

Long Distance Call

By Scribblesinink and Tanaqui

Jake's hand beat an unsteady tattoo on the top of the pay phone as he waited for Marshall to pick up. Angrily, he shoved his hand into the pocket of the thin cotton jacket he wore.

The line clicked and a tinny voice echoed through the handset. "Marshall."

Jake straightened. "Hey, Marshall. It's Jake." His mouth was suddenly dry.

"Jake." Marshall sounded guarded and Jake's forced optimism evaporated. Deep down, he'd known all along, lying in his bunk going over and over what Luke had said in his last call, and what Anna had put in her letter when he'd demanded the truth, that it was all bullshit. But it was the only way he'd been able to get through the long nights while Marshall investigated.

"Whaddya find out?" Jake tried to keep his voice level.

"I..." Even down the phone line, Jake could hear Marshall swallow. Maybe he should've asked one of the others. Tact wasn't a quality he appreciated right now. He just wanted a sit rep. Needed one.

"O'Brien!" he barked into the phone. "Report!"

"Yes, Sarge." Jake could almost hear Marshall snapping to attention. There was another pause, then: "You were right, Sarge. She's sick. Anna's sick."

Jake closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall, trying to breathe. "How bad?"

Again a pause. "It's cancer, Sarge. I'm sorry."

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Lights out had happened hours ago, and still Jake lay staring at the ceiling, wide awake. Though it was never silent in prison, after fifteen years in the military the nightly noises usually didn't keep him up. But tonight they were slowly wearing on his nerves: the scuffed footsteps of the COs making their rounds, the soft clanking of pipes behind the walls, the coughing and snoring of his fellow prisoners.

In his head, he kept mulling over the phone call, kept hearing Marshall say those dreaded words out loud. He'd hung up right after; unable to bear hearing more. Maybe it was cowardly, and he should've asked for more details—what kind, how far, what are the options?—but it was as if his brain had shut down and he could no longer find any words.

Besides, what difference would it have made if he had? He already knew the answers; he'd heard them in Marshall's voice. What options could Anna possibly have left, with no medical insurance and no income? Their few savings would barely get her into the door of a hospital, let alone pay for the treatment she'd need.

No longer able to keep lying down, he swung his legs over the side of his bunk and rested his elbows on his knees. Dishonorable discharge, one year in Leavenworth, and he'd go free: that was what they'd promised him. He'd figured it was as good a deal as he could get. The platoon would be

cleared of all charges, and he and Anna could make a fresh start, after.

Now, the deal sucked. He should never have taken it.

He should've fought them tooth and nail. He should've disputed the charges, gone the distance no matter what. And maybe, just *maybe*, he might have won.

And Anna would've gotten the treatment she needed.

Instead, she'd pay the price. Because *he* had made that deal.

Abruptly, the narrow cell seemed smaller than it had before, the air thick and heavy. He struggled to draw breath, his lungs burning as he gasped. Stumbling toward the bars holding him in, he grabbed them. The metal was cold and unyielding under his fingers. Blood thundered in his ears.

"Hey!" he hollered. Echoes bounced back at him from stone and iron in the still night, before dying away to silence. "Hey!" He rattled the bars but was rewarded with nothing but a sleepy "Shaddap!" from somewhere along the landing.

Taking a step back, he reached for the tin cup on the table and brought it round in an arc against the bars. "Hey!" he yelled again, adding his voice to the clamor of metal against metal. His own ragged breathing as he hammered the cup against the bars almost masked the sounds, from either side and above and below, of other prisoners yelling at him to be quiet, cursing him, or adding their own contribution to the din.

"Keep it down, Mendez!" One of the COs stalked along the landing towards him.

Jake rested his head against the bars, breathing hard into the sudden silence. "I need to get out!"

"Sure, Mendez. You and every other piece of scum in here." The CO began to turn away.

Jake hauled himself closer to the bars. "My wife's sick."

"Well, I'm real sorry to hear that." The CO didn't sound sorry at all. "Now shut the fuck up and let everyone get some sleep."

"She's real sick!" Jake clutched the bars, pulling himself against them as if he could pass through them by sheer force of will. "I need to talk to her."

"You can call her in the morning." The CO sounded like he was repeating something he'd said a hundred times before.

"I need to talk to her now!" Jake slapped the bars in frustration.

"Mendez, it's freakin' oh-two-hundred hours. She's not gonna want to talk to you...."

