

ZetaΣ

a novel
J. K. Bozeman



ZetaZ is the gang tag Mac, an ER doctor, finds on his neighbor Alicia's door. When her brother Alex arrives, robbed of the ransom sent by her wealthy family in Mexico, Mac turns to his cousin and best friend, Rod, who gathers a rescue crew. The ZetaZ seize Mac's son, Jeremy, and they locate the hostages by his cell phone. A gun battle and almost simultaneous drive-by shooting by a rival gang fuel violent reprisals.

ZetaZ

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ISBN 978-1-62646-655-5

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

Printed in the United States of America.

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BookLocker.com, Inc.
2013

First Edition

When I got home Monday morning, Jeremy was gone.

My first thought was that he might have gone out for another morning jog with Rod and Alex, but his shoes were on the floor under the coffee table.

As the time approached when he should be having breakfast and getting ready for school, I couldn't suppress my rising anxiety. I called Rod.

He answered before a second ring, already fully alert. "What's up?"

"Is Jeremy with you?"

"No," then, "Uh-oh. Any signs of a struggle?"

I looked around at the usual disorder of bedding on the couch, the jumble of his stuff in the corner, his Xbox. "Not that I can see."

"Anything else missing?"

I looked around again, saw his cell phone wasn't on the coffee table, as usual. "His cell phone."

"Does he keep it on ring or vibrate?"

I detested the obnoxious rap crap Jer had as a ringtone and had insisted he spare me. "Vibrate usually, when he's with me."

"This may be the break we need."

Break?! I was too baffled to respond.

"With any luck, his cell's still on and so far undetected."

"You think the ZetaZ have him?"

"Got a better explanation?"

I had no explanation at all, and, as I tried to think of one, the incipient terror I'd shared with Rod two mornings before threatened to rise again.

"We'll let the goons get through to Alex's dad – and he'll say he's had a hard time coming up with the cash, promise to have it to them tomorrow."

I reminded myself to breathe slowly and deeply, began to think more coherently. "Why would they take Jeremy?"

"Maybe they thought he was Alex. Maybe they decided to grab him after all – and bump up the price.

"Maybe they thought Alex was still staying with you – and the gorillas sent to grab him didn't know what he looks like.

"Maybe they just decided to grab what they could. These guys are *not* geniuses."

He was well out in front of me; all I could manage was, "So?"

"With any luck, we can get a fix on Jeremy's location."

The second mention of luck's role in future possibilities wasn't reassuring.

"Should I call Miranda?" I was thinking about alerting her not to call - but she wouldn't, if she thought he was at school.

"*Hell* no! She's the last person we need in on this."

"What *should* I do?"

"Sit tight, and let me handle it." He hung up.

I stood there lost for a moment, feeling annoyed with Jer, thinking he should have known better than open the door to anyone he didn't know.

(I know a concerned father should have been beyond such pettiness, and I had probably left the door unlocked, but I'm trying to tell the truth here.)

Did the ZetaZ imagine I could possibly come up with anything near fifty-thousand dollars?

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Like the average American, I'm in debt – a little over eight thousand on my Bank of America VISA, with a four thousand cash, twenty-two thousand total limit.

Then I was annoyed with Miranda for not being a better mother, for driving him away with her never-ending bullshit.

Finally it hit me that the school might call when Jer didn't show up, and while scrambling to find the number I recognized that I should start showing a little more of that composure under pressure I'd been crediting myself with earlier.

There was no one in this world I considered better able to help me find and rescue my son than Rod, and I had no doubt he was doing his best.

By the time the secretary answered, I was calm. I introduced myself, said Jeremy was staying with me, had apparently picked up an intestinal bug, was running a slight fever, and I thought I should keep him home for the day.

Then I called Lester, our hospital administrator, and told his secretary I'd apparently picked up an intestinal bug, was running a slight fever, with vomiting and diarrhea, and wouldn't be able to work that evening. She wanted me to hold for Lester, with whom I share little respect and less affection, but I pretended I was about to throw up again.

I hadn't taken a sick day in at least five years, but Lester was already less than satisfied with my performance, mostly because, according to his data, I didn't order enough unnecessary tests and procedures.

There had been complaints from patients or their family members who had requested superfluous tests –

though only when they knew their insurance or the state would pay for them.

Less than an hour later Rod called. "We've got an approximate location."

"Great!"

"Maybe not so great. It's probably an apartment house near Columbia and Carroll."

I couldn't recall ever hearing of either street. "Where?"

"Just this side – northeast – of Deep Ellum. We're closing in to reconnoiter. Call you when I know more."

He didn't give me a chance to respond, much less ask questions.

Deep Ellum is at the eastern end of Elm, one of Dallas's three major downtown streets. The area was once famous for black nightlife, juke joints and blues musicians, including Leadbelly (Huddy Ledbetter) and Blind Lemon Jefferson, who wrote "Good Night, Irene". (That about exhausts my knowledge of its history, but, if you're interested, I'm sure you can find more on the Internet.)

More recently the area had something of a renaissance, and there were several nightclubs which attracted mostly-white college-age kids, as well as trendy clothing stores, head shops and tattoo parlors.

Skin-head neo-Nazis started hanging out there, and their mindless petty violence frightened many people off, so the last time I was there – going to the avant-garde Undermain Theater with Anne – five or six years ago, it was on the skids again and felt neither safe nor savory.

To its north and east, the area usually referred to as Old East Dallas, is undergoing re-gentrification, pushing our burgeoning Latino population south and east toward

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the area near Fair Park, an all-black enclave still openly called "Nigger Town" by local bigots.

I went down to my car and got my Mapsco.

Dallas isn't laid out on a regular grid, and the northeast quadrant is one of the most irregular areas. Though I had driven downtown along Abrams Road, a major north/south artery, several times I'd never noticed that where it bends southwest at the Lakewood Shopping Center it becomes Columbia Avenue. A mile or so later, where it veers left to become Main Street, it crosses Carroll Avenue.

I had crossed Carroll, a significant street several times, but had always been too attentive to negotiating the transition from Columbia – which I had until then continued to think of as Abrams – to Main and the approaching maze of streets to notice.

Similarly, on my way to Fair Park along the route I've known from childhood, I had always been too attentive to negotiating the tangle of streets where East Grand Avenue jogs right into Haskell Avenue, then left onto Parry Avenue to notice the intersection with Carroll.

If this description seems confusing, try driving through it without a map.

I tried to get some sleep, but made one of an insomniac's biggest mistakes: going to bed before I was drowsy. I lay there worrying about Jer. I fought off images of what his captors might do to him, but I thought about how frightened he surely was and felt more tender concern for him than I had in years.

Rod called a little before six, invited me to dinner and asked me to stop off at Boston Market for a roasted chicken on my way.

I arrived at his house a little after seven, was a little disappointed not to find the big red pickup there. Need I say I would have felt a little more confident knowing a big tough guy like Beto was joining us?

