

Broken Shield



ISABELLA

SUMMARY

Tyler Jackson, former paramedic now firefighter, has seen her share of death up close. The death of her wife caused Tyler to rethink her career choices, but the death of her mother two weeks later cemented her return to the ranks of firefighter. Her path of self-destruction and womanizing is just a front to hide the heartbreak and devastation she lives with every day. Tyler given up on finding love and having the family she's always wanted. When tragedy strikes her life for a second time she finds something she thought she lost.

Ashley Henderson loves her job. Ignoring her mother's advice, she opts for a career in law enforcement. But, Ashley hides a secret that soon turns her life upside down. Shame, guilt and fear keep Ashley from venturing forward and finding the love she so desperately craves. Her life comes crashing down around her in one swift moment forcing her to come clean about her secrets and her life.

Can two women thrust together by one traumatic event survive and find love together, or will their past force them apart?

Broken Shield is an unflinching look at the lives behind the uniforms of those sworn to serve and save lives. When the rescuer needs rescuing, what then? Isabella offers up a tale of courage, redemption and love that you will not soon forget. Edgy. Filled with raw emotion. I was hooked from the first line.

20 years in public safety makes me generally skeptical about the way police and fire characters are portrayed in a fictional setting. Isabella delivers in Broken Shield.

—**Lynette Mae**, author of, *Faithful Service*, *Silent Hearts* and *Tactical Pursuit*, coming in 2012.

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SAPPHIRE BOOKS

SALINAS, CALIFORNIA

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To Ilene, the best editor I've ever worked with. Thank you for making me think. Your honest feedback made the book better.

Finally, this is dedicated to all those that put on a badge and put their lives on the line to keep us safe. I am forever in your debt.

My heart, my love, and my world have room for only one woman, Schileen. If I am lucky, the last thing I will see when I take my final breath, will be your beautiful brown eyes. Your lips, the last kiss I taste and your voice, the last song I hear.

Mi Amor, Schileen!

Prologue

Tyler sat cross-legged in the riverbed and looked down at the chrome deliverance cradled in her hands. The smell of honeysuckle drifted through the air. It enveloped Tyler as she contemplated what had brought her to this instance in time. It was ironic that she had picked a river bottom to sit in. Lately, it felt like every step Tyler took was like walking through quicksand. The struggle to move forward only added to her resolve to do what needed to be done today.

Thinking about Jill, tears began streaming down her face falling in little pools on her shirt. Tyler had stopped trying to control the tears weeks ago. They made her feel weak and she had finally just succumbed to the weakness. She had been so strong for so long, never once did she cry. She didn't want to be weak, not when she had been so strong. Remembering the day she lost Jill, Tyler's body curled under the memory.

She and her partner had been dispatched to an officer down call. Everyone in the city responded to the scene, including the fire department. Coming on scene, Tyler and her partner had to wind their way around a dozen police vehicles that were already there. Tyler's focus was clear, get to the victim, assess the situation, and save their life. She had done it a hundred times. This time, a set of hands stopped her progress to the group of officers circling the officer who lay on the ground. Tyler could barely see between their legs as the group shifted to let her partner through. Blood was pooling around the navy uniform, an arm stretched out in the middle of it.

"Tyler, stop. I can't let you go in there," Jill's partner, Kelly said, stopping Tyler's further progress.

"Kelly, I need to get in there. What the fuck are you doing?" Tyler looked down at the hands on her chest and then up at her friend's face. Realization hit her.

"It's Jill, Tyler."

"No," Tyler whispered. Her resolve to get to her wife pushed her past Kelly. "Mike?"

Tyler looked at her partner, watching as he was halfway through his routine.

The blood pressure cuff hung from Jill's arm. Pointing to her wife's stomach, he ordered Tyler to apply pressure to the blood soaked gauze under his hand. Tyler's legs felt as if they would buckle any minute so she dropped to her knees on the other side of her wife's body.

