

A Marine veteran of the War in Afghanistan, still recovering from his experience there and the loss of his closest friend, is recruited as a marksman by a gang of eco-warriors.

A Brother in Arms

by J. K. Bozeman

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A Brother in Arms

a novel

J. K. Bozeman

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Aron

Third night in less than a week he'd been unable to keep it up. He sighed in defeat and flopped onto his back.

She tried to kiss him, but he turned away, and she kissed his throat, his collar bone, his nipple.

"Don't!" he pleaded, hugging her against him.

"Haven't you considered the possibility I might actually enjoy it?"

"I don't deserve it."

"Then think of it as what I might deserve."

"I don't deserve you."

"Okay, then try a little harder to deserve me. Try not drinking so much."

"I do try," he insisted. "I go to AA almost every day."

"And drink at least a six pack every evening."

"So, why don't you kick me out?"

She sighed. "Because I love you. All I'm asking for is a little moderation."

"Alcohol is a depressant – and if sexual performance is so important to you . . ."

"But it's not important to you?"

"Of course it's important to me," she scolded, "Everything about you is important to me. I'm just saying if you loved and respected yourself more, we'd both be happier."

"Maybe you should see a psychologist at the VA."

"I couldn't get an appointment for months."

"And they'd put me on antidepressants – which don't exactly boost sexual performance."

"You could at least watch that DVD on overcoming traumatic experiences by recovering and accepting them."

"I don't have PTSD," he insisted.

"Okay. I'm too tired to argue."

"Tired of me?"

She turned away. "Tired of your self-pity.

"You're a good man – intelligent, strong, sensitive . . . and you deserve to be loved. And to love yourself."

He wondered if Dad's contempt and abuse had destroyed his capacity to love himself, if he'd been running on simulation until he'd hit a wall when he'd let Jay get himself killed.

"You're disappointing me, Aron."

He met Dr. Evans' eyes a moment, looked above and beyond at the books on the shelves.

"You're obviously intelligent. You get all the multiple-choice questions right, but your essays are barely worth a C.

"Don't you know how to write an essay?"

He shrugged. "I guess not."

"You're intelligent; you could learn – with a little effort."

The first college instructor's office he'd ever been in looked much like those he'd seen on television and in movies.

"Your responses and comments in class are always relevant. None of my other students demonstrate half as much insight."

His attention drifted to the hallway, boys laughing, carefree as he'd been before Afghanistan.

"You're the only student I have who seems to recognize history actually matters, that it's an organic whole – not just a succession of dates and events. When you're with us."

He recognized his inability to concentrate, nodded.

"You were in Afghanistan, weren't you?"

He couldn't recall having told anyone. "Yes sir."

"I was in the Marines. In Vietnam – another unwinnable war fought for dubious reasons. Went to school on the GI Bill, just like you are.

"Have you talked to anyone about PTSD?"

"No sir. There are thousands of veterans who've suffered a lot more."

"You left part of your ear there, didn't you?"

He was tempted to scoff, you noticed?

"Is it possible you suffered some traumatic brain injury?"

He shrugged. "Not that I know of."

"Are you taking – or using – drugs?"

"No sir."

"Alcohol?"

"Yes sir. I'm going to AA."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm a recovering alcoholic, and I still have to go occasionally."

He hadn't noticed anything about Dr. Evans that indicated emotional weakness.

"Let me know if you need help. In any way. Any time. My office hours are on the door and, as you can see, students aren't exactly beating it down."

He was being dismissed, stood, recognized his obligation to express his appreciation. "Thank you for your interest, Dr. Evans."

"'Thank you for your service,' as everyone seems to be saying to servicemen these days."

He finally found the guts. "I'm Aron, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Welcome, Aron," the group responded.

"Glad to finally hear from you, Aron," someone congratulated.

"I never drank much before I was in Afghanistan.

"My father was an alcoholic – and I didn't want to be like him."

"Mine too," several people responded.

"My mother, in my case," Connie sighed.

"I started drinking after I lost a good friend – one of the best – the best I've ever had.

"I drink trying to blot out that memory – at least for a little while.

"But I just dredge up more – and get angry and feel sorry for myself."

"Self-pity's an awful easy trap to fall into," Connie said.

"You got *that* right," Dale affirmed.

"I thought I was going to be a hero – a Marine – a real man, but I feel like a loser.

"I don't know why we were in that hell hole. It's like it never meant anything to begin with.

"Just a game Bush lost when he invaded Iraq."

"You got that right," Dale agreed.

"When I think about it, I can see I'm a lot more fortunate than most vets.

"I've got a good woman who loves me and takes good care of me. And one of my teachers encourages me.

"Sometimes I think if I just keep drinking – get drunk enough – I'll stop remembering, caring.

"Sometimes I think I don't deserve to get over it."

"That's grief," Connie said.

"And guilt," Chase added.

“Survivors guilt,” Dale insisted.

He nodded in acceptance. “There’s a point when I’m feeling – not ‘no pain’ – but less.

“But it doesn’t last. And I always end up hating myself more.”

Jaybird

The driver turned to glance at him. "You a vet?"

"Yeah." A little surly maybe, but why else would he have taken this ratty cab?

"Where bouts?"

"Afghanistan."

