

Kin

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When James is the only surviving brother after the end of the war in Vietnam he finds himself unable to go to his two brothers' graves. His son then persuades him to and he reluctantly concurs. Through out his journey to the cemetery James begins to reminisce with himself about memories he and his brothers shared together.
Good and bad.



Published on
Booksie

booksie.com/AemmaBella

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Kin

â No matter what happens, we are kin...and we always will be.â

â No matter what.â

â Higher than brothers.â

â Higher than ourselves.â

â More than kin.â

â We are one.â

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â Dad, you need to do it.â my son says to me.

We are sitting out on our back porch, waiting on Mrs. McCabe to come home to me. The sun is shining today; beaming down on our heads in its haughty wrath. I love the sun but that joker makes a mess of my skin if I stay in it too long.

My son is twenty-five years old. A man in is prime. He is the oldest of three... boys: James Jr.; Victor who is twenty; and Thameson, he's seventeen. I wanted the last one to have a more...creative name. But that boy is more ordinary than the sun itself.

Jr. (the one I am talking with) is my closest son. Almost... like a brother to me.

And that is exactly what we are talking about.

â I... can't, Jr., I can't bring myself to go down there.â I say.

He looks at me with a mixture of sympathy and anger.

He sigh.

â You're not going to feel any better if you don't go. Forget about what Granma and Granpa used to say. You know that none a those things were true. You deserve to be here. I'm happy you're here-in fact- I wouldn't even be alive if it weren't for you. I could care less that those old folks didn't want to see us. I don't care, Dad. But. You. Need. To. Go.â

My hands are shaking- with age as well as nerves- because I am looking at my Jr. for the first time and seeing that he is no longer the little boy that used to play in the dirt but a man with so much more sense than his Pa that I could cry and have no problem with him seeing me.

I am so proud of him.

I shake my head.

â Dad...â

â No, not that,â I say, â do you know how proud I am?â

He smiles wearily at me.

â Probably not. But!- your praise is not going to get you out of this.â he laughs.

I sigh and laugh a little myself because he is right.

â Alright...â I say as I wipe those stubborn laughing tears away from my eyes. â

James's face brightens and he clutches my shoulders firmly.

â You are sure?â he ask.

I nod.

â Do you want me to go with you?â

I think about it for a moment. It would be nice to have him along but this was something I had to do alone.

I grab his shoulder just as firmly before answering.

â No, thank you, but... this is something I need to do on my own.â

He nods. His face is content but disappointed is clearly there.

â You know I would love for you to come with me,â I say, â but this has gone on for forty years. I have to go alone.â

He nods again, this time with more understanding in his eyes

â You will call me if you can't handle it.â he says. And it wasn't a question.

I smile at him and clap him on the back.

â Yes, Sir!â I laugh.

~

â This is what men are supposed to do!â my father bellowed. I was nineteen at the time, my oldest brother, Scott, was twenty-two. And my youngest brother, Travis, was eighteen. We were all standing in front of our father listening to Captain C. McCabe; veteran of world war 2, explain to us the importance of serving our country. â No sons a mine will sit around this house while there is a war going on!â We had been trying to avoid the subject for several years. It had been a few years into the Vietnam clash and at the time it seemed like it would last forever.

â Pa, we could die,â said Scott as he rocked on his heels, â and you'd still have us running around out there?â Travis had been quiet the whole time and so pale mama had thought he had fallen ill. The truth was; he was afraid of Pa. So afraid he would try to do everything just right. Pa didn't care how old we were,

he'd beat us at thirty if he lived to see the day.

My Pa's face had gone hard with anger.

â You will go there,â Pa said, slowly enunciating each word, â you are gonna serve this country.â

But Scott didn't hold back and nod like Travis would've done. No, Scott bared his teeth at our father and cursed him to his grave.

Pa looked at Scott with this look so horrible I was afraid he would kill his son.

