

Buddies

Kip Cassino

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Buddies is a heartbreaking story about friendships forged in dark places and the psychological toll of war.

Kip Cassino's dramatic thriller *Buddies* follows fugitives from a society that they almost died to protect.

Captain and Pauley are military veterans, left physically and mentally scarred by their time in Iraq and Afghanistan. By taking a regular regimen of medications and keeping their heads down, they are able to eke out a living. But then Pauley's rage is incited, and he cannot control his murderous actions toward troublemakers who inspire no empathy.

Again and again, Captain and Pauley try to sustain their lives in a small town, only to go back on the run when bodies turn up. One body attracts the attention of Jack Prell and his FBI team, who realize that it connects to a string of other murders in multiple states. Captain, Pauley, and Jack begin a cross-country, violent chase across many states and climates.

The men and the pursuing agents are viewed against backdrops like dust storms in Arizona and the high, cool air of Colorado. Characters' travel methods mirror their positions in society; Captain and Pauley typically take buses, hitchhike, or walk, while Jack flies on Bureau-owned private jets. The places where Captain and Pauley stay are reflective of their predicament: they experience the desperate quiet of homeless shelter dinners and the desolate, dim static of a trailer television set.

The novel switches perspectives between Jack's team and Captain and Pauley, blurring hero versus villain roles. Captain and Pauley's relationship is tender and caring, and their platonic love and understanding are emotional. They have compelling and sorrowful histories, and their military experiences and traumatic transitions back to civilian life are sympathetic. Military terms are used in a realistic way, as is PTSD. Still, the novel draws uncomfortable lines between mental illness and violence.

Jack is less developed, and members of his team who seem important at the beginning fade without follow up. A romantic subplot between Jack and a teammate, Sarah, is hurried and detached; most of their interactions occur in short, undemonstrative scenes. Characters are described in engaging terms, as having a "dusting of freckles" or as moving "like a bear." One fleeting character comes back at the end of the novel for a surprising redemption arc—a glimmer of hope among the novel's brutality and sadness. Still, Captain and Pauley's deteriorating mental health leads the story to a mournful end, with some outcomes a mystery.

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DELIA STANLEY (December 9, 2019)

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