Not old enough for Vietnam. First Gulf, maybe. He was expected to ask, but . . .

"Aint that a fuckin mess an' a half?"

"Yeah," he muttered, gazing out the side window, not wanting to talk about it.

Scraggly winter-bare trees, no green in sight. He'd known the precarious early spring in Dallas hadn't reached Utah yet, but he hadn't expected it to be so cold and bleak.

"Obama oughta grow some balls, admit there aint no chance a winnin an' tell the Afghans *and* the Pakis to go fuck theirselves.

"Asshole fundamentalist Muslims! Always riotin bout somethin!"

Not all that different from fundamentalist Christians demonstrating against abortion or Tea Party mobs.

"Burnin the goddam Koran this week, pissin on dead Taliban last. I say, Piss on the whole goddam fucked-up country! Goddam boy-fuckers!"

He hadn't heard that insult before, but given how they treated women . . . He had to work harder to deserve Alyssa.

Since he'd come home he'd been too depressed most of the time, not interested in going out, not much interested in anything.

"That where you got that ear?"

No, he'd been born with it, got it clipped there. "Yeah." Why hadn't he worn a cap?

"Bush and Cheney oughta be in prison. Goddam war crim'nals – in my opinion."

He and most of the world agreed, but . . .

"Specially Cheney. One evil son-of-a-bitch, in my opinion."

Alyssa's response to the news the old goat had a heart transplant had been, "Good to know he finally has one."

"Some people say Bush was too fuckin dumb t' know better. But how smart you gotta be t' know Hitler fucked up invadin Russia before he finished off England?"

Napoleon had made the same disastrous blunder. Both armies had been overwhelmed by the Russian winter.

"A trillion fuckin dollars an' nearly five thousand a you boys killed – plus at least a hunnerd thousand *Iraqis*."

1.4 trillion for both wars, he'd read recently. He wondered if the KIA stat included suicides, frags and friendly-fires. 33,000 wounded in Iraq – not counting PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. Up to a million *Iraqis* dead, millions more displaced.

"Infrastructure blown all t' hell."

National treasures looted, civil war ignited, the Sunni forces Bremmer, a clueless asshole, had idiotically dismissed metastasizing into ISIS . . .

He kept his face turned toward the window, hoping the driver would recognize he wasn't interested in conversation.

"Worst part f'r me is all them boys blown half t' hell by IEDs. Lot of 'em better off dead, in my opinion. An' we'll be takin care of 'em the rest a their so-called lives. Gonna cost us billions."

He recalled a wisecrack he'd read recently: "Too bad all the people who know how to run the country are busy driving taxis and cutting hair."

Some of his classmates were driving down to Padre Island for spring break to get drunk and raise hell, maybe get laid. He didn't envy them.

He was probably an embarrassment to the few who noticed him, an unpleasant reminder of wars they could otherwise ignore. When they talked about the possibility of war with Iran, their main concern was the price of gas.

Dr. Evans had said we'd given the Iranians cause to resent us when the CIA had helped depose a democratically-elected prime minister and imposed the Shah, who was incompetent, corrupt and brutally repressive.

Maybe he would be able to pick up some carpentry or construction work in the summer, take a break from school, work off some frustration.

"We'd be a hell of a lot better off if we'd just paid Cheney, Halliburton, KBR an them other contractors, stid a lettin 'em lie us into another fuckin war."

Bush, Cheney, and most of their gang had finagled themselves out of Vietnam; none had ever been in combat.

"Goddam war profiteers, in my opinion."

Greedy, power-hungry old men started most wars, rarely gave a damn about the younger and less fortunate they were sacrificing.

“Get a closed-head injury with that ear?”

“Not that I know of.” Though that would help explain why he had a hard time concentrating, let little things – like this guy – get to him.

“PTSD?”

If he'd wanted a therapy session he could've stayed home and gone to AA. Name it and claim it: “Survivor's guilt.” But putting a label on it hadn't helped much.

“Been to the VA bout it?”

He shook his head. The VA Hospital was inundated with men a lot worse off, plus all the poor former servicemen. Thousands of vets were homeless, an average of well over twenty a day had committed suicide last year.

Most VA employees were apathetic, sometimes sullen. Even the more helpful didn't seem to actually give a damn.

Compassion burnout, Alyssa called it – probably hinting she was running low on it. He couldn't blame her.

He closed his eyes, let his head fall forward, thought of the DVD she'd insisted he watch: Overcoming traumatic experiences by recovering and learning to accept them.

He was expected to do his best to recall every detail clearly and coherently at least once a day.

Jay's death was coming back more clearly every time he made himself concentrate on it – a little different every time, so maybe his brain *had* been a little scrambled.

On the flight it had come back when he'd dozed, skidding down that incline, holding Jay like a sleeping child. Like his father had carried him when he was four or five – one of his few pleasant memories of the obnoxious

old drunk. His hands slippery with blood, begging, "You gotta help me, Jaybird! Goddammit, you gotta help me!"

Alyssa said he muttered something like that in his nightmares, Jaybird the one word she could always recognize.

Kane was standing over them. "One of you lovebirds has gotta hump his candy ass up to that ridge and scope for Talibunnies."

He'd hesitated, offended by "lovebirds," but Jay had laughed and was off, unburdened by equipment, scrambling up the steep mountainside with impressive ease.

