



Daddy Detectives, Episode 1

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Our heroes are adjusting to life as a married couple and are now parents of newborn twins. While the guys are enjoying paternity leave, their administrative assistant, Kimi, comes to them with a personal emergency. While Tyler investigates the whereabouts of her missing roommate, Ian plays stay-at-home dad with their two-week old twins.

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If you know who Tyler and Ian are—if you’ve already read their origin stories (Somebody to Love, Somebody to Hold, and Somebody to Cherish)—you don’t need to read this prologue. If you haven’t read their origin stories, keep reading if you want to get up to speed on their backstory quickly. Keep in mind, there are some spoilers below, so if you don’t want to read spoilers, then you might want to go ahead and read their origin stories first.

Somebody to Love : Once upon a time, a grumpy Chicago homicide detective, Tyler Jamison, was investigating the murder of a man who was killed on his boat in an exclusive Chicago yacht club. In the process, he met a young, gay, trust fund baby named Ian Alexander, a real ray of sunshine. Ian was the dead man’s friend and the person who discovered the body.

To make a long story short, Tyler eventually realizes he’s developing some inconvenient and uncomfortable feelings for Ian. Very uncomfortable, because Tyler had always assumed he was heterosexual; he just thought he’d never found the right woman. Ian, on the other hand, who’s been out and proud since he was a young child, is head over heels in love with the older, stern homicide detective. It takes Tyler a lot of painful soul searching to realize he’s attracted to Ian. Eventually, Tyler finds the courage to come out to his sister and his mother, both of whom love and support him unconditionally. That scene is a tearjerker—at least it was for the author.

The ending is a bit dramatic when Tyler saves Ian from a murderous attack.

Somebody to Hold : Tyler and Ian are getting used to living together in Ian’s Gold Coast townhouse. Tyler’s just glad he no longer has to go home to an empty condo. He ends up losing his job when he violates departmental policy to rescue Ian’s

younger sister, Layla, who has been abducted by sex traffickers.

After being fired from his job with the Chicago police department, Tyler decides to get his private investigator's license. He wants to be able to help people. And as a PI, he can now help living people rather than getting justice for the deceased. Things heat up in their second book when a man who's obsessed with Ian starts stalking him. The situation gets dicey when the stalker makes an attempt on Tyler's life.

Somebody to Cherish : The trilogy ends with a wedding and a honeymoon trip to Key West, where our two heroes investigate the abduction of a toddler. When they return home to begin their new lives as husbands, Ian decides to join Tyler in the private investigation business. In the epilogue, with the help of a surrogate, Tyler and Ian welcome the births of their twin son and daughter.

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As I'm standing in the checkout lane at the grocery store, there's a woman in front of me with two young kids in her shopping cart, both reaching for candy on the rack next to them. The poor frazzled mother is trying to shoo her children away from the candy while she's simultaneously handing the cashier a thick stack of coupons. It looks like we're going to be here a while. I glance down at the contents of my own cart—diapers, baby wipes, cans of formula, more bottles, and a package of pacifiers—and smile.

How many bottles do two babies need?

I quickly do the math—two bottles times approximately seven feedings a day. That's a lot of bottles. It's no wonder our kitchen counter has turned into a baby-bottle-sterilizing station.

"Mom sent you out to do the shopping, didn't she?" The amused voice comes from directly behind me. "You're a good husband to help her out."

I turn to the white-haired woman standing in line behind me. She's peering at the contents of my cart with a nostalgic smile on her softly wrinkled face. "I remember those days," she says wistfully. "How old is your baby?"

"Two, actually. They're two weeks old."

Her smile widens. "Twins? How wonderful. Congratulations to you and your wife."

My heart stutters in my chest, and it takes a moment for my pulse to even out. I'm still not entirely comfortable with outing myself in public. If my husband, Ian, were

here, he'd be telling her his life story, and they'd be making plans to meet up for coffee. As for me? I'm the reserved one.

I steel myself for the potential blowback and say, "It's husband."

"I'm sorry?" She's clearly not following.

"I don't have a wife, ma'am. I have a husband." There . I said it. Ian would be proud.

She frowns, but I can't tell if it's from confusion or disapproval. "You have a husband? You mean two— oh! " Her blue eyes widen as her lips form a perfect O. "I see."

I'm expecting the worst, but she surprises me by smiling and saying, "Well, congratulations to you both." She studies me a moment. "I didn't take you for a gay man." She chuckles nervously. "Not that gay men have to look a certain way. It's just that you don't seem the type—you're far too serious. But I assure you, I fully support LGBTQ rights. In fact, I have a great nephew who's gay."

Before I can respond, the young female cashier calls to me. "Excuse me, sir?"

I face the young woman as she motions me forward. The woman who was ahead of me in line is now pushing her cart out the door. "Sorry." I start unloading my cart onto the conveyor belt.

"No problem," she says, grinning as she starts scanning my purchases. "Congratulations on becoming a father."

I return her smile. "Thanks."

After paying for the items, I push my cart out to the parking lot and load everything

into the trunk of my black BMW. The thing is ten years old, but it doesn't look like it. It's in pristine condition and runs great. Ian keeps trying to talk me into buying something new, something flashier or more expensive, but I'm like, nah . It's paid off.

It's ten o'clock on a Friday morning in early September when I'm heading back to the townhouse Ian and I share in the Gold Coast neighborhood of Chicago. Before we met, I lived alone in a condo in Lincoln Park, a suburb just north of the city. After I lost my job with the Chicago Police Department, it made sense that I sell my place and move in with Ian. I was already spending nearly all of my free time there anyway, and I'd started to dread going home alone to my empty condo.

The two-story brick townhouse we now share is spacious, with four bedrooms and a rooftop greenhouse—Ian's happy place. Well, it's one of his happy places—the other is his small yacht moored at the nearby Chicago Yacht Club.

This morning traffic is light, which is a rarity for downtown Chicago. I follow Lake Shore Drive until I reach our turn off. We live on a quiet, treelined street of brownstones, a block from Lake Michigan.

I pull into our drive and park next to Ian's new gray Porsche SUV—he traded in his Porsche 911 for a larger vehicle to accommodate two infant car seats and a double stroller—and carry the groceries up the drive.

As I'm passing the recently renovated two-story carriage house that is home to our private investigation business, the door opens and Kimi, our twenty-three-year-old office manager, steps out. She's wearing a long floral skirt with a bulky white sweater and black-and-white high-top sneakers. Her spiky purple hair is cut short, and she's wearing a pair of large gold hoop earrings. It appears that flower power is still alive and well.

Kimi waves eagerly as she bounces on her feet. “Hey, Mr. J!” When she smiles, dimples appear in her round cheeks. “How’s it going? How are the babies?”

Ian and I gave ourselves paternity leave for eight weeks after the babies were born, which means we’re not actively taking any cases for another six weeks. Kimi is holding down the fort for us while we’re on leave. She answers the phone, schedules appointments, and orders office supplies—she does all the things that keep our business functioning day-to-day.

“They’re doing great, Kimi,” I say, stopping to juggle all the bags and packages I’m holding. “Thanks for asking.” I pause because I get the feeling she wants to say more.

“And Ian? How’s he taking to fatherhood?”

“He’s loving it. He’s a natural with the babies.” It’s true. Ian has taken to his new role as a father like he was born to it, whereas I feel like I’m constantly fumbling. I nod toward our back door. “I should take these inside.”

“Oh, right!” Kimi darts forward. “Let me help you.” She grabs the supersized package of diapers and follows me as I continue around back to the rear entrance to the house. When we reach the back door, she says, “Hey, Mr. J, I was wondering....”

I set down my bags so I can unlock the back door. “Yes?”

“I’ve got a date tonight. Would you mind if I left work early so I can get my hair colored?” She runs her fingers through the short purple strands. Her blonde roots are clearly visible. “Jerry said he’d monitor the phones for me.”

Jerry Harshman is our other employee. He’s a former homeless veteran whom Ian befriended, and he now works for us as a general handyman and jack-of-all-trades. He lives in the apartment above the office.

“Sure, you can leave early.”

“Thanks, Mr. J.” She reaches out to open the back door for me.

I’ve asked her a million times to call me Tyler, but she just can’t shake calling me Mr. J. It doesn’t make sense to me, as she has no trouble calling Ian by his first name. Surely I’m not that intimidating.

Kimi holds the door for me as I carry the items into the kitchen. She spots Ian standing at the kitchen sink washing out the coffee pot. “Hey, Ian!” she says with a wave.

Ian waves at her with a soapy hand. “Hi, Kimi. Oh, wow! I love your skirt.”

“Thanks, Ian!” she says with a salute. “You, too, Mr. J. Well, I’m taking off soon, so I guess I’ll see you guys on Monday. Have a great weekend.” The door closes behind me as Kimi takes off.

I set the bags on the kitchen table and start unloading. “I don’t understand why she won’t call me Tyler. She calls you by your first name.”

“That’s because you’re wicked scary.” Ian winks at me as he dries his hands and comes to join me at the table, peering at my haul. “Did they have everything?”

“Yes, everything on the list, exactly as you wrote.” I made it clear to Ian that when he wants me to do the shopping, he has to be specific. Very specific. Like down to the brand name, size, flavor, and color of the package—or better yet, send me a picture. This way, we’re both happy. He gets exactly what he wants, and I have the satisfaction of knowing I carried out my task correctly.

Ian peeks into the shopping bags. “Good job, babe.” Then he gives me a quick kiss on

the mouth. “You’re such a good husband.”

“I try.” Yes, I’m smiling, because when he’s happy, I’m happy. You know the saying Happy Wife, Happy Life? Well, it applies to husbands, too. When Ian’s happy, I’m happy. And when he’s not—well, let’s just say I don’t like it when he’s unhappy.

I tell him about the little old lady behind me in the checkout lane. “She said I don’t look gay. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She probably meant you’re way too serious,” he says, fingering the front of my white button-down, which is tucked into a pair of black trousers. “You can take the man out of his homicide detective job, but you can’t take the homicide detective out of the man.” He grips the front of my shirt and pulls me close for another kiss, this one far more lingering. “I wish I’d been there,” he says. “If she saw us together, she’d know. I’m gay enough for the both of us.”

That makes me smile, too, because he’s right. At the moment, he’s wearing ripped jeans and a white form-fitting T-shirt with a giant sparkly pink unicorn, with a rainbow-colored mane, emblazoned across the front. His light brown, curly hair is still damp from a shower, his beard trimmed short.

At thirty-one, Ian’s a whole sixteen years younger than I am. But the age gap doesn’t explain the difference in our personalities. He’s a ray of sunshine, while I’m a middle-aged, practical man whom Ian sometimes calls Mr. Grumpypants .

The baby monitor sitting on the island counter crackles, and then we hear a breathy sob that quickly ramps up to a full-throated cry.

“Please go soothe your daughter,” Ian says as he bumps my hip with his. “The bottles are almost ready. I’ll bring them right up.”

“You can tell that’s Lizzie?” How can he tell?

Ian looks shocked. “You can’t?”

“They sound the same to me—exactly like every other little baby on the planet.”

Ian raises his brow. “And how many tiny babies have you heard crying?”

“Not many, I guess.”

“Not many is right. Well, other than your sister Beth’s kids. On second thought, there are a lot of McIntyre babies, aren’t there?”

Ian’s referring to my sister’s in-laws. Her husband, Shane McIntyre, comes from a family of seven kids and a rapidly growing number of grandkids. I’ve lost track of how many there are now. Eight? I’m not sure. It seems like every time I turn around, one of the McIntyres is expecting. I can’t keep up.

Ian nudges me toward the stairs. “Go cuddle your daughter before she wakes her brother up. I’ll be right up with the bottles.”

I head upstairs to our bedroom, which is located at the front of the townhouse overlooking the street. The view out our big bay window is mostly obscured by trees. Currently, the babies are sleeping in white bassinets placed at the foot of our bed. As I approach, I gaze down into the first cradle to see a soundly sleeping two-week old infant wrapped up like a burrito in a blue blanket. I move on to the second cradle to find a squirming, squalling bundle of joy swathed in pink.

Ian was right. It’s Lizzie who’s awake and crying.

“I don’t blame you, Lizzie,” I murmur as I carefully unwrap her. “I’d be crying, too,

if someone put me in a straitjacket.”

I don’t understand the whole swaddling thing, but Ian insists that babies like it. He says it makes them feel safe and secure, like when they were in the womb. I’m not so sure I buy that explanation.

Once she’s liberated from her blanket, Lizzie does a full body stretch, extending her arms and legs and twisting her back like she’s a pretzel. She stops crying as she gazes up at me with big blue eyes, blinking like a little owl. Like her brother, she has a good amount of dark hair on her head. It looks like both kids inherited my coloring—dark hair and blue-green eyes.

A daughter and a son.

Elizabeth Ruth and William Alexander Jamison. We named Elizabeth—Lizzie—after my sister, Beth. Her middle name—Ruth—is Ian’s mom’s name. William was my dad’s name, and Alexander is Ian’s maiden name.

I reach down and pat Lizzie’s diaper, which feels suspiciously soggy. That might explain the crying. She hates being wet.

“All right, young lady. Let’s change your diaper.” I pick her up with both hands—careful to support her head with one hand and her bottom with the other—and carry her to the changing table.

It’s still sinking in that I’m a father, not of one kid, but two. I have a daughter and a son. It’s a bit overwhelming—the responsibility, I mean. Keeping them safe. Raising them to be good people.

When I skim my index finger over her tiny little hand, she grasps it tightly. My chest tightens as I stare down at her hand, holding my finger, and marvel at her existence.

As I'm finishing up with Lizzie, I hear Will stirring in his bassinette. "I hear you, buddy. Hold your horses. I'm coming."

Then it's Will's turn. And as I'm putting a clean sleeper on him, Ian walks into our bedroom carrying two burp cloths and two tiny bottles of formula. "Who's ready for brunch?"

* * *

That evening, after dinner, after the babies are tucked once more into their straitjackets and put in bed, Ian and I head for the living room for some down time. It's pretty much the first time we've had all day to relax together. After he turns on the baby monitor, we crash on the sofa to watch a movie. We prop our feet up on the coffee table and sigh in unison. I'm starting to suspect that being a parent is more taxing than being a private investigator. I don't ever remember being this tired, even after an all-night stakeout. Of course it doesn't help that we're getting up several times in the night to feed and comfort crying babies.

Ian reaches for the TV's remote control and starts skimming through our viewing options. "Let me know if you see something you like."

I glance over at him. Before coming downstairs, we had both changed into shorts, no shirts. Ian's long legs are stretched out in front, and his feet are bare. My mind is fixated on the knowledge that I could undress him in less than thirty seconds.