Rod came to the door with his game face on. I would rather have seen his usual self-confident smile.

The living room had been cleaned and straightened since the last time I'd been in it, but there was a pillow and folded bedding at the far end of the couch. There was an open book, *The Peloponnesian Wars*, face down on the end table nearer the door.

Rod is still an avid reader and, from what I gather from the contents of his book shelves, he prefers history, especially of wars and more particularly of ancient Rome. (Don't let him get started on the parallels between the Roman Empire and ours unless you're actually interested. And never claim that we don't have an empire.)

The house was uncomfortably quiet. I assumed Jule might be out reconnoitering, but I'd been expecting to find Alex.

I waited for Rod to volunteer the information, but his eyes had the unfocused, slow-blinking expression I've seen all my life when his mind is elsewhere. When it became clear he wasn't going to tell me, I asked, "Where's Alex?"

He looked at the black plastic Timex on his wrist. (He told me he had bought his first in Manhattan for less than fifteen dollars, finds them as reliable as any Rolex, more comfortable because they're light, more practical in his line of work because they hug his wrist tight enough not to snag, aren't easily detected by electronic devices, and last for years.) "Probably somewhere over south Texas or northern Mexico."

“You sent him home?”

“One less distraction.”

He went off through what he called the dining room, though it didn't have any chairs or a table, unless you counted the sheet of heavy plywood on two sawhorses of the cluttered workbench.

I knew I was free to follow him or go anywhere in the house, except his or Jule's bedroom.

(Even as a small child I wouldn't have entered his bedroom without his invitation or tacit approval. I can't recall him or anyone else ever saying I needed to knock – though I suppose Aunt Judy, jealous of her assumed management of the house, might have imposed the rule before I was able to recall yet another of her many rules.

I doubt Rod would have gotten visibly upset with me if I'd gone in uninvited, and he readily entered my bedroom. I suppose I felt some unquestioning respect for his privacy, an intuitive understanding that, for all our easy familiarity, he was and would remain an enigma, private and separate.)

With his back to me, he could continue more freely. “I didn't know how much longer I could keep my hands off him.”

He'd obviously summoned that calm tone from his reliable reserve of composure, but that he could speak so candidly, even lightly, made me feel a little more confident of our probable success in freeing Jer and Alicia.

“He got prettier every time I looked at him. He'd bat those big brown eyes, and I'd go weak in the knees.”

I chuckled, finding it hard to imagine him weak in any part of his anatomy. “I got the impression he was attracted to you too.”

He shrugged. "Maybe. But I couldn't let it happen.

"It's still a very serious transgression down there. More serious than when we were growing up – and I wouldn't ever want to put anybody through what I put you through."

I wanted to say it hadn't been so bad – and in retrospect it hadn't been, except for the damage done through my resistance. I wanted to tell him how much I regretted having been so ignorant, prejudiced and stubborn, to reassure him, to take him in my arms – for my own reassurance, as much as his, but I knew he wouldn't welcome my touch in his current detachment.

He was cutting vegetables on a well-worn – but almost-certainly recently disinfected – chopping block beside the sink, with his usual concentration and precision, which I always find somewhat amusing but reassuring. Even the rapid clicks of the heavy knife against the wood had a regular rhythm, and the disks of carrot were as uniform as poker chips.

If I'd been more alert and less self-involved, I might have used his absorption in that simple task – much as I had his concentration on similar tasks all during our shared childhood and adolescence, to speak freely – as an opportunity to begin trying to persuade him to stop punishing himself for something that was more my fault than his.

During our crisis I had recognized he was experiencing emotional turmoil, but I was too self-centered, too wrapped up in my own anxiety and guilt to pay much attention to his.

After the catastrophe and the subsequent break in our relationship, as I reflected on our shared experience, I'd been able to recognize that, even before he'd

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become overtly sexual, the easy rapport we'd shared and the uncomplicated contentment I'd felt in his presence had been waning. I can't recall either of us laughing during the uncomfortable weeks in which he had patiently pressed his seduction.

I hadn't, however, until his recent admission fully recognized how painfully conflicted he had been and how profound his guilt remained. Knowing his pride and sensitivity, I couldn't speak lightly of it or try to open a discussion while he needed to concentrate on the undertaking that lay immediately ahead of us.

"Onions?"

The slightest indication of objection would have served, but without looking at me, he sensed my consent.

It still sometimes amazes me how immediate our understanding can be, and how he continues to defer to my preferences. Except for that brief period of sexual intimacy, he has almost always placed my welfare and happiness above his own.

And I've taken it for granted.

Rod had put on black clothing and darkened his face and neck with brown makeup – though he would probably call it camouflage. Except for his hair, he looked darker than Jule.

I wondered where Jule was, but I remembered Rod's stern rebuke during my last visit, and I assumed he would tell me if he thought I should know.

We took my car, in case someone had noticed his Jeep when he had been reconnoitering that afternoon.

We drove south on East Grand Avenue, a route I was familiar with because it leads to Fair Park and the Music Hall. A few blocks after we had passed under R. L.

Thornton (I-30), he told me to take a right, into a maze of streets I would not have entered willingly with anyone but Rod.

When we were growing up and went to the State Fair every fall this neighborhood had been regarded as potentially dangerous – and there was no reason to imagine it had grown safer.

(Most people would probably call the locale Old East Dallas, rather than Deep Ellum. I had failed to take a closer look at the map of the area, so I was almost immediately lost.)

The streets were narrow, in poor repair and clogged with vehicles, and the sidewalks looked like they had been through an earthquake. Rod had me park against what had once been a curb.

He pulled on a dark brown, close-fitting cap which transformed him into someone I would not have recognized immediately if I encountered him on that dark street, squeezed my forearm and said, “Wish me luck.”

I had been expecting some instruction and sat there too unprepared to say anything.

The interior light doesn't come on when a door is opened, and he had all but disappeared within a few seconds, moving low against the big older vehicles – trucks and vans mostly – that lined the narrow street.

My shiny new Yaris, which Rod had disparaged as “not much bigger than a lunch box”, looked as out of place as a tuxedo at a barn dance. (Rod's sporty, spotless black Jeep Wrangler would have been almost as conspicuous, as well as less maneuverable.)

For all I knew Rod might reappear within a few minutes pursued by desperados, so I left the key in the ignition. As the night was warm, I rolled both windows

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down about a third and squinched down, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible.

Several big vehicles cruised past – probably looking for a place to park – their radios or CD players turned up to volumes that could have been heard over a jet airliner taking off.

Two tall, slim young Latinos sauntered toward me, both wearing oversized black T-shirts covered with heavy-metal crap – skulls, snakes, jagged letters – so common for at least two decades, I didn't look closely.