He'd taken his eyes off him a few seconds, heard a high-velocity report, saw him crumple, scrambled up toward him.

Jay was lying on his side, smiling up at him, legs jerking, blood spreading from the pulpy wound between his shoulders.

"Hold on, Jaybird, I got you."

He had to stanch the blood, get his hand over the exit wound – was jolted back.

"Salt Lake welcomes you with open potholes," the driver grouched. "Mormons blow their money on big fancy-ass temples an' sendin their boys – 'elders' they call 'em – off t' peddle their malarkey, an' let the infrastructure go t' hell."

Why let this poor guy bother him?

He had to work on being more patient and understanding.

He'd been spending too much time alone. No one he wanted to be with. Not even Alyssa, most of the time.

He couldn't expect her to understand how much he'd loved Jay, how much losing him had hurt, still hurt.

She was doing her best, but sometimes her concern irritated him. Especially when she touched his ear. When she kissed it his rage flared up and he had to struggle to fight it off. Kissing it would *not* make it better!

She deserved better, a whole man, there for her. Good thing she had a job she liked, friends, a life apart from him.

He'd had friends in high school, most of them superficial because he'd been a jock, handsome, easy-going. But he couldn't be that nice kid again, couldn't even fake it.

He drank to forget, feel more sociable . . . but resentment would make him belligerent, alienate people, and he would wake up despising himself more.

After all the abuse and humiliation he'd suffered from his old man, the only superiority he could claim now was he didn't mistreat Alyssa. Indifferent too much of the time, but never violent, never verbally abusive.

Not yet, anyway. No son to take it out on.

He'd felt almost fatherly toward Jay, first noticing him in boot, small and pale, big pale blue eyes and blood-bright lips, that asshole redneck DI in his face taunting, "'Slaughter'?! You gotta be fuckin shittin me! You couldn't slaughter a fuckin fly. Admit it, perty boy, you joined the Corps to suck dicks."

He'd thought of his old man's crude insults, found himself coldly indignant. He'd grown up despising coarse language, considered it a weakness, a futile attempt to feel manlier, had refrained from using it to prove he was stronger and better than people expected, able to overcome poverty and abuse – and it seemed particularly obnoxious when heaped on such a small, vulnerable boy.

His resentment had grown when bigger guys asserted dominance, jostled the poor kid aside. He'd thought of

chicks pecking an injured one, ganging up on it and pecking until they killed it.

When Jay's fine blond hair had grown out a little, he'd sometimes thought of a newly-hatched chick, felt an impulse to tousle his pale fuzz.

On closer inspection he'd seen the kid, though small and baby-faced, was well-proportioned, adequately muscled, in excellent shape, unblemished, except his lips, cracked and peeling from sunburn.

He'd learned from his old man's sudden arbitrary abuse not to do or say anything that brought attention to himself, hadn't until he'd heard a bully growl, "Stop lookin at me, perty boy, or I'll knock y'r fuckin teeth down y'r throat."

He'd found himself countering, "Guilty dogs bark, Sweeney. But don't kid yourself. You couldn't attract a hungry dog if you covered yourself with Alpo."

Laughter had erupted and Sweeney had glowered, tensed and doubled his fists, but like most bullies he'd been afraid to take on someone more his size and in better shape.

The kid had looked at him, and, though he hadn't let their eyes meet, he'd felt satisfaction in protecting him.

He'd watched the kid covertly, concern turning to relief as he proved his resilience and stamina, admiration growing as Jay demonstrated his agility and self-control, the dignity with which he held and carried himself.

The poor kid had caught so much razzing about his modesty that, wary of potential insults, he'd avoided showering at the same time or looking at him when he was naked. He'd rarely even let himself glance at his bare chest, pale and smooth, the down above his sternum visible only in sunlight.

"Here we are, buddy."

He handed the driver the two twenties from his shirt pocket. "Keep the change."

"Thanks, bro. Reg'lar's up ta four bucks."

Cold stung his ear and he berated himself for not having worn a cap. Did he have some unconscious need for people to stare at him?

The house was red brick with white trim, a big handsome two-story with dormers, solid and well-maintained, nicely landscaped, lawn and most of the shrubs still winter dead. Not the typical Marine's home – working-class or poorer – but Jay had never been a typical Marine.

The late-afternoon sun was too weak to warm him.

The steps and porch were swept clean, a thick coco-fiber mat in front of the heavy hardwood door, an oval of frosted panes around one clear pane too low for a good view inside. The chime was audible to his good ear.

Saturday wasn't the Sabbath for Mormons. Maybe they were all out – skiing, maybe. Jay had beamed when he talked about the freedom he felt in the mountains.

He should have called from the airport. Alyssa had found the address and phone number on the Internet, arranged the flight, charged it on her Visa. He could have at least called.

He'd kept putting it off, dreading an organized reception if he gave them enough time, the whole family gathering around, doing their best to make him feel welcome, careful not to get caught looking at his ear.

The door was opened by a small woman who looked too much like Jay not to be his mother, the same big pale blue eyes and fine straight almost-colorless hair. "Yes?"

"Is this the Slaughter house?"

