry before, not even when Torro was going through all the shit he did with Mike and TJ. Back then it was a different kind of anger. He had no idea what he was feeling now, if anything. He didn't want to feel. He didn't want to think. He just wanted them to leave him the hell alone.

"Baby, I know you're not..."

"Leave me the hell alone! Just go away. I don't need this fucking shit. Here's one for you..." Ryan slowly stood and sneered at Tony. "We're done! I don't want or need you! Just leave me the fuck alone!"

Tony cringed, his hands balled into fists at his sides. There was no way in hell that he would allow those assholes that did this to his baby to destroy the only good thing in his life. Ryan hurt, that was plain as day. He was tired and anxious. Yes, Tony did indeed understand the anger eating at his lover. He didn't blame him, and he knew he'd probably feel the same way. Nevertheless, to hear Ryan say what he did, about the two of them

drove a knife right through his heart. He looked into his baby's eyes and saw everything plain as day. "Is that what you really want?"

Ryan's hard eyes never wavered. He nodded his head, once.

Tony closed his eyes, bit his upper lip, and slowly nodded his head in acceptance. If this is what his boy needed, if he needed space to get better then he'd give it to him.

"Okay, I'll go stay with Carl if you need me."

Ryan turned away, the hot tears falling down his face with his emotions jumping all over the place. He cried for fucking everything. He cried when those assholes tried to kill him. He cried himself to sleep every night. He wanted Tony to hold him one second and then the next wanting nothing to do with him. He cried each time he heard himself begging those fuckers to stop hurting him. An O'Brien never begged! He brought shame to his family once again, first by being gay and now by begging. Why didn't they just kill him that night instead of leaving him alive to suffer? They stole his spirit and soul leaving nothing more than a shell behind.

They robbed him of life and a bright future to go along with it. They killed the other part of his soul that Paulie's murderers left behind. Now the assholes ran free because he couldn't tell anyone who in the hell did it. If he did, he'd be forced to admit that he had begged them not to kill him. His brothers would never respect him again. They'd die before they gave in and begged anyone, no matter what went on. Pretending to forget the details and telling everyone he forgot may have been the weaker way, but it would have to do because any other way would surely drive him to his grave.

"Whatever." He limped back to the apartment he no longer shared with Tony and never looked back.

"He's hurtin'," Torro said from Tony's side.

Tony nodded at Torro's statement, watching Ryan walk with difficulty to their apartment. "I hate this shit, T. I can't help him. Fuck, he won't let me. He's only been out of the hospital for a few weeks, and he's worse. He won't talk to me. Hell he hardly looks at me. He hasn't asked what happened that night. I try to talk to him about it and he yells at me to mind my business before shutting himself up in our room. He hardly eats, doesn't sleep. Shit, he's even stopped reading. Seems to me he's giving up. I'm losing him." Tony looked at Torro. "And I hate it because there's nothing I can do. He won't let me."

Torro nodded his head. "Give him a few more days, Tony. I know he didn't mean what he said. He's not himself. Remember what the doctor said about the after effects. We should expect him to be irritable, the changes in his moods. It's not his fault. I've warned the others to walk away when he gets like this and if they don't, they know the consequences."

"I don't have the energy to work them if they don't listen. I'm doing all I can with Ryan." He hated the terminology 'work them.' It was something he had to do while working for Mike. If an agent needed a tune-up, Mike would have to order that agent to undergo several training sessions with Tony that often involved abuse to said agent. It was a sick way to correct the mistakes of human beings. Though the training worked, Tony hated being the one doing the training.

"Hey, Carl and I have it. If the boys do overstep we'll snatch them up. You keep doing what you can for Ryan. All we can do is wait it out. Just don't give up on him."

"I didn't, Torro. But I think he did."

True to his word, Tony stayed with Carl to give Ryan the space he thought he needed. But now his own attitude was suffering. He snapped and growled at everyone, his patience evaporated until he felt like he was going to explode. He took to taking long walks on his own and even tried reading. Nothing worked to take his mind off Ryan and

the pain he suffered with on his own. While the others went off to work every day, he stayed home just in case Ryan needed something. A few times a day he'd go to their apartment to check up on him, and he always found Ryan lying on the bed staring at the ceiling.

