

Redeeming Honor

E.A. West

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Dedication

To the brave interpreters who have risked everything
to help make the world a safer place.

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"This is an incredibly sweet romance, profound and absolutely unforgettable—a bite-sized read that packs a super-sized emotional wallop."

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1

Meghan Carpenter glanced up from the spinning wheel as her twin brother stepped into her workshop, cellphone in hand. He dropped onto the wooden bench by the wall and watched her spin a few more inches of roving into worsted weight yarn. Ever since Ryan moved in after his discharge from the Marine Corps, he got quiet at odd moments or seemed fascinated by mundane things, such as her spinning yarn for about the millionth time. This time, however, she sensed he had something on his mind he wanted to share.

After waiting without success for him to speak, she stopped working altogether and studied him. "What's up?"

"I just got off the phone with one of the guys I served with in Afghanistan." He sighed and laid his cellphone beside him. Then he leaned forward and braced his arms on his knees. "He's had it rough, got injured in a blast, but he's recovered to the point he no longer needs rehabilitation."

"That's great news, right?" Something wasn't adding up about her brother's demeanor and his words. "So, why do you look so worried?"

"He doesn't have anywhere to go. Ever since he got to the States, he's been living in hospitals or apartments for patients receiving long-term therapies. Since he doesn't need treatment anymore, he's got to leave. Problem is, he doesn't have any family to take

him in and he's not quite ready to search for a job yet."

"Kind of like you." Meghan adjusted her work so it wouldn't untwist and rose from her stool to sit by her brother. She laid a hand on his shoulder, her heart going out to him and his unnamed friend. With as much trouble as Ryan had adjusting to civilian life with family to support him, she couldn't imagine how much more difficult it was for his friend. "Do you have any ideas for how you can help him?"

He slid a glance her way, reminding her of when they were kids and he wanted her to do something. "Well, you've got that other guest room upstairs, and I'm sure my friend would be willing to help out around here the same way I do. So..."

"You want to bring him here?" The nudge in her heart encouraged her to go along with her brother's plan, but she didn't know which of the men he'd served with she would be taking in. Not all of them were men she trusted under her roof.

"Yeah. He's a good man. A strong Christian." Ryan turned toward her, his eyes pleading as he spoke. "I really think you'll like him, Megs. And your farm would be good for him. He needs a safe place to adjust to life in the States."

Again, like her brother. She bit her lip, praying for wisdom. Once more, her heart nudged her to listen to Ryan and let his friend live on her small Indiana farm. "OK. He can stay here. When will he be moving in?"

"He's just a few hours from here, so I could leave early tomorrow to pick him up and have him back here by around suppertime."

"That soon?"

"Yeah. Apparently, he's already stayed in his apartment longer than they originally intended, but he

didn't tell me he didn't have anywhere to go until he called a little while ago." Ryan leaned over and wrapped her in a hug. "Thanks, Megs. I know he'll appreciate you letting him stay here as much as I do."

He grabbed his cellphone and left the workshop as he dialed.

Meghan moved back to her spinning wheel, but she didn't resume her work. Instead, her mind spun with what had just happened. This morning she had wondered again how long it would take her brother to recover from whatever he had endured during five tours in Afghanistan. Now, she faced the reality of having two recovering marines living under her roof. While she appreciated the help with her huge garden and herd of alpacas, her brother wasn't always easy to live with. He'd improved in the four months since he moved in, but he still prowled through the house in the middle of the night sometimes. When out in the fields he often took on the "thousand-yard stare."

Hopefully, his friend would have an easier time than her brother had adjusting to normal, boring life, but the way Ryan had spoken about him indicated he might be in worse shape.

Thank You, Lord, for blessing me with patience.

Meghan rose from her stool and headed into the main part of the house. If she was going to have another long-term houseguest arrive tomorrow, she needed to make sure the guestroom was ready. Fresh linens on the bed, maybe a friendly houseplant on the windowsill, and a quick dusting and vacuuming would take care of most of the preparations. She also needed to make sure the closet and dresser were empty.

As she placed her foot on the bottom step, Ryan

came down the hall from the kitchen. "Hey, change of plans. I'm leaving now, and we'll be here in time for lunch tomorrow."

"Why the change?" She lowered her foot to the floor and faced him.

"He needs help packing up the rest of his stuff." Ryan grinned and walked toward the front door, calling over his shoulder, "Don't worry. He really doesn't have a lot. See you tomorrow!"

