

Jocelyn's War

by Jason Ryan Dale

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First Chapter

"Tell me a story."

Jocelyn drawled the words gently as a whisper, but sharp enough so they carried through the steady din of Vicki's Bar. Cliffy stood his post behind the long countertop, the slightest of smiles stretched across his lips.

"What kind of story?" He wiped the bar as he spoke, tensing his arms to inflate the muscles he'd worked so hard to grow.

The walls were filled with glowing neon signs that made a rainbow on Jocelyn's blonde ponytail. Slouching off her barstool in a most unladylike posture, she anchored herself by one elbow to the red-stained wood. Though her eyes were still, the edges of her mouth had the unmistakable crescent of a drunk smile. Cliffy knew she needed only the right jab to send her into convulsions of laughter.

Jocelyn appeared modest next to the other girls in the Saturday night crowd, dressed in blue jeans and a sensible white tee shirt, but when she twisted her body just the right way, she showed a very flat stomach and the outline of other intriguing shapes still shrouded by denim and cotton.

"Tell me a story about your wife."

Cliffy scratched the gelled black daggers of hair that covered his scalp. "What do you want to know?"

Lifting her beer in a fragile little hand, Jocelyn studied his reactions. "Tell me how much you love her."

Nervous energy oozed as Cliffy's smile widened. "She's all right."

* * * * *

Daniel watched them through the red and gold and green spots of the glimmer ball that spun above the dance floor. He was sitting in the deejay box, the only inhabitant the sad little square had seen for many years, looking for something to break him out of his boredom.

"You ever seen that girl before?"

An equally unenthused figure was arrayed in Daniel's mirror image, watching the opposite side of the room. "That's talking to Cliffy?" Nick said, following his gaze. "She's in here a couple times a week. I think she lives in the neighborhood."

"Close enough to walk," Daniel said without shifting his eyes. "I saw her when I was driving in. What's her story?"

"I don't know." Nick's voice had an odd cadence, so that one syllable followed another with no change in emphasis. "I think her name's Jolene, or something. Why don't you go talk to her?"

Daniel slunk back in his chair so he could face his companion. "Nah. Cliffy seems to be making headway."

"Cliffy's got to be ten years older than she is." Nick's voice fired like a machine gun when he got excited, and Koreans, or so Nick claimed, were always excited. "Come on. You ain't stuck your dick in anything for months."

Daniel winced. They were roommates, so there was no use denying. He was thinking up another excuse when he saw salvation walking towards them.

"Yo, Eddie," he called with a heavy inflection in the first word. Though both men had lived in the suburbs all their lives, they were close enough to Philadelphia for "yo" to count as a respectful, almost formal, greeting.

"Yo, Danny," came the proper answer. Eddie Bean, sometimes called Eddie the Spic because of his Black Irish features, towered over both of them as he climbed the stairs of the deejay

booth. "Place is jumping. You boys must be doing well."

"Eh," said Nick. "It's because it's so fucking freezing out. People have to stay inside. They get stir crazy, so they come and drink."

"I hear you." With a series of abrupt head jerks, Eddie checked to make sure they could not be overheard. "I need something from the back of the house."

Daniel motioned to Nick. "He's your guy."

"What do you need?"

"I'm buying for a party," said Eddie. "Six should do it."

"Eight balls?" said Nick. "You got the money on you?"

Eddie looked to Daniel. "I can swing by tomorrow, if that's okay."

With a wave of his hand, Daniel said, "He's all right."

"Okay then." Nick climbed out of the booth. "Men's Room in five."

Eddie was not adept at hiding annoyance. "I know the drill."

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Jocelyn's face seemed to sway right, then left, then settle back over her skull. It was not fair, she thought, what beer does to girls. "Your wife's at home?"

"Yeah," said Cliffy.

"Does she wait up for you? Does she meet you at the door in lingerie and body oils, waiting for you to ravage her?"

"No," laughed Cliffy. "She's always asleep when I get home."

"Damn. Your stories are no fun."

"Okay, so tell me a story about you." He hung his head low, letting her imagine the tickling she'd feel against her lips if he let his goatee drop a few inches further. "Tell me about your young, strapping boyfriend, with his smooth skin and his full head of hair. Tell me what he's going to do when you get home."

