

High Pressure

A Tyler Locke short story

Boyd Morrison

Tyler Locke wasn't sure he was being followed until he reached the hardware store. A lanky man wearing a Seahawks cap, light windbreaker, and mirrored sunglasses ambled by on the sidewalk as Tyler scanned the array of Leatherman multi-tools on a rack, comparing them to the one in his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched the man turn his head to see where Tyler was before disappearing past the window.

Tyler thought he recognized the face, but he couldn't put his finger on where he'd seen him before. Tyler had suspected a tail for the last six blocks of the Greenwood Car Show, but with the large crowds wandering the road closed off to traffic, he couldn't be sure until this moment. The late June event was packed with auto enthusiasts and their families strolling along Seattle's Greenwood Avenue to gawk at the hot rods, classic cars, and exotic supercars that were backed up against the curb on either side. The displayed vehicles stretched for more than a mile between Sixty-Fifth and Ninetieth streets, and Tyler was near the south end at Seventy-Second.

He never missed the car show when he was in town. As a mechanical engineer who'd founded his own forensic engineering firm, Tyler had always been a gearhead. He consulted with automotive and racing companies frequently and had even displayed his

own Dodge Viper at the car show several times, relaxing in a lawn chair and sipping on a cold beer as he chatted with other owners about their cars. Today he was just an attendee, browsing the beautifully restored vehicles before meeting his sister Alexa and his best friend Grant Westfield for lunch at the 74th Street Ale House, his favorite restaurant in the area.

The man in sunglasses walked by the hardware store again, this time heading north. He looked at Tyler once more, but Tyler's gaze remained fixed on the tool display. When the man was out of sight, Tyler headed for the open door.

He spotted his target a block away, threading his way through the mass of people that had come out to enjoy the sunny morning. Tyler kept pace, racking his brain trying to recall how he knew the guy. It definitely wasn't from his stint in the Army. He remembered well every man who'd served in his combat engineering company.

Tyler wondered if he was someone from the neighborhood who was looking to reconnect after all these years. Tyler and his wife used to live only a few blocks from Greenwood, which was how he'd discovered the car show in the first place. Before moving to their large house in Magnolia, he and Karen bought a tiny Craftsman bungalow built in the 1930s. They didn't have a lot of space for the first few years of their marriage, but the view of Green Lake and the Cascades more than made up for it.

They didn't sell the Craftsman, instead renting it to a nice older couple who moved out a few months ago to a retirement community. Karen died several years back, and she'd been the one taking care of the property. Since the Morettis moved out, Tyler hadn't put much thought into what he was going to do with the creaky old house—sell it or refurbish it for new renters—so it remained empty.

Tyler couldn't remember anyone in the neighborhood who looked like this guy. Besides, it wasn't the kind of behavior an old acquaintance would display. The man had been following him for at least half a mile, never attempting to get close enough to speak to Tyler.

Something else was going on here, and Tyler didn't like it. He wanted to know why he was under surveillance.

He picked up the pace, beginning to close the distance with the man in the sunglasses before he also sped up. Although he never turned his head, he must have spotted Tyler's reflection in one of the car windows. He passed the firehouse, where firefighters were showing off their trucks to curious visitors.

Tyler walked even faster, careful to dodge the kids and leashed dogs darting in front of him. As he passed the Ale House, he looked for Grant and Alexa at their regular table, but they hadn't arrived yet. He quickly texted that he might be a few minutes late.

Tyler had caught up half the distance between them by the time the man reached Eightieth Street, one of the few cross streets where cars were allowed to pass through by a policeman directing traffic. The man darted across the street just before the officer raised his hands to stop the pedestrians on Greenwood. The smell of hot-wings sauce from a nearby restaurant mixed with the exhaust fumes of the passing cars.

Tyler, who was over six feet tall, could easily see over the crowd of people waiting for their turn to cross. The man in the sunglasses was nearing the public library, enough of a head start that Tyler might lose him.

But instead of continuing on, the man stopped abruptly and turned. He looked straight at Tyler, removed his sunglasses and cap with a flourish, and smiled. Despite the warm

summer day, Tyler went cold when he realized why he recognized the man.

It was the arsonist Lyle Corvath. Although he no longer sported a mustache and beard, even at that distance the burn scar trailing from Corvath's left eye and up over his bald head were unmistakable. But he was supposed to be dead.