"See anything good yet?" He has scrolled through the previews of half a dozen movies, everything from rom-coms to sci-fi to action movies. "What are you in the mood for?"

"You can stop now," I say. "I know what I want."

Ian pauses his scrolling and glances at me. “And what’s that?”

I take the remote from him and toss it onto the coffee table. “You.”

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Instantly, Ian's expression morphs into a huge grin. "Me?"

"Yes, you." I swear Ian has no idea how appealing he is. He's attractive, yes, but it's more than that. It's his eternally optimistic personality. The sparkle in his green eyes. It's the whole package.

I pull him onto me so that he's straddling my lap. His smile widens when I run my hands up his bare chest, pausing to thumb his nipples and gently tease his piercings.

Ian leans forward and kisses me as I grip the back of his head with one hand, holding him firmly, while my other hand continues its exploration.

He shivers and moans my name as he scoots closer and presses his erection against mine. Even through our clothing, the friction is exquisite. Ian cups my face and deepens our kiss, his tongue slipping inside my mouth and tangling with mine until I'm the one moaning.

I roll us so that Ian's lying on his back on the sofa cushions. I stretch out on top of him, our dicks aligned perfectly. When I press myself against him, rubbing my cock against his, he grasps my hips and pulls me even closer.

I run the fingers of one hand through his hair as I kiss him, hungry to devour him, to eat him up. Being with Ian is electrifying. Every touch, every breath spikes my arousal. I feel like a teenager all over again, needing and wanting. When I grasp a handful of his hair, a harsh groan escapes him. I know what my husband likes, what he craves. A firm touch. He likes that I'm bossy and a bit controlling—especially in bed. With my other hand, I grip his chin and urge his mouth to open for me. He

obeys, surrendering everything. Every breath, every gasp, every shiver.

I can tell when his arousal slips into sheer need. I reach down and slide my hand into his shorts. He's not wearing any underwear, so my hand comes into contact easily with his straining erection. I wrap my fingers around him, squeezing him firmly. He cries out and arches his back.

I kiss my way down his sensitive throat, making him shiver and moan. Then down his chest, over his pecs, and he gasps when I tongue one of his nipple piercings. Even as I'm kissing him, I work his shorts past his ass and down his thighs. Then I make him stand so I can remove them completely. After I toss a blanket over the sofa cushions, I shove my shorts off as well, and now we're both bare-ass naked.

Ian's heated gaze rakes my body. Then he grasps my shoulders and pulls me down on top of him on the cushions. When I align our erections perfectly and rub against him, he groans and holds me closer. I wrap my fingers around him, and he's hot and thick in my grasp. He takes hold of me, too, and we stroke each other, firm and fast, all the while maintaining direct eye contact. His emotions are right there in his beautiful green eyes, honest and vulnerable, and I can't take my eyes off him.

When I think we're both ready, I say, "Come for me, Ian."

Nostrils flaring with arousal, he nods, and then he ejaculates first, on my chest. I follow suit and we both come together, both of us milking out the pleasure without ever breaking eye contact. He collapses on me, and we lie together as we both try to catch our breath.

"Wait here," I say as I stand. "I'll grab us something to clean up with." I head to the hall bathroom to grab two warm wet washcloths and bring them back to the living room, and we wash up.

Suddenly, we hear static from the baby monitor followed by crying. And I'm not talking a whimper—this is a full-out, pissed-off cry.

I press my forehead to Ian's. "Someone's unhappy."

"That would be William, our son." He reaches for his shorts.

I reach for mine and pull them on. "How can you tell?"

"Easy. Lizzie's cries are short and fast, like wah wah wah . Will's cries are slower, more drawn out, as if he needs time in between each cry to suck in enough air. He's also louder."

"Are you making this up?"

"No." Ian laughs as he grabs my hand. "Come on, I'll show you."

We head upstairs to our bedroom, and sure enough, Ian was right. It's Will who's wide awake and in tears. Thankfully, his sister is sleeping through the noise.

"Come here, little buddy," Ian says as he scoops Will up. He cradles our son against his bare chest, and immediately the baby calms down, his cries turning into slightly mollified, breathy complaints. Ian kisses Will's forehead. "What's wrong, baby boy? Your daddies are here."

"Is he wet?" I ask.

Ian pats Will's diaper. "I don't think so."

"Is he hungry again?" I check the time. It doesn't seem like it's been that long since they last ate.

“I doubt it. He’s not due for another bottle for two hours. I think he wants cuddling.” Ian carries Will to one of two matching padded rocking chairs placed in front of the window, sits down, holds him against his chest, and starts rocking. As Ian pats the baby’s back firmly, Will stops crying. “All better now?”

I take a seat on the side of the bed and watch Ian with our son. He’s such a natural. It’s like he was born to be a parent, which is especially amazing when I think of the horrific conditions Ian experienced early in his life.

He’s certainly better at it than I am. I second guess everything.

I’m not inexperienced when it comes to babies. Not at all. My sister, Beth, was only six months old when our father, a Chicago police officer, died in the line of duty. I was eighteen then, still a senior in high school. My mother grieved terribly after the loss of my father—the love of her life. I stepped in to help her around the house, especially with taking care of Beth.

For many months after my dad died, there were days when Mom couldn’t even muster the strength to get out of bed. It seemed as if she’d almost lost the will to live. I think it was knowing she had an infant daughter who needed her desperately that kept her tethered to this life.

So, yeah, I’ve changed a lot of diapers in my life. But Ian? He’s a baby whisperer.

I find myself watching him comfort Will. Before long, our son is quiet again, completely relaxed in Ian’s arms. I walk over to them and run my fingers through Ian’s hair, smiling when he leans into my touch. “You’re a good daddy, Ian.”

He smiles, clearly pleased with the compliment.

We decided before the babies were born that Ian would be called daddy , and I would

be papa .

Ian glances up at me. “Want to put him back in his bed?” Will has fallen back to sleep once more.

“Sure.”

Ian stands and carefully transfers our son to me. I carry him to his bassinette and carefully lay him on his back. As I attempt to wrap him up tight again, his eyelids flutter open for a brief moment, his sleepy gaze unfocused, but then his eyes close, and he’s still.

Ian slips his hand into mine, and we both take a moment to watch our sleeping babies. Even after two weeks, it still feels unreal to the both of us, but especially to me. As a forty- something-year-old bachelor, I’d pretty much given up on ever finding love, let alone a life partner—a soulmate. It wasn’t until I met Ian and realized I was developing feelings for him that I began to hope it wasn’t too late for me.

“I’m so glad Will has your hair color,” Ian says wistfully as he reaches down to stroke our son’s dark hair. “I think he’s going to have your eyes, too.”

My sister and I have eyes that are an unusual shade of blue-green, courtesy of our Swedish mother. They’re not unexpected on my sister, not with her pale blonde hair. But on me, with my darker complexion courtesy of my dad, they are rather unusual.

Will indeed has my hair color—a brown so dark it appears black. When we started thinking about surrogacy, Ian insisted that I be the sperm donor. I thought we should both provide sperm and let fate decide who the biological father, or fathers, would be, but no, he insisted it be me. I’ll never forget his words. “I want to have your baby, Tyler.” His words made me choke up.

And that's what he got. Two of my babies, in fact.

If we do it again, I'll insist that Ian be the sperm donor the next time.

My husband yawns as he slips his arm around my waist. "Let's forget about the movie and go to bed. We don't have much time before they'll be hungry again."

I follow Ian to the bathroom, where we brush our teeth at our his-and-his sinks. Our shorts end up in the laundry basket.

Once we reach our bed, Ian grabs my hand and pulls me down beside him on the mattress. He rolls onto his side, and I spoon him, wrapping my arm around his waist. He presses back against me and sighs as he relaxes into sleep.

* * *

The inevitable happens about two hours later. Lizzie wakes first, letting us know she's at risk of starving to death. Will follows soon after, and now we have babies crying in stereo.

"I'll make the bottles," Ian says as he hops out of bed and pulls on a clean pair of boxers before he races out our bedroom door.

When Ian returns, both babies are wide awake, hungry, and wearing clean diapers.

The babies are lying in the center of the bed, and I'm seated on the edge attempting to entertain them, or at least distract them. "Perfect timing. They're getting restless."

Ian hands me one of the bottles, and then he tosses a burp cloth over his shoulder before he picks up Will. I do the same with Lizzie. Then we carry them to the rockers by the window and feed them.

Half an hour later, after burping and cuddling and washing their faces, we have both babies back in their beds and asleep.

I glance out the window to see it's still dark out. "Back to bed," I say, dragging Ian down onto the mattress with me. I pull him into my arms.

As usual, Ian falls asleep first. I lie awake enjoying the feel of him in my arms. I figure this must be what parenting is like—stealing a few hours of sleep when and where you can. And I wouldn't trade this experience for the world.

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The next morning, while I feed the babies, Tyler makes us breakfast. I enjoy watching him standing in front of the stove wearing nothing but a pair of navy blue knit shorts, his feet and torso bare, his short dark hair mussed from sleep. I'm loving these lazy mornings when we get to hang out at home and simply enjoy each other's company. I know they won't last forever because in six weeks our paternity leave will end. And frankly, I don't want to think about that right now.

I absolutely hate the idea of leaving our babies and going back to work. Tyler keeps asking me what we're going to do about childcare, and frankly I don't want to think about it. Get a babysitter? A nanny? Find a daycare? I can't even contemplate the idea.

I want to be the one to take care of our babies. I wonder how Tyler would feel if I stayed home with them. Would he be disappointed in me? The plan was for us to work together as private investigators—as partners. And as much as I love the idea of working with Tyler, I want to stay home with our kids.

It's not that money is an issue. My paternal grandfather, Tobias Alexander, made sure of that when he left both me and my sister huge trust funds upon his death. I don't have to work a day in my life if I don't want to. But that's not the point.

Tyler and I embarked on the PI business together, as partners. In fact, it was my idea. I wanted to work with him. I wanted us to spend our days together, as well as our nights. It was something we were going to do as a team.

I've loved all the stakeouts we've been on, the two of us holed up in his car late into the night—or into the wee hours of the morning as was most often the case, sharing a

thermos of coffee, eating snacks I packed for us. I mostly got a kick out of spending time with him.

In the beginning, when I suggested we work together, he was afraid I'd get hurt. He's a twenty-plus-year veteran of the Chicago Police Department, and I have zero experience. I'd never even held a gun before Tyler took me to the shooting range for lessons.

I had to beg him to let me work with him. Reluctantly, he finally agreed. And after all that, how can I tell him I've changed my mind? How can I tell him I want to stay home with our babies?

Right now, I'm sitting at the kitchen table giving Lizzie her bottle, while Will hangs out on top of the table in his infant seat. He's already had his bottle, so he's content to lie there and stare at the ceiling light overhead.

Lizzie is halfway done with her breakfast when there's a knock at the back door.

I automatically start to get up, but Tyler gestures for me to stay seated and says, "I'll get it."

He opens the door and steps aside as a very frazzled Kimi comes in. She pauses at the threshold, breathing heavily as she stands there wringing her hands. Her spiky purple hair is uncharacteristically flat and dull. She looks like she recently rolled out of bed.

"Kimi, what's wrong?" Tyler asks, automatically switching to his cop voice. Instantly, his demeanor changes from relaxed to sharp and focused.

"I'm really sorry to bother you guys," she says. Nervously, she runs the fingers of one hand through her hair.

“It’s no problem, Kimi,” I say. She doesn’t look good. She looks stressed, and if I had to guess, I’d say she didn’t get much sleep last night.

“I know you’re both still on leave,” she says, her eyes darting to the baby in my arms, “and you’re not taking any cases right now.” She pauses, looking from me to Tyler. “But—”

“What is it, Kimi?” I ask. Because something clearly is very wrong.

“I hate to even ask,” she continues. “I really do. And I wouldn’t if it weren’t so urgent.”

“Kimi,” Tyler says in his bossy voice. “Tell us what’s wrong.”

“It’s my roommate, Dina. She didn’t come home last night. I waited up for her, but she never showed. That’s so not like her.”

“Did you try calling her?” Tyler asks.

Kimi nods. “I’ve been calling and texting since the wee hours, but she’s never replied.”

“Where was she last night?” Tyler asks, immediately jumping into investigative mode.

“She went out clubbing with her friend Teresa and Teresa’s boyfriend, Neil. I called Teresa first thing this morning and asked when she last saw Dina. She said it was around two-thirty, when Dina called for a rideshare at the club. Teresa said she and Neil watched her get into the car and drive off, but she never arrived home.” She looks from Tyler to me, her gaze beseeching. “It’s not like Dina to run off without telling anyone. Besides, she works today, and she never misses work. Something has

to be wrong. I hate to ask—”

“It’s all right, Kimi,” Tyler says as he wipes his hands on a kitchen towel. “I’ll find her.”

“You will?” Her eyes light up. “Oh, Tyler, thank you.”

“You know the drill,” Tyler says. “Text me everything you can think of—a physical description of your roommate, a recent photo. Tell me what you know about where she went last night, her place of employment, and the names and numbers of her friends. I’ll need Teresa’s contact info and address.”

Kimi nods eagerly as she backs toward the door. “I’ll return to the office and gather the info for you.”

Tyler brings me a plate of scrambled eggs and two slices of buttered toast. He goes back for silverware and a jar of strawberry jam. He points his index finger at me. “You eat, while I go get dressed.”

“Aren’t you going to eat something before you go?” I ask as he walks toward the stairs.

Tyler shakes his head. Once he’s in work mode, he’s laser-focused, like a dog with a bone. “I’ll grab something later. Right now, every second counts.”

“Wait! I want to come up with you. Can you grab Will? I’ll bring Lizzie.”

Tyler frowns at me. “What about your breakfast? The food will get cold.”

“I’ll heat it up and eat it after you’ve gone. I promise.”

Tyler and I each carry a baby upstairs to our bedroom. He lays Will in his bassinette, and I lay Lizzie on the changing table. Now that they have full bellies, they're ready for clean diapers and a nap.

Tyler heads for our bathroom so he can grab a quick shower and dress. By the time I've got Lizzie back in her bassinette and I'm changing Will, Tyler comes out of the bathroom wearing a white bath towel wrapped around his waist. He's drying his hair with another towel. I watch him cross the room and disappear into our closet to dress.

Once I have both babies safely in their cradles, I head for the closet to indulge in one of my favorite activities, which is watching my husband get dressed. He's a former detective—of course he's going to put on a suit. And Tyler in a black suit and white dress shirt is fucking hot. There's no other way to describe it.

As I'm leaning against the doorjamb, my arms crossed over my chest, I look my fill as he pulls on his black boxer briefs, drawing them up his long, muscular legs. Then he steps into a pair of black trousers. A white short-sleeve T-shirt is next, followed by a long-sleeve white button-down shirt, both of which he tucks into his trousers. Then comes one of my favorite accessories—his black leather belt. I watch him thread it through his belt loops, then cinch it snug and buckle it.