Seven weeks had passed since the attack, and Ryan continued to go downhill. He stopped talking to everyone not even Benny could get a rise out of him, and that in and of itself was a miracle because Benny always got a rise out of people whether he meant to do it or not.

The casts came off, the bruises faded, and the stitches disappeared; yet Ryan had lost the will to heal inside where it really mattered.

Tony put the last of the luggage in the trunk of the car and closed it. He did a mental checklist to be sure he wasn't forgetting anything, double-checking the cooler in the backseat to be sure it had plenty of water and enough food to get them where they were headed.

"Are you sure this is what you want to do? Alone?"

Tony adjusted his baseball cap and lit a cigarette. "Never been more sure, Torro. This isn't healthy for anyone. It's not getting better. It's worse than ever, and personally, it's not fair to anyone."

"I know, but he'll get better. He will, Tony."

"My mind's made up. It's either this, or I'm gonna lose him for good. That's not an option I can live with. I have one last chance to save us, and I mean to do just that."

"Does he know?"

Tony shook his head. "I packed while he slept."

"You'll call and let us know how you're doing?"

"Of course. Please don't worry. Everything will turn out okay. I gotta hit the road if I'm gonna make it there by nightfall. Keep a close eye on those boys for me and call me if you need me to give them a tune-up over the phone. Oh, and if little Fayeane should

decide to bless us with an early arrival.” Torro and Liz named their daughter after Torro’s mother, the backbone of the O’Brien’s.

Torro took Tony in his arms and hugged him tightly. "Take care of yourself. If you need anything, call us."

"Will do."

"And, Tony, if anyone can do this, I know you can. We know you'll bring him back whole again."

"Or die trying."

Tony stood over Ryan as he slept, already missing him so much more than he thought possible. He looked peaceful in his sleep, so innocent, just like the old Ryan. He brushed Ryan's bangs off his forehead and kissed his nose.

CHAPTER SIX

Ryan gasped and jumped away from the unexpected contact, his eyes wide open in fear. They found him! They came back to finish what they started.

Tony jumped back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

Ryan blinked a few times, gasping for air. "What do you want?" He shook his hair out of his eyes and threw his long legs over the opposite side of the bed.

"What I want is for you to be okay again," Tony answered quietly, pleading TO him with his eyes.

"I'm alive aren't I? What the hell else is there?" he answered ignoring the pain that tore through his heart.

Tony watched him stand up and felt his heart breaking. Dammit, he missed Ryan. He missed holding him in his arms, missed kissing those full pink lips. He missed making love to him, and more than anything, he missed his happy-go-lucky lover who found good in everyone. "Why don't you get in the shower? We have a long day ahead of us."

"Every day is a long day. What's so different about today?" Ryan sat on the lounging chair and brushed his hair back with his fingers.

Tony's eyes refused to move off his lover's chest. They would rather enjoy seeing Ryan's abs, his washboard stomach, and long slender torso, instead of the pain filled deep eyes that haunted him in his sleep. He needed Ryan so badly, for more than just sex. Their spirits connected their souls were one. Damn! He wanted to hold his lover and baby him. He wanted to take care of him and protect him. Hell, he wanted to love him, but the damn kid all but threw him to the wolves the moment they left the hospital.

"Ry, take a shower. Please."

"Fuck off, Tony. I don't need you telling me what the hell to do. I'm a big boy now. Why don't you go find TJ or Benny to boss around? They get off on it."

Tony knew Ryan was referring to the time he spent with Mike training the agents. They all had gone through hell during those training periods, and they'd all suffered unimaginable amounts of pain. "Two choices, Ry. Either you take a shower or you go as you are."

Ryan lifted his scarred eyebrow and glared at him. "I'll take door number three. I ain't goin' anywhere."

Tony noticed Ryan eyeing his closed fists and the fear that flashed through his sad troubled eyes. He shook his head in sadness and anger. He had never given cause for Ryan to fear him no matter what the situation was. This needed to stop and it needed to stop now! "Okay, fine, but you may want to slip some pants on or something. Don't think the public will appreciate your birthday suit."