Otherwise, there was nothing distinctive or unpleasant about them, nothing notable, except they were sticking close to each other. As this wasn't a neighborhood in which guys were likely to get lovey-dovey, I was momentarily suspicious, until I noticed they were sharing a joint.

As they came abreast one of them leaned down and smiled as though he was going to give me some friendly advice.

Meanwhile, the other had rounded the back of my car and was holding a pistol on me, grinning and greeting me amiably, "*Hola, pendejo* ."

Pendejo, in case you're not familiar with the word, means dick, with a strong implication of stupidity – and in that moment I felt it fit reasonably well.

I don't know how I could have resisted them. If I'd had a gun, I wouldn't have considered using it, disobeyed them or deserted Rod.

My captor indicated that I should get out of the car with a familiar beckoning gesture, and I sighed and obeyed.

Neither looked like a criminal. Except for their shirts and a few inconspicuous tattoos, they looked ordinary,

even handsome and wholesome – and I suppose that's why they had been given the assignment.

The one with the gun pressed it into my back insistently, but not roughly, and the other took my left upper arm as though I was feeble and needed his help finding my way along an unfamiliar and potentially hazardous sidewalk.

As best I can recall, they led me a couple of blocks west, then a block south to our destination: a small, drab apartment building, plain as a Monopoly hotel token, two stories with three apartments on each and a wooden gallery along the second.

There were at least two dozen men, all Latinos, several cooking over barbeque grills, the air heavy with smell of charcoal lighter fluid, smoke and charring meat. Most were sitting with their backs against the wall, most with a beer or other drink in their hand, talking idly, like a group of workmen taking a break.

The doors of all the apartments, except the one in the middle upstairs, were open, and at least three radios or CD players were blaring different rhythms, apparently competing for the dominance of their favored regional music. Clothes, towels and carpets were strung haphazardly along the rail of the gallery above.

The parking lot, probably laid out for eight vehicles, was crowded with at least twice that number, and we had to make our way single-file between them.

None of the men looked at us, and, except for those sitting on the stairs, who moved casually and quietly aside, no one acknowledged our presence. The only indication that they noticed me and my captors was that they stopped talking, but as their voices wouldn't have

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been audible above the cacophony of music and rapid-fire announcements, even this was hardly noticeable.

My escorts conducted me up the rickety stairs, and up closer I could see that the building was covered with grayish asbestos siding, some of the shingles broken or hanging by one corner from a nail, revealing the tar paper or bare wood beneath.

(My guess is, the building was thrown up in the middle of the last century and had since received only the more basic maintenance – except for the railing, which may have been given a slap-dab coat of white paint about a decade ago. Even that had probably been the cheap, lead-based poison that continues to sap the health and intelligence of our poor.)

Do I need to say I found the place uninviting?

The kid without the gun knocked on the middle door, which was opened by a big gorilla in a muscle shirt, his upper arms nearly as large as my thighs, even the backs of his hands covered with tattoos. The one with the gun prodded me inside, and when I last glimpsed my captors they were leaving hastily without having exchanged a word.

The gorilla wasn't nearly as polite and gentle. He muttered something in Spanish I didn't understand, so he grabbed my upper arm, turned and shoved me against the door, kicked my ankle to spread my legs, took my wallet and gave me a thorough frisking, including a rough grope of my genitals, in case I had any doubt that he had me by the balls.

The three stupefied monkeys slumped on the couch staring at a wide-screen blaring the squealing tires of a car chase on the wall nearest me looked like the finalists in an ugly contest, every bit of exposed skin covered with

scribbled graffiti in enough variety to fill the average museum of modern art – except for their faces, which they apparently considered repulsive enough without embellishment.

The air was thick with marihuana and tobacco smoke, the stink of over-ripe male bodies and too-sweet incense sticks smoldering at a *Santa Muerte* shrine in the far corner: a plastic skeleton in a hooded robe, strung with gaudy Mardi Gras beads and several flashy medallions.

The other corner held an efficiency-style kitchen with refrigerator, range and counter with a sink overflowing with pots, pans and dishes that looked like they'd been there too long to lend any odor of rancid food to the brew of disgusting stench. A new white microwave looked a bit out of place among the clutter of pizza and cereal boxes, beer cartons, cans and bottles, etc.

I was too appalled to resist, and my new captor had no difficulty manhandling me past the wide screen blasting a car crash and gunfire to a doorway into a small foyer with an open doorway into a bathroom that more than matched the living area in squalor. Its dirty tile floor was all but covered with clumps of towels, its counter somewhat less cluttered than that in the kitchen, and the lavatory was grimy but relatively free of debris.

These goons were obviously not much interested in hygiene and grooming, though the mildewed towels and mold-covered shower curtain, with most of its rings torn, suggested that someone had taken a shower within the past month or so.

The commode wasn't visible beyond the shower wall, but you could have found it in the dark by following your nose to it. My handler didn't offer me an opportunity to use it; he opened a door on the left and shoved me in.

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Alicia was sitting near the headboard of a double bed, one lovely leg crossed over her knee away from me, her tight black dress surprisingly neat and clean, black stilettos against the wall beside the bed. She stood, her expression somewhere between surprise and dismay. "You!"

I was so relieved to see her alive and whole and to be free of that repulsive gorilla, I teased, "I was thinking you might be glad to see me."

Jer was sitting on the floor on the other side of the bed, his back to me, listlessly fiddling with a Rubik's cube.

Recognizing my voice, he jumped to his feet, ran to me and hugged me closer and tighter than he'd held me in at least a decade, pressed his face against my neck and murmured, "Dad!"

I had almost forgotten how much I had once loved him, was surprised by how much I loved him in that moment, how relieved and pleased I was with his warm body, even his adolescent odor sharpened by fear. As if summoned by some primal impulse too subtle to assess, all my fatherly concern came flooding back and I suddenly felt stronger and more capable, compelled to rescue him and Alicia.

The wall opposite the door had two windows, the lower half of the one on the right taken up by an air-conditioner, the panes covered with aluminum foil. I pulled the foil loose from an upper frame on the left and looked down on a dark alley, a tall wood fence and beyond it a neglected, shrub-choked back yard.

I tried to raise the window and, found it painted stuck. I looked around the room for some means of prying it loose and met Alicia's eyes, full of encouragement.

Except for her hair, she didn't look like she'd been held captive for nearly a week.

There were take-out containers – McDonald's, Taco Bell, etc. – on the battered dresser behind her, so she apparently hadn't been starved.

I went to the dresser, pulled out a drawer and rummaged through a jumble of ratty T-shirts, underwear, socks, etc.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"A knife – or something, to open the window."

Then recalling that Jer had probably been able to hold onto his cell-phone because it had been in one of the lower pockets of his cargo pants, I asked him, "Have you got a knife?"

He shook his head.

"Where's your cell-phone?"

"Uncle Rod told me to hide it."

"Get it. We might need it."