Watching him handle a leather belt makes my tummy feel weird, in the most delicious way.

As he takes a seat on a padded bench, he glances over at me, a knowing grin on his face. "Enjoying the show?"

I nod. "You bet I am."

Tyler pulls on a pair of black socks, followed by his shiny black Oxfords. Lastly, he stands and slips his black suit jacket on.

My breath catches. This is the man I first met—the gruff homicide detective investigating the murder of my friend Eric Townsend at the yacht club. My boat was moored right next to Eric’s boat. The first time I saw Tyler, I was sitting on the dock trying not to puke. Seeing Eric’s dead body—his tortured body—sickened me to my core.

I remember the moment I first heard Tyler’s deep voice as he assumed control of the crime scene. I vividly recall staring down at a pair of polished black shoes, and as my gaze lifted to his face, my pulse started pounding. He was the most gorgeous man I’d ever seen.

And now, after a tumultuous start, we’re married and parents.

“Ian.” His voice has dropped an octave.

I realize he’s watching me staring at him. I salute. “Yes, sir.”

He cocks an amused brow at me. “Sir? Really?”

My face heats. “I can’t help it. You’re putting out cop vibes. You know what that does to me.”

He walks right up to me, until we’re standing eye-to-eye. He’s only a bit taller than my six feet. “Hold on to that thought. We can play cop when I get home tonight. Now, I need to know you’re okay with me taking on this case.”

“Of course,” I say, surprised that he’d even feel the need to ask. “This is for Kimi . She’s not just our employee. She’s our friend. Of course you have to help her.”

He nods. “I needed to be sure. I didn’t want you to feel I was going back on my word. We agreed we’d take parental leave, and now here I am taking on a case after only

two weeks.”

I lean in to kiss him. My fingers are in his hair, which is still damp from his shower, and right now I can’t get close enough to him. “I love you,” I say against his lips. “I’m perfectly fine with you going out and being a hero. Go find Kimi’s roommate.”

Tyler’s arms come around me, and he pulls me even closer. “I’ll make it up to you later, I promise.”

Grinning, I run my hands up his chest, smoothing the fine fabric of his shirt over his firm pecs. “You bet you will.”

The last thing he does before leaving the closet is open the gun safe embedded in the wall. As soon as we learned we were going to be parents, he had a gun safe built into our closet. He wanted a secure place to store his guns and ammo—something our children would never have access to. He enters the code into a digital panel, opens the door, and pulls out his hip holster, which he secures around his waist. He tucks his Glock in on one side and two magazines on the other. Also attached to his hip holster are a pair of handcuffs and a slender flashlight.

Seeing him armed reminds me of how serious this PI job can be. You never know when things are about to go south. “Be careful,” I say, my smile suddenly gone.

I’m only now realizing how much is on the line. It’s not just me he needs to come home to. He has two children now who depend on him.

Tyler nods, his expression serious, as if he knows what I’m thinking. “Always.” He kisses me one last time before he walks out of the closet.

I watch as he strolls over to the bassinets, and my throat tightens when he leans down and kisses first Lizzie on her forehead, then Will. Then, to me, he says, “Take

good care of our babies.”

I nod.

Our babies.

Dear God, this man makes me weak in the knees.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am

I leave the townhouse through the back door and walk over to the carriage house, where I find Kimi seated at the reception desk, busily typing something into her phone.

When she sees me enter, she finishes up what she's doing and presses a button. "I sent you all the information you asked for. If you need anything else, let me know, and I'll run it down for you."

I nod. "Thanks. I'm heading out. I'll let you know as soon as I find something."

Kimi swallows hard and nods shakily. "I can't thank you enough, Mr. J."

"No need to thank me." I hold out my hand. "Can I have the key to your apartment? I'll stop there first to make sure she hasn't returned since you left this morning."

Kimi pulls her key off her keychain and hands it to me. "I'm afraid our apartment is a mess. I didn't do the dishes last night, and—well, it's a mess."

"Don't worry. It's fine. I'll be in touch."

I leave the carriage house and hop into my car. As I pull away from the townhouse, I'm hit with an uncomfortable sense of déjà vu . It wasn't that long ago that Ian's younger sister, Layla, went missing. She was about the same age as Dina is now. It turned out that it was her shitty bodyguard at the time who sold her out to a sex trafficker. I was on administrative leave from work at the time, and prohibited from doing any investigatory work, but I couldn't not help Ian's sister. Ian and I worked together to find her, save her, and in the process we rescued a bunch of other young

women who'd been abducted for the same purpose.

Finding Ian's sister cost me my twenty-four-year police career, but I'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. I hope Kimi's roommate isn't caught up in something that bad. You never know with cases like these. It might be something simple as taking off and forgetting to call her roommate, or it could be something serious. I'm hoping for the former.

It's a twenty-minute drive to Kimi's apartment in Rogers Park. She and Dina live in a unit on the third floor of an older brick building. Because of its age, there's no elevator. As I climb three flights of stairs, I hear TV sets playing behind closed apartment doors—mostly game shows and soap operas from the sound of it—as well as the occasional dog barking.

When I reach Apartment 3D, I knock first in case Dina is home. I don't want to walk in unannounced and scare the living daylights out of her. When there's no answer to my repeated knocks, I let myself in using Kimi's key.

The apartment is cool and dark, and it smells like pumpkin spice air freshener. I flip on some lights. "Dina? Are you here? I'm Tyler Jamison, Kimi's friend. She's worried about you."

When there's no reply, I begin a thorough search of the apartment, looking for signs of a struggle or forced entry. The door and window locks look untouched. And while the apartment looks lived in, there's no obvious sign of an altercation.

It's not a big place, so it takes me fewer than two minutes to verify she's not here. And it doesn't take me long to figure out which bedroom is hers. I find a pile of junk mail addressed to Dina Johnson lying on the nightstand beside the bed in the second bedroom.

There's nothing here that gives me any insight into where Dina might be, so I lock up the apartment on my way out and head back to my car. My next stop is to visit Teresa and Neil, as they were the last ones to see Dina before she got in her rideshare last night. According to Kimi's notes, Dina and Teresa work together at a restaurant.

It's another ten minutes to Teresa and Neil's apartment. They live in a more upscale complex, in an apartment on the second floor. I take the elevator up.

When I knock on the door, a woman answers. Her eyes are bloodshot, and she's still in her nightgown and robe. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a messy ponytail.

"Teresa Maxwell?"

The young woman nods as she opens the door wide. "Kimi told me you were going to stop by. Please, come in, detective."

I walk into the apartment and quickly scan the living room and kitchen. "I'm a private investigator, not a detective. Is your boyfriend here? Neil?"

She shakes her head. "No. He left at six this morning for work. He's a nurse. He works 12-hours shifts, so he won't be home until around eight this evening."

I motion to the sofa. "Have a seat, please. I'd like to ask you some questions." After she sits, I take a seat on the recliner across from her and pull out my notepad and pen. "From what I gather, you are probably one of the last people to see Dina last night. Tell me what you remember."

She proceeds to replay their movements from the night before. After having dinner at a local Chinese restaurant, they ended up at a nightclub called Jax.

"Dina called for a ride on one of the rideshare apps. Neil and I waited with her

outside the club doors for her ride to show up. A car pulled up to the curb, and the driver waved to her. Dina walked up to the front passenger window and leaned in to speak to the driver. A moment later, she smiled and waved to us as she got into the back seat.”

“What kind of car was it?”

“It was white, but I don’t know the make and model.”

“Four doors, I assume, if she got in the back seat?”

Teresa nods.

“What was her state of mind at that time?”

“What do you mean?” Teresa shrugs. “She seemed fine.”

“How much had she had to drink? Do you think she was drunk?”

Teresa winces. “She’d had a lot to drink, but she wasn’t wasted, just buzzed.”

“Did you hear what she said to the driver? Did she confirm it was actually her ride?”

She shakes her head. “No, we were too far away to hear them. We were standing just outside the doorway, and it was really noisy behind us in the club.”

“And you don’t know which rideshare company she used?”

“No, I’m sorry. She uses more than one, so I can’t be sure.”

“You didn’t see a logo on the car?”

“It was too dark, and I guess I wasn’t paying that much attention. I assumed it was her ride.”

“One last question for now,” I say. “How do you know Dina? Kimi said you two are friends.”

Teresa nods. “We work together at Maxine’s, a restaurant in Rogers Park. Neil used to work there too, when he was a student. That’s where we all met.”

“What do you do there?”

“I’m a server.”

“Both of you? Dina, too?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anyone at the restaurant who has ever given Dina a hard time? Perhaps an employee or maybe a customer? Does she have any admirers? Or enemies?”

She shakes her head. “A hard time? No, I don’t think so. Dina’s never complained about anyone in particular. But she does get hit on a lot by customers. She’s asked out a lot, too, sometimes repeatedly by the same guys, but she’s never indicated anyone was a serious problem.”

I nod as I finish up my notes. “Thank you for the information. I’ll be in touch if I have any further questions.”

Teresa walks me to the door, her face pale, her eyes framed by dark shadows. “You don’t think something bad has happened to her, do you? I could never forgive myself if it had.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any answers for you yet, but hopefully I will have some soon.”

When I get back to my car, I use my phone to check the hours of operation for the nightclub they visited last night. As it turns out, Jax doesn’t open until 4 PM. I head over there anyway hoping I can talk to someone. As I drive past the front of the club, I take note of two security cameras pointed at the front sidewalk and curb. If Dina got into a car, there should be camera footage. All I need is the license plate number of the car she got into.

I pull around to the rear parking lot, expecting it to be empty, but there are two cars parked near the back entrance—a sleek silver Porsche and a beat-up blue Ford Fiesta. I park beside the Ford and walk up to the back door. It’s locked, so I knock loudly. Twice.

An older black man wearing dusty coveralls and a toolbelt answers the door. “We’re not open yet,” he says in a gruff voice. “Not ’til four. Come back then.”

I pull out my leather wallet and flip it open to reveal my ID. It’s only my business card for the PI business, but it looks official—impressive even. I learned from my years, first as a police officer and then as a homicide detective, that flashing an ID can accomplish a lot. “I need to speak to the owner. Is he here? Or can you tell me how to contact him?”

The door suddenly swings wide open, and a brunette woman dressed in a form-fitting cream skirt and a sleeveless white silk blouse appears beside the handyman. “I’m the owner.” She eyes me from head to toe. “And you are?”

I show her my ID. “Tyler Jamison, private investigator.”

Her eyes widen a fraction. “A private investigator?” She sounds more intrigued than

she should. “Do come in.” And then she addresses the older man beside her. “Thanks, Eddie. I’ll handle Mr. Jamison myself.”

As I step inside, I wonder what she thinks she’s going to handle. I follow her down a hallway to an office. She closes the door behind us and leans against it, her ankles crossed. She’s wearing sharp cream-colored stilettos, and her skirt is a bit on the short side, which means she’s showing a lot of leg. It used to bother me that looking at an attractive woman’s leg did absolutely nothing for me. Now I know why, and I no longer care.

“Vicky Moreland,” she says as she pushes away from the door and walks toward me. She offers me her hand, and we shake. Her nails are long and painted a bright glossy red. Her fingers are adorned with a number of flashy rings. If those are real diamonds, she’s wearing a small fortune. I’m guessing the Porche outside is hers.

When she holds my hand longer than necessary, I gently pull mine free. “Ms. Moreland—”

“It’s miss ,” she says, cutting me off. The corners of her mouth curve upward. “I’m single.”

And I’m not. “Miss Moreland. I’m investigating a missing person case. According to the young woman’s friends, she was last seen here at your club at approximately two-thirty AM this morning, when she got into the back seat of a white sedan and was driven away. I’m hoping your surveillance cameras picked up her departure. If I could look at the footage... I’m hoping to get the make, model, and license plate number of the vehicle she left in.”

The woman eyes me for a long moment, apparently sizing me up. “I might be persuaded to let you see the footage, if you offer to buy me a drink first.” Her voice trails off suggestively as she gestures to the door. “The bar’s right this way.”

“You’re wasting your time, ma’am. I’m married.”

She smiles. “If I don’t mind, why should you?”

I’m not even going to dignify that comment. “Miss Moreland, you can either show me the footage now, or I can go file a police report and get them out here with a warrant.”

“Fine!” She turns back to the door. “Follow me.”

The security office is little more than a glorified closet. Along the back wall is a long table holding a number of monitors.

“May I?” I ask, gesturing to the keyboard.

She leans against the door jamb. “Help yourself.”

It doesn’t take me long to scroll back through the footage from early this morning. Teresa said Dina left at two-thirty, so I scroll back to minutes before that time stamp. When I see a trio—two girls and a guy—stepping out onto the front sidewalk, I recognize Teresa. I assume the male is her boyfriend, Neil. The other female must be Dina. The three of them are huddled in a group, waiting.

When a white sedan pulls up to the curb, the front passenger window goes down. Dina looks at the car, then walks over to the window and leans in for a rather lengthy conversation with the driver.

Dina nods, straightens, and then waves at her friends as she opens the rear passenger door and climbs into the vehicle. A moment later, the car pulls away from the curb. I pause the video and make note of the make, model, and license plate number. The video is black-and-white, but the resolution is good.

“Is that the girl you’re looking for?” the owner asks me.

“I believe so.” I back the footage up to get a good view of Dina and use my phone to snap a picture. Then I text the photo to Kimi to get confirmation of Dina’s identity.

Kimi texts me back promptly:

OMG, yes, that’s Dina!!

Then I send her a photo of the license plate and ask her to run a search for me. I need the owner’s name and address.

“Thanks for your cooperation,” I tell the woman as I rise from my seat. “How long do you keep video footage?”

“Two weeks,” she says.

“Good. I might need to see it again.”

By the time I’m back in my car, Kimi texts me with the vehicle owner’s name and address.

Terry Kramer 120 College Center Dr. apt 2C Roger’s Park

That’s not far. I head straight there, climb the steps to the second floor, and knock on the door of unit 2C.

When no one answers, I knock again, this time louder. I hear footsteps coming from within the apartment, and eventually, the door opens, but only slightly. The chain lock is still engaged.

A young man with greasy, long brown hair peers at me through the gap in the door.
“Yes?”

“Are you Terry Kramer?”

He frowns. “Who’s asking?”

I flash my ID. “Tyler Jamison, private investigator. I’m looking for Dina Johnson. Is she here?”

His eyes widen at the mention of Dina’s name, and he ducks out of sight and slams the door in my face.

Fuck.

Nothing like broadcasting your guilt.

I pound on the door. “Open up, Mr. Kramer, or I’ll have the cops out here before you can draw your next breath.”

