SHORT STORY

Promise Me Always

by Jayden Bird

Untitled by Jack Bordnick

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Afghanistan, 2004

Nausea rolled through my empty stomach, the damp air heavy with the stench of urine and feces. Six weeks we'd been in this hell. Six weeks of crippling pain and anxiety. I couldn't believe we'd made it this far.

Fogginess trapped me, and I fought it, licked my chapped lips, hoping to produce some saliva. Thirsty. So thirsty. In the beginning, I had welcomed the fever, the warmth that came when all around us was cold. Now, I knew it carried my death.

Somehow, I scraped together the last remnants of my energy, cracked my eyes open and looked for my brother.

"Sean." I coughed, and pain knifed my chest.

With clenched teeth, I pulled myself to the crumpled body on the stony soil.

"Sean." Grabbing his shoulder, I shook him weakly. "Wake up."

He didn't react, and I fell back, panting. I wanted to scream, wanted to let go of all my anguish, but I no longer had the strength. Sean was mine to protect. The four minutes I was born before him stipulated that. It was my job to encourage him to fight, to stay alive until someone rescued us, but a lifetime ago we had sworn never to lie to each other, and the truth was, we would both die. If not today, then within the week. Nobody was coming for us; the cave and tunnel system was too vast to find us in time.

"Ian?" Sean's hoarse whisper ripped me out of my spiraling thoughts.

"I'm here, Sean." I grabbed his hand.

For a long time, we lay in silence. It was good to feel his body heat, his pulse, even if fever and infection elevated both.

"I'm dying." Sean's voice was so weak, I barely heard it.

"Don't say that. Sergeant McNamara will come. You'll see. Before long, we'll be home with Dad and drinking beer on his patio."

My gut clenched at the lie. There was no doubt in my mind that Global Ground News moved heaven and earth to locate us, but any rescue attempt was in the hands of politicians. A journalist and a photographer documenting the oppression of the local Afghan population held barely any importance in the big picture of the war on terror.

"No, Sarge's not gonna find us." Sean slowly turned his head towards me. "Kill me, Ian." He pulled in a wheezing breath, grimacing. "Don't let me die at the insurgents' hands."

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I swallowed hard and squeezed my eyes shut.

“No.” My chest burned, and I rubbed my hand against it. “We can’t give up hope. Our unit will come.”

“Please,” came Sean’s faint whisper.

Silence filled the bare, rock-hewn cell, and my heart stopped for a beat or two before painstakingly thumping on. Oh God, how could Sean ask this of me? I couldn’t be alone here. With our end so close, I needed him by my side.

“Ian, please. They won’t find us — too many caves and tunnels.”

I knew, dammit.

“Sean, we need to keep fighting.”

“No… I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Think of Dad.”

I waited. Nothing. Sean’s labored breathing, the only sound reflected by the stone walls.

In the distance, men yelled in Pashto, their angry voices slashing the air. I tried to listen, but my mind was shattered, and eventually I must have lost consciousness, because the next thing I knew, loud footsteps approached.

“Get up.” The captor with the limp ran the muzzle of his rifle along the bars, the clang so loud it reverberated through my fever-riddled mind. “Get up!”

The door crashed open, and two men pushed in, making a grab for Sean.

“No.” I hauled myself over my brother’s body and covered our heads. “Stop! Stop, you assholes!”

Something hard smashed into my lower back. Red dots blazed over my retinas while darkness crept in, but I held tight. They wouldn’t get Sean. Not Sean.

With my vision still compromised, I was lifted and dragged away. Good. Let them take me instead. Anything to give Sean a reprieve.

Somehow, I got my feet under me, stumbling along. The same fifty paces uphill, then the same turn to the left before we reached the dreaded cave that reeked of blood, sweat, and burned flesh. Our burned flesh. Torches flared. A fire flickered to the right, the poker already heating in the flames. And straight ahead, the hated camera on its tripod that recorded every minute.