"I'm between strapping boyfriends," said Jocelyn. "Besides, I don't like guys my age. They all got X-boxes. Who can compete with that?"

"I bet nobody ever stood you up for Tomb Raider."

Jocelyn's soft eyes blinked a few times. "You'd be surprised."

* * * * *

Eddie sat in Nick's place, puffing a cigarette. "So how've you been?"

"Keeping busy," said Daniel.

"So I see." Eddie gazed past Daniel's shoulder. "Same old Cliffy."

"Yeah. He'll never change."

"I remember the night your brother and I first found this place. Cliffy was running it totally straight. He thought he was going to sell it in two years and retire."

"Shit," Daniel tried to sound interested. "That must be seven years ago now."

"Sounds right. Man. Is it really two years since Sean died?"

"Yes." Daniel answered with a voice that was quieter than before.

Eddie shifted in his seat. "I'm sorry for bringing that up."

"It's okay."

"We all loved your brother." The serious stare somehow didn't suit Eddie's face.

"I know." Daniel studied the floor in front of the booth. "You ever hear from the old crew?"

"Sometimes." Eddie flicked his cigarette into a nearby ashtray. "Chris is married with a kid."

"That's a success story. I'd have lost that bet."

"I know what you mean. Vince and Jay Jay are still kicking around. They're hooked up with some Downtown Guys."

"I see them sometimes. Of course, we all know about Charlie."

"Charlie. Yeah." A gloomy pall came over Eddie's eyes. "God rest his soul."

Daniel shrugged. "His own fault for drawing on the cops."

"True. Charlie was always a troubled kid."

"None of them were exactly Employee of the Month. It's a miracle that crew stayed together as long as they did."

"I know. You needed someone like Seanie to make those guys work."

Remembering that Eddie did not possess a sensitive nature, and that he could not have deliberately aimed the dart that just landed in his heart, Daniel shrugged off the sting.

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Jocelyn's hand found its way across the bar. She was pressing her thumb between Cliffy's knuckles, stroking the gold band that choked his ring finger. "I don't want to go home," she said. "My parents are going to be there, and my little brother's going to be up watching TV, and the dog's going to bark at me when I walk inside. It sucks living at home."

"Sounds like it," Cliffy said, sliding his hand in concert with hers. An assaulting wind made Jocelyn clasp his fingers. Blasts of arctic air sallied through the front door every time someone came or went.

"Jesus," said Jocelyn. "It's fucking freezing."

"I know ways to keep warm." Cliffy pressed both his hands on hers, tracing the palm, pleading with her skin to obey. Jocelyn let him have his way for a while, but then rebel goosebumps appeared up and down her flesh. She snatched the hand back to her side.

"What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." Jocelyn's fists imploded as she struggled to regain control. "I'm sorry. I think I should go."

"Don't say that." Cliffy reached back for her, but she denied his touch. Twisting his trim body out the flip top bar opening, he walked slowly to her side. "Come on. Tell me what's wrong." Pulling close, he summoned a barstool under his rear.

Jocelyn lowered her face, but met his eyes. "It's me," she said shyly. "I don't like being touched."

"Don't like being touched?" He tried to kindle a smile on her face with one of his own. "That's no way to go through life."

"I didn't say all the time," said Jocelyn. "It's just a thing I've always had. Sometimes, when people touch me, I freak out."

"All right," said Cliffy. "So it's not all the time. Tell me. When is it okay?"

"I don't know. Look. I'm a complicated girl. There are some things about me you just have to find out the hard way."

Cliffy made a pincer of his thumb and pointer and held the tip of her long finger. "But I want to learn. Help me out."

Jocelyn flicked him away. "If you're serious, you won't mind waiting."

"Okay," said Cliffy, settling onto his stool. "I'll wait."

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"So you got the gook working here now," said Eddie. "How'd that happen?"

Daniel had been watching Jocelyn. He saw how she changed when Cliffy touched her hand,

and, in ways he did not understand, it hurt him.

"My dad brought him to me, believe it or not."

"No shit," said Eddie. "I thought Mr. Rinker didn't know anyone who wasn't white."