"Don't care what the public thinks. I ain't goin' anywhere. I'm fine right here."

Tony's growl and his approach backed Ryan deep into the chair. "Get your ass up and get some pants on. Now!" He glared into his baby's eyes, wanting nothing more than to kiss him until that fear went away. He hated having to yell, but dammit, enough was enough. The time had come to bring his lover back to being a full and happy man.

Ryan's large, unmoving eyes never left Tony's, even when he stood and walked to the closet. Without paying attention, he grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt and dressed, one eye on Tony and the other on the door.

"Shoes!"

Ryan's hands shook; he looked nervously around the room, and that alone made Tony that much more determined to bring his boy back. Ryan grew up on the streets of Chicago in the midst of some of the roughest gangs around and never lived a day of his life in fear. He had always found happiness amidst the hell he lived in, even finding the good in some of the worst situations. He lived a happy, carefree life, and in one fucking night, four worthless bastards had stolen that from him. Tony took great satisfaction knowing those four pricks would never do this to another living soul, thanks to Carl.

"Let's go, kid. We have a long ride."

Ryan refused to look at Tony. He curled up on the seat, looking out of the side window, watching the Italian countryside fly by, eying the acres and acres of vineyards that he could smell for miles. The sun hung high in the sky, but he didn't feel the heat from it. All he ever felt anymore was the damn cold that seemed to take root deep inside. Nothing warmed him up anymore.

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"Thirsty?"

Ryan shook his head. He wasn't anything. He should have died with Paulie that day. That was the beginning of his end anyway. It wasn't fair! They walked home from school everyday together the same damn route. TJ warned him all the time to change the routes he used to get home. He was too predictable and it could lead to trouble. It was stupid and he knew that now.

He and Paulie always talked about their future together, the college they would attend, the apartment they would share instead of living on campus and in less than three minutes his whole world shattered. Paulie was killed instantly. They shot him twice in the head and back.

Three gay bashers stole his first love. Not even revenge could take away the pain of his loss. TJ killed those sorry excuses for human beings two weeks later and he still felt the same sense of loneliness and heartache. He learned how to live with grief and hatred by burying them. What sense did it make to face useless emotions anyway? His heart had a hard time allowing his brothers in, never mind outsiders.

He never planned to love another man. He made a promise to Paulie at the wake that he'd stay true to him. Falling for Tony happened when he least expected it to. He lost that fight with his heart the night he saw Tony, holding Benny a prisoner. Tony chased

the pain and anger right out of his lonely life and made him love him. He fell for that big man, head-over-heels. Dammit!

"Are you hurting anywhere?"

"You care."

"Come on, baby, you know I do." Tony peeked at him and frowned.

"Yeah, that's why you left me alone, right? Cause you fucking care! Yeah, Tony, I fucking hurt all over, and I can't feel a fucking thing!"

Tony kept his eyes on the road ahead of him. "We'll be there soon," he mumbled, lighting a cigarette.

Ryan exhaled. "What about work?"

"It'll hold. You're more important." Besides, it wasn't as if any of them needed the money. Each of them were worth millions, thanks to good ole' Mike Young.

"Whatever," Ryan said.

"Ryan, try to meet me halfway here."

"Fuck off, Tony. I didn't ask for this. I was fine at home."

"You're right. You didn't ask for it. None of us did, and you're anything but fine at home. You're right though. You have the right to feel that way about me. I did let you down, and I'm sorry."

"Everyone has let me down. What makes you so damn special? And where in fucksake are you taking me? This is kidnapping you know."

"If this was a kidnapping I would have used a gag and handcuffs or something."

"Fuck you! Where are you taking me? You didn't even give me a chance to grab my phone. What if I need it? What if I need to call someone for help?"

"You don't need it. I'll be right there with you."

Ryan squinted his eyes and glared at him. "Yeah, you did such a bang up job the last time. What is this, a repeat performance?"

Tony's jaw muscles clenched a few times. He stole a glance at Ryan and turned his attention back to the road. "Ryan, please."

Ryan narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I know the meaning of that word well. It does not work no matter how it's used. Do us both a favor and save it, huh?"

“I’m sor...”