"Um, I'm not sure Salt Lake actually has a slaughterhouse." She grinned, even more like Jay. "Sorry, I

couldn't resist the opportunity. Yes, this is the Slaughter residence."

He started to hold out his hand, hesitated. "I'm Aron - " "A-Ron! Jay's 'best bud'!" She was beaming, eyes shining, holding out the waist of her baggy gray sweatshirt. "You thought I was the maid." She laughed unconvincingly. "You're not the first. But at the moment I'm the cook."

He should say something, help her through their awkwardness.

"Well, come in." She held the door open wide for him. "Sorry about the dumb joke."

He went in, already regretting barging into her life.

"Do Marines let strange older women hug them?"

She had her arms around him before he could form a reply, and he held her gingerly in response.

"'Come through,' as they say in the Brit-coms. I'm making salmon croquettes for dinner."

He followed her across a stone-tiled foyer opening on the left into a large family room with a big stone fireplace, big wide-screen TV, hardwood floor, brown leather couches, colorful pillows and carpets, a central stairway on the right, hardwood like the floor, everything well-crafted, sturdy, clean.

He'd imagined Jay – grammar, manners, even his teeth perfect – growing up in prosperous circumstances, had often wondered why he'd enlisted.

The kitchen was open, modern except for homey details – country kitsch, Alyssa would call it – the aroma of canned salmon and onions familiar, almost reassuring. Cactus, ivy, jade plant on the wide sill above the sink, bare trees above evergreen shrubs in the back yard. To the left, a dining area with a big oval dark wood table and

matching café chairs, two walls mostly glass with mini-blinds open to the late afternoon light.

“Have a seat. If I’d known you were coming I’d’ve baked a cake.”

Mom welcomed people into her kitchen the same way.

“I should’ve called. I meant to, but I couldn’t find a phone at the airport.” He hadn’t looked, half hoping no one would be home and he could tell Alyssa he’d tried. Or make something up.

“Everybody’s got a cell-phone now. And, as big John Wayne would say,” she lowered her voice and imitated his hokey swagger, “‘Never apologize, never explain; it’s a sign of weakness.’”

He tried to chuckle.

She turned away and resumed kneading crumbled crackers and onions into the canned salmon in a big stainless-steel bowl. “Sorry I’m making you uncomfortable. It’s just such a thrill to have you here. To see you in the flesh after all Jay said and wrote about you.”

He took off his jacket, folded and laid it on one of the bar stools across the work island from her, sat on the stool beside it.

“Jay loved and admired you so much, was so grateful for your friendship and support. Though – probably doing his best to play the strong, silent type – he probably never let himself say so.”

There had never been any need to say it, their easy rapport another loss he wouldn’t let himself dwell on.

“You can’t imagine what a comfort you were to me.

“He was my oldest, but still a boy – not ready for the world, much less the Marine Corps.”

Jay had remained unprepared, too trusting, enthusiastic and impulsive.

"I was so worried the Marines would be too much for him, and he'd come home crushed."

He'd felt the same concern, had overprotected Jay, drawn the others into complicity.

"If you'd say something, maybe I wouldn't prattle on so."

He wanted to get it over with. "I'm a recovering alcoholic."

She paused, but didn't turn to look at him.

"We're supposed to ask for the forgiveness of those we've wronged or failed."

She stiffened slightly. "And how do you suppose you've wronged or failed us?"

He'd rehearsed. "I let your son get killed. I got lazy and careless and let him do something I should've done."

She turned to face him, her eyes bright with tears. "That was our Jay – too good for his own good."

"It was my turn. Past my turn." He swallowed. "I should've stopped him, made him armor up."

"I tried to save him, but . . ."

"I'm sure you did your best."

"Yes, ma'am, I did, but . . ."

"Darned onions!" She blotted her eyes on the sleeves of her sweatshirt.

"No, I'm not going to be dishonest. I'm crying. For you, feeling you have to ask for forgiveness. And for my beautiful son, who got himself killed in a senseless war in some godforsaken place halfway round the world."

She turned away, began forming the batter into balls and flattening them on a cookie sheet.

He swallowed again. "I hate myself for it."

"Jay would never have wanted that." She sniffed back tears. "I won't say it was God's will. Or something asinine

like 'He's in a better place.' But I know he would never have blamed you. I know it wasn't your fault."

Not completely maybe, but more his fault than anyone's.

"If there's anyone to blame, it's his father. And me. We let him go."

He'd let Jay charge up to that ridge alone, unprotected.

"He wasn't a mama's boy. Far from it. Daddy's little man. His pride and joy. Good – nearly always the best in school. Soccer, hockey."

She tore off paper towels from a dispenser under an upper cabinet, blotted her eyes. "His hockey coach said he was 'absolutely fearless' on the ice.

"Gymnastics, crafts, whatever he turned his hand to." She cleared her nose softly.

"Never any trouble. I never had to worry about him. Or his brothers and sister when they were with him."

She was looking at the table, probably recalling him there. "He didn't want to do missionary, but he couldn't disappoint his father. So he joined the Marines, to prove he was a man."

"That's why I joined. Why most of us do.

"I was a decent athlete in high school, but not good enough for a college scholarship. Couldn't find a decent job. Got tired of feeling like a loser."

"Did it make a man of you?"

He shrugged. "I'll have to let you be the judge."

"Did it make a man of Jay?"