He went down on his hands and knees and reached under the bed to retrieve it from atop one of the slats.

"Clever," I congratulated. "But now I'll know where to look for your stash."

"Of what?"

"Grass, meth, coke, porn – whatever you're into."

He smirked. "Ha ha."

I chuckled, gave him a soft sock on his shoulder, left the dresser to Alicia and went to the closet. Nothing but wire hangers, a few tawdry shirts, worn-out boots and shoes.

I decided to try to jimmy the window loose, was working it back and forth when I heard a sharp crack and saw something plummet past. The window came loose,

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and I looked down to find a small dark bundle on the gravel, was able to make out it was Willy.

Apparently Rod's crew was going to lower us from the roof, but the bad guys had spotted Willy, shot him, and he was lying there dead.

The rope was still hanging there.

I couldn't quite reach it, so I went back to the closet for a hanger. I was able to reach it, but when I tried to pull it in it came loose and slithered to the ground.

I leaned out to look down at their plan in ruins, the rope useless on the ground, and Willy, once so quick and nimble, such a pleasure to watch, still and probably dead.

Alicia had her ear to the door listening – though I doubt she could have heard anyone moving over the TV shoot-em-up bang-bang drumming the flimsy wall.

I grabbed the cheap blanket off the bed and tied it to the grubby sheet, then the second fitted sheet, which was even filthier and didn't add much in length after I knotted the end of it.

Alicia had meanwhile gotten Jer to help her move the dresser to block the door, and I joined them. It was too flimsy to offer much resistance, but it would slow them down, and I was pleased by how quickly we'd become a team.

The thugs in the living room had probably seen a thousand shootouts, but they had apparently never seen – or were too wacked to recall – the cliché of someone improvising an escape rope.

"You first," I told Jer.

He looked panicked. "I can't, Dad."

I held him close again, kissed his neck and assured him, "Yes, you can." I told him to climb out the window,

hold on above the knot, and I would lower him. I cautioned him to be as quiet as possible and hide in the bushes until all three of us were down. I couldn't think much beyond that, but we would at least be nearer freedom

He wasn't moving, so I took advantage of his lethargy, picked him up at his waist, turned him and got his feet through the window, telling him to hold on to the sill until I was ready.

He held on to sill like the fall would be ten stories into a pit of snakes. I had to pry one of his hands loose to get him to grasp the sheet, but he grabbed it with the other without further urging.

I had underestimated how heavy he would be, but I was able to lower him gradually and quietly enough not to alert our captors or the occupants of the apartment below.

Alicia didn't need any instruction. Her tight skirt would have made it difficult for her to climb out, but she was already standing near the window, with her back to it by the time I had pulled the rope back up.

Our eyes met briefly, and I was relieved to find she trusted me. I took her waist in both hands and had her out the window and on the ground in less than thirty seconds.

Getting myself down proved a bit more difficult. I tied the corner of the fitted sheet to the nearest corner of the bed frame, overestimating its weight, and climbed out the window.

When I let go of the sill and put all my weight on the rope the bed banged against the wall and rose, and I immediately dropped several feet, lost my grip and fell the last five or six feet. My fall was buffered somewhat by

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the bushes, but I landed with most of my weight on my left foot and wrenched my ankle.

I was so pumped with adrenalin and cortisol I hardly noticed. I was more concerned with Willy, who lay in the middle of the alley a few feet from me.

I was fending my way through the bushes toward him when there was a burst of gunfire, six or seven irregular shots in about as many seconds. Alicia and Jer had moved aside for me, and the three off us held ourselves still, our backs to the wall.

The goons may have been alerted by the bed banging against wall, and one of them may have looked down, but none of them would have had time to reach the end of the alley to our left, where a big guy was dimly silhouetted against the faint light beyond him.

The bushes we were standing among were mostly nandinas, which probably hadn't been pruned in years, maybe decades, so they were over six feet tall.

I had read recently that the plant is now considered invasive, but I thought of Mrs. Johnson, the widow who lived across Jefferson Street from the alley behind my dad's pharmacy, who called it "heavenly bamboo", and I was so grateful for its shelter I was inclined to agree with her.

The big guy staggered toward us. He was obviously drunk and/or stoned, and he apparently didn't know we had escaped or notice the light above us and my improvised rope dangling from it, as his interest seemed focused on Willy. He nudged the small body with his foot, then gave it a harder kick.

Satisfied Willy was dead, he shifted the gun to his left hand, unbuttoned and unzipped his baggy shorts and fished his penis out to take a leak against the fence,

supporting himself with his left forearm, which roused a large dog in the back yard beyond the fence.

He kicked the fence in protest, and the dog lunged at it – from its snarl, ready and large enough to take him on.

He lurched back and turned toward us, his dick dangling, and probably would have pissed on my foot, if he hadn't heard voices on the other side of the fence and turned away.

As he backed toward me I thought of Rod's "jail pants" in his description of the guys who had jumped Alex. I recalled seeing a kid at Albertson's whose pants had fallen nearly to his knees as he reached into a refrigerator and was struck by a bright idea: I would grab the cuffs of his shorts, pull them down, drive into his butt with my shoulder, send him sprawling, and while he was stunned I would pin his hand with my knee and take his gun.

My tactic worked as planned until Willy stomped his hand and seized the gun. While I was still stupefied with amazement, he had his prisoner flat on his belly with his hands behind his neck. I didn't understand much of what he was saying, but his prisoner and I had no doubt he meant it. Alicia laughed.

Then she took my arm, pulled me back and indicated a dark form moving toward us, dodging in and out of the bushes. By the second or third time he'd been silhouetted in the dim light I recognized Rod and ran to him.

He doubled over, his right hand hugging his ribcage below his heart, his left on my shoulder, and I helped him lower himself to the ground.

I assumed he'd been shot and I ran my hand under his back searching for the exit wound, sick with the

thought of how large it would be, hating myself for getting him involved in this nightmare.

"Knife," Rod murmured so softly it took me a moment to understand.

Jer had come out and was looking down, horrified.

"Call nine one one!" I commanded.

When I saw he was, I focused all my attention on Rod, my relief giving way as I recalled an anatomy teacher saying that professional assassins drove their daggers up under the ribcage into the heart, rather than take the chance on it being deflected by a rib.

The light was too dim to distinguish blood from black fabric, but I could feel his shirt was saturated down to his waistband, his pants wet and sticky to at least his upper inside thigh.

His breathing was rapid and shallow, but he is so fit I couldn't attribute that to his recent exertion – though I tried to rationalize that his wound made deeper breaths painful.

"I don't know where we are!" Jer pleaded.

"I know," Willy declared and snatched the phone.

I was too concerned about Rod to pay attention to him, so I still don't know where we were exactly. I palpated Rod's throat beneath his jaw, could feel a pulse, but couldn't gauge how strong or even how rapid it was. Our perception is distorted by anxiety, and he keeps himself in such excellent shape I felt unable to make an accurate assessment.