The pale color of Jill's skin terrified Tyler as she pushed hard on the blood soaked gauze. Blood oozed between her fingers as she called for more gauze. Slipping her arm under Jill's head, she lowered her head to whisper in Jill's ear.

"Baby, you're gonna be fine."

Jill slowly opened her eyes to look at her lover.

"I love you, Baby," she whispered.

"I love you, too." Tyler tightened her hold on Jill's slight body.

"Be strong."

"I can't."

"You have to. Promise me," Jill said looking up at Tyler.

Tyler could only nod as she gently caressed Jill's face. Bending down and kissing her lips, Tyler savored what looking back now, would be the last time they kissed. Resting her head against Jill's, she felt Jill take one last shuddered breath and relax. The silence around the couple was deafening. No one moved. Tyler gently rocked Jill, refusing to believe her wife was dead.

"Do something, Mike. Don't just sit there," Tyler said, laying Jill down. "Get the paddles." Tyler began chest compressions. "One, two, three ..."

Mike stood and pulled Tyler back. "Ty, there's nothing we can do. She's gone."

"No, she's not gone until they call it at the hospital. Now, get back there and do your job, damnit."

"Tyler." Kelly grabbed Tyler's shoulders and pulled her away. "Tyler, you did everything you could."

"No, Kelly..." Tyler whispered in desperation, "I can't lose her."

"I know, Honey." Tears pooled in Kelly's eyes as she held Tyler.

Tragedy would quickly play itself out again in Tyler's life. Two weeks later, a similar scene occurred as she rolled on a motor vehicle accident. This time though, it would be Tyler holding her father as they both stood strong in their grief. Her mother had been hit head-on when a driver fell asleep at the wheel. Molly Jackson was the pillar of the Jackson family. She raised a family of firefighters and carried on the stoic

tradition of a woman who accepted tragedy as a part of the firefighter lifestyle. Tyler's mother was her rock when Jill died. She had helped Tyler plan the funeral, held Tyler when she thought she might crumble at Jill's funeral, and waited and watched as Tyler bore her grief silently. Molly's death was the final brick of an already weighty load that pushed Tyler over the edge.

Now, Tyler sat looking down the barrel of what would bring Jill and her back together. She spun the cylinder, hypnotically watching the silver tips as they made their circular journey to their new location. Tyler had thought she could deal with the pain but she now knew she was wrong. Every morning she woke up and pulled Jill's pillow to her face, breathing in her scent. But she never cried. She was strong, just as she had promised. Today though, Tyler would break that promise. *Would Jill be mad when we see each other again or would she understand?* Tyler wondered.

Tyler put the barrel in her mouth and her fillings tingled. The sight on the end of the barrel hit the roof of Tyler's mouth as she slid the gun back further. Her tongue caressed the smooth barrel as she closed her mouth. Closing her eyes and squeezing them shut, Tyler felt the last of the tears roll down her face. The ridges of the hammer gently bit into her thumb as she clicked it back. The first click rang in Tyler's ears, the second click alerting her that the painful journey through life was almost over.

As she sat there Jill's smiling face flashed in Tyler's mind, her laugh echoed in her ears, and Tyler felt Jill's arms wrap around her body.

"Baby, please be strong," was whispered in Tyler's ear.

I can't, I just can't. I'm sorry. A warm soft breath caressed her neck as Tyler took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Brinnnggg, brinnngg.

Tyler's cell phone went off in her jacket pocket. She didn't want to answer it. Tyler was on a mission and it didn't matter anymore who called. Reaching in, Tyler pulled it out and pushed the end button. Without thinking, Tyler looked down and saw a message from her father. Pulling the gun out of her mouth she tapped the screen.

"Shit."

Tears began streaming down her face again as she read the message.

Happy Birthday, Honey. I know you're going through a tough time, but I just wanted you to know I love you. Don't forget dinner tonight, love Dad

Chapter One

One year later.