"I said now!" Turning, Jake seized the chair and smashed it against the bars. He let it go, and it cartwheeled across the floor, still tumbling even as he gave the table the same treatment. He could barely hear the CO shouting his name over the din....

Harrison looked around at the mess in Mendez's cell. Even with a face full of pepper spray, he'd gone on fighting like a madman, lashing out with anything he could lay his hands on. In the end, they'd had to taser him. Harrison shook his head: of all of them in here, Mendez was the last one he'd have expected to pull a stunt like this. Harrison wouldn't have said he was a model prisoner—he had a tendency to turn into the cellblock lawyer when any of the men had a problem—but he'd broken up more fights than he'd started.

Harrison crossed over to where a picture of a laughing Mendez, a woman and a kid had been tacked to the wall. Carefully, he took it down. He guessed Mendez would be spending more than a few days in the psych block, and he'd need it.

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He was sore all over. Muscles he'd never even known he had ached as if he'd been on a twenty-mile forced march in full gear, and his face felt like it was on fire. Senses returning, he realized he was lying on his back, cotton sheets beneath him. *Hospital bed*. He tried to remember if he'd gotten shot again. But the pain didn't fit with shrapnel wounds.

As soon as he scrunched his eyes open, they watered at the glare of the fluorescents, and he couldn't make out anything but blurry shapes and pale colors. He raised a hand to wipe the tears away—or rather, he tried to. Padded cuffs tied him to the railing of the bed at both wrists and—he attempted to move his legs—his ankles too.

A shadow fell over him, and something touched his burning jaw. Jake flinched, instinctively trying to move out of reach. The cuffs kept him from doing more than turning his head away.

"Easy there, Sergeant." The voice was male and matter of fact. Jake didn't recognize it. "Just gonna wash that pepper spray off. Make you feel better."

Pepper spray?

Digging through his mind, Jake discovered a distant memory of getting sprayed in the face with the biting gas. It had instantly burned his eyes and lungs, making it hard to breathe, hard to see... On what had happened next, he pretty much drew a blank.

"What—?" His voice was raspy, and the words seemed to stick inside his raw throat. He tried to swallow.

"Here, have something to drink." The owner of the voice held a plastic bottle with a straw near his mouth. Jake caught the straw between his lips and sucked. Cool water slid down his throat, and he eagerly gulped a few more mouthfuls before the bottle was withdrawn. "Better, huh?"

Unable to do anything else, Jake nodded and forced himself to relax while the orderly started to wipe at his cheeks and brow with something wet and soft. It soothed the burning sensation almost immediately. A short time later, Jake did indeed feel better, except for the stinging in his eyes every time he didn't blink often enough.

"The tearing'll pass," the orderly said after he'd finished with the wipes. "Nothing I can do 'bout that. Your system will have to work the stuff out by itself."

Jake nodded again to show he'd understood. "Thanks." He was pleased to find his voice sounded stronger, if still a little scratchy. He raised a hand and tugged at the cuff. "Any chance you can

remove these?"

The orderly shook his head. "Nope. Sorry. You'll have to talk to the shrink about that. She'll be 'round in the morning." He moved away. "Holler if you need anything. But I suggest you get some sleep."

After the orderly left, Jake blinked and looked around at the room. With his vision gradually improving, he could confirm he was in the prison's hospital wing. He tried to recall how exactly he'd ended up there, but his memories remained fuzzy. However, the way his entire body ached told him that pepper spray wasn't the only thing they'd used on him.

What had happened?

The last thing he remembered clearly was that he'd been thinking about Anna. About Anna being sick... Looking at the evidence, he figured he must've flipped his lid at some point. Like he'd seen others do, in Iraq and elsewhere. Never thought he'd get to that place himself.

And he couldn't afford to do so again, ever.

Because what good could he do if they locked him up in a padded room with no windows? How would that help Anna? No, he needed to be smarter than that. Needed to use his brain, stay calm, think things through. Approach this like any other mission. Which meant starting with collecting intel.

He settled into the pillow a little more comfortably, waiting. There wasn't anything he could do until morning and the shrink came round. Yet he didn't take the orderly's advice. Instead, he lay awake all night, plotting his next moves.

He'd call Marshall again, soon as he could. Ask him for those details he couldn't bear to hear before. He'd have to talk to Anna, too, and get her to tell him the truth. And then, together, they could form a plan of action.

In the quiet of Leavenworth's hospital wing, Jake Mendez made a silent pact with himself: somehow, he'd get them through this. Somehow, he'd find a way to save her. His wife. Anna.

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