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am

The twins are napping when I put a load of baby clothes in the washer. I've never done so much laundry in my life. It seems like they're intentionally spitting up on their clothes, on burp cloths, and on me and Tyler, just so I have more laundry to do.

When I finally get a chance to make myself an iced caramel coffee and sit for the first time all morning, Tyler's mother, Ingrid, calls. One of the perks of marrying Tyler is that I inherited his mother. Ingrid is far more than an amazing mother-in-law—she's become a real friend. When I first started dating her son, she and I bonded over our favorite topic of conversation—Tyler. We both adore Tyler, and that automatically made us the best of friends.

“Ingrid! How are you?”

“I'm fine, darling,” she says in her soft, slightly accented voice. “The important thing is, how are you ? And how are my gorgeous new grandbabies?”

I take a sip of my deliciously caramel-flavored coffee. “They're doing great. Both are sleeping right now. I finally got a chance to sit down after doing the breakfast dishes and putting a load of baby clothes in the washer.”

“And where's my son?” Her voice is slightly sharper now. “Why isn't he doing his share of the housework?”

“Oh, he is, trust me. But actually, he's not here right now. He's out working a case.”

“Working?” She literally sounds disappointed. “But I thought you two were on paternity leave.”

“We are. But Kimi—you know, our office manager, you’ve met her—”

“The girl with the purple hair?”

“Yes, that’s her. She asked Tyler for his help this morning. Her roommate didn’t come home last night after clubbing with friends. Tyler offered to find her.”

“Of course, he did,” she says, sighing with affection. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from my son. Would you be interested in some company? I’d love to bring you some lunch.”

“Yes, please. Come cuddle babies with me.”

* * *

Half an hour later, I catch a glimpse of Ingrid’s gray Honda as she pulls into the drive. She parks behind my SUV and comes to the back door, where I’m waiting for her so she doesn’t need to ring the bell. I don’t want to risk waking the babies.

I open the door for her. “Ingrid, come in.”

Ingrid Jamison is a beautiful woman, tall and slender and so graceful, with a creamy pale complexion that denotes her Swedish roots. Her silky, pale blonde hair is up in a stylish twist, and her blue-green eyes are as clear and bright as the Caribbean. She looks elegant, as always. Today, she’s dressed in a pair of cream slacks with a pale blue silk blouse. A string of creamy pearls adorns her long, graceful neck.

She walks inside carrying a casserole dish in an insulated bag. “I made a chicken-and-potato casserole,” she says as she sets it on the stove. “This should last you two a couple of days at least and save you some time in the kitchen.”

I laugh. “Not after Tyler gets his hands on it. That man can eat.”

“Don’t I know it,” she says with a grin. Then she gives me a full-bodied hug. That woman gives the best hugs. “Now, first things first.” She turns on the kitchen faucet and washes her hands. As she’s drying them, she asks, “Where are my grandbabies?”

“They’re asleep in the living room but they should be waking up any time now to eat. I swear, that’s all they do—sleep and eat.”

She laughs. “I’m sure that’s not all they do.”

“Well, no. We’ve changed more diapers than we can possibly count.”

“May I?” she asks as she takes a few steps in that direction.

“Of course!” I’m always eager to show our babies off.

I follow Ingrid into the living room and watch as she leans over the side of the playpen and gazes down at the newest additions to the family. She has three grandkids already, courtesy of her daughter, Beth. And now our two.

She smiles at the sight of our two swaddled bundles of joy. “Oh, Ian, they’re so precious. So perfect. I swear, Will looks exactly like Tyler did at that age.”

Hearing her say that tickles me to death.

I stop beside her and gaze down at two sleeping angels. They’re lying about a foot apart. Will is swaddled in a pale green baby blanket, and Lizzie in a pale peach one.

Ingrid reaches down and strokes Will’s hair. “Tyler had a lot of hair when he was born, too.” Then she switches her attention to Lizzie, who also has Tyler’s dark hair.

“She’s going to be gorgeous. I can already picture Tyler beating off her admirers.”

When Ingrid straightens and turns to me, there are tears in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you both.” She pulls me in her arms and hugs me again, and now I’m getting teary-eyed right along with her. “I’m sorry,” she says with a soft chuckle as she releases me. “I get so emotional over my grandbabies. Just ignore me.”

“You don’t need to apologize, Gigi.” That’s the grandmother name she’s chosen to go by. “I’m right there with you. I find myself getting teary-eyed over them at least once a day.”

“All right,” she says as she steps away. “I’ll stop gawking at them so we can have lunch.”

I set the kitchen table for us while Ingrid pours us two sweet teas.

“So, Ian, how are you doing, really ?” Ingrid asks as we dig into our casserole.

“I’m ridiculously happy.” I take a bite of my lunch. “This is delicious, thank you. And I’m pinching myself every day.”

“And Tyler? How’s he handling fatherhood?”

“Beautifully. He helps out with everything, and he runs all the errands for me. I’m in nesting mode right now and hate going out if I can help it. The only time we’ve been out, as a family, since the babies were born was to take them to their first pediatrician appointment.”

She takes a sip of her tea. “Do you mind that he’s working a case this soon?”

“No, of course not. He wouldn’t be Tyler if he didn’t want to help those in need.”

She smiles, but it's bittersweet. "He's so much like his father, always the hero. Always the first responder."

"Don't I know it," I say, remembering how he came running to my rescue when Roy Valdez—the one who'd killed my friend Eric—came after me on my own yacht, with the intention of killing me. And then there was the time Tyler sacrificed his own career to save my sister from sex traffickers. "Tyler wouldn't be Tyler if he didn't insist on saving people. It's in his DNA, and I don't mind one bit. It only makes me love him more."

But if he's a hero, what does that make me? I feel even worse for wanting to stay home with the kids while he goes out to investigate cases and potentially risk his life every day.

She studies me a moment. "Honey, what's wrong?"

I wave off her question. "Nothing. I'm fine."

Ingrid reaches across the table and takes my hand, squeezing it gently. "Sweetheart, you don't look fine. You know you can tell me anything, right? Becoming a parent can be pretty overwhelming. I totally understand what you're going through."

I take a bite of my food, chew, and swallow. It goes down like a rock, not because the food isn't good—it's fantastic—but because of my own guilt.

"Ian." She's using her mom voice, which makes me smile.

"It's not that. I mean, yes, babies are a lot of work, but it's fun. I'm enjoying them so much. It's just that—" Now I'm the one tearing up. "Having the babies has brought up a lot of deeply buried emotional stuff—my birth mom, my early childhood."

She tightens her grip on my hand. “Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry.” She knows I’m adopted, and she knows I was taken away from my birth mother for the first time when I was four, but she doesn’t know the awful, disgusting, gory details. It’s not something I like to think about, let alone discuss. Besides my own family, Tyler is the only one who knows the specifics of what happened. “I don’t remember a lot, but what I do recall gives me nightmares. And the idea of my kids going through something like that—”

“Ian, that’s never going to happen.”

“Rationally, I know that. But, irrationally, it makes me want to ensure they have a safe and happy upbringing. I want them to know they’re loved.”

“And they will, honey. Of course, they will. You and Tyler are amazing parents.”

I lean back in my chair and blurt out what’s eating at me. “I want to stay home with them.” There! I’ve said it. Out loud, for the first time.

“Stay home? You mean—”

“I mean, I want to be a stay-at-home dad.”

She smiles. “I think that’s a wonderful idea.”

My confidence deflates. “You don’t think Tyler will be disappointed? We were supposed to work together as PIs. We were supposed to be partners. I’m afraid if I tell him I want to stay home with our babies, he’ll—”

“Ian Jamison!”

Hearing Ingrid call me by my married name makes me smile.

“I promise you, Tyler will be thrilled that you want to stay home with the kids.”

“But it means he’ll have to do all the PI work by himself.”

“He won’t mind. When he was with the police force, he often worked alone. Trust me, he’s going to be pleased you want to stay home with the babies.”

I want to believe her, but my stomach is in knots.

“You need to tell him, Ian. Get this off your chest. The sooner you tell him, the sooner you’ll realize he’s fine with you staying home.”

The baby monitor on the kitchen counter crackles before we hear a faint squawk.

“That’s Will,” I say. I glance at the kitchen clock. “He’s hungry. They’ll both want to eat soon.”

Ingrid stands. “Do you mind if I get him?”

“Please do. I’ll get their bottles ready. Then you can help me feed them.”

Once I have the bottles ready, Ingrid and I end up on the living room sofa, each of us holding a baby, as we feed them. I have Lizzie, and she has Will. I don’t know what’s more precious—my babies or the look on Ingrid’s face as she can’t keep her eyes off them.

She nods to Lizzie. “I burst into tears when Tyler told me you two had named your daughter Elizabeth, after her Auntie Beth. And naming your son after Tyler’s dad—I can’t imagine anything more perfect. William would be so honored, so happy to know his son is married and has children of his own.” She gives me a tender smile. “You be sure to tell Tyler tonight, okay? Tell him how you feel. Get that off your

chest so you can stop worrying.”

I nod. “I’ll tell him.”

“Tonight,” she insists. “Promise me.”

“Yes, tonight.”

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The primary suspect slams his apartment door in my face, and as I'm about to kick it open, I hear the chain lock slide free. Then the door opens part way.

Terry Kramer stands half hidden behind the door, looking haggard and hungover. He's dressed in a pair of raggedy blue jean shorts and a badly stained Chicago Cubs T-shirt.

"Yeah, she's here," he says, his voice rough. He steps back and motions me inside. "I've been asking her to leave all morning. I even offered to pay for a taxi or even drive her home myself, but she refuses to get out of bed. Maybe you can talk some sense into her."

I feel an immediate rush of relief, simply knowing Dina's alive. In my career as a homicide detective, I saw more dead bodies than I can count. I admit, I was expecting the worst. "Take me to her, please."

Terry heads down the hallway and pauses in front of an open bedroom door. "She's in here."

I step inside a room that reeks of pot and sex. It's so dark in here, I can barely make out the sight of a body huddled beneath the bedding. "Dina?"

I hear a faint rustle of bedding, followed by an anguished moan.

My heart rate kicks up a notch as I wonder if perhaps she's not all right after all. "Dina, I'm turning on the light." I flip the light switch, which turns on a lamp on a bedside table.

The blonde lying in bed screeches as she pulls the covers over her head.

Now that the light is on, I can see the room clearly. The carpeted floor is littered with empty food wrappers, crushed beer cans, and empty liquor bottles. The furniture is old, scarred, and mismatched. Now I can easily make out the lump hiding beneath a tan bedspread.

“Dina?” I walk over to the bed. “Are you okay? My name’s Tyler Jamison. Kimi asked me to—”

“I know who you are,” Dina mutters from beneath the covers. “Kimi talks about you all the time.” She lowers the blanket to her neck and peers up at me. Her brown eyes are bloodshot, and her shoulder-length hair is a tangled mess.

“You scared the daylight out of your roommate when you didn’t come home last night,” I say. “Can you tell me what happened?” I’m still not entirely sure that Terry Kramer has nothing to answer for.

Dina glances past me at Terry, then at the disheveled bedroom. “Oh, God.” She moans as she covers her eyes. “This place is a pigsty.”

Terry is loitering in the doorway, and I have to wonder if Dina finds his presence intimidating. I still don’t know exactly what transpired here. Terry’s certainly not off the hook. If he took advantage of this girl—I glance back at him. “Do you mind waiting in the living room? I’d like to speak to Dina alone.” And before giving Terry a chance to answer me, I push him out into the hallway and close the door in his face. “Dina, did Terry hurt you?”

She grimaces as she shakes her head. “No.”

“Are you sure? Be honest with me. If he hurt you, or coerced you, or took advantage

of you in any way, you need to tell me. I'll make sure he's held accountable."

She sighs. "He didn't do anything wrong. I'm fine. Just hungover. And I have a headache."

"How much did you drink last night?"

She scoffs. "Too much, apparently. So much that I went home with Terry and let him—we—well, I'm sure you can guess." She glances down at the women's clothing on the floor—an orange dress, underwear, a bra—and winces.

"I assume you had sex with Terry last night."

She nods. "Please don't remind me."

"Was it consensual?"

Dina scrunches her eyes shut. "Yes."

"And he didn't pressure you in any way?"

"He didn't. I was wasted last night, and I only have myself to blame."

"Do you know Terry? I mean, from before last night?"

"Yes, we went to high school together. He comes into the restaurant where I work a lot. He's been asking me out for a long time, and I always say no."

"But you didn't say no last night?"

"No. I was stupid drunk, and I did a stupid thing. I called for a rideshare last night,

but then Terry pulled up to the curb when he spotted me standing outside the club. He offered me a ride, and stupid me, I thought a free ride was better than paying for one. So, I got in his car and canceled my rideshare. Terry asked me if I wanted to come back to his place to smoke some weed, and like an idiot, I said yes. We smoked, and I drank more, and the next thing I knew, we were both naked in this bed, where I did more stupid things.” She covers her face again and makes an agonized sound.

I nod toward the bedroom door. “I’ll step out so you can get dressed. Then I’m taking you home.”

Looking miserable, she nods.

I find Terry sitting on a well-worn sofa in the living room. He’s not looking so good himself.

“Are you calling the police?” he asks.

“Is there a reason why I should? Dina told me the sex was consensual.”

He shrugs. “It was. But the only reason she agreed to come home with me last night was because she was drunk. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have come. She doesn’t even like me.”

“And yet, knowing that, you still brought her here.”

He stares down at the floor. “Yeah.”

“Well, bad judgment isn’t a crime, drunk or not. Dina confirmed it was consensual, so I don’t see this as a criminal issue.”

Terry blows out a relieved breath.

While I'm waiting for Dina to appear, I text Kimi and Ian, both, to let them know I found Dina and that she's okay.

Then I send a second text to Kimi:

I'm taking Dina home. If you want to take off the rest of the day, it's fine. I think your roommate might need some support.

Kimi texts me back:

You don't mind?

I reply:

Of course not. Ask Jerry to answer the phones.

Then I text Ian to tell him I'll be home after I drop Dina off at her apartment.

Dina finally comes out of the bedroom, looking forlorn and sheepish. Her orange dress is badly wrinkled. This is definitely going to be a walk of shame for her.

I open the apartment door. "Ready?"

She nods. "Yes." She doesn't bother to look at Terry as she heads for the door.

Terry watches her walk out of his apartment. He looks like he wants to say something, but he doesn't. She doesn't even acknowledge his presence.

When we reach the curb, I open the front passenger door for Dina, and she slides in and buckles her seatbelt. She pulls down the visor and stares at her reflection. Nervously, she fusses with her hair, trying to tame the tangles.

