



JASON ANDREWS

**WHAT YOU LEAVE
BEHIND**

A SHORT STORY PREQUEL TO KINETIC STAR

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Jason Andrews

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In February of 2009, President Obama sent seventeen thousand troops to Afghanistan to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The young men and women who had already finished their first tour of duty were given the option to return home.

In July of that same year, a major offensive was launched in southern Afghanistan to fight Taliban insurgency.

March Fifteenth

ELYSE SHIFTED THE GROCERY BAGS to her left arm, arching her back to manage their weight as she opened the mailbox with her free hand. Gunther barked at her from the bay window shelf, knowing full well that he wasn't allowed up there. She had replaced the window sheers six times in the ten months that Gunther had been a part of the family, evidence that her patient training sessions with the German Shepherd weren't taking hold. She clamped her teeth around the stack of envelopes and fished for her house keys as she approached the front door. Gunther greeted her with a hundred pounds of furry enthusiasm as she crossed the threshold, knocking a grocery sack from her arm.

"Damn it! Back off!" she scolded, spitting her mail across the floor to join the sundries that skittered to a stop on the Pergo slats.

Elyse made sure that the rest of the bags were safe on the kitchen counter before bending over to retrieve the fallen groceries. The milk carton hadn't ruptured, but the lid of the blueberry container had burst open to scatter the fruit across the foyer. She wasn't sure if blueberries were harmful to dogs, but took the necessary precaution by shooin

Gunther into the living room and erecting the baby gate. He could easily hurdle the barrier, but had been conditioned since puppyhood not to. Elyse hiked up her blue jeans and knelt to retrieve the berries. A cold rinse under the tap and they'd be good as new. But her hand froze over the half-empty container as she spied the return address printed clearly on the corner of one of the letters she had dropped in her exasperation.

**United States Navy
Personnel Command
5720 Integrity Drive
Millington TN 38055**

She pushed aside the penny saver publication and retrieved the envelope from the stack. It was addressed to LCDR David Daniels. Her thumbnail slid along the seam until she felt the glue seal, but she paused there as her thoughts jumbled and gave way to worry. No, a notification of such importance would be delivered by men in uniform on her doorstep. A notification like that wouldn't be addressed to the deceased. She relaxed and cleaned up the mess. David was finally coming home, and she had to get his favorite dinner started. His first home-cooked meal in nine months—grilled porterhouse steaks and new red potatoes soaked in parsley butter. His dessert would be a serving of Miss Elyse Connelly topped with the naughty little number she'd picked out for this exact occasion.

The scent of buttery, simmering potatoes gave way to heated charcoal as Elyse stepped onto the back patio to check on the grill. David had said she could expect him at around seven o'clock unless the flight was delayed. She hadn't heard from him since yesterday when he'd arrived in Germany for the last leg of his journey home. It was now seven forty-five. The briquettes were white hot over a steady orange glow. They wouldn't last much longer.

"Porterhouses?"

The voice startled her, almost causing her to drop the heavy, domed lid of the barbecue. David stood just beyond the deck railing, his rucksack nestled in the grass at his feet. His frame was thinner, leaner. His face looked different, and not just because of the thick beard that now decorated it. There was something unfamiliar in his eyes, and Elyse blinked several times before it registered that David had finally come home.

Gunther exploded from the house before she could get a word past her lips, and vaulted the railing to dive-bomb his gangly, furry bulk into David's arms. Apparently Elyse would have to wait her turn. Satisfied with his greeting, the Shepherd finally raced off to find his newest toy. He was sure David would love it.

"Hello, beautiful," David said, mounting the deck steps and sweeping Elyse into his arms.

Her prepared response of "You're late" was smothered by overwhelming emotion as her lips pressed against his and stayed there for a long time.

"I missed you so much," she said when they came up for air.

"I know, baby," David replied. "I'm here now."

Her fingers tousled the new beard. "What's this?"

David stroked his chin and shrugged. "Tool of the trade. Do I smell parsley butter?"

"Sir, yes sir," Elyse said. "Go get cleaned up. These steaks won't take long."

"Good. I'm starving."

The steaks were already sizzling by the time David had retrieved his bag and entered the house for the first time in almost a year. Elyse watched him from the deck, not missing his momentary glance at the letter she had rested against the wooden bowl of decorative fruit that was the centerpiece of their kitchen table.