Hey, Sarg. What do we have?” Captain Russo asked the police sergeant on the scene. The two story wooden structure was fully engulfed by the time Engine Company Three got to the residence on Harcourt drive.

“Hey, Captain. We might have someone inside the residence,” the officer said, quickly jotting down notes for his report.

“No Shit? In that?” Captain Russo pointed to the red-hot structure.

“Well, the neighbor over there called it in about ten minutes ago. He said he heard a popping noise, went to check it out and saw the house smoking. The neighbor looked around and said by the time he got over to it, one of the windows in the back blew out. So he ran back and called 911,” the sergeant said. “He said that he thought the parents had left for the weekend, but that there might be one of the teenagers home. He couldn’t be sure.”

“Thanks,” Captain Russo said over his shoulder, as he walked over to a group of firefighters checking their oxygen tanks and helmets. “Ok everyone, we might have people inside, but we’re not sure. You three—” pointing to the three closest to him, “You get the job of trying to see if anyone is inside. Remember, everyone goes in alive and you all come out the same way. I don’t want anyone taking any unnecessary risks. You got me?” yelled the captain over the fire raging behind him.

“The rest of you, help finish laying down the lines from the street to the pumper and let’s get this baby out,” he said as the Fire Chief approached.

Captain Russo went about explaining the situation to the chief and discussed the possibility of people inside. Because of the blown out windows, the captain knew the fire was going to accelerate quickly. It was getting the oxygen it needed to burn hotter and quicker. He knew this would put his people at greater risk, but he didn’t have a choice. He had to send them in.

So far, the fire looked as though it was limited to the first floor of the house, with smoke starting to billow out through the windows and doors. The flames licked out the windows and doorframes, causing the firefighters that entered the house to drop down to the ground immediately.

“John, I’m gonna take the right side of the downstairs first,” said Tyler. She reached up to flick on the mag light taped to her helmet.

“J.J., you start on the right hand side of the upstairs. When we’re done we’ll join you up there,” Tyler directed, kneeling down to start the job of looking for people.

“Okay, I’ll take the back end of the house. Then we meet back here and go up to the second floor, together Tyler. Got it?” J.J. breathed into his headset.

“Got it.”

Taking a quick survey of the burning left side of the house, they split up, reaching out for anything that might look like a person. The smoke was already so thick that it left only two feet above the floor for the firefighters to maneuver in safely. Since no one had told them what age the occupants might be, the firefighters checked every closet, piece of furniture and cabinet to make sure a child wasn’t trying to hide to avoid the smoke.

“Clear on this side, John,” Tyler said into her mic.

“Good, clear back there, too,” John replied.

Making their way back to the entryway, the firefighters were getting ready to go up the stairs when they heard a huge crash. Looking back into the already engulfed room, they saw the source of the crash. The ceiling had come down and the fire was burning through to the second floor. A bathtub, toilet and sink fell through the floor, barely missing them.

“Shit, John, we gotta hurry. If someone is up there, we might have just lost them,” shouted Tyler over the penetrating sound of the flames working up the walls.

Outside, the fire crews worked to control the fire, while the police set up lines to keep the local residents back. This was an older part of the city with wide streets and big wooden houses. The kind of established neighborhood where everyone knew each other and spoke regularly. It wasn’t surprising to see all the neighbors, and a few who didn’t belong, watching the action.

###

Ashley Henderson knew this neighborhood well. She grew up in the upper middle class neighborhood, so it was difficult to see one of the old homes going up in flames. Her mom lived nearby and had probably heard the sirens. Ashley made a mental note to go over and let her mom know what was going on before she left the scene to write her report. Her mom would probably be surprised to see her, since Ashley usually didn't work this side of town. But she had requested a change in her patrol, and this was her new assignment. She proceeded to finish taping down the scene when Lt. Connors came over.