Ryan punched the dash and jerked straight up. He glared at Tony. “Shut the fuck up! I don’t want to hear how sorry you are. Everyone’s fucking sorry. What the hell good does it do me now?”

“Baby, if I could turn back time...”

“Yeah, well you can’t. None of us can or I’d be back in Paulie’s arms and in college by now. I’d be happy and safe with him. Instead, I’m stuck in a foreign country hiding from a goddamned madman who wants us all dead. My brothers live in fear every day of their lives. So, yeah, Tony, if you could turn back time, would you please? Cuz really I’d rather be anywhere but here!”

Ryan saw Tony flinch and a flash of pain run through his eyes. He was sorry the minute he said it. Shit! What did he do to the man who showed him it was okay to love again? He loved Tony with all his heart but dammit, Tony hurt him. He left him alone in that hotel and that’s why those assholes attacked him. If Tony loved him so much, why in the hell did he leave him alone?

Tony nodded and took a deep breath. “I hear ya,” he quietly said.

Ryan bit on his lower lip trying to find a way to say he didn’t mean what he’d said, but when he saw the tears falling from Tony’s sad eyes, the apology stuck in his throat.

“When we get back home, I’ll pack the rest of my clothes and stay with Carl until I figure out what I need to do. I made a promise to your brothers though and I intend on keeping that promise whether you like it or not. We have one month together after that you’re free to make whatever decisions and choices that are best for you.

“I know you’re hurting and I wish to God that I could take that away from you but I can’t. All I can do is support you in whatever you choose to do and help you get to that point. Ryan, no matter what, I love you and I care very much about you, but I will not be the one responsible for making your life miserable. It’s time I let you go.”

Ryan gasped and held his cry back. *He wants to let me go.* Ryan knew he blew it, but it would have ended eventually anyway. "Well, where are we going now? Why bother with me if you don't want me. Just take me home."

"No can do. And don't worry about where we're headed, I'm the one driving so why don't you kick back and rest."

"It's nice huh?"

They stood on the back deck of the home Tony rented for the month in Napoli overlooking the ocean. The nearest neighbor's place sat a half a mile away giving them plenty of peace, and alone time. The clear blue water danced back and forth to the shore, mesmerizing them.

"Yeah."

"You hungry?"

"No."

"Ry, you haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon. Why don't we shower and go grab a light dinner."

Ryan jerked his head to look at Tony, his eyes wild. "No. I..."

Tony swore under his breath and wanted to kick himself. Obviously, his brain had stopped working. It was too soon! "I'll go grab us something till we go shopping tomorrow. And after that we won't have to go anywhere."

Ryan's breathing quickened, sweat appeared on his upper lip, and nose, and he started shaking. He turned to look at the house and swallowed.

"You'll be okay. No one knows we're here."

"Like they didn't know before," he whispered.

Tony ran his fingers through his thick black hair, staring out at the ocean. It calmed him, and he needed a lot of that calm right now. Being so close to Ryan—and yet so far—had driven him to the edge of reason. Several times, he bit his tongue to keep from calling Ryan anything but Ryan. He clasped his own hands each time they went to reach out for him. Learning to do life without Ryan sucked. "I'll get some pasta from the diner down the road. I'll be back before you get out of the shower."

Tony used his key on the front door but the damn thing wouldn't open. He knocked harder and yelled out for Ryan to open up, but nothing. He ran around to the back hoping the sliding glass door was open, but knowing Ryan locked the house up tight. No amount of knocking would do him any good. He looked in, called out for Ryan again, and cursed. His stomach turned, his pulse raced, and his heart flip-flopped as if it were drowning in a sea of water. Panic, unlike any he'd ever felt, set deep in his bones. He had no way of helping Ryan like this. He could be in the house crying for help, screaming for him, and he'd never hear him. He looked closer at the inside, praying that it was okay and he was just overreacting. He'd die if...no, he wouldn't think of that night. Oh, shit! He went and left him alone again! His panic increased tenfold.