"Yes, ma'am." He swallowed, regained control of his voice. "The best and bravest I've ever known."

"If you're saying that to make me feel better – it doesn't. I want my beautiful son back."

“How could anyone *not* want him back? He was so good and smart and funny. So easy to love.”

“Did you love him?”

“We all loved him. He was our Jay-Jay. Our kid. Innocent. Modest. Never let anything get him down.”

He recalled their playful ragging, and, after Jay had gained some self-confidence, his good-humored responses, their open affection for him, using less profanity when they spoke to him, accepting the close bond he and Jay shared. “Everybody was always kidding him.”

“Even you?”

He shook his head, tried to smile. “We were too much alike. He didn’t drink at all, and I didn’t drink much. At least, not then.” Because he’d been afraid – justifiably, he now knew – he’d inherited his father’s affliction.

“Out of vanity mostly, I guess. I don’t like making a fool of myself. Don’t like horsing around, guys touching me.” He’d loathed the hateful old drunk’s touch, the brutal whippings he’d suffered until he was strong enough to fight him off.

“Neither of us smoked, chewed plug, dipped or got inked – tattooed. He had religious convictions, and I”

She was washing her hands, the water hissing softly. “Had respect for your handsome body.”

He tried to chuckle. “Jay probably told you how vain I was.”

“No, but speaking of vanity, excuse me while I go change into something more presentable.” She went off into the hallway and up the stairs.

The bare trees made him think of the barren mountains, nothing, not even weeds, to relieve their desolation.

By the time Kane had called break he’d been nearing exhaustion, gasping for breath because of the altitude, soaked through with sweat. They were in the clear, so he’d

dropped his load, shucked his headgear and vest, slumped down, back to the mountainside.

Jay, as usual, had done the same.

Kane had come up, stood over them. "One of you lovebirds has gotta hump his candy ass up to that ridge and scope for Talibunnies."

Jay had laughed, enjoying Kane's humor, and was off, scrambling up the steep incline, eager to demonstrate his climbing skills.

He'd recognized too late that Kane had been riffing on his nickname for Jay, had expected Kane to call Jay back, order him to armor up, but he'd turned away, trusting their – *his*– competence.

He'd let his attention stray, lost in daydream about Alyssa, heard a shot, saw Jay crumple, scrambled up toward him.

Jay was lying on his side drawing into a fetal position, legs contracting in spasms. Before he reached him he could see the blood spreading on his back, the ragged exit wound near his left shoulder blade big as his palm.

Jay had looked up at him smiling almost blissfully, and he'd urged, "Hold on, Jaybird. I got you."

He'd known he had to stanch the bleeding, get his hand over the exit wound, knelt and lifted Jay's upper body, holding him like burping a baby, chest to chest, head on his left shoulder, left palm over the wound, lifting Jay's arm over his shoulder, urging, "Put your arms around my neck and hold on, Jaybird."

He'd been relieved by how light Jay felt, alarmed by his failure to respond, begged, "You gotta help me, Jaybird!"

As he'd brought himself upright and turned to descend he'd heard a crack, felt a sting – not much worse than a yellow jacket, he'd said later, not exaggerating much –

lost his footing, went skidding down, managing to keep Jay on top.

He still couldn't recall much of that wild slide down, except terror, regret and growing guilt.

Kane and Dempsey were waiting, and, as he'd yielded Jay to them, his head fell back, eyes rolled upward.

He'd slumped down to catch his breath, sprawled with his back to the slope, watched Kane and Dempsey work over Jay's limp body, thought of trying to pray, but futility had already seized hold.

He'd pulled himself to his feet again, met Kane's glance up confirming the worst.

Kane stood and came to him eyes down, shaking his head soberly, held his upper arms and gently shook him, tears in his eyes and voice, "Awful sorry, A-Ron." Still looking down, hiding his tears, "Outstanding effort."

Failed effort! Why hadn't he gone up?!

"Jesus, A, you got clipped. I thought that was Jay-Jay's blood."

As he reached up to feel his ear he noticed his elbow resisting, throbbing. It had taken the brunt of the knocks on their way down. His left hand, fingers sticking together with Jay's blood, found what was left of his ear, the pulp behind it, not as painful as his elbow.

Why had he sat there on his lazy ass and let that good gentle kid go up?!

Why had he come here to open the wound of their loss?

Why had he let Alyssa talk him into it? Let her make the arrangements, pay for it?

How would he get back to her? Back to the airport?

He would have to call for a cab. Why was he the only man he knew who didn't have a cell-phone?

He looked out at the bare trees, felt night and cold descending, heard Mrs. Slaughter on the stairs.

She was wearing a pale blue denim shirt embroidered with flowers, her hair brushed, lips bright as Jay's in boot.

She set an open laptop in front of him – Jay's – and he saw himself naked outside the shower at base, showing off in a muscleman pose, goods in full view, gut sucked in, shoulders turned to emphasize his chest, grinning because he'd known how ridiculously self-satisfied he looked.

That moment came swarming back, everyone joking, clowning, laughing, doing their best to forget the danger they'd too soon face again. He'd felt part of them, secure in their strength and readiness, pleased Jay had relaxed his usual inhibition.

He pulled himself back, tried to laugh. "Told you I was vain."