"Officer Henderson, I want you to make sure the residents stay back. And keep everyone out of the way of the equipment. We still have EMT coming, just in case anyone gets hurt, as well as another engine company since it's now a two alarm," Lt. Connors advised. "Oh, and welcome to your new patrol area. I hear you grew up here?"

"Thanks, yeah just a couple of blocks over. My mom still lives there," she replied, realizing he would eventually wonder why a rich kid like her would want to be a police officer. She recognized the look the officer gave her when her words sank in. Shrugging it off, Ashley went about finishing the barricade. Both officers glanced back at the house when they heard the loud crash come from inside.

"I hope that wasn't one of our guys going down in there," he stated matter-of-factly.

"What would one of our people be doing in there?" Ashley questioned, concerned that a police officer would risk their life in a burning building.

"When I say 'one of our guys' I mean one of our firefighters. We're all public servants. You know—A brotherhood of sorts," Lieutenant Connors said, fondly acknowledging the professional courtesy police and firefighters extended to one another.

"Gotcha," said Ashley.

She'd had few dealings with most of the local firefighters. Ashley worked mostly vice and gangs in her short career, but met a few firefighters when a bust went south and the John got hurt. Her bachelor's degree was in computer science, so her

superiors felt that Ashley was more valuable working behind a computer than in a patrol car. She had spent a lot of her time establishing a database for the department of all the gangs and gang members in the city. Her work made it easier to track those members and what they were involved in. The move to vice was a welcome change when it was offered.

Vice, on the other hand, had been fun for her. Ashley worked catching Johns and drug dealers. Her “good looks” made her an easy choice, according to her captain. She didn’t disagree outright, but she never really felt attractive. She wouldn’t have picked a vice assignment if it hadn’t been for one of her peers getting pregnant. The department was desperate to find someone when prostitutes started being assaulted, so she volunteered to help out. Her offer was really made tongue-in-cheek to a friend in the department, but word got back to the brass and the next thing she knew, she was a “working girl”. After that assignment though, she was ready for patrol duty.

Looking back at the burning structure, she wondered what type of individual would volunteer to walk into a burning building.

###

The two-story structure was starting to burn through the exterior on the north side and the captain was starting to worry about the firefighters inside.

“Ok, you three. I want you to start working your way out of that structure. We have the left side of the exterior engulfed and it won’t be long before the whole thing is fully engulfed. So get your asses out of there now,” he yelled into his headset.

“Roger Captain. I am starting to work my way out,” shouted J.J. into his headset. He had covered the left side of the upstairs and had found nothing. The smoke was starting to choke off his vision and make it more difficult to differentiate things. He was working by feel now and knew that he had little time to get back out of the maze he had worked himself into.

“I am almost done on this side, Captain. How about you Tyler? You ready to rock and roll outta here?” asked John as he felt around for his exit.

“Yeah, I’m workin’ on it. Man, the smoke is thick as shit up here. Geez, we had better make short work of this search and get the heck outta here. John, be careful of that big hole on your side. I don’t want to have to come save your ass again,” joked Tyler, trying to maintain communication with the other firefighters.

“Right, like you’ve had to do that,” he chided.

“Don’t make me remind you of that fire over on Hillcrest,” she said.

“That’s enough. Focus on what you’re doing and get your asses out of there now, you three,” screamed the captain, listening to the whole exchange between the crew.

“Roger, Captain,” the three quipped in unison.

It was clear that the captain was not going to be happy with them when they got out. He hated to send his people in without clear direction but, unfortunately, this was the part of the job that worked his patience and his nerves. Working a fire was dangerous, however sending people into a burning building was worse. One never knew how fast a fire was going to work its way through a structure. A second story made it even more lethal.

“Come on, come on,” he thought as he watched the glowing house. So far, he couldn’t see any of his people exiting the building. He watched as the firefighters worked the exterior, dousing the flames at their base. But it didn’t stop most of the flames from greedily eating away at the wooden structure. The whole left side and center of the house were glowing from the burning timber and he knew it wouldn’t be long before the entire property was lost.