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I was pushed down on my knees, my hair yanked backwards. Twenty heavily armed men glowered, their eyes filled with bloodlust.

“How do you feel, Ian Marshall?” The man holding me pressed the sharp-edged blade of a large, frightening knife to my throat. His voice was friendly, caring even, and it messed with my mind. I wanted to cling to the kindness.

“Today is the day you die,” he said, never losing his benevolent demeanor. “I sharpened my sword, and I will take great pleasure in beheading you. And once we hold your head into the camera, I will disembowel you, and I will be rewarded for my heroics.”

With my head bent backwards and my legs shaking, I heaved, but my stomach was empty. All around me, men laughed.

My eyes burned, but I was too dehydrated for tears.

Forgive me for letting this happen, Sean. For letting you down.

“Enough.” The loud command forced the man behind me to take a step back, and the crowd quieted. “Turn it on.”

The leader looked straight into the camera with a smug face. “America,” he said, pausing dramatically. “You decided to ignore our demands. Now you will pay the price.”

A faint noise behind me made me turn my head. Two men dragged an unconscious Sean into the circle and dumped him unceremoniously a few feet from me.

“No!” Filled with adrenaline, I pushed myself up, struggled, teetered. “Leave him alone!”

I stumbled a step in Sean’s direction before a blow between my shoulder blades sent me crashing back down. Pain, everywhere, as darkness crept across my vision.

“Sean.” It was barely more than a breath, but he had to hear me. He just had to.

Nothing. No fluttering of eyelids, no twitch of hands. And it came to me with horrifying clarity. This was it. This was the end. No more traveling together to report from the hotspots of this world. No more visiting with friends. I wanted to see our dad, to feel his hug and hear his warm voice a last time.

Hopeless, I blinked and watched as one man held a little bottle under Sean’s nose before pulling him roughly to his knees.

No. No!

My breathing sawed through my lungs. In, out. In, out.

Do something. Do. Something.

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In a last-ditch Herculean effort, I belly-crawled over to my brother. Laughter surged around me, but I didn't care. I wouldn't let them torture Sean another moment. He asked me not to let him die at their hands, and I'd be damned if I wouldn't keep my promise.

Choking back a sob, my mind filled with acute clarity, and an incredible strength surged through me. I got you, Sean. I got you. My heart stumbled, contracted painfully, and with unswerving focus, I pulled my brother into my arms.

San Diego, 2005

"No." Sean laughed and threw his cards down. "I can't believe your lucky streak."

Smiling, I let my vigilant gaze wander over the families sharing the beach with us. What a beautiful day. The glorious Southern California sun beat down. An array of snacks and empty soda cans littered the beach towel we were sitting on. All that was missing was a chance to turn back time and undo the past year, erase those horrors inflicted on us. Maybe then the permafrost would leave my soul, and I would stop being constantly cold.

Instinctively, my eyes went to my backpack, and the urge to get the threadbare sweater from it rose. But it was July, the summer heat making everyone sweat. If I wore a long-sleeved shirt, I would garner attention I didn't want.

Turning towards Sean, I threw him a challenging grin. "You call it luck; I call it talent."

With my backpack in hand, I pushed myself to my knees and waited for the familiar bout of dizziness to run its course. "I'm gonna get us some ice cream."

"I can go." Sean was already getting up.

"No. You stay here. Clean up our mess. I'll be right back."

The other beachgoers were already staring. Staring, pointing, whispering. I would never let him take any flak just because those vultures couldn't keep their noses out of our business.

The people waiting in line at the ice cream cart eyed me with mistrust as I joined them, but I ignored them. Instead, I turned around and smiled at Sean shuffling our cards in the distance. This was about him, about our freedom. Nobody got to judge us, let alone tear us apart.

As if summoned by my thoughts, a slight throbbing started behind my forehead.

"What can I get you?" the vendor's gruff voice hit me, and I flinched in surprise.

"Two strawberries, please."

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His narrowed gaze traveled up and down my body. “You can pay?”

With a frown, I pulled a few bills out of my shorts pocket. “Of course.”