"You're still a fine-looking young man."

"Running and working out are about all that keeps me halfway sane." Trying to escape painful memories, loss, self-pity – exhausting the little energy he had, neglecting Alyssa.

She brought out a big skillet from a lower cabinet and a large plastic bottle of oil from an upper one. "Safflower. No worries about saturated fats."

He tried to chuckle. How could he tell her he wouldn't be staying for dinner? Wasn't ready for the rest of Jay's family, especially his father.

She turned on the burner. "I'm sure you watch what you eat."

"Yes, ma'am. My body's about all I've got to hold onto."

Not true. Alyssa was his anchor and refuge.

She poured the oil attentively.

"I'm thinking about cosmetic surgery for this gimped ear."

"It's really not that noticeable."

"From the front, maybe. And fortunately, I rarely have to look at it from behind."

She tried to chuckle.

"Nicked my mastoid and got most of my hearing in that ear." He thought of all those men the driver had spoken of, so much more grievously mauled and maimed. "But I consider myself fortunate."

She bent down to visually adjust the flame.

"My ear rings all the time, but I've got to where I can go for hours without noticing it."

"I certainly haven't noticed it."

He chuckled, almost convincingly. "My barber leaves my hair a little longer behind my ears."

"You're a good, brave man, Aron, and I'm grateful Jay had you for a friend."

"It was my privilege, Mrs. Slaughter. He was one of the finest – *the* finest young man I've ever known." He truly had been.

The croquettes sizzled as she dropped them into the hot oil.

"A mother knows things a father can't – or won't. But I wouldn't want Caleb to feel he was responsible for Jay's death."

Had he missed or misunderstood something?

"Jay never talked about him."

"Did you ever wonder why?"

He shrugged. "I never talked about my father either." But he couldn't imagine Jay had ever been mistreated – or he wouldn't have been so dismayed by the humiliation dumped on him in boot.

“He said he thought the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban was just.” She stifled a sob. “Insisted he would be more mature, know what he wanted to study in college. Wouldn’t have to depend on his father.”

She was gazing at the table again. “I don’t know what Caleb said to him, but I can’t help believing he could’ve stopped him.”

She turned back to the skillet. “I guess Jay knew his father would never be able to accept him.

“Maybe he thought he could overcome it. Some men do.”

Was she saying Jay was gay?

He’d considered the possibility, had decided, even if he was, he was too inhibited to try anything. And after a few weeks he hadn’t thought about it, had let himself enjoy Jay’s admiration, found himself loving him, more than he’d ever loved any man.

He looked at himself on the screen, recalled McGill following Jay into the shower a little later, teasing, “Damn, Jay-Jay, you literally don’t have a hair on your ass!” A spank. “Smooth as a baby’s butt.”

“Don’t drop the soap, baby boy,” Martinez warned.

He closed the laptop. “This probably looks dirty to you, but we were just goofing around.”

She was looking at the table again. “The last time he was home, sitting at the table after breakfast, he told me he loved you.”

“Can’t men love each other without?”

“We’re trying to tell the truth, aren’t we? Isn’t that why you’re here?”

“You’re saying he was gay, and you’re ashamed of him. But I’m not.” He wouldn’t let himself. “I’m proud of him for having the guts to stick it through.”

She opened a drawer, brought out a spatula.

"Maybe he felt that way about me. I didn't ask, and he didn't tell."

She was turning the croquettes, didn't seem to recognize his sarcasm.

He thought of all the insults Jay had endured. "And if he was, that makes him even braver and stronger."

She was clearing the counter.

"It didn't matter to me.

"If he'd tried anything, you think I would've had any trouble fighting him off?"

"I was thinking you might not have wanted to."

"Huh!" recognizing too late she hadn't meant to insult him. "I thought it was more like hero-worship."

She rinsed the can, dropped the eggshells in it and placed them in a stainless-steel canister beside the sink.

"That sounds conceited, but I was older and bigger and stronger and more aggressive. And I always . . ." was going to say, had his back, but he hadn't that day.

"If he was, whose fault was it?"

"Yours? Your husband's?"

She set the bowl in the sink and turned on the water.

"Or your god's? Who's supposed to be all powerful, but lets things like that happen."

She turned off the water, remained motionless.

"One picture of me naked, and he's in love with me, gay and bound for hell?"

She turned to look at him, eyes soft with compassion. "I'm sorry if I insulted you."

"Or, because he was still a virgin and otherwise almost perfect, does he still get his own universe? Only not one of the nicer ones?"

She turned off the burner. "I wasn't raised in the faith, and I know there are things that don't seem to make

much sense, but please don't say hateful things you'll regret."

"I regret everything.

"I regret coming here. I regret letting him get killed more than I've ever regretted anything in my whole life."

"Do you regret loving him?"

The poor kid had needed his encouragement. "No. But it hurt too much to lose him. I wish I was dead instead of him."

"No, you don't. That's just your grief talking."

"I do! My life hasn't been worth living since I lost him!"

"You're still young and strong. You'll recover."

"He was my little brother. I was supposed to look out for him – protect him."

"You did your best."

"I didn't! I let myself get lazy and careless!"

"You're human. We all make mistakes."

"He made me feel like I was worth something. Like my life had purpose, meaning."