Dinner was delicious, but couldn't compare to the lovemaking afterward. It was everything Elyse had been holding out for. Some of her friends had spouses and partners in the service, and for them infidelity was commonplace.

"Look, Elyse, it's just understood," Stacy had assured her after a tryst with a tree trimmer. "Our men are gone for months at a time. It's an unspoken agreement."

Stacy had even gone so far as to try to set Elyse up with her cousin Dean, an ambulance chaser from St. Paul, but the thought of men creeping around with soldiers' wives while they were off defending the country irked her to no end. She had not-so-politely declined the offer, and her respect for Stacy had dropped a notch. Elyse's disciplined celibacy had been tough, but well worth the effort now that it was over.

They lay together in a tangled mess of sweat-slicked limbs, breathing heavily in the aftermath.

"You're a great cook, but I think dessert was better," David said in between breaths. "When did you get that outfit?"

Elyse rolled to her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. "I didn't think you even noticed. It was on the floor before I could model it for you. Did they teach you that move in the SEALs?"

David chuckled and leaned up to kiss her shoulder. "The boys would look pretty silly in lace. Wow, bad mental image."

She traced circles on his chest with a slim forefinger, letting the silence that followed his comment act as a buffer before she changed the subject.

"A letter came for you," she said, letting the statement hang in the air.

David's arm draped across his forehead. His eyes were focused on the ceiling. "Saw that."

"It's from the Navy."

"Saw that, too."

Elyse studied his face, now fuller with the thatch of dark whiskers. His eyes flicked to hers before returning to the ceiling.

"Probably some form I forgot to fill out," he said. "So much damn paperwork."

"Aw, the big bad super soldier can't deal with a little paperwork?" she teased, flipping to her side and pressing up against him.

He opened his mouth to counter the jab, but reconsidered when her hand disappeared beneath the sheets.

"Do you want me to put my outfit back on, Lieutenant Commander Daniels?" Her voice was low and soft.

"What outfit?"

March Seventeenth

DAVID STEELED HIMSELF before walking into Lucky's.

He recognized many of the cars and trucks in the parking lot, a sign that something was afoot. Barry's F-150 had his customary deer-antler decal affixed to the tinted rear window, a decoration that traveled from vehicle to vehicle whenever he found a better deal on a new pickup. Pete's bike was parked next to it, a custom-built Triumph that he brought out only on special occasions and in perfect weather. David had ridden it once, and decided that he might look into getting a motorcycle of his own when he got back.

Raff had said that he was just getting a couple of their buddies together to grab a drink, but this was more than just a couple of buddies. It was probably a Welcome Home party or a similar gathering in his honor that always made David uncomfortable. He wasn't used to being the center of attention.

The muted kick drum rhythm exploded full bore into the upbeat last half of Skynyrd's *Free Bird* as David opened the door. Raff greeted him with a heavy mug of beer held high and his signature crooked grin before David had even closed the door behind him. He half-expected Raff to be wearing his deputy's uniform. It was how he always pictured Raff when his old friend crossed his mind.

"Hey hey!" Raff shouted, drawing the attention of the crowded tavern room. "Look who finally made it! The man of the hour!"

David forced his lips into a smile as Raff's arm encircled his shoulder and urged him toward the bar. Barry, Pete, and many other friends and acquaintances from David's past echoed Raff's "Hey hey!" with raised drinks.

"Rafael, you conniving little fuck..." David said through his conjured grin.

"What can I say? Word spread, soldier," Raff explained. "Relax and have fun. At least you won't have to buy your own sauce tonight."

David accepted a drink and a handshake from Danny West, his rival for the top spot on the wrestling team back in high school, and took a seat at the bar. He was immediately surrounded by well wishers, and drowned in gratitude for his service overseas. David acknowledged the words of thanks with a nod of his head and nothing more.

"Shot and a beer for my friend here!" Pete's voice rose above the laughter and music when he spotted the shallow level of liquid in David's glass. "So tell me, how are things going over there?"

It was a fair question, innocent in its simplicity. David hadn't taken the time to ask the question himself, so was at a loss for an answer. Should he go into an in-depth analysis of troop deployment and its overall effect on suppressing the ever-growing insurgency? Should he give an anecdotal answer, perhaps embellishing a story about a routine patrol in order to satisfy Pete's need for a tale to tell his friends that would make Pete sound important? Should he detail the sound of a man dying in horrible pain as pieces of his body lay ten yards in every direction? Make Pete aware that maybe his simple question wasn't so innocent? All of this raced through David's mind as Mason the bartender set a shot glass and a bottle in front of him. David picked up the shot glass and turned to give Pete the best answer he could.

