

Spiraling

By Aniyah Veal



Tyler sat in his parked car on the small street as he gazed at the row of identical houses. He parked in front of the house he had visited every day for six years. He exhaled as he leaned his head on the steering wheel. He wished the shot of tequila from earlier had done something to loosen him up, but he was still as stiff as a board. Nothing could have prepared him for what he was about to do. Not the long talks he and Evan had had in his apartment, away from all listening ears and prying eyes. Not the voice in the back of his mind that chanted “Always be ready”.

For the past year, he and Evan had said the mantra together like a daily prayer. He looked in the mirror every morning and told himself that today might be the day, the day that they died. Tyler went to bed every night relieved to have survived another day, but anxious for the next. In a corrupt system, there isn't much space for honest officers. Smith had been a great officer. He believed in justice and honor. He didn't last a month before he was discovered to have jumped off a bridge. The cracked ribs, bruises and burns he received prior to “jumping” was excluded from the news coverage, autopsy, and police report. Honest officers were dead officers. There was only one way to survive when there was no beating them. Tyler and Evan joined them.

When Tyler got Evan's text that simply said *Now*, he knew time was up. Immediately, he called Evan's phone to try and get an idea of how bad it was, but it went straight to voicemail. It was bad. Wasting no more time, he packed only his necessities from his shabby apartment, hopped in his car, and raced over to the house that he sat in front of now. He took in the silence of the street for another moment before he exited his car. Tyler walked up to the house and rang the doorbell, leaving no room for hesitation. The door swung open so quickly that he knew Jessica had been sitting in the living room, waiting for Evan. She looked at him with concern as she bit her bottom lip.

She sighed and asked, “Where’s Evan? Did he drink his way into oblivion at Tony’s bar for the second time this week?” He walked past her and entered the house without answering.

“Jess, you need to get Isaiah and come with me.”

“What are you talking about? Where do you think we’re going at two in the morning?” Jessica asked as she followed him through her house. She watched him peek out various windows of her home. He walked up the stairs and stopped outside of Isaiah's bedroom.

“There’s really no time to answer questions.” Jessica and Tyler stared each other down. She saw the way his hand rested near his waist where she knew he kept his gun and she saw the alertness in his eyes.

“We’re talking about this when we get in the car,” she said sternly as she pointed her finger at him.

“Sure, whatever. Go grab anything necessary for you and the little champ. I’ll carry him to the car.”

They had been in the car for about a half an hour and Jessica hadn’t spoken. Tyler used the time to think about the past year and what he would tell her. He knew Evan never wanted her to hear the truth. He was a great husband and father. He was a hero that helped to protect their city in their eyes. They didn’t need to know about the drugs or money they handled daily. They didn’t need to know that he drunk to erase the guilt of breaking his academy oath.

He didn’t know where Evan was or if he was even alive. The mere thought of Evan being gone made him shudder.

“This is the way to the airport, not the precinct,” Jessica stated quietly. She was mindful of her four year old son sleeping in the back seat.

“Yeah, it is. Never said we were going to the precinct,” Tyler answered without taking his eyes off the road.

“Why aren’t we? Obviously, something big has happened.”

“We can’t go there.”

Jessica huffed as she crossed her arms and shifted her body so that she was staring at the profile of Tyler’s face. She stared intently at him, trying to make him at least glance over at her.

“Alright, let’s cut the crap! Why are you being so cryptic with me? Don’t I deserve to know what’s happening?” Jessica whisper yelled at Tyler frustratingly.

“Jess, I am taking you two to the airport. I—”

“Is Evan meeting us there?”

“— am buying two tickets to Ecuador. You are going to take your child to go live with your grandparents.”

Jessica opened her mouth to speak and then closed it when no words came out. She leaned back properly in her seat as she processed Tyler’s plan.

Tyler sighed. He knew it must have been hard for Jess to not understand what was happening or why it was happening. He heard the sound of a motorcycle approaching behind him. He looked in his rear view mirror and saw the motorcycle trailing behind him. Tyler didn’t want to assume anything, but he slowed down to see if the biker would go around him. The motorcycle slowed down as well.