There was a clatter of gunfire, shots so rapid I won't venture an assessment, except to say more than fifty, up to a hundred, followed by squealing tires, like in some gangster movie – but, with the apartment house shielding us, not as real and immediate.

"See 'bout Jule," Rod murmured.

"Where?"

He raised his bloody right hand, weakly indicating to his right, letting his hand fall to his side.

I unbuttoned and unzipped his pants to free his T-shirt, and as I worked it free from under his hips, could see his white briefs were completely saturated. I managed to work the T-shirt up far enough to expose the wound and found it not much more than an inch wide, still oozing.

"Jule," Rod insisted.

I looked up at Jer and said, "I need your help, Son."

He was too dismayed to move.

"Get down here. Now. "

He obeyed me, sank to his knees opposite me.

"Put your palm here."

When he hesitated, I grabbed his hand, placed it over the wound and pressed it down. "Keep it there. Keep it firm."

Willy apparently guessed my intention. He had his prisoner on his feet, holding onto his waistband, which he'd apparently refastened, and was prodding him along with jabs of the gun barrel, using him as a shield as we moved toward the west side of the building which was slightly better lighted.

Except in movies I had never seen such a hellish scene. There were several wounded men slumped against the lower wall, others standing dazed in the open doorways. Most of the car windows were white with overlapping spider-web patterns, and I smelled gasoline, imagined the inferno that could erupt any moment.

The approaching wail of sirens should have given me some reassurance, but mingled with the raucous music, they only seemed to add to the chaos.

J. K. Bozeman

I didn't know what Jule was wearing, could only guess it would probably be black. There seemed to be a body or someone still squatting and cowering in terror in every narrow gap between the closely-parked vehicles, and every limb I could make out had tattoos. I started calling his name.

I've never had to pay much attention to triage; EMTs, admissions, nurses have brought my attention to the patients most urgently in need. I passed at least three badly wounded, possibly dead or dying men before I found Jule, wedged between two trucks in a puddle of greenish coolant, a swirl of dark blood spreading in it, doubled over, gripping his left thigh with both hands.

I knew pulling him away would cause him a lot of pain, but, thanks to too many exploding cars in movies, I could imagine a conflagration being set off by a live coal from one of the barbecue grills engulfing the parking lot. "Hold on, I'm going to pull you clear," I said, working my hands under his arms and around his chest.

He made the sucking sound of air drawn fiercely through teeth that macho men will allow themselves when in excruciating pain, but not one whimper until I'd gotten him out into the street, when he groaned, "Ease up."

We'd left a smeared trail of blood, and in better light I could see his femur was shattered a few inches above his knee.

I tore off my shirt to improvise a tourniquet and made him lie back to conserve his remaining blood.

Willy, who had been following me, ready to protect me, made his prisoner give me his shirt, and I was able to reinforce my bandage.

A squad car, sharp barks announcing its arrival, pulled up within a few feet of us, and in its headlights I saw that Jule's foot was turned outward, indicating his femur had been severed. By some miracle, his femoral artery hadn't been and some of his musculature was still intact, but he had lost so much blood he was no longer conscious.

A uniformed officer got out of the passenger side of the car and looked down on us.

Rod became my main concern again. "Get this man to a hospital," I insisted, "And splint his leg before you move him."

He reared his head back, making a comic face that asked, Who the hell do you think you are?

Other vehicles, sirens wailing and yipping, were closing in, their headlights disclosing the mayhem.

Willy had taken his prisoner to the nearer end of the building and was making him get down on his belly again.

I saw that his attention had turned to Beto, who was obviously seriously wounded. They lay along the shortest route back to Rod, but I didn't have the heart to pass them by. I ran back across the narrow strip of lawn between the building and vehicles, the nauseating reek of gasoline intensifying my terror that I might have already lost Rod.

An ambulance had meanwhile backed into the alley, an EMT had gotten out and was silhouetted against the gathering swarm of flashing lights, his broad-shouldered, slim-hipped outline familiar, and I greeted him like a long-lost friend, "Darius!"

His eyes, always bright and alert, opened wider, and, recognizing me, he greeted me, "Hey, Doc. What are you doing here?"

"Long story. I need your help."

J. K. Bozeman

"You got it."

I had no doubt he would follow me and hurried back to Rod.

Jer had kept his hand where I'd left it, but I didn't look at his face, avoiding his assessment. I fell directly to my knees across from him and felt for Rod's carotid artery, still faintly pulsing.

His eyes fluttered open, he smiled weakly and murmured, "Gimme kiss."

My mind reeled back to more than half our lifetimes ago when I'd refused and evaded his attempts to kiss me, all the heartache I'd caused. I knew I would never forgive myself if I continued to hold out and lost him. I caressed his forehead, as though pushing his hair off it as he'd done mine, looked into his eyes, dark and depthless with dilation, and kissed him as he had wanted me to then.

"Make way, Doc," Darius insisted.

I obeyed him, met Jer's eyes briefly as I lifted his hand away, and the scene seemed to open around me into fuller view. Alicia was looking at me, her dark eyes glittering. Darius and his partner, who I don't recall ever having seen before, were lifting Rod onto a stretcher.

Detective Andersson and two uniformed officers were approaching down the alley.

I took a deep breath, savoring the relief, grateful for air free of gasoline fumes.

Jer was standing, his eyes staring down at nothing, obviously unable to fully assimilate all that had happened. I went to him, held him close, wanting to smooth his hair, as I had Rod's, but my mind had cleared and I recognized my hands were bloody, so I kissed his neck and assured him, "Good work."

That now seems like a strange thing to have said, but I was including him in my appreciation for all the good fortune that had suddenly befallen us when I'd been too occupied to recognize and appreciate it.

I turned to meet Detective Andersson, who drawled, "Well, if it isn't doc on the spot."

I bowed much as Willy had after he'd climbed the tree, though not nearly as low, and said, "At your service. Where do I send the bill?"

He chuckled and turned to Alicia. "And here's the lovely *señorita* who caused all the trouble."

Alicia widened her eyes and drew herself erect, as though offended.

Andersson offered his arm. "Right this way, ma'am. Your limousine awaits you."

I watched her walk away between the two officers, concerned for her bare feet.

I turned to Jer and asked, "How do you like that? No 'my hero'. Not even a word of thanks."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head in mild reproach. "You're funny, Dad."

I put my arm around his shoulder and led him toward the ambulance into which Darius and his partner were loading Rod. "Let's call it a night."

"Is Uncle Rod going to be okay?"

I was grateful to hear him still calling Rod uncle and to escape any questions about our kiss. Though there had been no exchange of saliva, as we were both dry-mouthed with stress, and I can't recall a taste, no one who had seen it could have doubted I meant it. "He's in good hands."