A sharp *crack!* resounded throughout the tavern. David was on his feet in a heartbeat, hand grasping at his hip for a sidearm that wasn't there. The shot glass shattered on the hardwood floor, darkening the toe of his boot with brown liquor. A game of eight ball had started across the room at one of the billiard tables. The break was perfect, sinking two solids and giving a tall man in a blue baseball cap and checkered shirt a decided advantage over his opponent. David didn't miss the worried glances that were exchanged among his friends as he relaxed and returned to his seat at the bar.

"Things are fine," he said to Pete, tossing a ten-dollar bill onto the bar and pushing it toward Mason. "For the glass. Sorry about that."

Pete held up a finger to order a replacement shot for David. His next series of questions were about David's timeframe for getting a motorcycle of his own.

Physical Graffiti had played in its entirety by the time David had won his seventh game of cricket. He called it quits when the bull's eye began wavering in his vision, a result of cheap scotch and cheaper beer. He threw his last dart and returned to the table which was now decorated with empty pitchers and mugs. Some of his friends had filtered out, leaving David with pats on the back and promises of future outings, but the night was only beginning for Barry, Pete, and Raff. None of them asked about his tour of duty after Pete's initial query, and the absence of such questions was palpable. Numbed by alcohol, David didn't care one way or the other.

"And it's all for me grog, me jolly jolly grog—"

The door banged open to admit a group of young men decked out in Saint Patrick's Day paraphernalia and performing a lilting tune in an exaggerated Irish brogue.

"All for me beer and tobacco—"

They passed the table that David shared with his friends, their voices drowning out *Journey's Greatest Hits*, which had promptly begun after Zeppelin had ended. One of them wore a plastic bowler hat with a shamrock of golden foil bouncing from the hatband. His face was painted green, which did nothing to mask his inebriation.

"Well I've spent all me tin with the lassies drinking gin—"

Green Face removed his hat and placed it on Barry's head as he passed, then swept his arm about to accentuate the last line of the stanza.

"Far across the western ocean I must wander!"

Barry removed the hat and threw it after Green Face. It hit a bar stool and rolled to a stop at an odd angle. David's jaw tightened. He counted seven of them. Four against seven, should it come down to that.

The septet of newcomers swarmed over the bar, shouting orders at poor Mason who was shuffling between serving the tables and the bar as best he could. Green Face put his back to the bar railing and surveyed the room. His eyes fell over the bowler hat at his feet and his intoxicated smirk turned into a scowl as he regarded both the hat and Barry in quick succession.

"Hey man," he slurred, "I give you my shamrock hat and you throw it on the floor? Isn't that, like, bad luck or something?"

One of his friends, a young man with a buzzed hairstyle and flanged ears, turned to hand Green Face a pint glass. He sensed the shift in mood and tried to turn his friend back to their group with an apologetic wave directed Barry's way. Green Face wasn't having it, however, and scooped up the bowler, spilling half of his beer in the process.

Barry and Pete laughed and mocked the Irish brogue loud enough for Green Face and his friends to hear.

"What's Fonzie like, Davy?" Raff warned, clutching at David's forearm as he quoted his favorite line from *Pulp Fiction*. "Tell me. What's Fonzie like?"

David was on his feet before the spinning hat ever reached Barry. He knocked it out of the air and insinuated himself between Barry and his approaching antagonist.

"Let me buy you and your boys a round," David offered.

Two of Green Face's friends flanked him. Bolstered by their superior numbers, the rest of them set their drinks on the bar and turned around.

"Nah, man," Green Face said. "How about you take your ungrateful boyfriend out back and stick it in his pot of gold?"

David heard Raff's resigned voice somewhere behind him. "Now see, why does it always have to go there?"

Pete and Barry's chairs scraped against the floor as they got to their feet. Raff grabbed a pitcher and leaned back as he emptied the last of the golden lager into his mug. He sighed as David left the table and opened the front door. David paused in the entryway, looking at Green Face expectantly. He knew exactly what he was doing. Green Face was the alpha, the leader of his merry band of bullies. To reject David's challenge would show weakness, even if he laughed it off as not worth his time. His friends would know that he was scared, and that was exactly it. Green Face had been scared his entire life.