"Ryan! Open the door!" He pounded at the door with both fists, ignoring the sharp pains in his hands. Frantically he kicked it and yelled for Ryan to open up. "Come on, baby, please be okay." He tried the windows and found them locked. Ryan must have put the damn chain on the door and if he did that, Tony knew the one way lock would be engaged as well. He looked down the length of the house and spotted the utility room door that connected to the laundry room inside. "Ryan?" he called out. He turned the knob and thanked God when it opened. Once he made it into the house his eyes swept the area looking for signs of struggle or... he would not think that. Not again.

He heard the shower and swallowed to make his heart go back to where it belonged. The damn bathroom door locked tighter than Fort Knox, a new habit of Ryan's since the attack. "Ryan! You okay in there." He gave it a few seconds and listened, but all he could hear were the sounds of the shower. "Ryan! Open the door. Are you okay?" He pounded again, shouting as loud as he could.

"I'm coming in." Tony threw all of his weight against the door intending on getting in the room come hell or high water. The door creaked and splintered as it fell out of his way. He rushed into the large bathroom, barrels of steam hitting him in the face, momentarily blinding and smothering him. "Ryan?" he called out making his way to the tub. What he saw caused his heart to fall to his feet.

Ryan sat in the far corner of the garden tub huddled up. His head between his knees, his arms wrapped around himself, and crying. Even with the hot water raining down upon him, he continued to shiver and shake.

Ryan's sobs tore at Tony's heart as nothing ever had before. He was scared to death and it was all his fault. Perhaps it was for the best he called things off between them. His heart shattered at the realization that perhaps he wasn't the one for Ryan after all. He never considered giving up on anything in his life, least of all Ryan, but clearly, he wasn't the man for this job. It was time to take his boy home, and it was time for Tony to leave the pack. He needed to get over Ryan and Ryan needed to heal without him around. He swallowed that damn lump down and took a steady breath.

"Ry?" He turned the water off and grabbed the towel off the countertop. "Come on. It's okay. You're okay." The tears tore him up. "Let's get out and get dried off. Take my hand." He put his hand out, afraid to touch him. He brought the towel around and stepped into the tub, knelt down in front of the sopping-wet younger man, and gently laid his hand on his shoulder.

"No! Get away from me!" Ryan yelled in pure panic.

Tony didn't miss the terror in Ryan's eyes. Ryan wasn't seeing him, he was seeing those bastards who did this to them. He gently corralled Ryan's swinging arms to keep them from hitting him. "Please leave me alone! Please don't hurt me!"

Tony sat down in front of Ryan with tears in his own eyes, witnessing the pain, seeing the younger man relive the past. "It's okay. It's okay, baby. I'm not gonna hurt you. I won't ever hurt you."

He reached out and Ryan screamed, "No! Please God help me!"

Ryan's wild arms got free striking Tony across his face and chest. Tony grabbed the wild limbs to prevent them from hitting him a third time. He grunted when Ryan's long legs found their mark, catching him twice in the stomach before he grabbed Ryan to hold him tight against him. Jesus, how in the hell would he walk away from this guy when he loved him so damn much? "You're okay, baby. I got you. I got you tight with me." Tony held him, comforting him, lulling him, trying to calm him down.

After several long moments, Ryan finally gave up from pure exhaustion. He went limp in Tony's arms, still shaking and crying with tears streaming down the sides of his face. Tony laid his chin on top of Ryan's wet head and murmured words of encouragement until Ryan's breathing slowed.

"Please let me go," Ryan requested quietly.

Tony flinched at the quiet request. His baby never said that to him. Not once had he ever wanted to be let go. In fact, most of the time Ryan needed physical contact of some type, even if it was as little as him holding onto Tony's belt loop. Only then would he be still and content.

Quiet moments passed, but it wouldn't last. He felt Ryan's body tighten up; his breathing grew deeper, almost gasping for air. He wrapped his arms tighter around the smaller man determined to fight the damn demon that stole his lover. Together they would fight it and win, no matter what it took.

"I can't do that, baby. We're here in this together."

"Please let me go."

"Tell me why. Ryan, tell me why you want me to let you go."

"Tony, I'm all but dead anymore. I can't do this."

"Ryan, you're not dead."

"But I am! Tony, I am. I hate everything and everyone. I just wanna die!"

"Ryan, it's a miracle you're still alive. Please don't throw that in God's face."