“Hmpf.” He handed me two ice cream cones, but instead of letting go, he held on to them. “I don’t know where you got the money, but you better not show your face again. Your kind isn’t welcome here. We clear?”

Anger surged through my veins, my blood seething. Sure, my shirt had seen better days, and maybe my shorts were a bit worn, a little dirty. And the scars on my arms and legs weren’t a pretty sight. But I paid good money. I had as much right to be here as anyone else.

“What?” Sean asked when I flopped down and gave him his cone.

“Nothing. Just a judgmental asshole.”

With nostrils flaring and lips pressed together, he stared towards the boardwalk. I knew what he wanted to do. Get over there and tell that vendor off. But that wouldn’t do. He had to remain here, remain safe.

That night, I tossed and turned in our cheap motel room as memories of our rescue kept me from falling into a restful, deep sleep. The hell we’d been through. My hands ran over the raised scars on my chest and stomach. They were healing, but no amount of time could ever knit together the wounds left in my soul.

Lying on my bed, I watched Sean sleep peacefully.

Out of nowhere, my head throbbed, and I swallowed against the rising nausea. I needed him. So much. I couldn’t allow anything bad to happen to him.

Sean’s eyes followed me as I paced back and forth between two dilapidated buildings, the place grungy, the dumpster stench thick in the air. I didn’t care.

“Ian. Please. It’s time,” he begged.

“No.”

“But —”

“No!”

From the corner of my eye, I could see him leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, a deep frown marring his face. He didn’t understand. No one understood.

The pounding in my head intensified, and I groaned.

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“Dad is okay.” I tried to appease him. “He knows we’re doing fine.”

“How? We ran and never looked back.”

My knees wobbled as the world spun around me. Desperate, I grabbed the wall behind me and squeezed my eyes shut. I wished he’d drop this.

“He knows, okay?” Blinking my eyes open, I glared at him. “There are things you don’t need to worry about. This is one of them.”

The straps of my heavy backpack cut into my shoulders, and I hiked it higher.

Across from me, Sean pressed his lips together. “One of these days, I’ll go. Just leave. Then you can see how you’ll get by.”

A stabbing pain exploded in my head at the thought of my being alone again, and I swallowed.

“Ian, we can’t run forever,” Sean said eventually, his voice soft and full of sympathy. “I don’t want to live like this anymore. In shabby motel rooms, constantly roaming from town to town. I deserve better. You deserve better.”

He was right. He deserved better.

I just couldn’t go back to our father, the traitor. He didn’t understand, never would. He wasn’t there in that cave system, held prisoner for weeks. Wasn’t there when they starved and tortured us, when Sean slipped away from me. Bile rose in my throat, and I hurried behind a dumpster.

No, our father knew nothing about what we’d been through. And then, he betrayed me in the worst way. Because of that, we had to leave. We were better off without him. But Sean didn’t understand that.

When I eventually straightened, the sour taste of vomit lingering, my brother stood at the back alley’s mouth and watched me.

Something had to give, I thought as I rinsed my mouth with the bottled water I had packed. Either Sean would accept that going back home wasn’t an option, or… or I didn’t know. There had to be a way to get it through his thick skull.

When I looked up again, the spot my brother had been standing in before was empty, and a sharp fear squeezed my heart.

God, no, please no. I hurried out of the alley, my eyes searching the crowd, darting from one side to the other, but there was no sign of him. Overrun with worry, I clenched my fists. Right or left? I couldn’t decide. In the end, I hoisted my pack onto my back, turned left, and

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ran down the sidewalk.

“Sean? Sean!”

People stared at me, alarm written all over their faces.

“Have you seen my brother? He’s my twin. He looks exactly like me.” But they sidestepped me, noses wrinkled, eyes narrowed, and I stopped asking.

Sean had left. He’d left me just like he said he would.

My chest seized with a crushing force, and I couldn’t have stopped the sob if I’d wanted.

Sean.