“Get your asses out of there now, you three,” he yelled into the headset, his frustration evident in his voice. “I want to see your asses out here now, do you hear me?”

“J.J., where are you?” John asked.

“I am coming out of the hallway right now. Can you see me?” he replied, not stopping for an answer.

“Yeah, I got a visual on ya. How about you, Tyler? Where are you?” John asked again.

“I am working my way out of the right side. I’ll be right behind you guys. Start moving before the captain comes in here and drags our asses out feet first,” Tyler said, knowing the captain just might do that very thing if they didn’t get out soon.

The three would-be-rescuers began working their way out of the glowing structure. Each one was relieved that not only did they not find anyone inside, but that they had once again left another burning building intact. John and J.J. reached each other at the top of the stairs and gave each other a high-five and a thumbs-up. They knew they had spent too much time in the house and their oxygen was getting dangerously low. A quick exit was definitely in order.

The captain stood watching the house. He began to see his people exiting the blazing structure. He released a deep breath and felt the tension leave his shoulders. Scanning the group, he did a head count and realized he was one short.

“Shit,” he mumbled.

Just then, Ashley came up to the captain. “Sir,” she said, interrupting his growing concern. “These are the owners of the home. I think you might want to talk to them about who’s home.”

“Huh? Right. Sorry about your home. Can you tell me if anyone is inside? Your neighbor thought that one of your children might be home. Is that possible?” he asked, watching the front door of the house.

“Well, we just talked to our son and he left earlier this afternoon. So no, no one should be home,” cried the older gentleman, hugging his wife and watching his life going up in flames. Ashley put her arm around the shoulders of the older couple, trying to offer what little comfort she could.

“Okay, then let’s get this doused and mopped up before any other structures become involved,” yelled the captain.

“Tyler, where the fuck are you? Get your damn ass out here now.”

A dark figure started to show itself, slowly growing in the blazing glow of the fire. Finally stopping a few yards away from the group, she dropped to her knees.

“Shit,” yelled someone from the group, the captain, J.J. and John all running to her.

“Are you alright, Tyler?”

Tyler lurched forward putting her hands out in front of her to steady herself as she gulped for much needed air. When she did, the package that she was protecting fell out of her jacket and onto the lawn. She had run out of air minutes before exiting the house and it was all she could do to make it outside before passing out. Her head was spinning from the lack of oxygen and she knew she was in bad shape.

“Capt ...” was all she could get out before passing out and landing just next to the reason she had risked her life in the first place.

“Kittens? You risked your life for some stupid cats, Tyler,” Captain Russo yelled, bending down to pull off Tyler’s mask. “Medic, get over here.”

A group of firefighters gathered around Tyler, taking off her helmet, air-tank harness, and turnout jacket. Two paramedics reached Tyler’s side. One started oxygen while the other peered into each eye with a flashlight.

Rubbing a knuckle across Tyler’s chest, one of the paramedics called her name, “Tyler, Tyler, wake-up. Can you hear me?”

Ashley watched while the paramedics went through their resuscitation routine. Tyler’s soot covered face couldn’t hide how beautiful she was. A small ring around her face, where the mask had protected it, showed high cheekbones and a straight nose. *She could be a model*, thought Ashley, as she continued her assessment of the firefighter. Suspenders framed the white tank top she had on, the outline of her bra showing through the tightness. Her turnout pants rested just below the firm breasts.

When there was no response, one of the paramedics started an I.V. Looking up at the captain, he raised his eyebrows as if to ask, *what now?*

“Shit. Get her on the bus and let’s get her to the hospital,” Captain Russo said as he shook his head and rubbed his mustache.