"So did I. Nick's been working out, though."

Eddie's mouth curled into an ugly smirk. "Plus, he's up front, so he's the one the cops get in a raid. That's smart. Your dad was always telling Seanie to put some insulation between himself and the product."

Daniel did not share Eddie's ideas about race, but most of their mutual friends and business associates did. Speaking up would mark Daniel as different, possibly untrustworthy, so he held his tongue. "Five minutes must be up by now."

"Bet you're right." Eddie gathered his jacket and stood up.

"Have fun at your party," Daniel said, masking the relief he felt.

"Thanks. Hey, before I go, I heard something you should know." As Eddie pulled himself close, Daniel mused how all gangsters gossiped like hairdressers.

"Ever heard of Bobby the Beast?"

"The biker?" said Daniel.

"That's him."

"I've heard the name. He's been gone since long before my time."

"My time too," said Eddie. "You hear his sentence is up? Some people think he's coming back."

"Coming back to what? Didn't he used to run with the Ghost Knights? He's going to need a shitload of flour to make a cake out of what's left of that bunch."

"I hear you," said Eddie. "But, from what people say, he doesn't need much help. The guy's seven feet tall, and all muscle. They also say he's got reptile blood. Like a serial killer, almost. I heard he killed a made guy, for no reason."

"That's all talk," said Daniel. "He's like a wiseguy boogeyman."

"That's funny, because I heard about him from an oldtimer I know from my new job. He said that when the boogeyman goes to sleep at night, he looks under his bed for Bobby the Beast."

"Didn't this guy go away twenty years ago?" said Daniel. "He'd be what? Fifty something?"

"Good point." Lighting a new cigarette, Eddie frowned a little as he looked into the distance. "Just thought you might want to know."

"Thanks." Daniel was doing impatient things with his hands, grabbing his nose, flicking lint off the table, hoping Eddie would take the hint and leave.

"Wasn't there some connection between Beast and your father?" said Eddie. "Something about a junkyard?"

Daniel pretended to cast a wary eye towards the entrance, the way a savvy, experienced drug dealer would, but really he was just interested in the pair sitting in front of the bar. "That's a long story."

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Cliffy sat like a customer, watching his two helpers pull out beer bottles and pour odd-colored liquids into shot glasses. His chin was sunk to the floor. Jocelyn sat beside him, swirling what was left in her emerald bottle.

"Not in here," she said at last, casting a crooked frown over the room. "Not with all these people around. I feel like they're looking at me. Like they all know what we're doing."

Cliffy brightened. "I get that. Dirty, crowded bar. Not a turn on. So where?"

"Not my place," said Jocelyn. "Not with my family around. And not your house, with your

wife upstairs." Cliffy was not happy with the disinterested tone that had come over her voice. "I don't know. Someplace private."

"You know," Cliffy said, "it's not but a hop, a skip, and a jump to the airport. They got those hotels all around."

"Pretty pricey."

"I'll bet you're worth it."

"Thanks." All of a sudden, Jocelyn reached out and caught his bicep in a tight grip. Thick, rubbery sinews writhed underneath her fingers. She let her hand tarry, to Cliffy's delight, but finally braced on his elbow and descended from the barstool. "I told you I was complicated," she said, turning for the wall with the coat hangers.

"Hey," said Cliffy. "At least let me call you a cab."

"I'll walk. I don't want your cab waking up Mom and Dad."

Cliffy watched her butt cheeks sway in an easy rhythm as she walked away. Soon a cold rush of air met his skin and she was gone. To make the moment complete, he pressed his wedding band until it pinched a chunk of his flesh.

* * * * *

Nick returned to his seat. "Your friend asked for a discount."

"I've no doubt," said Daniel.

"He said he was one of your brother's pallbearers."

Daniel shrugged. "My memory of that week is fuzzy. If he said it, I'm sure it's true. Anyway, no discounts was Sean's rule."

Nick laughed. "I'm always sorry I didn't know your brother better."

"You'd have liked him. Everybody did."

Nick, unlike Eddie, was capable of detecting Daniel's moods. When he chose a new subject, they both knew what he was doing. "Eddie also told me about this Beast guy. He seemed to think there might be fireworks."

