

Exclusive, unpublished short story by Jane Harvey-Berrick

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A Bad Start

Two hours later and my hands were still shaking.

I'd been sitting in the cafeteria, fingers pressed against a cup of coffee that was now lukewarm. I could still smell the faint scent of soap and sweat as the man's hands gripped around my waist and pulled me towards him, the scream dying in my throat.

Another shudder ran through my body. *If he hadn't been there ... the other man.*

My brain refused to consider what could have happened next. He was there—and I was thankful for that.

Working as a foreign correspondent wasn't as glamorous as it sounded. I

spent my time in harsh climates, trying to talk to people who were too scared to have their words reported, too intimidated to have their photographs taken.

It was important work—I thought it was important. My family didn't disagree, but they worried about me. And after everything that had happened today, it seems they were right to worry.

I couldn't help replaying the afternoon's events in my mind.

My guide and interpreter, Omar, had taken me to a small, mudbrick house on the outskirts of the tired-looking village of Washir, trapped in the war torn land of Helmand Province, Afghanistan. We'd been careful. Omar had borrowed a rickety, beaten up car from one of his numerous cousins rather than risk being seen in the modern American vehicle that I had access to. Then I'd been covered from head to toe in a blue burqa, so I couldn't guess how we'd been spotted.

But ten minutes into the interview with Annoosheh and her family, there was a loud thump against the door, then one of the windows was smashed. An angry mob had gathered, and they were threatening to drag me outside. Omar wouldn't tell me what else they were threatening to do to me.

I was terrified. With no escape route, no backdoor, and no plan, my hands were shaking as I used my satellite phone to

call the emergency number I'd been given upon arriving at Camp Leatherneck, the USMC base where I'd been living for the last week.

The noise outside grew louder and more windows were smashed. I cowered into the back of the room with the other members of the family as Omar and Annoosheh's father piled furniture against the door, their eyes wide and panicked.

Suddenly, I heard shots outside, the sounds of a semi-automatic weapon firing. I thought I was going to die.

The door was kicked in and then I saw the most beautiful sight in the world: US Marines, armed and deadly.

The leader grabbed me by the hand, yelling something I couldn't hear above the clamor and noise. Then he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the door, his men clearing a path to the waiting jeep.

Annoosheh and her family followed quickly, and we sped away in a cloud of yellow dust as the furious mob rained down rocks on us.

Omar insisted that we leave him and the family I'd been interviewing at his uncle's house. I pulled out my wallet and gave him every dollar I had in there. It wasn't much, but it would help them leave Helmand. I hoped.

The Marines stoically ignored me as they drove back to Camp Leatherneck. They'd checked I wasn't injured, but they had

nothing to say to me. I could sense their dislike.

Once I was safe in the compound, I was debriefed by my liaison, Captain Luis Fernando. He offered to make an appointment for me with the Base's counselor. I just wanted to take a hot shower and wash away the fear and grime of the day.

When I finally felt clean, I forced myself to the cafeteria, but my stomach churned too badly for me to risk eating. Thankfully the coffee was drinkable. Okay, it tasted like crap, but coffee helped.

Until one very large and very pissed off Marine came marching over to me.

"You don't belong here, lady," he snarled, standing next to my table, his broad, tanned hands resting on lean hips.

"Excuse me?"

"You nearly got yourself killed today. I had to risk *my* men to come and get your ass out of a sling. You risked lives: yours, ours, that Afghan family, your terp. For what? Another damn story about how badly the US is fucking up Afghanistan!"

"I don't! That's not what..."

"I'm not finished!" he snapped, and I couldn't help flinching away from his obvious anger, from the raw power locked inside his muscled body.

"We're supposed to be winning hearts and minds out here, but your dumb stunt

has set us back weeks—maybe months.

You don't belong here. Go home and leave the real work to us."

My mouth hung open, moving uselessly as I tried to reply.

He shook his head in disgust, his dark blue eyes flaring with anger.

My own fury ignited at the sight of his broad back and arrogant lift of his head as he walked away from me.

I called out loudly. "Do you have sisters, Sergeant?"

He stopped and turned slowly, his eyes narrowing as he decided whether or not to answer my question. His eventual reply was grudging.

"I've got a younger sister."

"That's nice," I said flatly, my eyes flicking up and down his tall body. I guessed he was in his late twenties, so a younger sister would be ... what ... early twenties? "What's her name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"Just interested."

I could see him examining my question, searching for any danger areas, any way in which answering would show weakness.

"Lucy."

"That's a pretty name. Did Lucy go to high school?"

"Of course she did," he scoffed.

"She's in college now and..."

His words cut off when he realized he was coming close to having a conversation.

“That’s nice,” I said again. “Good for her. The girl I went to interview today is 14. Her name is Annoosheh—it means ‘lucky’. She’d like to be a doctor, but that’s not going to happen. I know you won’t ask me why, so I’ll just tell you. Her family have been told to take her out of school or she’ll be killed. For wanting an education. And it’s not just her—the same thing is happening all over Afghanistan.”

I saw a muscle in his jaw twitch as he clamped his mouth shut.