We followed the others along the alley and watched the ambulance with Rod inside creep its way through the

swarm of pulsating lights. The reek of gasoline was still nauseating, but it had been rendered less dangerous by the dowsing given the area by a fire truck that had joined the throng of vehicles, all their lights flashing red, white and blue. You could almost have thought it was a Fourth of July celebration.

As we made our way across the ratty strip of token lawn an officer, with Willy by his arm, intercepted me. "This kid says you know him."

"I certainly do. Worth his weight in wildcats."

"You're the doctor, right?"

I knew I didn't look much like one. "When I'm not rescuing people from kidnappers."

Jer rolled his eyes and shook his head again.

"Think you could get this kid patched up?"

I hadn't noticed Willy was in need of attention. "I'll do my best. *Vamos, Willy.*"

Willy fell in beside me, and the officer had other matters to attend to.

I introduced, "Willy, *este es mi hijo, Jeremy.*"

Willy gave him a quick bow. "*Encantado.*"

Judging by the way he was moving after that two-story fall, he certainly looked somewhat enchanted.

"*El placer es mio,*" Jer responded, his accent impressively good. (Thanks mostly to Anita, who had begun teaching him at an early age, when our brains are more open to language.)

Our luck held, and my car was where I'd left it, untouched, the key still in the ignition and my cell phone in the tray where I'd dropped it.

I kept a small flashlight in the compartment over the steering column, and, though I was hesitant to linger in that neighborhood, I fished it out and ran its beam over

Willy. There was a hole near the waist of in his dark green T-shirt, and its lower quarter and his jeans down past the bottom of his pocket were saturated with drying blood, so I coaxed, "*Muestra me la herida .*"

"*No es una herida ,*" he contended, "*Solamente una araña.*"

I took "*araña*" to mean something like spider bite and understood he was trying to minimize it, but I insisted, "*Muestra me.*"

He lifted his shirt just high enough to show me a neat ellipse of wound about three inches long and an inch wide in the middle. I suppose his skin had been so taut that, though the bullet had only grazed him, it looked like a knife cut. "*Este requiere suturas.*"

My Yaris was a two-door, and Jer had taken his usual seat. I asked him to get in the back, and he complied without his usual sigh of complaint.

"*Vamos a la hospital , Willy.*"

"*Por favor, no, Señor Médico,*" he pleaded.

I smile every time I recall his "Mister Doctor". "*Vamos,*" I insisted.

"*No quiero dejar sangre en el carro nuevecito,*" he stalled.

"*No importa. Vamos.*"

"*Suplico po favor, no, Señor Médico,*" he pleaded.

"*Tengo miedo de la migra y el hielo.*"

His wound was no longer bleeding, so I decided I would take him and Jer to the apartment, then go by the ER to pick of a suture kit and stitch him up after he'd had a shower

I was puzzled by his "*hielo*" (ice) until, after we were safely on East Grand, when I figured out he meant ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

When I arrived at the hospital, there was a police patrol car out front in my reserved parking space, so I parked across the lot.

An officer was loitering outside, another inside. They seemed to recognize me, though I can't recall ever having seen either of them before. I suppose their presence made me feel more secure.

We had a fairly busy early evening – though nothing unusual. A dislocated shoulder, a badly sprained ankle, a couple of ODs – one intentional, the other apparently not.

One pretty teenager, a too-often seen repeat patient was suffering yet another acute asthma attack. She obviously enjoys attention, doesn't use her maintenance inhaler regularly, entertains herself and manipulates her mother with her distress. I gave her an impatient look, but spared us both another futile lecture.

One young man, who looked perfectly healthy, complained of acute abdominal distress. I examined him and questioned him about what he had eaten earlier. He admitted having a big bowl of ice-cream, and I suggested he might be lactose intolerant.

His wife scoffed and insisted I hospitalize him for further testing the next morning. Though I felt fairly certain I was right, I did.

An older gentleman had fallen getting out of the shower and opened a gash on his forehead. Scalp wounds often bleed freely, and his was no exception. He was lucid, patient and cooperative, embarrassed by all the attention.

J. K. Bozeman

After I had closed the wound, his daughter insisted he might have suffered a concussion and demanded an MRI. I risked another of Lester's lectures by refusing and advised the daughter to bring him in the next day if he had significant symptoms, such as confusion, memory loss or speech impairment.

I was working on a drunk who had been involved in a bar brawl and sustained several contusions and a significant laceration over his left eye. He was loud, rude and unruly, until Lavinia came in and told him he had better settle down or she would summon the officer in the lobby and have him carted off to jail.

Jared, one of our part-time orderlies, came by saying he was going to make a food run, asking if anyone wanted him to pick up something.

Except for the pizza, most of which Jer had gobbled down, I hadn't had a substantial meal since the one Rod and I had shared, and the thought of a Santa Fe chicken sandwich from Schlotzsky's had me salivating. I gave him a ten Rod had loaned me and told him to keep the change.

A few minutes later, he came back to ask Beth if he could borrow her car. (He used DART to get to and from the hospital.) She said Joe, her husband, had dropped her off, so I tossed him my keys.

He was always cheerful and ready to help, so good-natured, polite and attentive I didn't give a second's thought to trusting him with my car.

We were all fond of him and found pleasure in his presence. If a patient vomited, bled or defecated, he would clean it up before anyone had to ask – and he smiled doing it. His smiling face comes back to me now.

He was tall and slim, pleasantly proportioned and impressively agile. He always wore baby blue scrubs, much the same color as his eyes. (Now that I think of it, he may have only had the one set, faded because he washed and ironed them before every shift.) He usually came in with his short blond hair styled in a quiff with gel, but he was so active it soon resumed its natural shape.

He was in his second year at Richland College, planning on transferring to a four-year university and eventually attending medical school. He may have been getting some sort of credit by putting in three evenings a week with us, but he obviously enjoyed the work and, judging by his battered shoes, probably needed the income.

I'd only had one conversation with him. He'd asked if he needed organic chemistry to get into medical school, and I'd said probably not, but he would find it useful.

He took teasing especially well and laughed when people called him "Kissy Face", another of Lonny's tags, I suppose – fitting, because his lips were full and bright with blood, as though he'd recently been making out.

Apparently he'd had quick, furtive sex with at least two staff members, and word was he was well-equipped, but too quick on the trigger.

Sid, one of the older orderlies, had teased that when Rosalee had met him in a utility closet, she'd had trouble distinguishing him from a broom – then she'd found his boner, which was somewhat larger. Jared had blushed and laughed with his usual good humor.

I barely heard the blast, but nothing has ever hit me harder.

Beth and I were still working on the obnoxious drunk when Lavinia opened the door and said, "Doctor."

J. K. Bozeman

I knew it was something serious, and I followed her to the lobby, where several members of our staff were blocking my view of the gurney. The expression on an officer's face told me he shared Lavinia's grave assessment.