â Charles, I need to talk to you.â Mama said. I hadn't even noticed she was in the room. I thought she had gone to fix supper.

Pa got up slowly and rammed his shoulder into Scott; scowling at him before he left the room with Mama.

â You. Are. Crazy!â Travis hissed. He was shaking so hard I had to grab hold of his shoulder. He jumped a little before glancing to see that it was just me.

'This boy is not going to last in the military.' I thought.

Scott didn't look at our brother, only at the swinging kitchen door Papa had just walked through.

â I wanna kill him.â was his curt reply.

â W-what?â I said. I wasn't really surprised, just taken aback because he had the guts to say it out loud.

â Hell maybe we all outta go up there,â Scott continued, â at least when we get back it would be an equal fight.â He scoffed and stomped out of the room.

â Jesus,"Travis whispered. He finally stopped shaking but he was still paler than snow. â Scott is losing it.â

I nod my head and take Travis by the wrist leading him to through the front door to find Scott. He was sitting in an old rocker our Granmama had given to us. She died some time ago but that rocking chair was still as sturdy as it was when it was new.

â Scott,â I said leaning on the old white railing with my arms folded, â we all know he's gonna make us sign up and go.â

I sighed, hating the realization in my words.

I continued.

â I know... Scott?â I started feeling worried. Scared.

He looked up at me. He hadn't really been looking at me while I was talking. Just gazing out at the hills and the sunset.

â What if we don't survive?â I asked

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He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “We will. We are brothers, James, we're gonna protect each other no matter what.”

“I heard they like to separate kin...” said Travis.

“Where did you hear that from?” I asked.

He shrugged.

“Bobby Jordan said his cousin and his brother signed up a few years ago. Said they separated them and Bobby's cousin's brother died in combat.” he said quietly.

“Bobby J also likes to make up stories, Travis,” Scott said, “I wouldn't bet on that story being true. And even if it was?- I wouldn't let them separate us.”

Travis relaxed finally, and little color returned to his cheeks.

I was about to tell Travis that I had gone to the brother's funeral myself but Scott gave me the “Don't you even think about it” look so I backed off.

I patted Travis on the back instead.

“Boys! Suppers ready!” called Mama.

I glanced quickly at Scott and he gave me a hard look.

I shook my head slightly so that only he could see it and he raised his eyebrows at me.

He started to smile.

I didn't.

Travis never saw our silent discussion. He was busy staring at the sunset just as Scott had been doing moments before.

I was worried about Scott; he'd been acting out with Pa and lying more often than Mama would've been happy with. She was one of those “True Christians”. The kind that judged everyone who didn't believe what they believed.

I despised her more than Pa sometimes. I had seen her treat a gay couple as if they were walking shit. I had seen her treat a Negro woman like a disease.

“Those times are over, Mama!” I wanted to scream at her after witnessing that. I never had the gull to stand up to either one of my parents. I was ashamed of them, yes, but they were still my one way ticket to life.

But Scott- Scott was different now. Since the war started he could feel Pa's eyes on us. He knew what he was thinking. He knew it was inevitable. Pa wouldn't rest until he screamed “Cowards!” at us. And even that was unlikely to happen because Pa would've hated to announce that his seeds were cowards. That would've been the end of him.

I wouldn't be surprised if that had been Scott's plan.

Scott was clever like that.

We all walked into the kitchen to have our supper. Pa was sitting at the head of the table glaring at Scott. Mama was staring at Travis. She was just as worried as I had been.

We took our meal quietly. Careful not to make too much noise chewing or moving forks and spoons around.

Later that night Pa had us go to bed early.

“Boys need to get up early and head down to the office,” he said, “see if they still taking some back up.”

I cringed when he clapped Travis on the back right before we went upstairs. It was loud and overbearingly enthusiastic.

Travis nearly fell over when the weight of his hand hit him.

Scott just kept walking, unfazed by the noise and what the clap meant.

When our door was closed Scott let us have it.