“Schools for girls have been burned down and teachers educating girls have been threatened or killed; girls have been attacked walking to school and even *at* school. So education is unsafe for them—it’s rare to find any educated past elementary age. Annosheh is an exception—until now. Eighty-five per cent of Afghan women are illiterate*.”

The sergeant frowned, his full lips thinning as he pressed them together. I had his attention and I was on a roll.

“Maybe you read about Malala Yousafzai, a 15 year old Pakistani girl? She was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen because she spoke up for the rights of girls to be educated. Or maybe you read about the 276 girls who were kidnapped from their school in Nigeria two years ago by Boko Haram—their crime was attending school. Many are still missing. Does any of this sound familiar, Sergeant?”

He nodded, a staccato tilt of his chin.

“Well, that’s why I do what I do, because I believe that we in the West need to read these stories. We need to keep fighting for what is right because otherwise we let the darkness win. That’s why I’m here. And that’s why I’ll continue to do my job.”

“Fine,” he said, his dark blue eyes glittering in the harsh lighting. “You do your job, you go save the world. In the meantime, poor slobs like me have to save you from yourself!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I bristled.

“You come here, to a fucking war zone, and think being a liberal do-gooder is going to save you? Well it won’t. People like me, people with guns are going to save you. You’re so naïve and ill-prepared, but you think that you have the right...”

“I am *not* ill-prepared!” I snapped back. I certainly wasn’t going to have this asshole tell me that I didn’t know my job. “I do my research, Sergeant, just like you.”

It was true: I’d read up everything I could find about Helmand Province—correct behavior, local customs, even a few words of the Qu’ran to use in an emergency. Although I had to admit none of that preparation had helped me today.

“Just like me,” he mimicked, an ugly smile on his handsome face. “So with all

that research, with all that preparation, how do you think they found you today? You think it was just an accident that a mob turns up outside the house where you're conducting an interview—a mob with the intention of dragging you out and stoning you to death?"

I felt faint as every drop of blood rushed from my head, leaving my body cold and shocked. For a moment the asshole sergeant looked chagrined, but then the stormy expression returned.

"I didn't know," I whispered.

When he spoke again his voice was still stern.

"Your footwear," he said. "In Afghanistan, women don't wear white socks and white sneakers: your research should have told you those are banned, because the Afghan flag contains white, so wearing white shoes would signify walking on top of it." His voice was acid as he sneered at me. "You were seen. So much for your preparation. You should stick to reporting from the Bronx—it would be safer."

When he walked away this time, I didn't stop him.

I sat stewing for another hour, alternating between fury at the way he'd spoken to me, shock at how close I'd come to dying today, and the danger that I'd put myself in along with Omar and Annoosheh's family. And then the shameful realization that I hadn't even thanked Sergeant Asshole.

He was right: he and his men had put their lives on the line for me. I felt small and ashamed.

I left the cup of cold coffee and went to speak with Captain Fernando again.

He looked irritated when he saw me standing at his door for the second time that day.

“Yes, Miss Buckman, what can I do for you now, ma’am?”

There was a slight emphasis on the word ‘now’, as if he really meant, ‘why are you bothering me again?’

“I wonder if you could tell me the names of the men who came to my rescue today, Captain?”

“For the purpose of?”

“I want to thank them,” I said simply.

He looked surprised. “Anything else?”

“Well, I’d offer to buy them all a drink, but seeing as alcohol is forbidden here...”

He smiled.

“You don’t need to do that, ma’am. I’ll pass on your thanks to the men in question,” and he turned back to his paperwork.

“I wonder if I could thank them in person,” I pressed gently. “It would only take a moment—it would mean a lot to me.”

He sighed, but nodded and stood up.

“This way, ma’am.”

We walked through the camp, sweating in the heat, despite the long shadows cast by the setting sun. He led

me past rows of military vehicles and featureless temporary buildings, until we got to a long, barrack-style tent, and heard the sound of men's voices.

"She sure got you chasing your tail, Jack," someone laughed. "Not that I blame you, man, that pretty little journalist is a sight for sore eyes."

"I don't care how smokin' hot she is," came the reply. "That stupid bitch risked her life to..."

"Ten hut! Officer on deck!"

One of the Marines lounging by the entrance had noticed us. Captain Fernando risked a quick look at me then clearly decided it was better if he pretended neither of us had heard that last sentence. The only giveaway was the dull flush of red beneath the tan of the handsome asshole's cheeks as his voice cut out, the words 'stupid bitch' dying on his lips.

My own cheeks were equally red, not just because of what he'd said, but because he was standing bare-chested in front of me, a t-shirt hanging from one hand as if he'd just yanked it over his head.

His skin was smooth and tanned golden by long hours in the sun. I could see the muscles of his chest and stomach, an eight-pack, before I tugged my eyes upward to his strong chin, ruthlessly shaved, and those intelligent, heated, dark blue eyes.

"At ease, men," said Fernando, clearing

his throat. "I think most of you know our resident reporter. Miss Buckman, this is Sergeant Jackson Connor, the man who led the extraction party today. Men, Miss Buckman has got something she'd like to say to y'all." Then he turned to me. "The floor is yours, Miss Buckman."