Everyone was so stunned, paralyzed with horror, I had to move them aside to reach the body, its face obliterated, torso bloodied down to his slender waist and flat abdomen, but he was recognizable by his pale blue scrubs and long, slim legs.

There was no possibility he could have survived the blast, but his left hand and lower arm were unbloodied, and I took his wrist, noticed for the first time how fine his hand was, his nails clipped close and clean.

(I'm weeping as I write this, but I was too shocked at the time to feel much beyond dismay.)

I met Lavinia's eyes, full of concern and sorrow, shook my head, trusting her to take care of the formalities, and returned to the drunk.

He was quiet, as though he had picked up on our collective distress, and I sutured his wound carefully. In a few months the scar will barely be visible.

When I went back into the corridor I found Detective Andersson, was surprised he could have appeared so soon – though I suppose I had lost sense of time. With him there was a man of about my age in a dark suit, white shirt and tie, his expression sober, concerned.

Detective Andersson gently touched my lower back and guided me to the man, who he introduced as Agent Barton.

"Frankly," Agent Barton said, "we're not quite sure what to make of this."

"The usual: revenge," Andersson said.

Agent Barton nodded tentatively. "We still don't know who perpetrated the drive-by. It might have been Los Zetas – the drug thugs, defending their brand – but more likely, it was another local gang.

"And we strongly suspect the fire-bombing this morning was retaliation for the trouble you brought down at the apartment house."

"Sure it was," Andersson affirmed.

"Apparently, having failed to get you then, they planted a bomb in your car."

"No doubt in my mind," Andersson asserted.

"We've been considering taking you into protective custody."

"At the very least," Andersson insisted, "you, your cousin and son need to get the hell out of Dodge *muy pronto*."

Agent Barton almost smiled. "My advice, exactly."

Lester came bustling in, obviously upset with being called in on short notice, without his usual impeccable grooming, patting his hair to make sure it covered his receding hairline. "Get your stuff. I want you off hospital property – for good – in fifteen minutes."

Andersson gave him a hard look. "No need to get ugly about it."

Lester drew himself up to his full height and bridled with self-importance. "And who might you be?"

In no hurry, Andersson brought out his badge. "I not only might be – I am."

Agent Barton backed him with a stern glare.

"Let's go, son," Andersson said, his hand on my lower back again, gently urging me toward the entrance.

I hadn't imagined he was capable of such kindness.

J. K. Bozeman

Except for the shattered rear window, the rear of my little Yaris was intact, but the front was hardly recognizable as having been a car.

He guided me to the back seat of a patrol car, got in on the other side and gave the driver Rod's address. I was too dazed to wonder how he knew it.

We were quiet through most of the ride, but after Garland Road had become East Grand he said, "This is the point in western movies and what they used to call dime novels, where you and your cousin round up your posse and go after the bad guys.

"I want you to promise me you won't do that."

The idea had never crossed my mind.

"I want you to grab a few things, get your cousin in his Jeep and haul ass.

"Notice I know what he drives. If I know, what makes you think they don't?"

It occurred to me he had better access to data, but I fully intended to take his advice.

Rod's Jeep was parked at the curb, where I'd last seen it.

He directed the driver to pull into the driveway, laid his hand on mine and said, "Your education and experience are too valuable for you to let those assholes kill you. Promise me you'll be on the road ASAP."

I nodded.

He took out another card and handed it to me. "Keep in touch."

(I can't help but wonder why he didn't stick around while Rod and I got our stuff together and were on our way. I suppose he needed to get back to the hospital. He was certainly no slacker. I couldn't have asked for better support and advice, and I'm deeply grateful to him.)

The house was quiet and dark inside, except for dim light through the closed blinds in Rod's room, but the exterior lights were sufficient for me to find my way to the back door.

I jerked the latch on the storm door open as Rod had instructed me and found the key where he'd told me he kept it hidden.

There was sufficient light spilling from his open bedroom door that I didn't need to turn on the kitchen light. I called his name as I made my way through the clutter in the dining room.

"Yeah," he answered, without the least alarm in his voice.

I found him reading in the old rocking chair that had belonged to our great grandfather – and had still been in the dusty attic of his father's house the last time I'd seen it. He looked up at me with the expectant patience I've known all my life.

"I just got a good sweet kid killed."

He came to me and held me comfortingly, as I knew he would.

"They put a bomb in my car." I barely got the last word out before a sob cut it off, and I gave in to grief, cried like a little boy.

Safe in his loving arms, my mind cleared and I said, "We've gotta get out of here."

"Two minutes."

My briefcase was still on the worktable, and some clothes were on a chair in the living room. I grabbed them, headed for the front door, then doubled back. "Keys."

He tossed them to me and I hurried out the front door, trusting he would follow, unlocked the passenger side,

tossed my stuff in the back seat, got in the driver's seat, started it, and backed into the driveway, ready to leave.

Rod may have kept his word about two minutes, but it felt like at least ten. If I wasn't already nervous enough, my cell vibrated.

Anne, so I answered before a second buzz.

"Are you alright?"

"Shook up, but still functioning."

"Lavinia says you took it hard."

I'd been thinking I had handled it well.

"He was such a good, sweet kid." I was aware I was repeating myself. I probably wouldn't have described Jared as sweet to anyone but Rod and Anne, had to fight off a sob before I could continue. "I'll call you back. Rod and I have to make ourselves scarce."

"Come here."

"I can't take the chance on dragging you into this."

"Call me back as soon as you can."

I unlatched and pushed the door open for Rod, he threw his kit in the back seat and got in asking, "You driving?"

"No, just warming the seat for you."

"Aint you thoughtful? Buckle up."

I obeyed, turned on the headlights and pulled out, turning left toward East Grand, as though headed for what was once home.

Headlights followed, but I tried to assure myself that the sudden appearance of the goons would be too much of a coincidence.

I probably should have turned right and headed for R. L. Thornton Freeway, but I turned left, as usual.

Rod rolled down the window and adjusted the passenger side mirror so he could have a better view.

The vehicle followed, gained on us.

When we reached the junction with Gaston, the left-turn arrow was turning yellow.

“Left,” Rod insisted.

The arrow was red before we made it through, but the vehicle was still on our tail.

“Right lane,” Rod advised, “More escape routes that way.”

There was no longer any doubt we were being followed, and another vehicle, an old faded-green SUV with a tan front right quarter panel, speeded up beside us. A big red van ahead of us was slowing us down – purposely.

Rod reached under the dashboard and, as though we were engaged in some military exercise, announced, “Airbags off. Party time.”

I almost laughed at the incongruence of his light-hearted tone, my excitement undoubtedly fueled by adrenalin.

“Let that one behind us get on your bumper.”

I did. I could see an arm with a pistol out the passenger side window, and at least one bullet struck the tailgate.

“Now, stomp the brakes – hard.”

It plowed into us hard, then fell behind.