Raff put his head in his hands as Green Face summoned the courage to join David at the door. David turned back to rest of the group as Green Face pushed past him.

"You fellas coming?"

The remaining six newcomers looked at each other in disbelief. Pete and Barry joined in their confusion, not sure if they had heard their friend correctly.

David turned and left the tavern, leaving the door open as a reminder of his invitation. His boots crunched in parking lot gravel as he approached Green Face, who squared off against him with fists clenched at chest level. David didn't pause to size up his opponent or settle himself into a similar fighting stance, he simply walked right at Green Face without stopping.

"Let's see what you—"

David's jab busted Green Face's lip, interrupting the man's foolish bravado. He suppressed the urge to end the fight with a follow up hook that would have dropped the stunned Green Face where he stood. Instead, David let his painted opponent recover and return the attack.

David moved forward at an angle and ducked the haymaker when it finally came. His arm snaked around Green Face's neck in the same motion, trapping the attacking arm and forcing the man's own shoulder into the other side of his neck. After that, all David had to do was squeeze. The lack of blood flow through the carotid arteries did the rest. Green Face slipped to the gravel, his holiday revelry at an end. He would wake up later with a splitting headache and the knowledge that the bearded man in Lucky's Tavern had let him live.

"David!"

Pete's warning reached David's ears at the same time he heard the shuffling footsteps in the lot. David found Green Face's friends fanning out around him. The one with the buzz cut looked at his friend with concern but didn't dare approach the man who had bested his drinking buddy. David turned his attention to Buzz Cut as Pete, Barry, and Raff exited the tavern behind the group and crossed their arms over their chests.

"Let me buy you and your boys a round," David offered.

Buzz Cut's eyes traveled from Green Face to David before he threw his hands up in defeat. "Sure, man. Okay."

The others accepted David's offer in kind.

March Eighteenth

THE CREAK OF THE FIFTH STEP alerted Gunther to Elyse's presence as she made her way downstairs. The Shepherd was curled up next to his master, guarding him as he lay sprawled in the middle of the living room floor. David's protector abandoned his post when Elyse made her way to the patio door and opened it just enough for Gunther to slip through to begin his morning ritual of watering the fence posts and sniffing out any varmints that may have intruded on his domain overnight. She closed the door against the morning chill and turned back to David, who was still dressed in the button down shirt and cargo pants he had worn to Lucky's the night before.

She padded across the carpet and knelt next to him, deciding that he might like to be woken up with a kiss. But as soon as her lips touched his, she found herself on her back with her forearm in a viselike grip and a strong hand clamped over her mouth. His face loomed over hers, his eyes penetrating with murderous intent. A flicker of recognition passed over the frightening gaze and his grip loosened. David scrambled away from her until his back hit the sofa where he sat blinking in confusion.

"Elyse, I..." he stammered.

She ignored the pain in her arm and got to her feet, pulling her robe tight as she went into the kitchen without a word. Her hands trembled as she placed the coffee pot under the tap. David rose to follow her, and she stiffened when his arms slipped around her waist.

"I'm sorry, baby," he whispered into her ear. "Bad dream."

"You have green paint on your knuckles," she said, grasping his hand and lifting it for closer inspection. "And is that blood?"

David withdrew from her and took a seat at the kitchen table. "The guys threw a thing for me. It got a little out of hand."

Elyse dumped an extra scoop of coffee into the filter before placing it into the coffeemaker. She hit the brew button and turned to face him.

"Then why am I not bailing you out of jail right now?"

David ran his hands over his face and rubbed his eyes. "Raff was the party organizer."

"Friends in high places," Elyse said.

"He convinced the guy not to press charges on the premise that the guy was being a dick," David replied, rising from his seat. "I'm going to get cleaned up."

Elyse waited for him to mount the stairs before pushing back the sleeve of her silk robe. An angry purple imprint was forming on her fair skin. It was in the exact shape of his hand.

April Eighth

SHE STILL HADN'T MOVED THE ENVELOPE, hadn't placed it in the computer room atop the neat stack of mail that she had collected for him while he was away. David wanted to explain it, to rip it open and engage her in the argument that would no doubt follow, but he wasn't ready for that. He had to sort things out before that happened, starting with the unfamiliar feeling of detachment that had surfaced since he'd been home.