"I can't feel anything inside me anymore."

"It's still there, sweetheart, it's just buried. You gotta talk to me and get it out. You haven't asked me what happened that night. You've never said a word about it and you have to. It's eating you alive, baby."

"I can't, Tony. I can't find it," he said almost in a whisper.

"It's time to look and let it go. You have a life to live. You're young; you have a lot to do with your life. Maybe one day you'll finally get into that college you talk about, you'll meet someone special and this will all be but a memory. You'll find that happiness once again but you have to let this other go first."

Suddenly, Ryan shoved Tony away from him, jumped out of the tub, and ran from the bathroom. Tony hung his head down for a few seconds, trying to breathe and remain calm. He made his own stomach sick forcing those words from his lips. How would he live his life without Ryan in it?

He found Ryan sitting on the living room couch, his elbows on his knees, head resting in his hands while staring out at the ocean and rocking back and forth against the couch. The tears continued to run down the sides of his face, falling onto the carpet below. He sat next to him, taking care not to reach out no matter how much he wanted to.

"The first time I saw you, I knew you would be my future. The night you took care of me after Mike shocked me, I knew you'd always be here for me. I fell in love with you on that night, so deeply in love. I felt alive in your arms for the first time since I lost Paulie. Do you remember? Do you remember holding me, telling me everything would work out and I'd be okay? You promised you'd always be there for me. Do you remember, Tony?"

Tony nodded. "I meant it."

Ryan peeked at Tony through the wet strands of his hair. "You don't mean it anymore because you can't stand the sight of me."

"Stand the...Ryan, what do you mean?" Was he reading this all wrong? Ryan really didn't want to let what they had together, go but it couldn't stay like it was. Ryan needed to come to terms with what happened and until he did, he'd never move forward.

"How can you want to look at me? How can you stand to stand there, to be here day after day, looking at me?"

"Ryan, that makes no sense."

"I think I need to go home. I've ruined your life enough as it is. You should have taken me home two weeks ago. If you'll call my brothers they'll come and get me. I hate to see what I've done to you, to everyone. I can't keep doing this to you."

"You haven't done anything I didn't want done. Ryan, love is unconditional. You take the good with the bad. There is no easy solution. So when you find it, you shouldn't let that go so easily. I let you go because you asked me to but I hate to see you hurt."

"I let you down! Dammit, Tony. I let you down," Ryan said, looking down in shame.

Tony moved to the floor in front of him, got to his knees, took Ryan's chin in the palm of his hand and brought his head up to look in his boy's disappointed eyes. "You did no such thing. You have never let me down. How could you think this?"

"I did you know. I didn't stop them. I let them do that to me. I just lay there like a baby and I begged them to stop. They laughed at me, calling me names, and I cried. They hit me so many times I lost count and when he stabbed me, when that knife was shoved into my back, I lost the feeling in my legs. I remember not being able to breathe. I remember the dread of never seeing your face again because they decided I was sick and not worthy of being alive, all because I love a man. Before I lost consciousness, Tony, I thought of you and of your love." Ryan wiped the tears off his face and turned to look out of the sliding glass door. "You wouldn't let anyone do that to you, but I did. I'm not good enough for you. I wasn't for Paulie, and I'm not for you."

"What in the world do you think you could have done? There were four of them, one with a bat, one with a knife, and the others waited for you to fall to get their thrills. What do you think you could have done? I doubt I could have done things any different. How could you think that I'd be so shallow?"

"I fucking begged them, Tony! I never beg."

Tony felt the pain and anger radiating off the man he loved and took him in a tight hug. "I've heard you beg a time or two," he whispered. He felt Ryan's body relax and sighed. "I would have begged too. In fact, I think anyone in that situation would have done exactly what you did, just to live to see another day."

"In what sense? I hate myself. I hate what I've become because of them. They hurt me on levels I didn't know existed and I can't stop, thinking that somehow, I could have stopped it."

"There wasn't a damn thing you could have done to stop them. If anyone were to be blamed for that attack, it would be me. I caused that to happen to you. I made them stop messing with those guys at the café. They took their anger at me out on you. Ry, all these weeks I've been fighting against my own guilt and self-hatred for leaving you alone

that night, for letting them do that to you, and I thought you blamed me that whole time. Instead, you thought that I'd be disappointed in you. And I thought you were disappointed in me.