“Why are you slowing down?”

“Crawl in the back seat, duck down and cover Isaiah,” he tried to say calmly as he started accelerating again. His right hand reached for the gun at his waist. Jessica looked at him puzzled and froze when she saw what he was reaching for.

He leaned over and unbuckled her seat belt as he yelled, “Now!”

She crawled to the back and shielded Isaiah with her body. He woke up, but she covered his ears as the motorcycle sped up closer to them. Jessica didn't have time to scream before the motorcyclist began shooting at the car. Glass shards fell on her as the back windshield was shattered. Tyler cursed as he swerved on the road. He focused on not crashing his car and trying to shoot back at the motorcyclist. His hand gun couldn't compete with a machine gun. He heard the whimpering in his back seat and thought of a plan quickly. He yelled back at Jessica to brace herself.

Tyler drove his car off the road into the woods as if he had been injured. He sat still in the car and waited. He reloaded his gun quietly. Jessica shushed Isaiah's crying in the backseat and covered his mouth. She ignored the tears rolling down her cheeks as she tried to be silent. Tyler knew the man would come over to make sure he wasn't breathing. He heard the motorcycle ride over and stop. He heard twigs snapping under the man's feet as he walked closer and he gripped his pistol tighter. He knew he only had one chance to get it right.

Without moving, Tyler glanced at the rear view mirror and saw a clear view of the man walking up. He whipped around and fired three rounds. This time Jessica screamed and jumped. Tyler heard the body drop as it fell out of view. He exited his car and saw the dead body. He couldn't help but think that this wasn't the way things were supposed to go. He leaned against the trunk of his car, wiped the sweat off his forehead and listened to Jessica try to calm Isaiah's

cries for his daddy. He listened to her shaky voice as she told the boy that everything was okay and that Uncle Ty had saved them. He waited until they were quiet to move towards them.

“Hey,” he knew he startled her when he saw her flinch, but he continued, “are you guys alright?”

Jessica nodded stiffly as she said yes. Isaiah had buried his face in her neck and was tightly holding onto her. He nodded at the scared boy and she nodded back. Tyler squatted down and rubbed Isaiah’s side. Isaiah turned his head to face him as he sniffled.

“Hey, Champ. You did great,” Tyler said softly as he offered the boy a smile.

“I want Daddy,” he whimpered out quietly while he yawned. His mom caressed his hair to comfort him.

“Are you still tired?” Tyler asked, ignoring the mention of Evan. Isaiah nodded in return.

“I guess we better find you a bed then, Slugger,” Tyler replied before ruffling Isaiah’s hair. That earned him a small giggle as the boy leaned closer into his mom to escape his uncle. Tyler noticed the relief in Jessica’s eyes when he mentioned a bed.

“We’re really going to a motel?”

“Yeah, this guy just brought us a couple of hours. They’ll be waiting to hear back from him. The kid needs a bed after all this.”

“You’re right. Thank you.”

Tyler gave her a small smile and went to stand. He held his hand out for Jessica to take before she shook her head. He was confused at first before she looked down at her son still gripping onto her. He realized she didn’t have much choice, but to stay in the backseat with Isaiah. He nodded before closing the car door. He got back into the driver’s seat and let his hand

hover over the key before turning the ignition. He looked at Jessica in the rear view mirror as she caressed Isaiah's hair.

"Jess?"

"Yeah?" she asked as she looked up at him.

Tyler gulped and said, "I'm sorry you guys had to see and hear... that." Jessica nodded slowly as she glanced down at Isaiah before looking back up.

"Yeah."

They held eye contact for a few more seconds. Tyler broke it to start his car and steer them back onto the road. Jessica looked out the window at the clear early morning sky as she softly hummed for Isaiah.

Tyler sat on the metal motel stairs as he smoked and watched the area. He was once again surrounded by silence. He thought it was around five in the morning although he didn't bother checking. Jessica and Isaiah had been in the room for about an hour and a half. He wasn't expecting them to wake up for at least another couple of hours. He didn't sleep and he wouldn't try to sleep. As he inhaled and exhaled another puff of smoke, he heard the room door open and close. He felt a presence to the left of him and he turned to see Jessica.