Chapter Two

Tyler rode her motorcycle like a woman possessed. The bike ate up the highway, each stripe on the road becoming a blur whizzing past her. Her short hospital stay had produced no ill effects and she had gotten the number of a cute RN for her troubles. All in all, a wash, thought Tyler, remembering the ass chewing she had gotten from the captain afterwards. The warm breeze caressed her chest and bare arms. The goose bumps were a result of the tingle that etched through her body when she rode this fast. Her headphones thumped in her ears, the music an indulgence she enjoyed when she rode. The sultry voice of the blues singer made her smile when she thought about the last time she danced to the song. It had been their song, Jill and Tyler's, and they played it every time they danced together. But that had been over a year ago and now Tyler's gut clenched at the memory.

The smile evaporated and she punched the MP3 player that was attached to the handlebars to the next song, wishing she had remembered to take the song off the darn thing. Memories weren't a friend she invited over anymore. She'd had her one shot at happiness and it had ended badly. Now, all she needed was a fast bike, a faster woman and a shot of good tequila. Then, the pain could join the rest of their friends tucked away in the back of her mind where they belonged. Weaving between the now slowing traffic, she wished she had left earlier to ride. Her days off were few and far between sometimes. Switching shifts with other firefighters who needed a day or two more for vacation or more time for a family event gave her the diversion she needed. Besides, what would she do with all the free time? Working only nine days out of the month was starting to drive her crazy.

The traffic was starting to let up as she passed the reason for the slowdown. A stranded motorist with a cop car behind it had caused all the rubber-neckers to slow down and watch the drama, obviously hoping it was something more. Tyler gunned the bike when the traffic dispersed more, weaving in and out of the nosey crowd. Looking down at the clock in her fairing she calculated it would take her a good half an hour more because of the traffic before she met the guys over the hill at the Look Out. The restaurant was a magnet for bikers. Street racers loved the curves up to the restaurant and cruisers liked the easy ride through the mountains. Who would have

guessed both saw the same ride so differently. Leaning back Tyler stretched herself, propping her long legs on her highway bar pegs. Getting comfortable, she rolled the throttle a little more until the baritone of the pipes smoothed out. She didn't need to worry about being side swiped now that she was out of city traffic, so she let the rumble roll out a bit softer.

###

Ashley heard the bike as it passed her location. The stranded motorist was frantic and swore she had filled the car with gas the night before.

"Is it possible you have a hole in the tank, Ma'am?" Ashley inquired, watching the motorcycle as it crept past her location. *Illegal pipes*, she thought before responding to the answer she received to her question.

"I know I filled it. I have the receipt right here," said the motorist, shoving the paper at Ashley. "I want to file a robbery report. Someone has obviously stolen my gas."

"Ma'am, I'm not sure we'll find whoever stole your gas. Besides, unless you saw them, I'm pretty sure we won't catch 'em." Ashley smiled at the older woman, wishing for one short second she had stayed in vice. "I'll be happy to send an officer to your house later and he can look around and see if he can find anything."

"What about fingerprints? Why don't you take some fingerprints right now?" The woman's persistence was wearing on Ashley.

"Ma'am, we're right in the middle of traffic and that wouldn't be safe for either of us. Besides, I work patrol and you would need to see someone from the burglary division to write a report. Okay?" Ashley knew she was placating the woman, but she was hoping the woman would see reason. She wished the day was already over and she had just started her shift. "Why don't you call a tow service to come out and bring you a gallon of gas so you can get where you're going. I can wait here until they arrive."

Crossing her arms indignantly, the older woman said, "I don't own a cell phone. I don't want brain cancer getting me just because someone wants to talk to

me right now. They can wait until I get home and call me then.”

Dropping her head in defeat, Ashley pulled her cell phone from her belt and handed it to the woman. “Please, tell me you have towing.”

“Of course. We’ve been auto club members since they started forty years ago.” Looking inside her huge purse, the woman started rummaging around. “Now if I can just remember what I did with that card.”