How had they done it back in the forties? The brave men who had endured living nightmares on tiny islands in the Pacific and in the freezing forests of Europe had come home and settled in to build America into the superpower it is today. But what thoughts had visited them in the still of the night when sleep would not come? David wished he

knew, hoped he could find some solace before it was time. He pushed the thoughts away as he opened the front door.

"How did the interview go?" Elyse insinuated herself between Gunther and David as he came in and wrapped her arms around him in a warm hug.

"As well as can be expected, I guess," he said. "I've heard that a lot of guys coming home from the war are having trouble finding jobs."

His eyes drifted past her to the envelope in its perpetual resting place on the kitchen table.

"Well, what did they say?"

Peregrine Composites might have welcomed David into their company with open arms and promises of fair compensation had David actually gone to the interview. But the steering wheel of Elyse's Jeep Wrangler had turned left instead of right, and David had instead found himself at the Harley-Davidson dealership interviewing cruising bikes. He'd spent the rest of the afternoon at the jewelers.

"They'll let me know," he said, retrieving a bottle of Dos Equis from the fridge and cracking it open against the edge of the countertop with a smack of his palm.

If Elyse detected his deception, she didn't show it. Her hand extended to him as she shouldered her purse.

"Keys," she said. "Gotta feed Hercules."

David tossed the key ring to her. "Stacy still in Cancun?"

Elyse caught them one handed as she reached for the doorknob. "Yep, and she can't get home soon enough. I hate cats. Do they all stare at you like they are planning your assassination?"

"Yep. Dinner later?"

"Sure. Whatever you want."

David waited until the Jeep pulled out of the driveway before reaching into his jacket pocket to retrieve a small, velvety box the color of coral. He lifted the lid to reassure himself that it was still there, then snapped it shut with his forefinger. Gunther padded across the carpet, perhaps hoping that the small box held a treat for him. A thought struck David as he reached down to stroke the Shepherd's ears. He took hold of the leather collar and inspected the tags that jingled below the thick, furry neck.

A devious smile spread across his face.

April Twentieth

ELYSE SAT BOLT UPRIGHT. He was doing it again.

It had become a nightly ritual, and Elyse had learned to identify the stages and extricate herself from the danger zone at just the right moment. First came the weird, jerking movements, the tiny muscle twitches that woke her up. The vocalizations soon followed, always on the cusp of forming words but never coherent. From there, David's twitches would evolve into full-on thrashing as his moans erupted into angry, unintelligible shouts or shuddering sobs. Elyse had been elbowed in the face on the first night, and from then on she slept lightly, listening for stage one to commence. She missed the initial signs that night, however. David was well into stage three by the time she awoke, and managed to roll from the bed just in time to evade a knee to the groin.

She sat on the floor with her head cradled in her hands, somewhere between sleeping and waking. She had tried to rouse him once, but the person who stared up at her was not David. Elyse had been shaken to the core and hadn't tried again. No, better to let him work it out, let his brain exorcise the demons.

"Ngah!" David lurched to his knees, throwing back the covers and spreading his hands out around him as though searching for something. "I'll find it, Simmons! I'll find it and they're gonna patch you up!"

Elyse huddled against the dresser with knees tight against her chest and waited for it to stop. This was the first time his nocturnal ramblings had made any sense. She didn't know whether he was getting better or worse, and it terrified her.

April Twenty-First

DAVID WASN'T THERE when Elyse awoke. She had no memory of him lifting her into bed and pulling the coverlet snug against her chin. Morning sunlight streamed through the open blinds. The clock read half past nine. She stretched and took the edge of the comforter in her hands, preparing to swing her legs out.

"Nope, you stay right where you are."

David appeared in the doorway holding a tray. Elyse smelled coffee and bacon.

"What's this?" she asked as David's lips curled into a familiar, sly grin.

It was the same one he had worn the first time he asked her out. She had refused, of course, but he was persistent and eventually wore her down, sporting that grin each time he asked.

"It's breakfast in bed. Spinach and mushroom omelet, bacon, and fresh-ground coffee made from those imported Colombian beans you get at the organic market," David said, setting the tray on the nightstand and offering her a fatty pork strip cooked just enough give it some color. Just the way she liked it.

Elyse rubbed her eyes and took the piece of bacon, but she wasn't biting. "What did you do...?"