My head pounded, my vision blurred with pain and tears, but I didn’t care. I needed to find my brother.

Tires squealed, blinding pain, and I was flying. The impact was brutal. Twisted on the pavement, someone touched me and I screamed. Then the world stopped being.

A warm, firm hand held mine and squeezed it lightly, pulling me out of the dense fog I drifted in. Blearily, I blinked my eyes open as scattered memories trickled back into my consciousness.

Sean had left me. How could he leave?

“Shhh. It’s fine. You’re gonna be okay.”

I snapped my eyes towards Sean’s familiar voice, and a breath, half laugh, half sob, escaped my mouth.

“You’re here,” I croaked and immediately grimaced when I tried to swallow.

“Of course I’m here. Where else would I be?”

A thousand places and none at all.

Still dazed, I looked around and recognized the room we were in. The stark white walls. The antiseptic smell. Nurses had been by, talking to me, but I couldn’t remember what they’d said.

“Hey. You back with me for good now?” Sean’s smile was uncharacteristically sad.

I swallowed as a single tear ran down his cheek. He’s not supposed to cry. Never. I wanted to lift my hand and wipe the salty traitor away, but I couldn’t. Confused, I looked down my

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arms to see thickly padded restraints fastening both my wrists and ankles to the hospital bed.

“Sean?” I turned my eyes back to him. “What’s going on?”

More tears trickled down his face, and they pierced a path into my still hazy memory.

Our father.

He was here.

I vaguely remembered a nurse cutting off that damn medical alert bracelet that named him as my emergency contact. I should have removed it the moment we ran away from home. No, not ran. Left. We had the right to leave. He’d tried to separate Sean and me.

Pressing my lips together, I turned towards my brother. “I bet you’re glad.” My bitter words slashed the air like a sword.

Sean flinched.

“It’s time, Ian,” he swiped at his cheeks. “We’ve had our fun, but now it’s time to go home.”

Home. We didn’t have a home. Not anymore. But before I could sort through my thoughts, Sean gently squeezed my arm.

“I know you want to protect me,” he said. “Make sure I’m safe, but I am. And I want to go home. I want to see the endless sky and smell the wisteria in our backyard. I’m homesick.”

Turning away, I blinked my treacherous tears into submission.

Never did I think Sean would make me choose, but here we were. Stranded in a hospital room like so many months ago. But this time there wouldn’t be a happy ending, no run for freedom. My head throbbed, and I swallowed.

“Dad will be good to you.” Sean looked at me imploringly. “He will understand.”

I didn’t care what our dad had to say about me. All I wanted was to grab Sean and leave. I yanked at the restraints, but a brutal pain in my shoulder stopped me mid-movement, and I groaned.

“Stop.” Sean’s hand pressed down on me. “Please, Ian. I’m sure he’s sorry about what happened. Just give him a chance.”

A knock sounded through the too-quiet room, and my eyes darted to the doorway. A woman in medical scrubs poked her head through the gap, smiling when our eyes met.

“You’re awake. Wonderful.”

She quickly stepped into the room, completely ignoring Sean.

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“Are you ready to see your dad, Ian?”

If her voice hadn’t been full of sympathy, I’d have hated her for her association with him.

“No.” I shook my head.

Over at the window, Sean took a deep breath before exhaling noisily.

“I don’t want to see him, okay?” I clenched my fists and glared at him.

“You could at least try!” my brother cried out.

This was leading nowhere. Turning back to the nurse, I ignored her compassionate gaze and pressed my lips together as I reined in my anger. “I have no interest in seeing our father. Tell him he can leave.”

“I’m sorry,” the nurse said, and she really looked like she was. “But I can’t do that. He has papers identifying him as your guardian.”

A man cleared his throat, and my blood froze in my veins. There in the doorway stood our father, as immaculate as always in his expensive three-piece suit, with his perfectly trimmed hair, clean-cut face, and smooth, sun-tanned skin, his gaze deceptively affectionate and kind.