“That sonofabitch!” he hissed. Throwing his shirt in the corner with vehemence.

Travis jumped. He hardly ever cursed himself and hearing it always made him start.

“Keep it down!” I hissed at him, “I'm not in the mood for a beating tonight.”

He scoffed and shoved his way past me.

“What is wrong with you?” I silently asked.

And, as if he'd heard me, he looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes a little before shaking his head.

“I'm sorry, Trav,” he said, “I'm just so sick of this war. I'm sick of Pa encouraging death! This is ridiculous! What if I don't want to fight!”

“He'll call you a coward—” Travis started

“I don't care!” Scott cut in, “I'd be a coward with a life!”

Travis shrugged in defeat and got himself ready for bed.

After Travis left I spoke up.

“Stop yelling.” I quietly said.

He was about to protest but then just decided to sit down on his bed.

“Why did you lie to him?”

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â Because if I didn't he'd be scared to whole time. He'd probably die of a heart attack before we get there. You saw the look on his face. He is terrified. It's bad enough Pa is making us go but the fact that he knows Trav is that scared- and still making him go? Why do you even wonder why I hate him so much?â

â You can't just lie to him like that, Scott. He would've gotten over it when we got there. As for Pa? You don't hate him, don't say that-â

â I've always hated him!â he laughed, â You mean to tell me you didn't notice? Wow- I'm a better actor than I thought if I fooled my own brother. You think Trav could tell?â

I just shook my head.

â It's not funny, Scott.â

â What's not funny?â Travis had come back from the bathroom. His face was swollen and pink.

He'd been crying.

â That Pa fell down the porch step a few years ago,â I lied, â Scott still thinks it's funny but I said it's not since Pa gashed his leg open from that.â

Scott looked at as if to say â Who's the liar now?â and quietly walked out of the bedroom to take his turn in the bathroom.

Travis looked at me skeptically.

â Alright.â

I sighed.

I never liked lying. Especially to Travis. But it felt like he always knew when we were lying. He'd give us that look as if to say â I'm not stupid, I can see the truth in your eyes.â it was a scarey thought.

But Travis just kept on staring at me.

â Jesus!- will you stop that.â I laughed

â Tell me the truth, James.â he said quietly.

I had almost forgotten he was eighteen. Nearly a man and no longer a child.

â Trav,â I said, â do you hate Pa?â

He cocked his head and looked off in deep thought.

Then he straightened himself and looked me straight in the eye.

â Yes.â

â Why?â

Stupid question.

“Don't act like you don't hate him too. I see the way you look at him. You look disgusted, sometimes downright hateful. You're very bad at hiding your feelings, James.” he said with a bitter laugh.

“Whatever though. He wants me to go to Vietnam?- I'll go to Vietnam. It has to be better than staying here with them.”

He threw the towel he had hanging over his shoulders in the corner along with Scott's shirt and blew out a heavy sigh.

“Look at the bright side,” he said, “Scott gets to let out all that pent up anger.”

I was shocked.

I didn't know he noticed Scott's attitude.

But of course I'd been underestimating Travis for awhile now and it suddenly seemed a lot less surprising that he did know.

~

“You're sure you don't want me to go?” my wife, Annalynne, says to me “We have been married for twenty-seven year and I still love her to death. It's a long drive and we wouldn't have to stop much if we took shifts.”

She is the sweetest woman I know. Always looking out for me; making sure I'm fed; loving me when I needed loving; cursing me out when I acted like a fool.

I love that woman more than anything but I can't take her with me. I love her but I don't want her to see me struggle with what I have to do. What I've been needing to do for forty years.

“Yes, I'm sure.”

She frowns at me and takes my hand in hers.

“You be strong for me, okay?”

I nod and kiss her forehead.

I pick up my bag and load it into my old friend Dellie. Dellie is my 86 Silverado. Got her a little before Jr. was born. This girl has gone through a lot with me; pot holes, broken fenders, thunder storms. I love this truck more than I'll ever love any expensive sports car.