Tyler had headed the team investigating a series of fires and explosions that had targeted locations around Seattle more than a year ago. Because of the potential links to international terrorism, Tyler's firm, Gordian Engineering, had been brought in to consult on the case based on their previous work analyzing all kinds of disasters, from building collapses to airplane crashes.

Tyler's team was the one that made the breakthrough leading to Corvath. When the FBI went to arrest him, Corvath burned his own house down rather than turn himself in. Three bodies were found in the wreckage, reduced to little more than ashes and bone. Two of the corpses were positively identified as Corvath's sister and her husband. The third was presumed to be Corvath, but no dental records could be found for him. After six months without him surfacing, the case was kept open but put on the back burner over Tyler's objections. He knew Corvath would never have committed suicide, especially by fire, after suffering burns from a previous arson attempt gone wrong.

Now Corvath had returned, and apparently the first thing he'd done was seek out the person responsible for exposing his crimes. Tyler didn't know why but wasn't going to let him get away again.

Corvath waved at Tyler, put his cap and sunglasses back on, and kept walking the other direction. Tyler ignored the cop's outstretched hands and sprinted through the traffic, leaving squeals of tires behind him.

When Corvath glanced back, he began running as well. He flung open the door to the library and ran inside, Tyler following close behind. He stopped at the circulation desk and surveyed the room to see if he could spot Corvath in the stacks.

Then his stomach knotted when he realized that the library could be Corvath's next target, just like the public buildings he had previously set ablaze. Tyler had to stop him before he could trigger whatever mechanism the clever arsonist had devised.

Tyler exchanged glances with the teenage librarian manning the desk. She smiled timidly at him and then her eyes flicked toward the back of the library. Tyler nodded his thanks and ran toward his quarry.

Corvath, who had taken a seat at one of the computer terminals, saw Tyler approaching. He swept the monitor to the floor and picked up the table like a shield. But he didn't use it to defend himself against Tyler. He raced toward the plate glass window, crouching behind the table as he smashed into it. Corvath was protected from the razor-sharp shards of shattered glass as he continued through and onto the sidewalk. Two of the patrons screamed at the sudden impact, while the others merely watched in stunned disbelief.

Tyler leaped through the hole in the broken window and raced after Corvath, who was back on Greenwood shoving people right and left as he burst through the crowd. They were slowing him down enough for Tyler to catch up.

Tyler was about to tackle Corvath when a Great Dane, spooked by the commotion, yanked its owner into Tyler's path. Tyler tripped on the leash and went down, tucked himself into a roll, and then jumped back to his feet in one fluid movement.

Corvath laughed and kept going. That spurred Tyler to run even faster.

He caught up with Corvath by the post office. A rock band was belting out a tune from the parking lot of a nearby bar. It kept playing as Tyler tackled his prey.

They both tumbled to the ground. Corvath flailed at Tyler, but he was outmatched by thirty pounds of muscle. Tyler wrenched Corvath's wrist around, flipping him onto his stomach and pressing a knee into his back.

"What are you doing here, Corvath?"

"I wanted to see you again, Locke," Corvath said in a high-pitched voice.

"Why?"

"We had unfinished business."

"I know. Hope you like prison. You won't see many fires or explosions in there."

"We'll see about that. But I'm talking about our business together."

A crowd of spectators were beginning to gather. The only ones ignoring them were a group listening to the roar of a revving 1968 Mustang V8 convertible.

"Get the police," Tyler said to one of the spectators before turning back to Corvath.

"We have no business together, you nutball."

"You killed my sister and her husband."

"Wrong. You did that when you faked your death."

"Which I wouldn't have had to do if you hadn't zeroed in on me."

"Is that your pathetic defense? None of it's your fault? Save it for the police." He looked around to see if any officers were coming but couldn't spot any.

"I needed to pay you back," Corvath said. "That's why I found you."

Tyler leaned down. "What are you talking about?"

"But first I found your sister and your friend Grant."

Tyler yanked Corvath's arm until it nearly came out of its socket. The arsonist cried out in agony.

"What have you done? Tell me!"

Corvath grimaced as he spoke. "Left...jacket...pocket."

Tyler reached in and found two objects.

The first item was a phone. The screen had a red digital readout, but it wasn't a timer counting down. It was a number that was increasing every few seconds. Currently it read 310 psi.

It took a moment for Tyler to recognize the second object. It was a copper plumbing joint with a metal lever mounted on it. The blood drained from his face when he understood what it was: a water heater pressure relief valve.

Just like the one from his Craftsman bungalow. Corvath must have lured Grant and Alexa there.

