

## Buddies

### Kip Cassino

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*Two men try to outrun the traumas of their past, but leave destruction in their wake, in the sensitive and suspenseful thriller Buddies.*

In Kip Cassino's taut chase thriller *Buddies*, two veterans leave a bloody path behind them as they struggle to survive with PTSD.

Two men roam the country seeking nothing more than a quiet place to work and live. They hope to drown out the memory of their shared trauma: war. Pauley and the Captain always manage to settle down in a nondescript town and find a sliver of peace until something triggers the darkness within them. Then, a vicious murder committed by one of the two forces them to flee and hide out somewhere else. The past ten years have followed this cycle.

As the FBI begins to connect unsolved murders to Pauley and the Captain's travels, the two buddies find fewer places to hide and targets on their back. While all the murders were either self-defense or committed while defending innocents, they were horrific acts of unrestrained violence and cannot be left unchecked.

Pauley and the Captain have an unusual relationship. They bond over the war and their injuries, which are both physical and mental. Pauley is a lumbering brute, half burned and disfigured, and his medications allow him a tenuous grip over his PTSD. The Captain has more mental scarring that he keeps in check with medication and by caring for Pauley. The strain of the war, and the men's inability to cope with the aftermath, humanizes both men, though they are not endearing. They are broken and unable to fit into society, which prompts their violent outbursts. The mystery of which of the two commits the murders becomes less important as it becomes clear neither are likely to survive alone.

A secondary narrative follows an FBI team as it pursues the two men. This detailed chronicle is broken up by a romance between one of the lead agents and a stellar computer technician, who find solace in each other's arms. Their relationship contrasts well with the horrors that Pauley and the Captain inflict.

The story begins in a slow manner, alternating between these two foci. Its violence is less detailed as the story proceeds. The book comes to focus on the impact of the violence instead—on the community, on the two men, and on the FBI team. During tense moments, the narrative jerks between the narratives to heighten tension and highlight the diminishing focus on violence itself. Dialogue is used to highlight characters' inner thoughts: Pauley's speech, which is slurred when he speaks aloud, is more coherent in his mind, and also more hopeful. He comes to seem oblivious to what he and the Captain are responsible for.

Cassino excels both at building tension and at slowing to unveil horrors, all without resorting to glorifying violence or disrespecting the men's war service. Though the conclusion is presumed—there's only one real outcome that Pauley and the Captain can expect—it is satisfying; the story is less about the men's future than it is focused on the fact that they could never outrun the darkness in their past.

*Buddies* is a novel that builds its suspense well, and that also emphasizes the realities of struggles with mental health.

JOHN M. MURRAY (June 19, 2020)

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