“Be safe, James.” says Annalynne. Tears are gliding down her puffy red cheeks. I kiss her and hold her for a moment.

“Where's dad going?” I hear Thameson ask.

“The grave yard.” Jr. whispers.

“Oh... crap.” I hear Victor mutter.

I nearly laugh at them.

'Am I really that bad?' I laugh to myself.

I give each of my sons a long hug goodbye.

â Be careful.â says Victor, clapping my back.

â Be safe.â says Jr.

â Be strong, okay?â says Thameson.

I look at him and see that worry is written all over his face.

'How much do you know?' I silently ask.

He blinks and I see his eyes start to well.

He is so much like Travis; so emotionally connected to his family. So smart.

I grab hold of him for another hug.

â When did my sons get so grown?â I ask no one in particular.

Annalynne smiles but tries to cover it up with her fingers. I love when she does that yet I hate it because I can never see her smile. The tears are still there and I wish I could brush them off. But I know she won't let me. She loves her tears and she'd want to shed them for me.

I let go of Thameson and get into my truck.

I live in about eight hours away from DC and I have to trips: one at a warehouse to pick something up; the second at motel for sleep.

I drove down to the abandoned warehouse where my brothers and I would go to get away, share secrets, hide secrets. It was our sanctuary.

Two hours later I'm surprised to see the old building is still standing.

It has to be sixty years old now. Old brown bricks finely chipping away with age. Some of the windows were broken, gone, or just plain filthy.

But I love this building.

It holds all the secrets in my past. It holds my whole past. It holds my brothers' past.

I rode the old elevator to the top floor; its old chains creaking with the weight of the metal box as it rose higher.

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“Hey! I found these bandanas on sale at that old Stop N Shop,” Scott said, “We can take em with us when we go in. They are red so we know who is a brother and who isn’t.”

“Aren’t we all supposed to be brothers?” I asked. I was sitting in an old plaid chair in the corner of the run down room on the top floor the abandon warehouse. “Military personnel and all? We have to treat them as brothers as well, right?”

Trav nodded in compliance while he sat on the floor fixing his uniform.

“That doesn’t mean they are blood though, James,” Scott said a little too darkly.

“I like them!” Travis burst out. He knew bad energy when it traveled the room. “It gives the three of us a personal-homey touch. And it would be nice to be able to separate my real brothers from strangers. Makes me feel better knowing we can tell each other apart.”

“They would also make for fantastic targets as well,” I mutter. I never liked the idea of having red scarves hanging from our uniforms. They looked like some kind of betrayal to me.. and targets for the enemy.

“What’s that, James?” Scott said with a mockishness to his tone.

I shrugged and played with my fingers.

He scoffed and tossed one of the scarves at me.

“I’d love to wipe his filthy blood up with this thing one day,” He uttered. He was talking about Pa.

Travis stopped tempering with his uniform.

“You may not get the chance to if God hears you say that again,” he said quietly.

“God has nothing to do with my wishes,” Scott said. He tossed Travis his scarf. “He never listens to them anyway. Otherwise Pa would’ve been dead a long time ago.”

I hopped out of the chair and treadled over to the selfish bastard I called me brother.

I shoved him against the window.

“You won’t get a chance to do SHIT if you die out there,” I spat at him. “You’ll never know... I may be the one to wipe you blood one day, Brother.”

He shoved me away.

And I stared at him for a moment before I left the building.

~

The elevator reaches the top floor and I walk out and head for the cupboard where most of our secret stashes had been kept. I open it and there they are. The red scarves Scott had bought for us. I burned my own a while back but I put theirs away in a place I knew where no one would find them. One of them was hard and dark from old blood.

Travis's.

The other was spotted lightly with hard spots of old blood.

Scott's.

I sniff away on coming sobs and tuck the scarves in my pocket.