“Ian,” he said, nodding to me. “It’s been a while.”

“Go away.”

I needed to get out of here. A shiver ran through me when I couldn’t see my backpack anywhere.

“Ian.” He stepped into the room, motioned for the nurse to leave, and shut the door. “I won’t go. This needs to stop. You need to come home. Sean needs to come home.”

I snorted, challenging him with what I hoped was an icy glare. He might look sincere enough the way he was standing there, body language open, voice soft and friendly, but I knew it was all fake, that behind the caring demeanor, sinister intentions were lurking.

“No, you’ll just rip us apart and put me away again.”

“I won’t. I promise.” He shook his head, his shoulders sagging under an invisible weight. “That institute — it was wrong of me to bring you there. I can see that now.”

“Liar!” To my utter dismay, the tears I’d held back earlier forced their way out and ran freely down my cheeks. “All I’d wanted after we came home was your love and consolation. Instead, you brought me to that damn mental hospital. And you’ll do it again because you hate me,” I gasped out. “You hate me.”

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I flinched when Sean suddenly appeared next to him, then relaxed when he perched on my bed, cupped my face, and wiped at the tears still pouring down my cheeks.

“Give him a chance, brother mine,” he whispered. “It’s time.”

More tears sprang free, and I tried to grab Sean’s hand, but the restraints wouldn’t let me.

“What?” he asked, his eyes so kind and full of love that it choked me.

“Promise me you won’t leave me. Promise me always.” I needed to know that he’d be by my side.

“I promise.” Sean smiled, and the sudden warmth enveloping me chased away the chill that had me shivering before. “I will always be right here.” My eyes followed his free hand as it pressed down on my chest. I couldn’t feel it. Why couldn’t I feel it?

— I stumble along. Fifty paces uphill, then to the left. The flickering copper light of the torches licks at the damp walls of the cave, with its stench of blood, sweat, and burned flesh. Bile burns the back of my throat. No. Not Sean. Not Sean! I choke back a sob when they drag him into the circle —

I jerked my eyes back to my father just to see him holding my backpack in his hand. Within a fraction of a second, my body pushed past the sedative still lingering in my system, and a horrible pain pierced through my head.

“No.” I desperately pulled at the restraints. “Hands off. That’s mine.”

“Ian.” My name on his tongue was quiet, but it hit me like a thunderclap. “It’s time.”

— My heart stumbles, clenching painfully, as my mind fills with acute clarity and a colossal strength surges through me. With unwavering focus, I pull my brother into my arms. I’ve got you, Sean. I’ve got you —

No. It wasn’t time yet. It never would be. This was wrong. Wrong.

A sob tore through my lungs, and I gasped for breath.

“Get your fucking hands off that!” I yelled, fighting to get free. “That’s mine! Everything in there is mine!”

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“No, Ian, it’s not.”

— It all depends on me now. I won’t let them kill him —

Wrenching at my restraints, I watched my father undo the zipper and reach into the pack.

No. No!

Frantically, I turned back to my brother, but he wasn’t there.

“Sean? Sean!”

— I close my eyes, press a kiss to my brother’s temple, place my hands on either side of his head, and give it a violent twist. For a split second, right before he crumples in my arms, I can sense Sean’s relief. Then it is gone, and an agony more brutal than anything I’ve ever known consumes me —

I yelled. Thrashed around, the straps cutting into my wrists.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was dimly aware of someone pushing me down into the mattress, of the door opening and people rushing in, but I didn’t care.

Sean was dead.

My brother. Was dead.

The prick in my arm barely registered, but the floating feeling that set in shortly after did. Drowsy, I watched my dad pull Sean’s urn from my backpack and cradle it to his chest.

After what felt like an eternity, he finally looked at me, his eyes once again cold and unforgiving. “You shouldn’t have killed him.”

With that, he turned towards the door, throwing a fleeting glance at the doctor and nurses still lingering in the room. “Make arrangements to commit him to a facility of your choice and send the papers to my assistant. I’ve got what I came for.”

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