I get in and start the engine, wondering what to say to her. I don't think there's much I can say. Obviously, she made some bad decisions last night. But something does occur to me. "Did you use protection last night?"

Dina whips her head in my direction. "Protection?"

Oh, come on. Surely this girl wasn't born yesterday. "Protection—condoms, birth control? Are you on the pill?"

She pales at the question. "No."

"Did you use condoms last night?"

Another shake of her head. "I don't know." Her brow furrows as she tries to recall. "I don't remember. Probably not. I mean, it happened so fast. I don't see how he had time to get one on. Certainly not the first time. And after that, no. He didn't use condoms."

"You should always use protection, not only to prevent pregnancy, but to avoid contracting STDs as well."

Dina turns to look out her side window, putting an end to my lecture on safe sex. She may be a bit disconcerted, but for me, this is a good outcome. Hell, it's a great outcome. It could have been so much worse. I think back to all the cases I investigated as a homicide detective, all the times when young women went missing and all we found were their bodies.

When I pull up in front of Dina's apartment, Kimi is already there, standing in front of the building. She runs out to the car and opens Dina's door. "Thank God! I was so worried."

“I’m sorry,” Dina murmurs to her roommate. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I passed out before I could think to call you. And then, this morning, I couldn’t face it.”

Kimi leans into the car, gazing past her friend to me, her eyes brimming with tears. “I can’t thank you enough, Mr. J.”

“No need to thank me, Kimi. I’m just glad she’s okay.”

After Dina gets out of the car, Kimi closes the door and walks her friend up the sidewalk to their building. She waves at me before they step inside.

I text Ian.

How’s it going, babe?

He texts me back a few minutes later.

Good. We’re napping.

That makes me smile. I love how easily Ian has taken to parenting. That really shouldn’t surprise me because he has such a big heart, and he’s such a softie for love and affection.

I send one last text.

I’m on my way home. Do you need me to pick up anything?

He texts me back immediately.

Nope. We just need you.

When I arrive home half an hour later, the house is quiet. The downstairs is empty. I head upstairs to find the babies sleeping in their bassinets, and Ian asleep in our bed. The poor guy must be exhausted as he had to do everything by himself today. I make a pit stop in our bathroom so I can freshen up. Then I strip down to my T-shirt and underwear and climb into bed with him.

Ian turns to me and slips his arm around my waist. “Welcome home,” he murmurs sleepily. “We missed you today.”

“I missed you, too.” I press my lips to his forehead. “After two weeks of being at home, it felt weird getting back out there. But I’m glad I did.”

“Your mom stopped by. She brought us a casserole, so guess what we’re having for lunch for the next two days, if it lasts that long.”

I chuckle. “That sounds perfect. I’m glad she got to see the babies.”

Ian yawns. “I’m glad Kimi’s roommate is all right.” He’s clearly still half-asleep, and a moment later, he’s in la-la land.

I lie there wide awake and reminisce about how much my life has changed since I met Ian—how I went from a lonely, solitary closeted man to an openly gay man now married with kids. I owe everything to Ian—he pulled me out of my shell, albeit kicking and screaming, and forced me to look myself in the mirror and acknowledge who I am and what I need.

And what I need is this man.

I doze off myself for a little while, and when I wake up, I can see the sun is low on the horizon, meaning it’s getting close to dinner time. My stomach grumbles loudly.

I roll toward Ian and kiss his forehead a few times, until he begins to stir. If we don't get up now, we won't be sleepy when it's bedtime."

"What time is it?" he asks as he squints at the clock.

"Almost five."

"Oh, crap! Dinner! Are you hungry?" He lifts his head to peer at me. "Of course, you're hungry. You skipped breakfast this morning, and knowing you, you haven't eaten a thing all day."

"Have we got something we can grill?" I'm not the best cook, but I'm good with a grill and a spatula. Making dinner for Ian is the least I can do when he's been home on baby duty all day.

"We have some fresh ground beef," he says. "How about burgers?"

I give Ian a kiss and then swing my feet to the floor. "You relax. I'll get the grill started."

* * *

An hour later, we're up on the roof in the greenhouse, all four of us. Ian is sitting on a lounge, holding Lizzie. Will is lying in the center of our big bed up here, cooing as he looks around the greenhouse at all the flowering plants and potted trees.

The burgers are done, so I make up plates for the both of us, burgers with cheese and condiments on buns, potato chips, and cold bottles of Coke. I place Ian's plate and drink on the little table beside him. "Here," I say as I take Lizzie from him. "You eat."

“You’re the one who needs to eat,” he says. “You’ve had nothing all day.”

I sit on the other lounge and hold Lizzie tucked into one arm while I reach for my burger with my free hand. “I can multitask.”

Ian grins. “Now you’re showing off.” He watches me as I gently bounce Lizzie, while taking a bite of my burger. “Stop being so sexy,” he says, looking at me like I hung the moon for him.

It’s difficult to chew and smile at the same time. This guy! I love how he makes me feel. I’m just trying to do my part, and he acts like I’m doing him a huge favor when I’m simply trying to be a good husband and father.

Lizzie lodges a complaint, so I put my burger down so I can adjust my hold. I smile down into her perfect little round face, with her tiny nose and little rosebud lips, which are currently quivering as if she’s ramping up to cry. “Hey, little lady, what’s wrong?” I bounce her a little more, but she’s still not happy. I lift my gaze to Ian’s. “What’s wrong? Is she hungry?”

Ian shakes his head. “I doubt it. They ate not that long ago. Check her diaper. Is she wet? She doesn’t like to be wet.”

I pat her padded bottom. “Might be. It feels soggy. And warm.”

Laughing, Ian stands. “I’ll change her. You eat before your food gets cold.”

After we’re done eating, I ask him about something that’s been on my mind all day. “Are you sure you didn’t mind me working today? I know we said we wouldn’t. I don’t want you to think I’ve changed my mind. It was an emergency.”

“Of course I don’t mind. You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t do everything you could

to find Kimi's roommate."

But I can't shake this guilty feeling. "I just don't want you to think this time off for us as a family isn't important to me, because it is. I want to do my share, not leave you here handling everything alone."

"Oh, my God, stop it! I love you so much." Ian lays Lizzie on the bed next to her brother and then he pulls me to my feet. "Stop being so amazing and kiss me."

It's a bit surreal standing on the roof of the building with the night sky overhead. We can see the stars through the greenhouse roof. The lake is off to the east, moonlight rippling on the glassy surface of the water.

"Dance with me," Ian says as he grabs his phone and pulls up our wedding playlist. He connects his phone to the speaker system we have up here, and soon the plaintive notes of Make You Feel My Love by Adele start playing. Ian wraps his arms around my neck. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I tighten my hold around his waist and pull him against me. We move slowly to the music, letting the poignant words surround us. I cup the back of his head, and he groans when I claim his mouth.

When the song ends, we take the babies downstairs to give them their bedtime bottles. Then we tuck them in their bassinets.

I reach for Ian's hand. "Come back up to the roof with me. I want you under the stars."

When I first met Ian, and he showed me the greenhouse on the roof, I realized immediately that this was his happy place. He suffers from claustrophobia as a result of the abuse he suffered as a young child. Up on the roof, in the greenhouse with its

glass walls and high ceiling, he revels in the openness.

As a surprise for him, I arranged to have a king-size bed brought up here so he could sleep up here beneath the stars. It's always been one of our favorite places to sleep and to have sex. With all the foliage in the greenhouse, it's private enough. None of our neighbors in adjacent buildings can see inside.

"I really need a shower first," he says, giving me a pouting smile.

Ian slips into our bathroom and, a moment later, I hear the shower running. The temptation to join him is too good to pass up, so I strip naked and walk into the bathroom. He's already in the process of washing his hair.

"Mind if I join you?" I ask.

Ian grins. "Please."

I step into the walk-in shower, come up behind him, and slide my fingers into his sudsy hair. He drops his arms, relaxing his shoulders, and I massage the shampoo into his hair.

"Oh, God, that feels so good," he says with a groan.

After I rinse his hair, I squirt some of his favorite body wash into my hands. Then I start at his neck, massaging it and then his shoulders, smiling when he practically melts beneath my touch. I slide my hands down his arms, and then run my hands up his chest.

He leans back against me and shivers when I focus my attention on his nipples.

Finally, the best part of all—I slip my hands down his torso and wrap the fingers of

one hand around him. He's already half-hard, and it doesn't take long before I have a full-fledged erection in my grasp.

As I stroke him slowly from root to tip, he leans his head back against my shoulder. His breaths come fast and hard, his chest heaving. Before long, he's close to coming, so I back off.

Ian groans in frustration.

I smile. "I want you coming in my mouth, not in the shower."

His knees practically give out, and I support him with one arm wrapped around his waist while I shut off the water. I grab a thick, clean towel and quickly dry him, then myself, and then I take his hand and lead him out of our bedroom and up the stairs to the greenhouse.

He follows me without a single word of complaint, stopping only to turn on the baby monitor. I steer him backward until the back of his legs meet the mattress. As I push him down onto the bed, I smile when I see the heat and anticipation in his eyes.

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My husband turns me on. I mean he really turns me on. He's gruff and dominant, and he thinks I need to be coddled—and I love it . We're heading up to the greenhouse for some quality alone time because our babies are sound asleep in their bassinets in our bedroom—and we don't feel comfortable doing grown-up stuff in the same room, even when they're sleeping. So, since the babies were born, we've been sneaking up to the roof for hanky-panky. And that suits me just fine because I love making out with my man beneath the twinkling stars in the inky night sky.

After he steers me to lie down in the center of our bed, Tyler kneels on the bed and looms over me, his muscular arms caging me in, his big hands resting on the mattress, one on each side of my head. As he leans down to kiss me, my breath catches and my belly quivers. I run my palms over his firm pecs, then slide them up and over his broad shoulders to slip them around his neck.

When I think about how much I love this man, and when I think about how freaking lucky I am that he loves me back, my throat tightens. And to think, what were the odds that I would meet him one dark night on the dock beside my yacht? How was it that he was the homicide detective who was assigned to investigate Eric's murder that night? It could have been any number of detectives assigned to the case, but it wasn't. It was Tyler.

He's watching me with a curious expression. "Are you overthinking again?" His voice is low and laced with amusement.

He knows me so well. "Yes."

His lips travel up the side of my neck. "About what?"

“The odds that we even met in the first place.”

He pulls back and levels his gaze on me. “Stop it, because it’ll drive you crazy. We met, period. It was fate.”

“Do you believe in fate?”

“Ian.”

“But what if some other detective had been assigned to Eric’s murder?”

Tyler gazes down at me as he wraps his long fingers around my cock and begins stroking me, long slow pulls on my dick. I’m still half hard from the shower.

“It wasn’t someone else,” Tyler says. “It was me.” He lubes his palm and then strokes me in earnest, his hand twisting on my heated flesh. His other hand reaches between my legs and cups my sac, gently massaging me. His thumb comes up over the crown of my cock, catching a bit of precum and swirling it around my tip.

Tyler keeps stroking me, squeezing me with just the right amount of pressure, until my muscles quake. And then he draws me deep into his mouth, his tongue caressing me, and the suction is exquisite. The heat of his mouth is so perfect I can’t hold out any longer. I shoot my come, and he swallows it down, every drop. His hand and mouth soften on me, and his movements slow as he milks my orgasm.

He kisses me. “Now, enough of the overthinking.” His voice is low, rough with arousal. “We met, you’re mine, and that’s the end of it. Got it?”

I grin. “Got it.” I sit up and push him down onto his back. Now it’s my turn. I scoot down the mattress, reach for him, and lick him from base to tip, tasting his precum as I swirl my tongue over the crown. He’s already hard, and now he’s thick and

throbbing against my tongue. After I lick him slowly, along his entire length, I draw him deep into my mouth.

With a growl, he grips my hair. “Fuck!”

I love going down on my husband. His strength and power are all mine, and I love bringing him to the very edge. I draw him deeper, all the way to the back of my throat, and that’s still not enough. But his chest is heaving, his fingers are digging into my scalp, and his hips are rocking restlessly because he can’t resist thrusting just a little bit, even though he tries not to. But I don’t want him to be a gentleman—I want him rough. So I tease him a bit more, one hand on his cock, the other playing with his balls, while my mouth and tongue torment him.

Nearing his climax, he can’t help thrusting, and soon he’s coming, and I eagerly swallow it down because I love this, I need this connection between us. I want him to need me, in the same way I need him.

I draw out his climax as long as I can, gently stroking him, milking him. His hands are still in my hair, but gentle this time, almost petting me.

“Ian.” He reaches for me and pulls me up beside him, and we lie face to face. He leans in to kiss me, and it’s a soft, reverent kiss that steals my breath and my heart. “God, I love you,” he says.

I smile into our next kiss. “You’d better.”

We lie in bed, both of us trying to catch our breath, and gaze up at the night sky. Despite all the light pollution in Chicago, we can still make out a few stars.

Tyler rubs my back, and his touch feels so good I don’t ever want to move from this bed. I could lie here with him forever.

That is, until we hear a baby crying over the monitor.

“That’s Will, right?” Tyler asks, not sounding entirely sure.

“Yes!” I lean in to kiss him. “You’re learning.”

“Well, let’s go see what he needs.”

We head down to our bedroom, and sure enough, Will is wide awake and complaining loudly. Lizzie is sleeping right through the noise.

“Hang on, buddy,” Tyler says to Will.

We head to the bathroom to quickly clean up, and then we grab clean shorts.

Tyler scoops Will into his arms and cradles him to his bare chest. “He’s dry,” he says after checking the baby’s diaper.

“Maybe he just wants to be held.” I hold out my hands, and Tyler brings him to me.

We end up lying in bed, propped up on pillows against the headboard.

I hold Will to my chest, his cheek pressed against my bare skin. I stroke his dark hair, and he quickly settles down, sighing as he relaxes in my arms. “See? He just wanted to be held.”

“What are we going to do about childcare when we go back to work?” Tyler asks. “Our hours will be erratic, you know. It’s not like we’ll be working nine-to-five desk jobs. We’ll be in and out based on the cases we’re working. That’s going to be difficult to schedule babysitters.”

“I’m not sure.” My pulse starts racing, and I can feel my heart pounding. I should tell him how I feel—that I want to stay home with them. Ingrid made me promise I’d tell him tonight, but I just don’t know how to go about it. “We have six weeks. We’ll figure something out.”

Before long, Will has relaxed himself right back to sleep.

“Bedtime,” Tyler says as he takes Will from me and returns him to his cradle.

I switch off the bedside lamp as Tyler crawls back into bed.

He rolls me to my side, spoons me from behind, and wraps his arm around my waist. I sigh, reveling in this closeness.

Tyler yawns and kisses the back of my neck. “Goodnight, babe. Sweet dreams.”