I close the cabinet and head back to the elevator. It rumbles and shakes on its way down but I don't care. I wouldn't even care if it fell and killed me. But I can't think like that. No man can think like that when they have a family at home they love so much as I do. My heart aches when I think of things like that. Death and suicide. I'm too old to be thinking about that nonsense. Sixty-six years old. If I wanted to do it I would've done it when I was relieved. Not after I made a family.

The elevator is down and I stride back over to my car. Dellie sits there in the hot sun waiting patiently for me to drive when I'm ready. I stick the key in the ignition and continue on towards DC cemetery.

~

â Move! Take some damn cover, marines!â Captain Gain shouted at us. â Jesus they gave me all the idiots!â

We were being shot at by men I didn't recognize. I couldn't bring myself to move or shoot. But Scott seemed to be having a field day.

He was shouting and cursing and hooting and hollering and gloating. He was having too much fun murdering Man.

Travis would stick with me and only shoot when necessary. He protected me. Which shocked me at first because Scott and I had been worried that we wouldn't be able to even get him on the plane. He was brave though. Braver than Scott. Unlike Scott Travis didn't enjoy murdering people. He made sure every man he shot moved on with his eyes closed.

â I don't want there spirits floating around preying for revenge.â He'd told me.

I had only shot a few men and with each one it took me a long time before I was able to shoot another. Even longer a time before I didn't care anymore. Unfortunately that time didn't come until after I shot a little girl in the head. Because we were told to eliminate all civilians in the village. I cried that night in our camping barracks, silently but the tears were there. Travis saw me shoot the girl and made me go back with him to close her eyes. He sat on the edge of my bed with his hand on my shoulder trying to calm me and barely succeeding. I felt like a coward for shooting her. But she would've been killed anyway. There were too many brothers covering the area for her to escape.

I grew used to it though. Killing innocence; planting bombs; signaling air strikes. I grew to become more and more like Scott. And that scared me more than being shot at. All those years we were there with short vacations that we never used to visit home and then we would have to go right back and be the murders we pretended not to be.

We were in a jungle at one point. A very random place for an area that was mostly city and desert. But we were there. It was hard to see around the leaves and the trees. We were looking for a campsite that held some kind of nuke or an airstrike. I don't remember. I only remember what happened in the process.

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Travis was leading our group, he had been promoted to Sergeant not too long before our mission so he took Captain Gain's place while Gain led a special task force. Why they didn't have the honor of pursuing this quest was beyond me and still is.

The campsite was guarded by a large tan brick wall. We heard distant voices and assumed they were in the tents so we moved up a little faster. Never assume anything in the middle of a battle field. Especially when it's quiet and empty. Travis let a lower rank check the corner before we moved in to the base. The marine was shot in the chest by a Vietnamese man with a large shot gun. Travis shouted to everyone to open fire and we did.

The man shot Travis in the throat before another marine got him in the head.

It felt like time slowed down when I saw Travis falling to the ground, blood pouring out of his neck and his eyes rolling back into his head. He fell to the ground with a wet splat.

“Keep moving, McGee!” Shouted another marine. He got my name wrong but I knew he was yelling at me.

I stepped over my brother's body and helped clear the base. When it was clear and we succeeded I ran back to Travis. He was already dead though. I don't know why I expected him to be laying there smiling up at me. His neck was practically hanging on by a thread attached to his body. I screeched something horrible right then. Another marine, Private Thomas, ran to me.

“Oh...” was all he could say and then he backed away. I know I had to move, we were lying in the open in front of the hole in the wall. I knew I would've been an easy target. But I didn't care. I took my time. His eyes were wide open so I closed them. We killed the man that killed him so there was no need for further revenge. I took the red scarf off of his belt loop and held it to his neck. A reminder that this is his blood on his scarf, that his own blood was shed during this ridiculous battle. I put the scarf in my pocket and got back to my feet- face stoic and ready to get back to work.

Travis L. McCabe

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Vietnam

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