"Did you get enough sleep?"

"I'll sleep when I'm safe with my son in the sky," she replied. She was looking straight ahead, but she had her hand reached out towards him. He only raised an eyebrow.

"I thought I heard that you quit," he said with a teasing tone.

“Well, forgive me, but you wouldn’t believe the day I just had,” she returned sarcastically with a smirk. He only shook his head.

“Tyler, cut me a break man,” she slightly whined. He chuckled as he pulled his second cigarette from behind his ear, lit it and handed it to her. Tyler watched the woman he considered a sister and silently cursed himself, Evan and the entire police precinct.

“If you think you’re going to ship us off to Ecuador without telling me anything, then you’re crazier than I always thought,” she said it like it was a joke, but Tyler knew better.

“There’s some things you don’t want to know, Jess. Leave it be.”

He rubbed his hands over his face while she scoffed and added her ashes to the pile in between them.

“I’ve been with Evan for ten years. He’s been my life for ten years... I deserve to know. I need to know.”

Tyler tried to ignore the trembles in her speech that let him know tears were filling her eyes. Tyler sighed and said a silent apology to Evan. He leaned back and smashed his cigarette butt into the stairs. Jessica mirrored him. Then, he began to fill her in on the general things. He told her of their precinct that had, in the past year and a half, begun to fill up with more and more criminals that enforced the law and called themselves cops. He told her that he and Evan stuck out like sore thumbs for not immediately jumping on the bandwagon. He explained how they were singled out and distrusted. Being distrusted in a group that stood solidly together was dangerous. Ashamed, Tyler informed her that he and Evan had been involved with more illegal activities than legal before he stopped himself from continuing. He had kept his eyes glued to his hands to avoid looking her in the eyes. He felt her stare though, burning as strong as ever.

“What did you guys do specifically?” Tyler wouldn’t answer her.

“Fine. I don’t have to know. I know good men when I see them. You have always been a good man,” she said softly as she rested her hand on his arm and squeezed it.

“You married a good man. A man with a conscience.”

“That’s why he started drinking so heavily. How did you cope without liquid courage?”

“I thought of all the evil I put away, before this all started, to keep me grounded.”

“So why do they want us dead if you guys joined them?”

“They never did trust us. We were planning to expose them all. Run sting operations, testify or confess... the thing is I don’t think they have even caught us yet. They must be running on a hunch. To them, we are merely disposable.” Jessica thought about his entire confession.

“Is Evan alive?” Jessica asked suddenly.

“I don’t know.”

Jessica pulled on Tyler to make him look her in the eyes.

“What’s your gut feeling? Please, be honest. ”

“ I don’t think he is, Jess...”

Jessica let out a sharp sob as she tried to hold back her emotions. Tyler held his arms wide open, inviting her in. She moved closer to him and let him hold her as she let it all out. Tyler knew she would try to cry herself out of tears before Isaiah woke up. They sat like that until the sun rose.

After Isaiah woke up, they all got ready, left the motel, and ate at McDonald's. McDonald's was Isaiah's favorite place and he deserved breakfast there. Tyler and Jessica allowed the radio to fill the comfortable silence as they drove to the airport. Isaiah played happily with one of his action figures that Jessica found in her purse.

When they arrived at the airport, Tyler led Jessica and Isaiah through the hectic building. He paid for their flights that were luckily leaving within that next hour, walked them through security, escorted Isaiah to the bathroom, and led them to the waiting area where their boarding gate was located. Jessica told Isaiah to sit across from them as he played so they could talk above a whisper. They were the only ones sitting in the area.

"Why don't you come with us?" she asked hopefully.

Tyler shook his head and let out a bittersweet chuckle. "No can do. That will only put you in more danger to be with me. It's not in the plan."

"What was the plan?"

"No matter what, either Evan or I had to make sure you and Isaiah got away. You two have always mattered the most. Mattered more than us."

Jessica looked fearful as she said, "You know it isn't safe for you here. How will you make it?"

"I probably won't," he answered plainly. Jessica took a sharp breath and began to bite her lip again.