Her voice trailed off in playful accusation as she sat up and propped her back against the pillows.

"Nothing yet," he said. "Eat up."

Elyse did as she was told, her eyes searching his face for clues as she sipped the bitter, dark coffee. The grin never left his lips as he watched her eat in silence. Something was definitely afoot.

"How long have you been up?"

"Not long," he said. "How is it?"

He indicated the half-eaten omelet, and Elyse nodded in approval.

"Perfect," she said around a mouthful of egg. "To hell with Peregrine, you should open a breakfast diner."

"Pure Eggsellence?" he offered.

Elyse shook her head and picked up the last bacon strip.

"Skillet 'n Grill It?"

She shut him down again and wiped the grease from her fingers with the brown linen napkin he had placed next to the plate. Gunther rounded the corner, and would have entered the bedroom if David hadn't stayed him with an extended hand.

"Bistro Elyse?" he said.

"Now you're getting somewhere."

She looked past him at Gunther, who appeared to be patiently waiting for something. Elyse cut a piece of egg from the omelet and held it up between thumb and forefinger. Gunther looked at David for permission, then bounded into the room when the nod came. The Shepherd leapt onto the bed and took the egg from her fingers with gentle care before swallowing it in one gulp and looking at her for more. The sun rays became trapped in a glimmer at Gunther's neck.

"What do you have on your collar, boy?"

Elyse pushed aside the shaggy neck fur and grasped at the aluminum tags that dangled there. Her fingers closed around something cool and cylindrical.

"How did you get this stuck in your—oh my god."

It was a traditional solitaire in a basket setting atop a dual-wound band of white gold. The gem captured the sunlight and toyed with it, coming alive as though it had captured a tiny sun within its facets.

"David..." Her words drifted from her, lost in the pounding of her heart. The ring blurred as her eyes misted over.

"Do you like it?"

David sat down next to her and removed the ring from Gunther's collar. He covered her shaking hand with his and offered the ring to her.

"Elyse Rhea Connelly," he began, but what followed became distorted and elongated, as though someone were playing a record at the incorrect speed.

She was pretty sure he had just asked her to marry him. What else could he have said? But at that moment she was only aware of the multitude of thoughts that sped through her mind before he ever finished the question. The night terrors. The heavy drinking. The violent behavior. The fact that he had lied about going to the interview.

The unopened letter from the Navy.

Unable to reply, she accepted the ring and held it up, mustering the best smile she could. It wasn't enough. David's grin faded. The greasy bacon turned in her stomach. She threw back the covers and darted for the bathroom, startling both Gunther and David alike.

May Fifth

THE REVOLVER RECOILED in David's hand, protesting against his palm with surprising force. The targets that Raff had purchased were printed with obnoxious renderings of insane zombie clowns wielding over-sized, spiked mallets. Bozo's forehead was missing, the coin-sized bits of paper falling like confetti to the range floor.

"The Judge, huh?" David said, hefting the large pistol and removing his ear protection. "I can see that."

Raff nodded in approval, removing his own earpieces to continue the conversation. It hadn't been difficult to convince Teddy to let them use the range after hours. The fact

that every deputy in the county gave Ted's Armory & Range their business on a regular basis didn't hurt Raff's case, nor did David's military service.

Raff hadn't told his wife about David's fight at Lucky's weeks ago, but Elyse had. Melanie had been getting regular reports from Elyse since then, and Raff was well aware of his friend's erratic behavior. Raff thought it might be good for David to let off some steam.

"Four-ten shotshell or forty-five Colt. Either way, it slams the gavel down. Hard," Raff said.

David smiled and opened the cylinder to eject the spent forty-five casings. "Hand me some of those shells," he said. "This should be fun."

The undead paper clowns didn't have a chance. Once they had been summarily dispatched, the friends walked to their cars with the carbon taste of gunsmoke in the back of their throats. Raff noticed that David seemed more relaxed than when he had entered the range, and seized his opportunity.

"How's Elyse?" he said.

David paused in the midst of sliding his weapon bag into the Wrangler. Raff's question might have sounded innocuous to the casual listener, but for David it wasn't.

"She's wearing the ring," David said, "but I haven't heard an official 'Yes'."

Raff replied with a neutral "Hmph."

"Maybe I'm just old fashioned, but I was raised to answer a question when it is asked of you. Either way, just answer it."