"Bored wannabe wiseguys are always making up enemies for themselves," said Daniel. "It makes them feel important. Don't worry. You and me are Connected Guys."

"You're a Connected Guy. I'm just your faithful sidekick."

"Whatever. The point is, we don't worry about bikers. That's not the way the food chain works. Bikers worry about us."

"If you say so," said Nick. "Cliffy's blonde is gone."

"Really?" Daniel searched the room. "Where'd she go?"

"Don't know. Someplace without Cliffy."

Daniel spied him out across the room. He was wiping down a section of the bar.

"Good news for you."

Daniel scratched his head. "Maybe."

The evening thrived, then grew sickly and had to be put down. At one thirty, Cliffy clicked the switch that made the lights blink their "last call" message to the few revelers who remained.

"We're out, man," said Daniel. Most nights, these were the only words that passed from him to Cliffy.

"Okay, boys," he answered. "See you on Monday."

"Sure thing." Nick patted him on the shoulder. "Better fishing next time."

"I hope so," said Cliffy. "My bait's not getting any younger."

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The tenders and the bar backs stayed until the doors were locked. They put up the tables, swept the floors, and wiped the countertop one last time. Soon Cliffy was alone, flipping through dollar bills, balancing the cash drawer. Tired and hungry, he slipped the money into the footlocker safe and spun the combination wheel.

Razor cold wind slashed at his face as he locked the front door. To leave the prime spots ready for customers, he always parked away from the entrance, in an alleyway behind the building. Piles of dirty snow lined the driveway like a stockade. The broken rays of streetlights guided Cliffy's weary senses. Dreams of a quiet drive home fueled his thoughts, until he saw the white-coated figure seated on the bumper of his car.

"Hi," he said, blood rushing to his cheeks to fight the wind. "What are you. . ."

"Told you," Jocelyn said, stepping from her perch. "Complicated."

A black fuzzy hat sat on her blonde mane. Two thinly-gloved hands found Cliffy's chest and searched for the edges, top to bottom, sides to center. He craned his neck to meet her lips. The chill forced them to press close or admit painful bursts of freezing air onto their tongues.

When the kiss was finally broken, he put his hand to her chin, lifting her face to his with the least force imaginable. "Did you reconsider?"

"Are you sure your wife won't miss you?"

"She doesn't follow me that close." Cliffy held her hand. "Let's go."

"Wait. I've got an idea."

"Oh yeah? What?"

She ran her glove back and forth over his stomach, teasing his hunger. "Where are your keys?"

"Right here." All Cliffy's thoughts of quiet and rest were gone "Why?"

Jocelyn shoved herself backward. "Pop the trunk."

"What?"

Her voice was all mock impatience. "Pop," she enunciated slowly, "the trunk."

Chuckling and shaking his head, Cliffy pressed a button on his key chain. The car made two beeps and the back section yawned like an alligator.

Jocelyn sat back on the bumper, leaning towards the opening like a game show hostess. "Roomy," she said, looking back.

"You're crazy," said Cliffy. "We're going to freeze. At least let's go in the back seat."

"Ahem," Jocelyn quipped. "I made my decision. Come on." The trunk bucked as she climbed on. "I'll bet you've used ice before. It's the same thing. Just more intense." She let her coat drop to the ground, resurrecting the imaginings of her body that Cliffy had made inside.

"You really are complicated."

She stood again and bunched the front of his shirt in her hands, pulling him into another kiss, pivoting him to the side, guiding him inside the trunk. He fumbled on the bumper, groping for a comfortable position.

"Lie back," Jocelyn commanded.

"Oh yeah," he murmured, almost falling into the chasm. She kissed down his neck and nuzzled his chest, cooing along the way so that he felt the vibrations.

"You've got to tell me your work out," said Jocelyn.

"First thing in the morning, dollface." Cliffy was not concerned when she stopped caressing him. All his thoughts were hopes for where she would take up her attentions next.

Squatting on the salt-smearred pavement, Jocelyn slipped her hands into the fallen coat. Her quarry was freed in less than a second.

Cliffy never heard the gun fire.

END OF FIRST CHAPTER

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