"Years and years of psychology. Thank you, Mike Young. If I would have let you go, I know your brothers would have lost you forever. We all would have. You tried to hide your pain. You tried to convince yourself that no one mattered to you because you couldn't deal with the disappointment of letting not only your family down, but yourself as well."

"They're still out there. They can do this again to someone else."

Tony reached out and gently moved Ryan's hair out of his eyes. "They'll never hurt another soul on earth again."

Ryan looked deep into his Tony's eyes, and understood the meaning behind those words. TJ made that same promise to him over Paulie's death. He laid his head on Tony's shoulder. "I'm scared. I don't know how to stop being scared. If my brothers knew, they'd be disappointed in me. I mean, it's not enough that I'm different than they are, but add this to that and...well, I'm not really an O'Brien now, am I?"

Tony wrapped his arms around Ryan's stiff shoulders. "How are you so different?"

"I'm nothing like them, Tony. I'm gay. I'm the only one. A gay O'Brien. My dad..."

"Loves you very much and if they weren't in Ireland they'd be right here with us. They all do, Ry. Maybe it's you. Maybe you're not happy with who you are." Tony closed his eyes, hating to have said that aloud and knowing that it needed to be said.

"No. I've known since I was a kid that I was different and I'm fine with who I am. What I'm not fine with is being hurt over my sexuality. Does it make me any less of a man or a person? Do I not deserve the same happiness and the chance at loving and being loved by another person just as a straight guy does? What is the crime, Tony? Why did they have to do this to me?"

"I wish I could answer that for you, and sadly we won't ever have the chance to ask those fucks, but I can guess just like you can. Some people can't accept what they don't understand. They see something they can't explain, and the only way they deal with it is through violence. If those guys knew the real you, they'd see that you're a lot better than they ever could have been. They probably never knew happiness, probably never had anyone in their lives that really gave a damn about them. However it goes, you survived and you can be happy again. If you ask me, many of those so-called straight people aren't that damn happy. Have you ever looked at them?"

Ryan chuckled and gently kissed that warm neck he loved so much. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being you. For teaching me and loving me and waiting. I'm sorry I've been such an asshole."

"We all have that asshole syndrome. Did you forget about TJ already?"

Ryan laughed. "How can anyone forget that? Add Benny to the mix and damn, it's a wonder we didn't kill them."

"There you have it. There's nothing for you to be sorry over."

For several long minutes, Ryan cuddled with his lover, and Tony kissed the top of his black head with a smile.

"They made me hate being alone, Tony. I hate it. I want to stop being scared, and I want to be able to enjoy an afternoon alone if that's what I need without worrying about locking every door and window. I want to be okay to walk up to the store on my own without looking over my shoulder. I want to be like I was, and I'm afraid I'll never be that way again."

"It's gonna take time but you won't be alone."

Ryan held his head up; his big blue eyes looking into Tony's black ones. "You've stuck by my side through all that I put you through. You never lost your patience with me. You didn't give up on me. You gave me space when I needed it and all that time you blamed yourself. I pushed you away cuz I blamed myself, yet you didn't. And yet I lost you anyway."

Tony studied Ryan's face. The perfect little nose, the perfect, bluest eyes he'd ever seen, the thin face, so unlike his brothers. He was sex on a stick to boot! Lost? Who lost who? What? "Ryan, are you saying you...I mean, well..."

"I love you, big guy. I love you with all that I am and even if you could turn back time I'd stay right here with you. Please forgive me, I didn't mean any of it. You have to know I didn't. I want to spend the rest of my life in your arms, not some college with a bunch of frat boys."

"I'm always gonna be here for you, and so are your brothers and Carl and Ben, all of us. We want you back, baby. Don't you want us?"

Ryan took his first steady breath in too long and nodded. "Yes, more than anything. I need you. You're my life, Tony Ferrari, I love you."