"I hear ya, brother," Raff said.

David faced his friend. "Has Mel heard anything? What's the deal?"

Raff held his hands out in defeat. "You know I can't."

"I know," David said as he finished loading his gear and climbed into the Jeep. "Had to try."

Raff nodded. "I know."

"You and Mel want to meet us up at the Pajaro later? Said I'd take her out for Cinco de Mayo."

"Would love to," said Raff, "but I'm on duty tonight. We're setting up checkpoints for the holiday. Overtime, you know."

"Got it," David said as he started the engine and closed the door. "I thank you for all you do in protecting society from idiot teenagers who can't handle their liquor."

"Wise ass," Raff chuckled. "You be careful tonight."

"Always."

* * *

The margarita glass was the size of a small fishbowl, and Elyse had licked almost all of the salt from the rim by the time she reached the bottom. Her head was starting to spin and she couldn't feel the tip of her nose. David had just finished his second fishbowl.

"Dos mas," he called, holding up two fingers to the server who was doing his best to stay ahead of the demands of the packed cantina. "Margaritas aqui, por favor!"

"I think he's from Duluth, Sweetie," Elyse said. "I know his cousin Cheryl."

"Anyone can be multi-lingual," David said. "I'm sure he knows the universal sign for 'two more' at any rate."

A trio of musicians in full mariachi regalia made their way to the table and serenaded Elyse with a classical ballad. She didn't know much Spanish, but caught the words "bonita" and "guapa," which made her blush a little. David dropped a ten-dollar bill into the sombrero they presented before they moved on to the next table with smiles and nods of gratitude. He plucked a tortilla chip from the basket and crunched into it, turning his attention back to Elyse.

"So I spoke to Justine at yoga a few weeks ago."

The words were out before Elyse could stop them. Maybe it was the tequila talking, but the first verbal volley had been launched without provocation.

A glass smashed against the floor at a nearby table, a miscalculation from a server who was overwhelmed by her responsibilities. David flinched involuntarily, another one of the idiosyncrasies he had brought home with him.

"Justine?" he said.

"Justine Carruthers. She's married to Warren Carruthers, whose brother is the recruiter at Peregrine Composites."

She let that piece of information hang in the air. David stared at her, cool as the ice in the margarita glasses before them. He nodded for her to continue despite the fact that it was apparent that she was waiting for him to speak.

"It's not that you didn't go to the interview, David," she said as her pinky wiped at the corner of her eye, an unconscious habit that revealed itself during uncomfortable situations, "it's that you lied to me about it."

Two fishbowls swimming with alcohol appeared on the table. Cheryl's cousin from Duluth was standing there, patiently waiting for something. Perhaps he had asked them if they'd like to order food. Elyse didn't care. She was too busy daring David to break away from her stare. The server took the hint and left them to it.

Elyse sensed David struggling with his reply. Which strategy would he choose? Perpetuate the falsehood by compounding it, or come clean and apologize?

"That job's not for me, Elyse." he said. "I'm sorry."

He reached for her hand, but she picked up her margarita instead. The salt collected in the corners of her mouth as the lime-infused beverage passed her lips. The liquor warmed her belly, giving her the confidence to speak the truth. Finally.

"David, I... I think you need to talk to someone. I can't... *We* can't go on like this."

His face reddened and he chugged half of the voluminous margarita. The ice cubes clinked against the glass as he set it down with a touch too much force. Heads turned their way.

"Can't go on?" he said, raising his voice. "How do I even know you *want* to go on, Elyse? You wear that fucking ring but you haven't answered my question!"

His eyes were changing, turning into the menacing creature that appeared in her bed every night.

"The fact that I'm wearing this ring *is* your answer, David!" Now her voice was drowning out the mariachi band as well. "Do I have to send you a written fucking contract?"

"No, but a simple 'Yes' would do!" he thundered, kicking back his chair and lurching to his feet. "Ever since I got home, you tiptoe around me like I'm a monster! Either that, or you pity me from the corner of your eye! What do you want from me, Elyse? I'm trying my best! You don't know what it's like over there!"

The Elyse from a couple of months ago would have cowed before him, shrank into her chair. But this Elyse, the one who had been forced to watch the love of her life slowly melt away from her, stood up and faced him nose to nose.