I smile. “Goodnight.” I contemplate bringing up the topic of childcare again, and telling him how I feel, but the truth is I’m afraid. I don’t know how he’ll react, and I can’t bear the idea of disappointing him.

I’ll tell him tomorrow.

Maybe.

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Something wakes me in the middle of the night. Immediately, I'm on alert, although I'm not sure yet why. I assume it's one of the babies that woke me, so I lie still, listening intently for one of them to cry. But there's no sound coming from the bassinets.

I slowly allow myself to relax. My arm is around Ian's waist, and my nose is tucked against the back of his head. I breathe in his scent, and it calms me. Just as I'm drifting back to sleep, it happens again, but this time I know exactly where it's coming from.

It's Ian.

He shudders in my arms and with a heartrending whimper, he tries to pull away from me. Naturally, I tighten my hold on him, thinking that will reassure him, but it has the opposite effect. He starts fighting me, even in his sleep. The sounds he's making—cries of pain and fear—break my heart.

It's always the same dream—he relives his nightmarish childhood, being locked in a dark room for hours on end with little food or water. The windows are boarded up, blocking out even the moonlight. His birth mother—a crack whore—prostitutes herself downstairs, entertaining multiple johns a night. And all the while, for hours at a time, her terrified young son is locked upstairs, alone and afraid and hungry.

“Shh,” I murmur, my lips in his hair. “Ian, you're safe. I'm here.”

His struggling increases.

“Ian!”

He jerks in my arms as he tries to pull away and screams, “No!”

“Ian, wake up.” I roll him to face me and grip his chin. “Look at me.”

His eyes flash wide open, but his gaze is unfocused. He blinks once, twice, then looks around the darkened room before settling on me. “I—” All his energy deserts him.

It was always the same. All night long, he’d hear all sorts of sounds coming from downstairs—men shouting at his mother; his mother crying, begging, and even sometimes screaming. Every night, it was the same, a never-ending nightmare, until one day, after a neighbor reported hearing Ian’s frequent cries, the local children’s protective agency got involved and removed him from the home.

After months of going back and forth between his birth mother and foster care, Ian’s birth mother lost her parental rights permanently, paving the way for Eleanor and Martin Alexander to adopt him.

Thank God.

I fully believe Eleanor and Martin saved Ian’s life.

He turns away from me, his breathing choppy and uneven.

I rub his arm. “Do you want to talk about it?” Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn’t.

Ian shakes his head. Instead, he pulls my arm around his waist once more and holds tightly to it. He presses his face into his pillow and lets out a muffled, agonized cry. His pain hits me like a punch to my gut.

I roll him back to face me. “You’re not in that room anymore, baby. You’re free. You’re safe.”

Tears stream down his cheeks as he violently shakes his head. “No,” he gasps, his voice shaky. “It wasn’t—me—in there.” His voice breaks on a quiet sob. “It wasn’t me locked—up—in the dark.” He sucks in a breath.

I frown in confusion. “Then who—”

“It was Will and Lizzie.” He stares into my eyes, his own stricken with pain. “They were trapped in that god-awful room, and we couldn’t get to them. We tried, over and over, but we couldn’t reach them. The door was locked.” He shudders violently in my arms. “I can still hear them screaming for us, begging for us to free them. I tried! You tried! You slammed your body against the door, but it wouldn’t budge.”

My hold on Ian tightens. “Ian—” I have to pause a moment to rein in my emotions. Sometimes the need to track down his birth mother is more than I can handle. “Ian, I swear to you on my life, I will never let anything happen to you or to our kids. No one is going to—”

“They were my age, back then, they were four and they could talk. We could hear them calling for us, begging for us to save them.”

I force him to look at me. “It was a dream. Trust me, there’s no door on Earth I wouldn’t be able to break through if I needed to get to you or our kids.”

His eyes search mine in the dim early morning light, looking for reassurance. Eventually, he nods. Then he pulls free of me, gets out of bed, and walks to the bassinets. I join him as he stares down at our babies, who are sound asleep and have no idea their daddy is having an emotional meltdown.

When he shivers in the cool night air, I pull him back against me, his bare torso pressed against mine, and I warm him with my body. I press my lips against the shell of his ear. “Everything’s okay. They’re fine.”

He nods as he clutches my arms. “I hate her for what she did to me. I hate her for making me like this.”

I kiss the spot behind his ear. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

Finally, I’m able to lead him back to bed. I lie down beside him, pull him into my arms, and tuck the covers around us.

Ian drifts back to sleep to the sound of me whispering sweet nothings against his temple.

I monitor Ian’s breathing until he finally falls into a deep sleep. It’s been 26 years since Ian was taken away from his abusive birth mother, and still the nightmares haunt him. I’m afraid they always will.

* * *

Ian’s usual bubbly personality is nowhere to be seen the following morning. While I make breakfast, he sits at the kitchen table, Lizzie cradled in his arms as he gives her a bottle. We’re having pancakes this morning—pancakes always cheer Ian up—with sausage links and orange juice. When the food’s ready, I set a plate in front of him, then bring over the butter dish and a small pitcher of warm maple syrup.

“Do you want me to take her?” I ask. “I’ll finish giving her a bottle while you eat.”

Ian shakes his head. “I can manage.”

He's juggling a baby and a bottle. I don't see how he can manage a fork, too. He's also not making eye contact with me.

"Ian?" I take a seat at the table. "Do you want to talk about it?"

He shakes his head, still managing to avoid my gaze.

"Clearly, something's bothering you. Do you want to talk to someone else? Your mom? Your sister? My mom? Beth?" These are the people he trusts the most.

Ian finally looks at me, his eyes filled with tears. "How could she do it?" He glances down at Lizzie, who's eagerly sucking on her bottle. "Children are so defenseless, so vulnerable. They rely on their parents for absolutely everything—to keep them safe. Hell, to keep them alive. How could she do the things she did to me?"

I'm at a loss for what to say. We've discussed this before, and I know Ian's well aware of how addiction affects people, distorting their judgment, hijacking their decision-making. It's an insidious illness.

He gazes down at Lizzie, a sad smile on his face. "I could never do what she did."

I lean over and squeeze his shoulder. "Of course, you couldn't."

"I love them too much. Did she just not love me enough?"

My heart is aching for Ian, my stomach hollowed out. Once more, I have to fight the urge to track down his birth mother and— oh, hell. What could I possibly do to that bitch that wouldn't land me in prison?

I fix myself a plate of food and sit at the table with Ian while I eat.

Ian still looks preoccupied.

I reach for my coffee. “Still hungry? Want more to eat?”

He shakes his head. “I’m good. Thanks. It was delicious.” He takes a sip of coffee, then says, “I need to call my attorney. I’ve been avoiding it because I don’t want to leave the house to go to his office, but I can’t keep putting it off.”

Ian has left the house only once since we brought the babies home—last week when we took them to their first appointment with the pediatrician. Otherwise, he’s been a total homebody. That’s really not like him. He’s usually so outgoing. In his free time, he’s either on his yacht or out taking photographs, almost always with me in tow. I don’t like him going out on his own. He’s not easily recognized in public, but because of his wealth he’s often a target for unwanted attention.

“I guess I have to come with you,” I offer. I keep my tone casual, even, because I don’t want him to think I’m being overprotective.

He frowns. “Yes, because your name is on everything now. You’ll have to sign for the changes, too.”

Ian’s net worth is a staggering amount of money that continues to grow because it earns way more in interest than he spends. Ian’s paternal grandfather, Tobias Martin Alexander, made several fortunes with a telecommunications company he founded in the early twentieth century. Ian’s younger sister, Layla, inherited the other half of the Alexander dynasty. The two of them are on every Forbes list imaginable. Looking at Ian, with his trendy pop culture T-shirts and ripped jeans, you’d never guess.

Before we married, Ian refused my suggestion that he have his attorney draw up a prenuptial agreement, even though I begged him to.

“Nope. What’s mine is yours now, too,” he’d insisted. So now I’m officially part of the trust. And now we need to update the trust to provide for our children. I glance at these two-week old babies who have absolutely no idea of the wealth they’ll inherit one day.

“We need to figure out what to do with the kids while we’re gone,” Ian says, frowning as he mulls over the problem.

“Can’t we take them with us?”

He shakes his head. “They’re too young to go out. Do you know how many germs are out there? There’s that awful respiratory virus going around, not to mention yet another new strain of Covid. And they’re not fully vaccinated yet.”

“Then we’ll get a babysitter.”

Ian nods as he props Lizzie against his shoulder and pats her back. When she lets out a loud burb, he smiles. “That’s my girl. Let’s ask your mom if she’s free to babysit. My mom will be working, and Layla’s busy with midterms coming up.”

Ian’s adopted mother, Eleanor, is an assistant district attorney in Chicago.

“I’ll call my mom,” I say. “I’m pretty sure she’d jump at the chance to babysit.”

I carry our plates to the sink, rinse them off, and put them in the dishwasher. Ian still hasn’t said a word, and it’s worrying me. Leaning against the kitchen counter, I cross my arms over my chest. “What’s bothering you, baby?”

Ian’s gaze shoots to mine. “Nothing. I had a bad dream. That’s all.”

“Bullshit.” I cross the room and take Lizzie from him and lay her in her infant seat.

Then I pull Ian up onto his feet. “It’s more than that.” We’re nearly the same height—I’m just a tad taller—so it’s easy for me to stare him in the eye. “Talk to me.”

When he looks away, I slip my hand around to cup the back of his head. My fingers slide into his hair. “Talk to me,” I repeat, my voice low and quiet.

Ian sighs. “I’m afraid to tell you.”

Now it’s my turn to frown. “Afraid to tell me what? You know you can tell me anything.”

He blows out a heavy breath. “I know we talked about doing the PI business together, that we’d be partners, and in the beginning I was all for it—really, I was. Hell, it was my idea. But now—well—”

“Now what?”

He gives me such a beseeching look. And then he blurts out the words so fast I can barely follow. “I want to be a stay-at-home dad. I don’t want to work. I want to take care of our kids.”

I’m finding it hard not to smile. He was all worked up over nothing. “This is what’s been weighing on your mind? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I wasn’t sure how you’d react.”

I sigh. “You should have said something before now. I think it’s a great idea. In fact, that answers the question about what we’re going to do for childcare.”

“You’re okay with me staying home?”

“Yes.” Hell, yes. I’d be able to go to work without worrying every second that Ian could get hurt.

His hopeful expression is just too much. “Really? Ingrid said you’d be okay with it.”

“As usual, my mother is right.” I hold him at arm’s length so I can see his face. “Ian, please, I beg you. Next time, tell me what’s on your mind. Don’t tie yourself up in knots worrying about how I’ll react.”

Even though he nods, he looks far from confident.

“Oh, my God,” I say, cupping his face as I lean in to kiss him. “What am I going to do with you? When have I ever said no to you?”

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am

After our heart-to-heart about me being a stay-at-home-dad, it feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my chest. Tyler says he doesn't mind at all. In fact, he seems thrilled with the idea. He's right—I should have told him sooner. I'd been sweating this for over a week now, and apparently unnecessarily because it turned out to be a big nothing burger. I should have told him so I could stop worrying about it.

Tyler cups my face and gazes down at me with so much love and acceptance, I could cry. "Don't you realize I'll give you anything you want? If it's in my power, it's yours."

And then my heart swelled like three times its normal size, like in the Grinch movie.

That afternoon, I call my attorney, Leo Granville, and make an appointment for the two of us to see him Friday afternoon. Then I call Ingrid and ask her if she can babysit. She gives me a big YES. To say she was excited would be an understatement.

Now that all that's taken care of, it's time for baths. "Do you want to help me give the babies their baths?" I ask Tyler.

"Sure," he says, looking a bit less confident than he sounds. "I can manage baths."

We've set up a baby bathing station in the upstairs hallway bathroom. I bought two infant bathtubs, which we put into the big bathtub. Then we kneel on towels beside the tub and each wash a baby. So far it's working great. At least until they outgrow these little tubs.

After filling the tubs with just a few inches of warm water, we go get the babies from their cradles, strip them down, and wrap them each in a blanket before we carry them to what we're now calling the kids' bathroom .

Tyler lowers Will into his little tub, and before I can even issue a warning, a stream shoots up and hits Tyler in the chest, soaking a spot in the center of his T-shirt.

I try not to laugh, but the look on Tyler's face is too comical.

Tyler gives me a droll look. "I just got peed on by our son, and you're laughing. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Will gazes up at his papa with the most innocent look imaginable. If he could talk, he'd be saying, " Who me? What did I do?"

I am laughing now. "Hey, it could have been much worse. He could have hit you in the face. And trust me, I speak from experience."

We wash the babies with baby-approved body wash and tiny little washcloths, super gently, as if they're made of spun glass, because of course they are. Washing their hair is an ordeal, because we're both paranoid about getting shampoo in their eyes, even though the shampoo is advertised as "tear proof." Sure. We're not about to test that theory.

Once they're rinsed off, we swaddle them in blankets and carry them back to our bedroom to diaper and dress them before putting them down for a nap.

Apparently, having a bath is exhausting, because they're both ready to doze off.

The rest of the day passes uneventfully. I do two loads of laundry while Tyler goes outside to mow the grass. It's all very domestic.

For dinner, we have the rest of Ingrid's casserole along with some freshly-baked sourdough bread with butter.

Once the babies are in bed that night, we try once again to watch a movie in the living room. We end up watching that gay rom-com based on a romance book, the one about the son of an American president falling for a British prince. It's cute.

Watching a rom-com leads to us doing a bit of making out on the sofa, while Netflix plays some other movie quietly in the background, and before we know it, it's midnight.

"Time for bed," Tyler says as he lays his hand on my knee. "Someone needs his beauty rest."

"You must be referring to yourself," I say sleepily, "as I'm already beautiful."

He laughs. "Yes, you are," and then he kisses my cheek. "Come on. Let's go up." And then he stands, grabs my hand, and hauls me to my feet so we can head upstairs to bed.

"Parenting is hard work," I say as we crawl into bed.

I fall asleep the minute my head hits my pillow.

* * *

Our bedroom is well lit with the morning sun when I finally open my eyes. I slept through the night, the entire night, without a single dream—or rather a single nightmare. I didn't dream about being trapped alone in a dark room, and more importantly, I didn't dream about our kids being trapped. The latter is far worse, believe me. I survived years of abuse, but I could never survive one minute knowing

my kids were being mistreated.

I reach beside me to find the bed empty. That's not a surprise as Tyler is an early-bird. He wakes up at six even when he doesn't have to. I quickly scan the room, and my heart skips a beat when I see Tyler seated in one of the chairs in front of the window, Lizzie in his arms happily sucking on a bottle. Tyler's dressed in a pair of gray sweatpants and a faded Chicago police department T-shirt. He's smiling down at our daughter, chatting quietly to her.