Finally! His baby finally made it back. "I love you too, brat. Things are gonna be fine." Tony's heart swelled with the power of the love he felt for his boy. He grabbed his boy, the only one he loved into his arms and held him as if there would be no tomorrow. "Marry me, baby. Will you?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tony took the next week working alone with Ryan, gaining more trust and teaching him that it was safe to love again.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. You about ready?"

"Just need my shoes." Ryan put his Chicago Cubs cap on backwards and grabbed his shoes. "I almost hate to leave, it's been so relaxing. It's what it should have been like before," he added with regret quietly.

"I know we won't ever forget it — what they did—but, Ryan, you're alive. You're whole again, maybe more so now."

Ryan grinned and looked away out to the ocean. He admired the silver engagement ring on his left finger and held it up against the sunlight. "I learned that no matter what happens in life each day is a gift and I'm not alone. Most importantly though," he said, looking back at his man, "I'm proud of who I am, what I am, and my love for you. It's not wrong to feel this way. It's nothing but right, and you are that to me. Right. Ain't our fault that others are close-minded bigots."

Tony smiled and nodded in agreement. "You've come a long way, and together we'll go to the end of the world."

Ryan giggled and lay back on the couch. "Who would have thought Tony to be such a romantic? No one will ever believe me."

Tony grinned. He kissed the man he loved more than life itself, and said, "Get your ass in the car. We're goin' to eat."

Tony felt Ryan tense up the second the café came into sight. His hand stayed on his lover's shoulder and gently squeezed. "You're okay."

Ryan looked around. Nothing had changed since the last time they visited. He saw the same lady selling the flowers from her little white cart, and over there the same man was selling trinkets, and the same sweet smells were coming from the café. He took a deep breath and followed Tony's lead to the café.

They sat at the same table with the same tablecloth—even the same waiter waited on them. The noon hour brought the sun directly above their heads, small patches of clouds played in the sky above them, and the smell of the ocean hit their noses. Life went on.

"Smells great," Tony said taking hold of Ryan's hand. "Let's eat."

Ryan felt anxious. His eyes darted back and forth. His breathing grew deeper so he shut his eyes. He was fine. Tony was right here, and those guys weren't here. Things were fine. He squeezed Tony's hand and took the last steps on his own.

"Ry! I forgot to pick up some smokes. I'll be right back."

"Hold up, I'll ride with ya!" Ryan hopped up off the chair on the deck, grabbing at his shoes with all haste.

"No, it's okay stay, enjoy the water. I'll be right back," Tony hollered from the kitchen.

Ryan's mouth dried up. He broke out in a cold sweat, his heart beating in his chest like a jackhammer. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't tell Tony to wait. He couldn't say anything. He heard the front door close, heard the water swishing off the shore, heard the car start, and then heard it drive off. He was alone as before—he spun to look at the front door. Open! Tony didn't lock it! It was open to whoever wanted to come in.

"Calm down, you can do this! You've been alone lots of times. Hell, walking down the streets of my old neighborhood alone was something in and of itself. I survived that, I'm sure as hell gonna survive this." He picked up his bottle of beer, toasted the ocean, and took a deep drink.

Tony stood to the side of the house, hidden in the dark with a big smile. Ryan had passed the final tests with flying colors. His baby was just fine.

EPILOGUE

6 Months Later

"He looks great, Tony. Happy. More so than before, don't you think?" Torro said, watching TJ, Ryan, and Benny goofin' off in the lake. "Just remember, I'm giving him away at the wedding."

"Yeah, he's good. Still has a nightmare now and again, but he's good." Tony knew he was grinning like a fool, but he really didn't care. "Yes, he told me he asked you. Thank you for supporting us. It means so much."

"Hey, it's my pleasure. Thank you for loving him as he deserves to be."

"I should be the one thanking you." Tony looked at Torro then and grinned. "He's made me more of a person than I ever was. He gives me a reason, T, and that's enough for me."

"Tony! We're gonna go help those people out up there."

Tony, Torro, and Carl looked to where the boys pointed and smiled. Never let it be said that their boys never helped those in need.

"Be careful. If she slips, and that boat slips..." Carl mumbled.

"Lord, I apologize, but gracious what the hell. Her butt is as big as the back end of that sailboat she's pushing up the dock. Hurry boys! She's slipping!" Tony yelled.