"Maybe you gave him a sense of purpose too. He said he'd never loved anyone so much. I thought you might have"

He recalled the ribbing they'd caught accusing them of it, snorted. "We hardly ever even touched each other!

"Your religion had him in such a straightjacket he could barely look at a man, much less have sex with one."

"I guess I let my imagination run a little wild."

"I came here to apologize and made us both feel worse."

"I don't feel worse. I consider it a privilege to have you here. To talk about Jay."

"If I'd known he needed me that way"

He had known, should have accepted it, told him it was okay, helped him accept himself.

"I'd never seen him so happy, so self-confident."

He recalled the easy silence they'd often shared. "I only wanted to tell you how much he meant to me – to all of us – and how sorry I am we lost him."

"I know, and I'm grateful."

"If I could have him back" he might swallow his pride and offer himself.

"I guess I let my grief get its claws out."

"He's still the best and bravest man I've ever known. The best friend I've ever had. Ever will have."

"You'll have others. You're too good and generous not to."

He shook his head. "I won't ever let myself love any man that much again."

"You will. You're too brave and unselfish not to."

He shook his head, unable to believe it.

"You'll have children and love them even more. You won't be able not to."

He recalled how like a little boy Jay had sometimes seemed to him, his soft hair he'd never let himself touch, his tender last smile, the love and trust in his eyes, surrendered to grief and let himself sob.

Kane

He didn't recognize the black Honda Civic, was a little alarmed when the door opened and a man – Kane, his hair too long to still be in the Corps – got out and greeted him, “Hey, brother!”

He wasn't quite ready when Kane took him in his arms, held him close, closer than anyone except Alyssa had ever held him. Was Kane in trouble? Holding him so tight and long to reconnect their bond?

Shared moments of danger, trust and undeniable love came back – the comfort and reassurance Kane had given him after he'd lost Jay, shaking him gently, tears in his eyes and voice. He might not be able to refuse him.

“Damn, you're looking fine, A-Ron.”

He had to swallow before he could respond, “You too, Fearless Leader.”

Recognizing Jay's nickname for him, Kane tried to laugh, held his upper arms again and pushed him gently away to look into his face, find the tears he couldn't hold back.

Kane's eyes were damp too, and he pulled him into another rough hug, laughed, sniffed back tears, laughed more heartily. “All that blood, sweat and tears – for what?”

He shrugged and shook his head.

“To hell with Helmand province and the whole goddam fucked-up country!”

Maybe he wasn't in trouble, just happened to be in the area. "How'd you find me?"

"Google."

"Come in," he invited, squeezing Kane's trapezius, finding him strong and healthy, more at ease than he'd ever known him.

"Where's your car?"

"In the garage. Half a block to the bus, so I ride DART – Dallas Area Rapid Transit – to school in less time than I could drive, and I don't have to waste time finding a parking space."

"Damn, it's cold."

"Earliest cold snap on record," he responded, "Single digits in North Dakota." He embraced Kane with one arm, as though he might warm him, and Kane returned his half embrace as they crossed the yard.

Most of the plants he'd planted in the bed beside the porch were dark and withered by the recent frost, and the living room was cold. He crossed to the thermostat in the hallway, dialed it up to 68, trusting Kane would take a seat without being urged.

"Got any beer?" Kane asked.

He wouldn't burden him with his usual confession, found the Heineken in the middle of the second door shelf of the fridge where it had been for months, didn't let himself count them.

Kane was smiling, eyes shining as he took the beer. "You're not joining me?"

He smiled and shook his head. "That's the only one in the house."

Kane took a sip. "Damn, it's good to see you, A. Great to see you looking so good."

"Great to see you too." He sat on the couch nearest Kane. "Where're you living now?"

“Back in Oakland. Got in a couple of semesters at U C Berkeley.

“You still with the same woman?”

“Alyssa. Yeah, she can’t get rid of me.”

Kane chuckled. “Don’t pull that modest act on me, A. I’ve seen what you tote.”

He thought of his show-off image on Jay’s laptop, tried to erase the image with a laugh, evade the ache in his chest by asking, “So, what brings you to Big D?”

“You.” Kane kept his eyes on his face. “I thought you might be interested in going to work with me.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m not real sure yet. The offer’s a thousand a month plus expenses during training, three plus expenses when they sign you on. Some travel, probably some danger – but nothing new to us.

“They asked me if I knew anyone I thought might be qualified, and I couldn’t think of anyone I’d rather work with.

“You’ve got more skills and heart than any man I’ve ever known.”

He snorted softly.

“I mean it. I’d trust you with anything.”

“I feel the same about you.”

Kane sighed. “War never leaves you, does it?”

He shook his head resignedly. “Not for long.”

“You know what impressed me most about you?”

“When we lost Jay-Jay, it hit you hard, but you bounced right back. Let Dempsey patch up that ear – when you could’ve . . . and were more reliable than ever.”

“Gutting it through was the only way I could keep it together.” He couldn’t fight back tears.

“That’s courage, A. Don’t be ashamed of loving that good kid.

There were probably tears in Kane's eyes too, but wouldn't let himself look.

"Real men let themselves feel, A.

"Fuck that phony macho bullshit Hollywood peddles in movies. Die hard, my ass – those Hollywood ho-daddies wouldn't last a week in the Corps.