When it finally dawns on me that it's morning already, and I didn't wake up once in the night, I shoot up into a sitting position. "Oh, my God, I slept through the night!"

Tyler nods as he coos at Lizzie. Clearly this isn't news to him. "I'm glad. You needed a good night's sleep."

"But—didn't they wake up during the night?"

He nods. "I handled it."

The digital clock on the nightstand reads eight-thirty. Holy crap. I slept eight hours straight. "When did they—"

"We did bottles around four, and again now."

I can hear Will in his bassinette, cooing and kicking his legs, clearly awake and not the least bit upset. I spot a second bottle on the little table between the chairs by the window, but it's empty, which means he already fed Will.

I fall back in bed with a groan, astonished that I slept through two feedings, as well as grateful to Tyler for handling it, but also feeling guilty for not doing my share. I should have helped. I can't believe I didn't hear them.

“You should have awakened me,” I say, admittedly sounding a bit petulant.

Tyler shakes his head. “No, you needed sleep.” He props Lizzie on his shoulder and pats her back until she lets out a loud burp. “That’s my girl! All done.” He sets her empty bottle down next to the other one, rises from his chair, and brings her to me, laying her beside me. “Hang out with your daddy while I get dressed.”

A moment later, I hear the water running in the shower. I’d love to join him, but I don’t want to miss out on this cuddle time with Lizzie. I roll onto my side so I can gaze down at her. Her big blue eyes latch onto my face, and she just stares at me. I know I’m biased—because I’m one of her fathers—but I swear she’s got to be the most beautiful little girl in the world. “Who’s a beautiful little princess?” I smile at her, hoping she’ll respond with a smile of her own.

She keeps staring wide eyed, occasionally blinking, but there’s no other reaction. I’ll have to Google when babies start smiling.

Will makes his displeasure known then. I think he realizes he’s missing out on family time. I hop up and grab him and bring him back to bed with me. When I lay him next to his sister, they turn to look at each other. Their hands catch, and even though it’s probably just a random reflex, they’re holding hands.

“I hope you two will be best friends,” I say as I lie on my side and gaze down at them.

A moment later, the water in the bathroom shuts off. Tyler joins us shortly after, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. His chest—OMG, his chest! And those broad shoulders and muscular arms. I could stare for hours.

“What’s on the agenda today?” he asks as he sits beside me on the bed and towel dries his hair.

“Well, diaper changes first, and then we’ll see. Probably morning naps before long.”

He chuckles. “For you, or for the babies?”

“Funny.” I swat his arm. “I meant for the babies.”

“That’s pretty much all they do, you know,” Tyler says. “Eat, sleep, and shit.”

I swat him again. “Don’t talk about our children that way. It’s disrespectful. Besides, I’m pretty sure that’s typical for babies at this age. Growing and developing is hard work.”

Tyler pats my hip. “I’ll get dressed, and then we can change diapers. Afterwards, I’ll make us some breakfast, and we can sit outside on the patio to eat and have our coffee while the babies get some sunshine.”

“You read my mind,” I say as I swing my feet to the floor. And I smile because my life has taken a turn I never expected and never could have dreamed of.

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am

On Friday afternoon, we arrive right on time for our appointment with Ian's attorney. Fortunately, his office is located in downtown Chicago just blocks from the restaurant where we'll be dining tonight.

Leo Granville is in his late sixties with white hair and blue eyes. He's wearing a Rolex and an impressive pair of diamond cuff links that are probably real. He's dressed in a light gray, pin-striped suit, a pale lavender dress shirt, and a purple paisley tie. There's a silk hanky peeking out of his breast pocket. Fancy.

Ian and I are seated on two emerald green, upholstered armchairs in front of the attorney's huge mahogany desk. I cross one leg over the other, my foot bouncing as I brush at imaginary lint on my pantleg. I'm definitely feeling out of place here, as the attorney drones on about grantors and assets and trustees. Apparently, I'm now a grantor, along with Ian. I told him he didn't have to do that. It's his money. His inheritance.

I remember when we first started dating and Ian's father, Martin, warned me to stay away from his son, or else he'd get me fired. The irony is, I did get fired, but not because of anything Martin did. I got fired for going against departmental policy when I searched for Ian's missing sister and saved her from a sex trafficking ring.

At the time, Martin assumed that I, a lowly homicide detective, was after Ian for his money. I laughed in his face. I would have gladly signed a prenup in a heartbeat, only Ian refused to have one drawn up, despite the advice of legal counsel. Fortunately, Martin and I are on excellent terms now—probably because I saved his daughter's life. He knows I have Ian's best interests at heart, and he trusts me to take good care of his son.

As Granville talks, Ian nods and offers a comment occasionally, even going so far as to make suggestions. He seems to understand it all.

My ears perk up when they get to talking about beneficiaries. Will and Lizzie are added to the beneficiary list, along with some vague statement about any future children being automatically included.

Future children.

I never dreamed I'd get married, let alone have kids. And now we're talking about the possibility of having even more. Actually, I'm okay with the idea. Like I told him, I want Ian to be the biological father of our next child. I smile at the mental image of a little curly haired boy with green eyes.

My mind wanders as I study Leo's many diplomas hanging on the wall. Behind him is a wall of dark wood bookcases holding matching sets of law books with fancy leather covers. This is all too rich for my blood.

I know next to nothing about estate planning and complicated finances. My philosophy has always been simple—spend less and save more. I did all right for myself as a bachelor police detective, and I have a decent amount of money tucked away in investment accounts—certainly enough to survive comfortably on my own after retirement. But Ian? He's loaded. Ridiculously so.

Ian was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth—by his adoptive family, of course. But you'd never know that by meeting him. He's the most selfless, compassionate, empathetic person I've ever known. Knowing what I know about his early years, it's a miracle he turned out the way he did. I credit the Alexanders for that.

I glance at him through my peripheral vision, listening as he chats with Leo, and my chest tightens. I want to give Ian the world—which is ironic because he can buy

almost anything he wants. But there are things I can give him, intangible things, that I know he craves—protection, physical security, emotional security, devotion, and companionship. I know him, and I know what he needs, and I’m only too happy to give those things to him.

When Ian notices I’m watching him, he grins, reaches for my hand, and links our fingers. I squeeze his hand in return, as he keeps up the conversation with Leo without missing a beat.

Once all the talking is done, and lots of revised papers are signed—by both of us—we take our leave.

As a five-star restaurant, Renaldo’s has a strict dress code, so I’m dressed in a black suit, white dress shirt, and black tie—my go-to look. Ian is wearing cream slacks, a pale aqua shirt, and cream loafers that look as comfortable as bedroom slippers.

“Let’s walk to the restaurant,” Ian says as we exit his attorney’s N. Michigan Avenue building. It’s a nice night, and the restaurant isn’t far.

It’s early Friday evening, and the sidewalk is filled with tourists laden with shopping bags, as well as with locals leaving their offices and heading for the train or the bus. The street traffic is heavy, cars rushing by, taxis, people on bikes.

We head east on N. Michigan toward the restaurant. We’re walking side by side, close enough that our arms occasionally touch. A couple of times Ian’s fingers brush mine, and when I catch his gaze, he grins at me.

I know he wants to hold hands, and I feel bad that I still struggle with outing myself in public. It’s easier for me to be myself and relax at Ian’s favorite dance club, because nearly everyone there is gay, or an ally, so I don’t feel like I stand out. But here? Out in public, we’re sort of a minority, wading through a sea of heterosexual

couples.

But Ian couldn't care less. His grin remains intact, and I have to admit he's far more courageous than I am.

As he casually brushes his pinky against mine, I glance down at the slender gold wedding band on his left hand. The one that has my name engraved on the inside, just as my ring has his name engraved on it.

Wedding rings.

We're married.

Husbands.

I catch his gaze—those beautiful green eyes are looking at me like I hung the moon for him just because I'm taking him out for dinner.

I really don't deserve this guy.

To hell with society! And to hell with my own personal hang-ups. Ian deserves better, and what kind of husband would I be if I didn't meet him halfway?

I reach for his left hand and interlace our fingers. His eyes widen in surprise, but immediately his shocked expression turns into a smile. We get a few curious looks from passers-by, even a few surprised double-takes, but nothing disapproving or judgmental.

The tension in my shoulders eases when I realize the pedestrians around us aren't going to stone us. In fact, most of them ignore us completely.

My focus is on the man walking by my side, so when I hear a woman's shrill scream up ahead, I'm disoriented for a split second as I try to pinpoint her location. Suddenly, others are screaming, too, and the pedestrians a block ahead of us scatter in all directions.

As the crowd parts, I see the source of the chaos. A white sedan has jumped the curb and is plowing down the sidewalk straight for us, knocking over newspaper racks and trash cans. People are shouting as they jump out of the way, falling, hitting the pavement. I spot two bodies on the ground. Shit!

Instinctively, I wrap my arms around Ian and drag him out of the path of the vehicle. Another man rams into us in his frantic haste to escape the car, shoving us toward the brick exterior of an office building. I maneuver us at the last second to take the brunt of the impact myself as we slam into the building, but Ian still hits the bricks with the right side of his body.

The car shoots past us, and a moment later we hear the unmistakable sound of metal hitting metal. I look down the sidewalk to see that the car hit a light pole head on, coming to an abrupt stop.

I scan Ian for injuries, running my hands along his arms and shoulders, searching for broken bones or blood. "Are you hurt?"

"No," he gasps. It sounds like he's had the wind knocked out of him, too.

I examine the side of his head looking for blood or a lump. "Did you hit your head?"

"No." He grasps my hand. "Honestly, I'm okay. Just shaken."

I glance over at the wrecked car. Steam is billowing from the crumpled hood, and the engine is still running. That's a problem because there's a risk of fire, or worse yet,

an explosion. Bystanders crowd around the wreckage, many of them on their phones taking video. I hope someone is calling 911. Others are assisting pedestrians who had fallen or been trampled in the melee.

“Go,” Ian says, pointing toward the car. “Check on the driver.”

I’m torn. The former cop in me wants to jump into first responder mode, see to the wounded and the driver, but Ian needs me, too.

Ian squeezes my hand. “I’m all right, babe.” He slides down the wall to sit on the pavement. “I’ll sit right here and catch my breath.”

I crouch down in front of him, cup his face, and give him a quick kiss. “I won’t go far.”

With Ian safely out of danger, I approach the driver’s side of the car, reach through the open window, and turn off the engine. The driver, a teenage boy, is unconscious and slumped in his seat. Lucky for him, he was wearing a seatbelt. I press my fingers to his carotid to verify that he’s alive. His pulse is strong and steady, so I don’t think he’s in imminent danger.

The airbag deployed, of course, but it’s deflated now. I do a quick visual inspection of the driver and notice that, other than having an apparent broken left arm, he looks to be relatively unharmed. I notice his phone is clutched tightly in his right hand. I suspect this is likely a case of distracted driving which, unfortunately, is not uncommon.

“Has anyone called 911?” I ask the people who have gathered around the car.

“I did,” a young woman says as she points to her phone, which is still pressed to her ear. She gives the dispatcher the address of the crash scene.

“I did, too,” says a man standing on the passenger side of the car. “They’re on their way.”

Almost immediately, we hear the jarring peal of multiple sirens. And minutes later, several police cruisers arrive, along with several paramedics. As the officers exit their vehicles, I recognize several of them. They acknowledge me with nods as they approach the crash site.

“Hey, Tyler, you okay?” one of the officers asks as he pats my back. “Don’t go far. We’ll want to get a statement from you.”

I nod. “Sure.” I point to Ian. “I’ll be right over there.” When I return to Ian, I crouch down beside him again. He looks flushed, but otherwise all right. His eyes are clear and focused. “How are you feeling?”

Ian reaches for my hand. “A bit shaky. Can we go home? I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Of course. I need to give a statement to the police, and then I’ll take you home.”

After I talk to the officers once more, giving them a detailed rundown of what I saw, Ian and I walk back to our car. As the sidewalk clears, I pull him close. “Are you sure you didn’t hit your head?”

“I didn’t.” He’s quiet for a while, and then he says, “My God, Tyler, we could have been hit. It happened so fast. If you hadn’t pulled me out of the way—” He stops and turns to face me, tears pooling in his eyes. “Tyler, we could have died.” His voice breaks. “Our kids could have lost one or both of their fathers tonight.”

I pull Ian closer and wrap my arms securely around him. “I will never let anything happen to you.”

When he buries his face in the crook of my neck, I murmur against his temple. “It’s okay. We’re okay.”

* * *

When we arrive back at the townhouse, Ingrid meets us at the back door. “Hey, guys, why are you back so soon?” She takes one look at Ian and practically shrieks. “Oh, my God, honey! What happened?”

I hold the door for Ian as he steps inside. “Where are the babies?” he asks.

Mom points toward the hallway. “They’re in the living room. They ate about half an hour ago, and now they’re sleeping.”

Ian races out of the kitchen and down the front hall to the living room.

“Tyler, what’s wrong?” Mom asks me as we both follow him. “Is Ian okay?”

“I think so. We had a close call this evening.” I proceed to tell her what happened.

“Oh, my God! Was he hurt? Are you hurt?”

I shake my head. “I’m fine. I checked Ian for injuries, but other than being a bit bruised and sore, he seems okay. The important thing is, he didn’t hit his head on the building. That’s what I was most worried about—a head injury.”

We find Ian standing beside the playpen staring down at the babies.

“Oh, sweetie,” my mom says as she walks up to him and puts her hand on his back. “Are you okay?”

“Just a bit sore,” he says. “I hit a brick wall.”

I steer Ian to the sofa. “Please sit before you fall down. Can I get you something to eat or drink?”

He shakes his head. “Not food. I don’t think I could eat anything right now.”

“Oh, you poor baby,” Mom says as she sits beside him and takes one of his hands in hers.

Ian lifts his eyes to me. “Do we have any hot chocolate?”

“We do.” Hot chocolate is Ian’s comfort drink. His mom—his adopted mom, Eleanor—used to make it for him when he was young and struggling emotionally.

Ingrid pats Ian’s thigh as she shoots to her feet. “I’ll make it, sweetie.” Then she eyes me. “You sit with him, Tyler.” She asks Ian, “Do you want it made with water or milk?”

“He likes it made with milk,” I say, answering for him. “And with mini marshmallows. There’s a bag of them in the cupboard.”

Ian’s staring down at his hands, which are clasped tightly in his lap. He looks like he’s shutting down completely. I haven’t seen Ian this upset in a long time—not since Roy Valdez attempted to attack him on his yacht.

I sit beside him and put my arm across his shoulders. He instantly melts into me. At least he’s no longer shaking.

“You saved me tonight,” he says, his voice so quiet I can barely make out the words.