“One down,” he said, his voice still reassuringly calm. “Now, for our friends on the left.”

Both windows on our side were down, two arms with pistols were firing at us, and at least a couple of bullets thudded into the Jeep, one into my seatback, missing me by a few inches.

“Sideswipe ‘em. Now!”

I did.

J. K. Bozeman

“Harder. Push ‘em across the median. Keep it up.”

There was a blare of horns and the SUV clipped an oncoming vehicle, which skewed its rear bumper against the side of the Jeep and scraped down it, taking my side mirror.

A bullet smashed through the middle of the windshield near the mirror, leaving a hole and surrounding spider-web, and I could make out an arm hugging the side of the van.

“Okay, if that’s how they wanna play. Ease off and pull over into the left lane. We’re gonna ram ‘em off the road.”

When we’d fallen behind about forty yards, he said, “Okay. We’re gonna hit the bumper, left side. Put it in third, floor it and keep it floored.”

We rammed it and drove it off the road. It hopped the curb and plowed into some shrubs.

He shook me in congratulation, “What a team! You an’ me, Cuz! You an’ me!”

I was too dazed to respond.

“Take a right.”

I did and found myself in a strange neighborhood, obviously older, but well-maintained.

“Right.”

The narrow street was overhung with trees, and there were so many cars parked at the curbs I had to slow to wend my way among them.

“Right,” Rod said.

When we came to a T intersection, I took another right.

“Wrong,” he said, as though I’d given the wrong answer in a game. “This is Lawther. Dead-ends up ahead.”

The road is so narrow I couldn't turn around immediately. We went around a bend to the left until we reached an area big enough to make a U, were hardly on our way again when we met the van from hell headed toward us, an arm and pistol out the passenger side window.

"Chicken time," Rod said, "Make him think you're gonna hit him head-on."

I swerved toward him, a bullet crashed through the upper right side of the windshield – though you wouldn't have known it by Rod's non-reaction – and at least two thudded into the hood.

I sideswiped it hard enough I thought I might have damaged it sufficiently to put it out of commission, or that it might have hit a tree or some obstacle on the side of the narrow road.

No such luck.

"Damn, who'd've thought a Ford could take that much punishment?"

(I'll take his word for the manufacturer; I certainly hadn't found the leisure to notice.)

"Okay, if that's how they wanna play. Speed up, but let 'em catch up with us. We'll take 'em out like we did the first one."

I was glad he could recall how we'd taken out the "first one".

"Floor it."

I did.

(It seems strange that there were no other cars on that narrow road, which surely sometimes led to a convenient spot for private observation of what in high school we might have called submarine races.)

"Now, ease off until he's on our bumper."

J. K. Bozeman

The van caught up, and there were pistols firing out of windows on both sides, bullets smashing into gate and through the rear window, one hitting the headliner above Rod's head.

"Okay, stomp 'em."

I did, and the van slammed into us hard.

(Recalling those two rear-enders, I had to stop and do a few neck rolls.)

Rod rolled down his window – the only one still intact – and announced, "Two through the windshield! Suckers never learn."

We left the van behind, were headed north along the west shore of White Rock Lake, in the clear at last, the Jeep badly damaged, but still operational – though not for much longer. There was a red light on the console, and we started to lose power.

"Pull over, pardner. This is as far as she goes."

I pulled over on the shoulder as far as I could and coasted to a stop.

"Damn fine of her to get us this far, don't you think?"

"Phenomenal!"

He shook me again. "Never had a better driver."

"Never had a better navigator," I responded.

"You an' me, Cuz."

"You an' me," I repeated, too dazed to think of anything else to say.

I couldn't get my door open, so, after Rod got out, I climbed across, my cast making that more difficult – and my ankle, which hadn't given me so much as a twinge during the chase, started pulsing with pain.

Judging by the hiss and steam illuminated by the headlights, the radiator had taken at least one bullet. Another had struck the gas tank and the nauseating reek

of gasoline made my stomach constrict, almost made me retch, which reminded me it was well past empty.

Rod had an irregular splotch of blood below his wound, but you wouldn't have known it by his movement.

He unlatched the back of the passenger seat, pushed it forward, reached over to fish out a flashlight out from under the driver's seat, ran the beam over me, then rounded the Jeep, making a thorough inspection.

"We are two fortunate dawgs," was his only comment.

I tried to take the flashlight from him, but he held onto it, insisting. "Will you stop worrying about me?! I'm okay."

"In case you forgot, I'm a doctor – and it's my job to worry."

He shook his head and, though I couldn't see, probably rolled his eyes, as he has several hundred times during our lives.

I knew there was nothing I could do to reassure myself, so I took out my cell and called Anne.

She answered after the second ring, "Where are you?"

"Not, am I okay?"

"Are you?"

"Considering what Rod and I just went through, remarkably well."

"So, *where* are you?"

"On Lawther Drive, on the west shore of White Rock Lake."

"What 're you doing there?"

"Enjoying the lovely weather. Can I take you up on that offer of accommodation?"

"Of course."

"Could you throw in transportation?"

J. K. Bozeman

“Should we pick up beer and a pizza on the way?”

I was so high on relief and adrenalin I laughed. “Would you? We’re somewhere south of the Hunt mansion.”

“We’ll find you.”

I knew she would – though without the beer and pizza. I was suddenly so famished I almost called her back to ask her to bring a snack.

Rod had walked off along the roadside with his phone to his ear.

When he returned I asked, “Have you talked with Jule?”

“How’d you guess?”

“Well?”

“He’s got a titanium steel rod in his leg – facing a couple of months of rehab. Not exactly jubilant about it.”

I tried to chuckle. “Any news about Beto?”

“Still in ICU.”

He turned and walked away to make another call, and grief and regret seized me again.

All the elation I’d felt with our success in evading the bad guys gave way to the recognition of the nightmare I’d brought down on us. How could I have been so careless with Jared? How had I failed to recognize the possibility of a bomb being planted in my car?

I had been thinking I was familiar with death – but it had always seemed distant and for others. If I hadn’t been hungry and tossed Jared my keys, oblivion would still be waiting for me.

I kept thinking, if I’d given Jared the attention he deserved, I would have been more cautious. If I hadn’t let myself get juvenile about Alicia, soft-hearted with Alex,

ZetaZ

had let Detective Andersson handle it, hadn't pulled Rod into this endless disaster...

But you don't need to be reminded of how weak and foolish I was.



ZetaZ is the gang tag Mac, an ER doctor, finds on his neighbor Alicia's door. When her brother Alex arrives, robbed of the ransom sent by her wealthy family in Mexico, Mac turns to his cousin and best friend, Rod, who gathers a rescue crew. The ZetaZ seize Mac's son, Jeremy, and they locate the hostages by his cell phone. A gun battle and almost simultaneous drive-by shooting by a rival gang fuel violent reprisals.

ZetaZ

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