I looked at each of the men in turn. The oldest couldn't have been more than 30; the youngest, a teenager who barely needed to shave. But they all had hard bodies and the flinty expressions of men who'd seen too much.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you before," I said, my voice carrying across the length of the long tent-covered dormitory. "You know, what with all the bullets flying around and the angry mob out for blood." There was a soft murmur of laughter, but I had to close my eyes briefly as the feeling of terror began to crawl up my throat again. I swallowed twice before I could continue. "So thank you—all of you—for saving my life." My eyes locked on Sergeant Connor. "I mean it—without you guys, I wouldn't be here now."

I'm not sure if I imagined it, but his hard expression seemed to have softened slightly.

"I'm flying home tomorrow," I continued. "Someone told me that the Bronx is safer than *Lashkar Gah*..." I paused as a few more laughs echoed down the room, and even Sergeant Connor cracked a small smile. "But the

next time any of you are in New York City, I'd love to buy you a drink. I work for the *New York Times*, a darn great building on Eighth Avenue, so I'm pretty easy to find."

I looked across at Captain Fernando. "That's it," I said softly.

As I left the room, I could feel Sergeant Connor's dark blue eyes burning into my back. I squared my shoulders as I walked away. The bastard had called me a stupid bitch; but he'd also saved my life ... and said I was 'smoking hot'.

I'd been back in NYC for a month. I'd tried several times to find out what had happened to Omar and Annoosheh's family, but so far—nothing. They'd disappeared into the chaos of a country still at war after a decade of intervention.

I kept thinking about what Sergeant Connor had said to me: had I made things harder for the troops out there? I'd had such a strong belief that I was on the moral high ground, but now I wasn't sure. I certainly hadn't improved things for Annoosheh, but my articles about the plight of women's education in Afghanistan and elsewhere got a lot of publicity, and several charities had benefitted by receiving large donations from the public. So maybe it had been worthwhile.

My musings were interrupted when

Allison, my PA, put her head around the door.

“Hey, MJ, you’ve got a visitor waiting for you in reception.”

I frowned at her. “There’s no one on the schedule?”

She shrugged, a mischievous look on her face. “Nope, no one scheduled, but you’ll want to make the time for this one, I promise.”

“Well, who is it?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re the reporter—go find out!”

Irritated but intrigued, I rode the elevator down to reception, scanning the lobby for my mystery guest.

My breath caught in my throat when I saw Sergeant Connor leaning against the wall, his arms folded and an amused expression on his face.

He wasn’t in uniform, and he looked far more relaxed than I’d seen him so far. He was wearing worn blue jeans and a plain gray t-shirt stretched over his broad chest and shoulders. I remembered that chest all too well, especially as it had starred in several erotic dreams over the last four weeks.

The automatic doors slid open bringing a gust of air toward me, along with the faint scent of soap and something more masculine.

I realized I was still staring, and the corners of his mouth lifted in a smile.

“Sergeant Connor!” I choked out.

“This is a surprise.”

I held out my hand and he shook it surprisingly gently.

"Jackson," he said. "My friends call me Jack."

"Mine call me MJ. So what are you doing here? Can I help you with something?"

"Waal," he said, a slow drawl in his voice, "I met a journalist out in Afghan who said she'd buy me a drink if I was ever in Manhattan. So here I am."

I blinked rapidly. "Oh, okay! Sure!" My laugh was a little nervous. "I definitely owe you a drink. After all, you did give me valuable sartorial advice about my footwear and, you know, saved my life and stuff."

He grinned for the first time since I'd met him.

"Sartorial advice on footwear? Did you swallow a dictionary, Ms. Journalist?"

"Did you graduate from charm school, Mr. Marine?"

He laughed loudly and several people turned to look at us, although it was possible all the females in the building were already looking.

"So, how about that drink?" he asked again, his eyes flicking up and down me quickly, but not so quickly that I didn't catch him doing it.

"Do you usually take drinks from stupid bitches?" I asked, my voice bland.

He winced and looked uncomfortable for a second.



Written exclusively for newsletter readers

By Jane Harvey-Berrick

USMC Sergeant Jackson Connor has a tough job to do. He doesn't need reporter MJ Buckman getting in his way.



If you want to support the men and women who work to keep us safe, my two favourite charities

are www.felixfund.or.uk (UK),
and www.eodwarriorfoundation.org (US)



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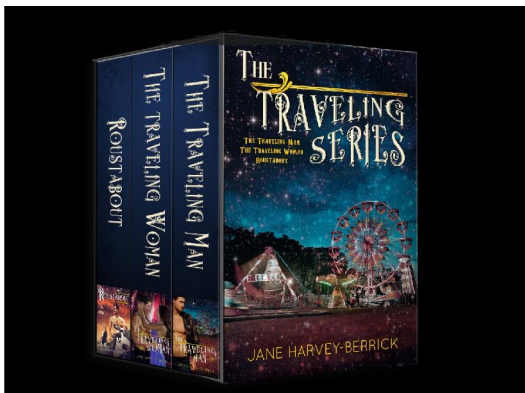
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