I tighten my hold on him. “I guess that’s only fair since you saved me .”

He eyes me. “When did I ever save you?”

“You saved me from myself. You saved me from loneliness.”

A hint of a smile curves his lips. “I guess I did do that.”

“Yeah, you did.” I lean my head against his.

“If I’d died tonight—”

“You didn’t.”

“No, but if I had, our kids would have grown up without me.” Ian shudders. “And what if you had died? I can’t do this parenting thing without you.”

I turn to face him, my hands on his shoulders. “Ian, you have to let this go. You can’t dwell on it because it will only drive you crazy. Yes, what happened tonight was traumatic, but we were lucky. We’re both okay.”

He gives me a hint of a smile, which is reassuring. “Weren’t you the big hero tonight? Again.”

“I promised I’d keep you safe. I was just keeping my word.”

I lay my arm across his shoulders and pull him to me, letting him rest in my arms as he processes what happened.

Before long, Ingrid returns to the living room carrying a tray holding three mugs. She sets the tray on the coffee table. “I made enough for all of us. I think we need to make

a toast.”

I hand a mug to Ian, then take one for myself.

Mom sits on Ian’s other side and raises her mug. “To life, health, and happiness.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Ian says with a grateful smile.

* * *

Mom stayed with us for about an hour, mostly because she was worried about Ian. I can’t blame her because I was, too. After Ian settled down, she left, and Ian and I watched a movie in the living room, with the babies close by, still sleeping.

They woke up right as the movie ended, and we made bottles and fed them as we sat side by side on the sofa. Ian held Lizzie in his arms, and I fed Will. I watched as he gently traced her features, skimming his index finger across her forehead, along her tiny dark eyebrows, down her little nose.

He doesn’t say it, but I know he’s still thinking about how close we came to disaster tonight. It’s weighing heavily on me, too. What if I hadn’t reacted fast enough? What if Ian had hit his head on the brick wall and sustained a potentially life-threatening head injury?

So many what ifs .

After the babies are done eating, we carry them upstairs to our bedroom to change diapers and put them in their sleepers. Then we put them in bed with us for a while, for some quality family time, as Ian calls it.

We lay them side by side on the mattress between us and watch them interact with

each other until they become drowsy and have trouble keeping their eyes open.

By this time, Ian is much more himself, clearly more relaxed, and finally smiling again, especially when he coos at the kids.

“All right,” I finally say. “Bedtime for these two.” I hate being the one who has to put an end to the party, but it’s getting late, and the babies are falling asleep. And God knows Ian needs sleep, too.

We swaddle them and tuck them into their bassinets.

“Ready for bed?” I ask Ian as we watch our babies drift off to sleep. He doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to move from his spot beside the cradles.

He turns to me. “Take me upstairs, Tyler. Please.”

What he means is he wants me to take him up to the greenhouse, to our bed beneath the stars, and make love to him. He wants sex—he wants penetration. And I know why. He wants that overwhelming connection, both emotional and physical, between us. He wants to feel that sense of submission. He needs to feel my dominance over him.

I lean in to kiss him. “All right.”

He nods, and then heads for the bathroom. “I’ll meet you upstairs.”

While Ian showers, I take a quick shower myself in the hall bathroom. Then I pull on a pair of black boxer shorts and head up to the greenhouse to set the mood. I light a dozen candles and pull down the bedding. I grab two tumblers from a small cabinet and a bottle of Glenfiddich. After the evening he’s had, I think a little whiskey might help settle him.

“Hey.”

I turn at the sound of Ian’s voice to find him standing just inside the greenhouse, gloriously naked and aroused. His hair is damp from his shower, his curls finger combed. He looks so beautiful and so lost it makes my chest ache.

Immediately, my pulse kicks up and my body responds, my growing erection tenting the front of my underwear. I hold out my hand to him, and he comes straight to me and wraps his arms around my waist. His skin is warm and damp from his shower, and he smells so good.

“I need you.” His voice is muffled against my shoulder.

“I know.” I cup the back of his head. “I need you, too.” I kiss him then, at first gently, and then hunger takes over both of us.

I run my hands down his arms, and then back up his sides to his chest. I brush his nipples with my thumbs, and he shivers.

When Ian grabs one of my hands and lowers it to his straining erection, I wrap my fingers around him, giving him the tight grip he loves. Moaning, he presses his face against my throat and kisses my pulse point.

I ease him down so that he’s sitting on the edge of the bed. Then I grab the two tumblers off the sideboard and hand him one. “To us,” I say, holding out my glass. “For coming out of a bad situation unscathed.”

Ian touches his glass to mine. “To close calls.”

His eyes look haunted, which tells me he’s not over the shock. Ian knocks back his liquor in one go, coughing as it burns his throat.

“You really should sip that, you know.” I take a biting sip. “It’s too good to waste.”

He gives me a wry grin. “It’s warming my belly, so I’d say it wasn’t wasted.”

I finish my drink, and then return our glasses to the sideboard.

Before I reach the bed, I lose my boxers, dropping them onto the floor. As Ian scoots over and lies on his back, I crawl to him, caging him in, looming over him.

He gazes up at me with so much love and trust in his eyes, it’s humbling. He has no idea how desirable he is, how much I want him. Crave him.

For so many years, I was both alone and lonely, all because I didn’t realize this is what I need. This man —this perfect, emotional, complicated man.

Ian pulls my face down to his for a kiss. As soon as our lips touch, we go from zero to sixty in the space of a heartbeat. Our lips collide and caress, our tongues tangle and tease. Both of our cocks are fully erect and straining together, hungry for touch.

I kiss my way down the column of his throat, across his chest, to first one nipple and then the other, and all the while he’s breathing like he’d run a marathon, excited, aroused, needing more. My lips travel down his abdomen, stopping long enough to tease his belly button with swirls of my tongue. He’s squirming now, impatient for what he knows is coming. What he wants so badly.

I nip at his pelvis bones. I bury my nose at the base of his cock and breathe in the smell of warm male mixed with a hint of his beloved bubble-gum scented body wash. That always makes me smile.

The sight of his straining penis is too good to pass up, so I take him in my mouth, draw him in deep to the back of my throat. With one hand, I squeeze the base of his

cock, while my other hand massages his sac. The whimpers and moans coming from him make me even harder.

I bring him right to the edge and then back off. He growls in frustration because I denied him an orgasm, but we both know it's way too soon. Instead, I grip his chin and look him in the eye. I drop my voice an octave, letting him hear my arousal. "I'm going to fuck you first, baby. You can come when I do."

Eyes wide, Ian swallows hard as he nods.

"You're mine, Ian."

Nodding, he sucks in a breath. "Yes. God, yes." His breathing is shallow now, rapid, as his chest rises and falls in anticipation. His cheeks are flushed, his nostrils flaring. Still grasping his chin, I lean down and devour his mouth. He kisses me back just as hungrily.

When he starts making sounds of need and want, I roll him over and tuck a pillow beneath his hips. I reach for the lube and take my time gently preparing him and driving up his arousal in the process. I stroke him with my finger, teasing him, easing the way, opening him up for me.

Once I think he's ready for more, I slowly press into him, a bit at a time, coaxing his body to accept me. It's a slow, teasing process, invoking lots of pleased groans from the both of us.

Once I've worked my entire length inside, he sighs, clutching his pillow as he breathes slow and easy. I cover his body with mine, draping myself over him and pinning him to the mattress as I lift my hips and rock into him, slowly at first, gently, until he's relaxed enough to take me easily. Each time my cock strokes his prostate, he moans.

The pillow beneath him allows me enough room to reach underneath him, take hold of his sac, and gently massage his balls. He grasps his erection and strokes himself in time to my thrusts. When we come, we'll come together.

"Tyler." His voice is a plaintive plea. The sounds he's making tell me how much he's enjoying this. How good it feels.

"I know. Hang on, baby. Soon."

I continue thrusting, stroking him inside, until he can't hold on any longer. "Tyler, I'm—" And his words are choked off as he cries out, his voice loud and raw. When his body strains and bucks, I follow him, and we come together.

Sometime later—I've lost track of time, we lie side by side, both of us heated and breathing hard, until the night air cools our skin and our heart rates return to normal.

I hold him. We hold each other. And if I had to guess, I'd say we're both grateful to be alive.

* * *

Later that night, back in our bedroom, I hold Ian in bed until his breathing deepens and slows. When he drifts off to sleep, I finally give myself a chance to relax for the first time all evening. I try to keep the memories at bay, but my brain keeps reliving the accident, over and over. My brain insists on going over all the what-ifs. What if I hadn't gotten Ian out of the path of that car? What if he'd been hurt more seriously? What if one of us had died?

Stop it .

You did pull him to safety. You'll always pull him to safety.

I guess it's my turn to freak out a bit. I close my eyes and force my brain to think of other things.

When Ian shifts in his sleep, pressing closer to me, I tighten my hold on him.

"I love you," he murmurs.

"I love you, too."

And if that isn't the understatement of the year, I don't know what is.

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Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 5:29 am

Ian Six weeks later

Right after lunch, we bundle the babies in warm clothing—in sweaters that Ingrid knitted for them, along with matching hats. I lay them in our double stroller and tuck them in with matching gray fleece blankets with little white baby elephants on them. The blankets are gifts from Tyler’s sister.

“Ready to go?” Tyler asks as he walks into the kitchen wearing blue jeans, a navy hoodie, and sneakers. As much as I love seeing him looking dashing in his black suit, I get a big kick out of seeing him dressed casually.

Tyler grabs my jacket off the coat rack by the back door and holds it for me as I slip my arms into the sleeves. He smiles down at Lizzie and Will, his voice softening as he talks to them. “Are you two ready to go out and face the world? Are you? Do you want to go for a walk?”

Hearing Tyler speak baby talk to our kids makes me weak in the knees.

Will kicks excitedly, and Lizzie blinks as she gazes up at Tyler. A moment later, she breaks into a big smile as she stares up at her Papa.

I grab Tyler’s arm. “Oh, my God, babe! She’s smiling!” I whip out my phone and take a picture of her huge toothless grin, which I then forward to our family group chat, which includes Tyler’s mom and sister, as well as my parents and my sister. I caption the picture “Baby girl’s first smile!”

Tyler holds the back door open while I push the stroller outside. We head down the

driveway and turn right to head toward Lake Shore Drive. We cross the busy street at the crosswalk and then make our way over to the paved walking path, which is rather crowded today, but that's not surprising given how nice the weather is. The beach is filled with people, but of course no one's in the water. It's too late in the year for swimming. I'm excited about next summer, when we can take the kids out on the boat and play with them in the water.

"Which way?" Tyler asks me when we reach the path.

"Left. It's less crowded."

We walk for a good half-hour along the path that follows the shoreline. I glance out at the boats on the lake and feel a pang. I haven't taken my boat out since the kids were born.

"Do you miss it?" Tyler asks. He must be reading my mind. "Being out on the water?"

"Yes. Maybe next year when the kids are older, we can all go."

Tyler and I take turns pushing the stroller. I don't think either one of us has gotten over the novelty of it.

Two white-haired women wearing matching tracksuits stop to see the babies. They ooh and ahh over them, and then glance up at us with curious expressions on their faces.

"Who's the father?" one of them asks. She glances at Tyler. "I'm guessing you are. They have your coloring."

Just as I begin to nod, Tyler says, "We both are." And then he surprises me by laying one of his hands overtop mine as it grasps the stroller's handle.

The women smile, first at each other, and then at us.

“My, how things have changed,” one of them says wistfully. She looks at the other woman. “Honestly, I never thought I’d see the day.” Then, to us, she says, “Congratulations, you two. You make a very fine couple.”

“Thanks,” I say, grinning from ear to ear. “So do you.”

The women’s smiles broaden as understanding sinks in, and I could swear they’re both blushing.

* * *

When we return to the townhouse, Kimi comes out through the carriage house door to meet us in the drive. “All right, guys. It’s been eight weeks. Does this mean you’re taking cases again?”

Tyler nods. “I suppose it does.”

“Good, because we got a call a few minutes ago from a woman who’s worried about her teenage daughter who’s sneaking out of the house at night. Her mom wants to know what she’s up to. I told her I wasn’t sure if we could take the case, but I promised I’d call her back this afternoon. I wrote down all the details if you want to see them.”

While those two are chatting about following up with the new client, I run down to the curb to see if the mail has come. I open the door to our mailbox to find a single white envelope inside, addressed to me. But there’s no postmark on the envelope. It wasn’t mailed through the post office. A chill goes down my spine when I realize someone put it in here.

I open the envelope and pull out a sheet of plain white paper. On it is a handwritten

note.

Ian,

I know everything.

Your mother was a whore and a drug addict.

And you're no better.

I want a million dollars in small unmarked bills, or else I'll take it all to the press.

I have pictures. Lots of pictures.

And trust me, you don't want them going public.

I'll send instructions for where to deliver the money.

If you tell anyone, I'll make sure you regret it.

"Ian? Is everything okay?"

I glance up the drive and see Tyler watching me with concern. I realize I'm standing there frozen, staring at the sheet of paper in my hand. My heart lodges in my throat, and my chest feels like it's being squeezed in a vice. "Yeah. Fine." But even I don't believe me.

Tyler leaves the stroller with Kimi and walks down the drive to meet me. "What's wrong?"

When he frowns, I realize I'm clutching the paper to my chest.

His suddenly hard gaze searches mine. He's in detective mode now as he holds out his hand. "Give it to me."

I hand him the paper, and as he reads it, I look away. Instead I stare at my townhouse, my home for the past decade. I watch a smiling Kimi as she bends over to talk to the babies. They're probably awake by now and hungry.

Tyler turns the paper around to study the back. Then he takes the envelope from my hand. The note and the address are written in black ink. "Do you have any idea who sent this?"

I shake my head. "No one knows about my birth mother and my past, except for my parents and Layla, but they'd never do this. It was in the news years ago, but I imagine everyone's forgotten about the salacious coverage."

Tyler folds the sheet of paper and slips it back into the envelope. "I'll see if I can get someone to lift fingerprints off this. Besides yours and mine, I mean. As far as evidence goes, it's already contaminated." He reaches out to cup my face. "Don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of this."

I'm at a complete loss. "Do you think my mom—I mean my birth mother—could do something like this? I don't even know if she's still alive."

His hand slides down to mine, and he laces our fingers together. "I don't know, baby, but I'm sure as hell going to find out."

* * *

Thank you for reading Episode 1 of Tyler and Ian's new series, Daddy Detectives. I love these characters too much to let them go. I hope you enjoyed this first installment. Stay tuned for Episode 2. I'm envisioning these stories as TV episodes, each a short read. I hope you approve. If you haven't read their first three full-length

books, I hope you'll check them out, starting with Somebody to Love .