"That's why you need help! Can't you see that?" she said. "I'm tired, David. So tired. For nine months I laid awake at night wondering if you were going to make it home. Now that you have, I lay awake worrying even more. And not about whether you're going to crush my windpipe during one of your episodes, but because you are in such pain and I can't help you. I worry about you, David! I want you to get through this. For us. For our future."

He started to speak, started to say something that he shouldn't, but thought better of it. Elyse would later learn what it was that he couldn't—no, *wouldn't*—say, but in that moment, as she looked at him through a blurry layer of tears, she became fully aware of the heavy burden he carried. The burden that he refused to share with her. She became infuriated that he wouldn't at least give her a chance to help carry the load.

"You need help, David."

She ripped the diamond ring from her finger and dropped it into his margarita glass before making her way to the exit as fast as she could.

May Tenth

ELYSE SAT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE staring at the unopened letter. Beside it was a stick of white plastic, oblong in shape and tapered at the end. An oval-shaped window was cut into the stick halfway up its length. Gunther was sitting at the door, waiting for him to come back.

But he wasn't coming back.

She had come home from work to find the bed perfectly made and his rucksack nowhere to be found. The ring had been placed atop her pillow, a folded note resting between the band of woven gold and the white linen.

Sleep well, Elyse was all it said.

The days following Cinco de Mayo had been a cold war. Poor Gunther could sense the tension, but wasn't sure who to comfort—except when he came bounding up the stairs in the middle of the night to protect her from David's violent fits that erupted on the couch below.

"Find someone else," Stacy had said. "This damn war fucks them up in the head. You don't need that. You tried, Elyse."

Elyse's gaze moved to the plastic stick, then back to the envelope. It was a long time before she picked up the envelope and slid her thumb into the seam once again, this time completing the motion. The stiff paper sliced into her thumb, perhaps a warning that she should go no further, but she ignored the pain and continued. She knew what was inside. She had known in her heart all along. The letter unfolded to confirm it.

To: David L. Daniels, LCDR

From: Glenn Braithwaite, CDR

Date: 3/12/2009

Re: Recall to Active Duty

In accordance with your military orders, issued 6/23/2008, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, you are hereby recalled to active military duty.

The letter went on to stipulate details and logistics, but Elyse had read all she needed. It was clear that this was just a formality of his decision to serve a second tour. He had made his choice before he ever finished his first, before he had appeared in the backyard just in time for steaks.

Her forehead pressed against the cool finish of the wooden table as the letter fluttered to the floor. Her fingers found the plastic stick and she lifted her head just enough to look at it for the hundredth time. Perhaps this time the message in the small oval window would change.

But the purple plus sign stared back at her with stubborn determination.

June Second

THE BARRACKS SERVED as a temporary staging ground next to the tarmac where supplies were being loaded into the C-17 on the nearby runway. David had just finished strapping down his pack when a familiar voice called out above the excited chatter that filled the tent.

"Double D in the house!"

Wally Pritchett slammed his open hand into David's in a high, bent-elbow shake.

"Oh shit! Who let you in here?" David replied. "How long has it been? Coronado?"

Wally nodded. "Mom's still got the graduation picture on the mantle, my man!"

Walter Pritchett had been David's assigned partner during SEAL training. If he failed, David failed, and vice versa. One lesson David had learned early on is that the team is only as good as the man beside you, and they had supported each other through the worst of it. Wally had gone on to serve in another unit during his first tour, but it appeared that they'd be reunited for their second.

"Listen up, Ladies!"

The room fell silent as another familiar voice rose above the din. A tall, striking figure parted the tent flaps. He had more tattoos than David remembered, but the flat top haircut and the self-assured smirk were the same.

"The CiC has seen fit to grant you sissies another crack at the towel heads," he said around puffs of a thick, brown cigar. "Apparently someone thinks you need a babysitter, so I guess I'll keep an eye on you punks while you try your damndest to seek and destroy our enemies."

His dark eyes fell over David and he issued the slightest of nods David's way before continuing.

"I know you have all been there before, so I'm not going to preach to you about the importance of what we're doing over there. The mission hasn't changed. We'll be going door to door. We'll be in the thick of it. We'll be showing these mother fuckers that you do *not* mess with the United Fucking States of America! Do you understand me?"

The tent erupted into a unified "HUA!"

Commander Braithwaite smiled and spat a soggy piece of cigar paper into the air.

"Then mount up, boys! This is gonna be a real treat!"

END

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