Keying the mic on her shoulder, Ashley let dispatch know she was going to be at her present location until the tow truck arrived. *Unless, of course, I’m hit by a bus*, she wished, continuing to watch junk fly out of the small carry-on the woman called a purse.

Chapter Three

Tyler stretched in the chair and listened to the conversations swirling around her. She picked bits and pieces of one or another, yet didn't commit any to memory. She was letting the last beer she had over an hour ago work its way through her system. The ride back would be slow and relaxing, hopefully. The talk around the table turned to women, everyone's favorite topic of late. The guys she hung with were all single and serial daters. Few of them had steady girlfriends, a reflection of their firefighter lifestyle. Women loved men in uniform and lesbians were no exception. Tyler never lacked for female companionship, ever, and the best part of it all was that she didn't have friends with benefits. She didn't need friends. She needed diversions that kept her body stimulated and her mind engaged in the moment.

"Yeah, did you see that hottie working the Hawthorne fire the other night?" J.J. asked, taking another pull from his beer.

"No, I was too busy saving Sparky over here," one of the paramedics said, slapping Tyler's thigh.

Tyler heard someone let out a meow and everyone started laughing. Tyler blushed as she looked around the table. Her buddies were like family. But she didn't take shit from her family, so she wasn't about to take shit from these guys either.

"Very funny, ya bunch of dick heads." Tyler slapped at the hand that briefly rested on her thigh. "Keep it there and you might lose it. Then what will you tell your penis when it wants a date?"

"That you're available." The smirk that greeted Tyler made her laugh. It had taken a long time for her to become one of the 'guys' and she had appreciated their support when she lost Jill.

Tyler jumped up and sat in the paramedic's lap with a thud, wrapping her arms around his neck. Planting a kiss on his lips, she devilishly smiled at her buddy.

"Last time I checked, I didn't bat for your team. So unless you're switching sides," Tyler said, looking at his flat chest, "you're dreaming." Leaning in, she gently slapped his cheek. "Wake up honey. You're having a bad dream." Her face rubbed

against the rough bristle of the young man's face.

The raucous laughter worked its way around the table as she hugged the paramedic closer. Tyler knew she was making the paramedic blush but she didn't care. If he was going to give, he better be willing to receive.

"Big strong men like you make my heart flutter," Tyler said, batting her eyes at the now visibly embarrassed paramedic. "Eww, I love your scruff, too, ya big bear." Tyler ran her hand over the chest hair that peaked out from his shirt.

The paramedic tried to toss Tyler off his lap, but she just hugged him tighter. "Geez, Tyler. I can't understand why you're still single, bein' such a sweet talker and all."

"Anyway, what were we talking about?" Tyler wiggled her eyebrows at the men sitting at the table. "Women?"

"Come on Tyler, are you saying you didn't notice Officer Henderson the other night?" J.J. asked, throwing Tyler a skeptical look. J.J. knew Tyler better than anyone at the table so she just shrugged her shoulders and went back to stroking the furry chest. Tyler didn't remember much after dropping the kittens on the ground. The next memory she had was the voice of her captain yelling at her as the ambulance closed its doors and raced to the hospital. This time she had been admitted to the hospital overnight, the scorching pain in her chest a testament to the careless way she treated her life. Sitting back down in her seat, she tried to remember if she had seen anyone new at the fire scene, but drew a blank.

"Guess not, buddy. I actually don't remember much except the Captain chewing me a new ass before the bus took me to the hospital." Tyler smiled at J.J. and shrugged again. "Nice, huh?"

"Nice? This chick is hot, man, and there is no way she bats for your team. No way," J.J. said, a few others echoing his proclamation. Tyler laughed as the men started making bets on who would get her number first.

"Well you know what they say guys, two drinks away ..." Tyler raised her empty glass and smirked. The men grumbled around her with comments of "bullshit" and "no way, she's too hot" or "we didn't get the gay vibe off her".

Smiling, Tyler raised her hands in defeat and said, "Okay, I'm just saying."