"The poor smegs who try to live their lives without feeling are gonna wake up middle-age empty because they haven't let themselves fully experience life.

"Have you read *American Sniper*?"

"Tried to." He thought of his father's bragging, trying to shore up his wounded self-esteem. "Never much cared for macho bullshit."

Kane nodded in agreement. "Poor Chris Kyle, so hooked on being a hero he got himself and a brother killed trying to get another fix of hero – and might as well have taken down the poor guy he was supposedly trying to help.

"I figure both of them were too full of themselves – too condescending – maybe not exactly bragging, but trying to make killing seem so easy that poor loser got pissed off and gave them a taste of their own medicine."

He shook his head sadly. "More fallout from those stupid wars."

"Losing Jay hit me hard too, A. Beautiful kid. Smart. Brave. Funny. 'Ever ready.'"

One of the nicknames Martinez had stuck on Jay because he was always up first, cheerful and energetic. Too ready that day.

Kane sighed. "Sorry. I know you don't need reminding."

"I flew up to visit his family last winter." Spring actually, but it had felt like winter. "Asked his mom to forgive me for letting him get killed."

"That took balls."

"I guess."

"You know, A. You know. That's one of the reasons I'm asking you to join our team."

He'd been feeling stronger, but wasn't sure he was ready for anything more demanding than school or manual labor. He'd let himself become complacent, lazy.

"At least, give it some thought."

He nodded, recalled how kind and considerate Kane had been that day, the gratitude he always felt after that memory ambushed him.

He heard Alyssa's car pull into the driveway, went to the door, waited and held it open for her.

She'd noticed the strange car, came in with her eyes wide with question, glanced first at the green beer bottle on the coffee table.

"Alyssa, this is Kane."

She smiled. "Pleased to meet you at last, 'Fearless Leader.'"

Kane laughed. "Pleased to meet you, Alyssa. Pics don't do you justice – though that didn't keep A – Aron from drooling over them."

He tried to laugh.

"And those were some spectacular goodies you sent. Those pecan pralines – mm-mm! My mouth waters just thinking about them!"

"I thought we might order a pizza for dinner," he suggested.

"I can't stay," Kane objected. "'Miles to go before I sleep.'"

He recognized a dodge, looked to her for backup.

"Please stay. We have a spare bedroom. Two actually – though one is currently occupied by weights and junk."

"My weights, her junk," he added.

"No, really, I can't stay," Kane maintained.

He gave Kane an imploring look, but seeing it was no use, took off his jacket and urged, "At least, take my jacket."

"That I will, bro," Kane agreed, "as a loan."

He helped Kane into it.

"Gives me the coat off his back," Kane commented.

"That's my man," she responded. "Please come back soon. Aron thinks the world of you, you know."

"I think the world of him." Kane hugged him again, looked into his eyes a moment before heading for the door.

He followed, and as they crossed the lawn he asked, "Did she say something wrong?"

"Absolutely not. Do you have any free time tomorrow?"

"I'll be home about one thirty or two."

"We could meet with Whit- our DCO - about two thirty."

"Sounds good."

"I'll be by for you a little after two. Wear decent clothes, good underwear and socks. Now get back inside and take care of your woman. She deserves it."

"Don't I know it," he laughed.

He watched Kane get into the car and drive off up the street, shivered, chuckled about his advice.

She was in the kitchen, making a salad, the microwave humming. "Did he say something wrong?"

"He was perfectly charming. And quite handsome."

"He drank the beer."

"You're strong enough to have a beer every now and then."

"He's offering me a job. Good pay. Some travel."

She didn't respond.

"Would that be okay with you?"

"Thanks for asking."

"So, what have I done wrong?"

"I've been on my feet all day, and I'm tired."

"Let me make the salad."

"I'm not *that* tired."

He waited.

"It's what you haven't done. Do you have even the slightest intention of ever marrying me?"

He should have known Kane's visit and the possibility he offered would make her feel insecure and been prepared, took a moment to form a response. "Are you sure you actually want to marry me?"

"I am."

"How can I refuse?"

"Don't strain yourself fumbling for a romantic declaration."

"Okay." He chuckled, took her in his arms and nuzzled her nape, breathed in her familiar aroma, murmured, "I'd probably better marry you before you change your mind."

She laughed and turned to hug him, her lips and breath warm on his throat. "Do you have some time frame in mind? A month? A year? Two? A decade?"

"I'll go with answer B."

She laughed and held him tighter.

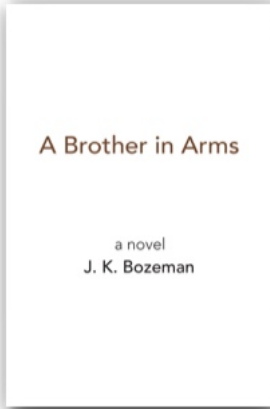
"All I ask is that it not be a big expensive whoop-de-doo with a dozen bridesmaids. And not in a church."

"How about in my grandmother's back yard?"

They would have to wait for warm weather, late spring or early summer. "Sounds acceptable."

"And I want a child. Your child. Soon."

He felt weak, lightheaded, hadn't had his usual late afternoon snack, wasn't prepared for a child, but didn't want to argue.



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