"I estimate the water heater will explode when it reaches 330 psi," Corvath said. "Your rental house is, what, a mile away? Long way to run. I wish we both could be there when it goes, but I'll just have to watch it later on the cameras I set up to record it."

That had been Corvath's plan the whole time, to lead Tyler away from the vicinity of his house and then taunt him about it when it was too late to reach it.

Tyler didn't waste time asking any more questions. He slammed Corvath's head into the pavement, and the arsonist went limp, out cold and ready for the cops, who Tyler could see approaching.

He didn't stop to explain the situation. He ran over to the revving Mustang convertible, yanked the owner out, and jumped into the driver's seat. The Mustang was

right in front of Eighty-Third Street, so Tyler didn't bother trying to navigate through the crowds. He threw the car into reverse, crunched through a wooden barrier, and backed it full speed down the road between the cars parked on either side.

When he reached Dayton Avenue, Tyler spun the wheel around and slammed his foot on the gas, keeping one eye on the pressure gauge app on Corvath's phone. It read 320 psi. His house was still ten blocks away.

He barely slowed when he reached Eightieth Street, just missing a passing car as he shot across. The street was so narrow that there wasn't room for two cars to pass each other, so he kept his hand on the horn as he rounded the small roundabout islands of every intersection. Once he had to pull up onto the sidewalk so he wouldn't have to wait for a car to go by.

By the time he reached his house, the gauge read 325 psi.

He left the Mustang idling on the street as he leaped out. The dark blue house was still intact. He raced up the front steps and glanced through the window into what should have been an empty house.

Instead, he saw his red-headed sister Alexa seated back to back with Grant, a huge former pro-wrestler who served with Tyler in the Army. They were tied up, breathing but unconscious. Corvath must have drugged them.

The chairs were situated directly above the house's water heater.

Tyler didn't have the house key, so he slammed his shoulder into the door with all his strength, busting it wide open after the third hit.

He flicked open the knife on his Leatherman and sliced through the nylon ropes. He counted out the rhythm of the pressure gauge in his head. He was up to 329 psi.

He threw Alexa over his shoulder and carried her outside, placing her behind the Mustang. Then he ran back inside to get Grant.

There was no way he could pick up Grant's 260-pound bulk, so he dragged his friend by the shoulders, heaving from the exertion. The count in his head was over 331 psi.

He barely got Grant's feet off the stoop and into the yard when the water heater blew up, flinging Tyler to the ground. Without the relief valve, the pressure from the steam had built up to the point that the tank could no longer withstand it, failing spectacularly.

The bottom of the water heater ruptured, shooting the remainder up like a rocket, blowing a massive hole in the floor and shattering the chairs into splinters.

It didn't stop there. The tank kept going up, punching through the ceiling, then the roof, and blasting into the sky. The explosion was so powerful that not only was every window in the home destroyed, but the walls ballooned out and the entire frame was shifted off its foundation.

Tyler looked up to follow the path of the soaring water heater, which had flown five hundred feet in the air. It arced over gracefully and landed a block away in the middle of the street with a resounding clang.

He caught his breath from having the wind knocked out of him. After making sure Grant was uninjured, he retrieved Alexa from behind the Mustang and laid her down on the soft grass next to Grant. The fire station was only a few blocks away, so he wasn't surprised when he heard the siren start up. The explosion hadn't started a fire, which would no doubt disappoint Corvath, but the firefighters would want to make sure the gas lines were shut off.

After texting his contact at the police department to make sure they took Corvath into

custody, Tyler scanned the block, wondering where the arsonist had hidden the cameras, but he couldn't spot any. He'd find them later. Right now, he was too exhausted to care.

He sat down next to Grant and Alexa and looked at the ruined house that he and Karen used to live in. While he listened to the approaching siren, Tyler tried to imagine how he was going to explain this to his insurance adjuster and then shrugged. They'd figure it out. At least now he didn't have to worry about renting it out.

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About the Author: Boyd Morrison is a Seattle-based actor, engineer, *Jeopardy!* champion, and New York Times bestselling author of THE LOCH NESS LEGACY, THE ROSWELL CONSPIRACY, THE ARK, THE VAULT, ROGUE WAVE, and THE CATALYST. His adventure thrillers have been published in over twenty languages. He is now co-writing with Clive Cussler in the Oregon Files series, the first of which was called PIRANHA. Their second collaboration, THE EMPEROR'S REVENGE, comes out in May 2016. For more information, go to www.boydmorrison.com.