"This is horrible. I'm already most likely a widow and now I lose you too." She looked absolutely miserable while she had the chance. Isaiah was in his own world as he made his toy fly around.

“Hey, you know that we love you guys and you guys love us. Just remember that. Don’t worry about me, worry about our little guy.” She nodded half heartedly.

“Here, I have something to give you.”

Tyler pulled out his wallet and handed her a debit card from within it. Then, he pulled out a thick white envelope. Jessica opened the envelope slightly to peek inside and was surprised to see a thick stack of hundred dollar bills. She gasped and almost dropped the envelope.

“This money is for you, Isaiah and your grandparents. The bank account linked to that card has all the money we were ‘earning’ through the year. This way it will be spent by and for good people,” Tyler explained to her as she sat there close to tears again. She put the money and card away and took a moment to clear her throat.

“I want to give you something too.” She reached up and pulled all her hair to one side. Tyler watched Jessica unclasp her cross necklace, put it in his hand and close his fist around it.

“May it give you protection.”

Tyler took the cross and put it around his neck right away. They smiled at each other, but their smiles slipped as they heard the announcement for their section to start boarding. They watched people from all directions start forming a quickly moving line before they stood up. Tyler and Jessica gave each other one last hug before kissing each other’s cheek. Then, Tyler scooped Isaiah up who giggled.

“Champ, you’ll be a big boy on the plane, right?”

“Yes, Uncle Ty.”

“Attaboy,” Tyler yelled, overly excited for Isaiah’s benefit as he gave him a high five.

“Will we have dinner this Sunday like usual, Uncle Ty?”

Tyler put Isaiah down. “No, but I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too. I love you,” Isaiah said innocently as he clung to Tyler’s leg.

“I love you too, Isaiah,” Tyler choked out as he led Isaiah over to his mother.

Tyler watched the two of them make their way through the entrance. They turned back around to wave goodbye and he waved back. He watched them until it was impossible to see them. He turned and headed out of the airport. He clutched the cross around his neck the entire walk to his parked car in the garage.

Tyler sat in his car as he thought about the past day. He had saved his sister and godson. He was content with that. They would live in Ecuador safely and happily. That’s what he wanted. That’s what Evan wanted. He sat in the garage thinking about what they could have done to Evan. He could think of a dozen ways they could have tortured or killed him. He contemplated between calling Evan again, going to go search for Evan or trying to lay low. He didn’t have to contemplate for long.

Tyler felt a vibration from the phone that he had forgotten was in his back pocket. He pulled it out, tapped the screen and froze as he saw Evan’s contact name on the screen. In record time, he unlocked his phone and tapped his text message icon. What he saw made his throat start to tighten and his heart beat erratically while he struggled to inhale enough air. The message had a picture of Evan’s body lying in a pool of blood. His green eyes were still open. The text attached said *You’re next*.

Seeing it was surely different from thinking it. He felt himself start to gag and he quickly opened the car door and leaned out. After a minute of emptying his stomach, he reached up to wipe his mouth and discovered that his cheeks were wet. He looked at the phone before chucking it behind him and out the space where the back windshield used to be. The sound of the phone hitting the ground echoed in the large level. He leaned forward to press his head to the steering wheel as his hands gripped it tightly. He gasped for air until his breathing slowed down to normal.

He felt as trapped as he imagined he would feel in the end. The only thought that bounced around his mind was “Always be ready” over and over. He wondered if he was ready to die. He was. He wouldn’t let anyone but himself decide when.

Tyler turned on the radio and switched through channels until he landed on the one he and Evan listened to during traffic. Evan was always in charge of the radio while they were on duty because Tyler had “no taste in music.” Coincidentally the song that started to play was a song he had heard at Jess and Evan’s house. He had sat with Isaiah at the kitchen playing Go Fish as Jess and Evan cooked dinner together. He watched them move around each other smoothly as they hummed together to the tune. He smiled as he remembered and lifted his hand from the dial, satisfied with the song choice.

Tyler pulled the gun out from his waistband. He checked the gun and saw one lone bullet left. Tyler took the gun, raised it to the right side of his head, took one steady breath and pulled the trigger.