Meghan stared at the door long after he closed it. Her brother left in a better mood than she'd seen in a long time. Could he need his friend to live with them as much as, if not more than, his friend needed a place to stay?

~*~

The oven timer dinged, and Meghan grabbed a hot pad. Golden-brown cookies filled the air with the delicious scents of vanilla and chocolate. She set the tray on the granite counter, shut off the oven, and then turned to the task of transferring chocolate chip cookies to the cooling rack.

As she set the baking sheet in the sink, the front door opened. Meghan's heart jumped, and she hurried from the kitchen, eager to see which of Ryan's friends would be living in her house. She stepped into the hall and spotted her brother and a swarthy-skinned, black-haired man wearing huge dark sunglasses. Each of them carried a black suitcase.

Ryan grinned as his friend closed the door. "Hey, Meghan, this is my buddy Basir Hamidi. Basir, meet my sister, Meghan."

The black-haired man removed his sunglasses to

reveal a pair of wire-rimmed glasses and scar tissue around his tawny-brown eyes. "Thank you for letting me stay in your home."

Meghan swallowed her surprise at his heavy accent and pushed aside her sorrow that he had endured something terrible to cause the scars. Regardless of what he had been through, the only thing that should matter to her was helping him to feel comfortable in her home. She offered a warm smile and clasped her hands at her waist. "I'm glad I had an empty guestroom for you. I'll let Ryan give you the grand tour of the place while I put the finishing touches on lunch, but remember that this is your home, too, for however long you need it."

"Thank you." He inclined his head, his right hand over his heart. Then, he lowered his hand and glanced at Ryan.

Her brother slung an arm around Basir's shoulders and guided him to the stairs. "Your room's up here."

Meghan returned to the kitchen and struggled to wrap her mind around her new houseguest. She'd expected an American marine, but her brother had brought home an Afghan man. Had Basir somehow become a marine? Had he been part of the Afghan army? Questions flowed in a steady stream as she chopped hardboiled eggs for the chef's salads she'd planned.

She paused in the middle of scooping them into a bowl. Did Basir have any food preferences that would make her planned lunch a bad idea? Her gaze strayed to the refrigerator, where a bowl of ham cubes waited for her brother's salad. Since Afghanistan was a Muslim country and Islam forbade the consumption of pork, would Basir mind her serving a pork product?

Ryan had said he was a Christian, but she had no idea how much of the Islamic religious mores might have become part of Afghan culture.

Too late now to change the lunch menu. She would just have to hope he overlooked any foods he couldn't eat for cultural reasons and forgave her ignorance. At least she also had a bowl of smoked turkey cubes for the salads. Before she prepared supper, however, she would be sure to ask about any preferences or dietary restrictions Basir might have.

She set the dishes of toppings on the table, along with a huge bowl of green salad. A sense of accomplishment filled her as she gazed at the lunch that had mostly come from her own property. She had grown the lettuces, carrots, peppers, cucumbers, onions, and tomatoes. The only ingredients she had bought were the dressing, meats, and cheeses. She had traded a neighbor produce for the eggs.

The men entered as she poured the last glass of iced tea and placed it on the table. She set the pitcher on the counter and joined her brother and his friend at the table.

"Looks good, Megs," Ryan said as he settled into his seat. He indicated a chair to Basir, who then pulled it out and sat down.

"Thanks." She took a seat, noticing how easily her brother and his friend interacted. There were little things that indicated her brother must have learned quite a bit about Afghan culture, such as indicating Basir's seat, but Basir also seemed comfortable in an American kitchen. Maybe it didn't matter whether certain foods were taboo in Afghanistan. If he had been in the United States long enough to adapt to the American way of life, he might not stick to Afghan

culture any longer. With that thought in mind, she decided to quit making assumptions about her new houseguest and treat him the same way she would treat anyone else.

The three of them bowed their heads, and Ryan thanked God for the meal and Basir's safe arrival. As they passed around the dishes, Meghan noticed Basir never used his left hand to touch the serving utensils, only his right hand. He also bypassed the ham, which didn't mean much since she didn't take any either.

She couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. "So, Basir, Ryan tells me you guys served together in Afghanistan."

"Yes, I was an interpreter." He shifted in his seat and glanced at Ryan.

Ryan grinned and waved his empty fork toward Basir. "Don't let him fool you. He's the best interpreter I ever worked with. He was also a lot more fun than some of the others we had."

A faint smile lifted the corners of Basir's mouth. "You taught me much American culture during those times."

"Hey, I owed it to you after all you taught me about Afghan culture in the course of doing your job." Ryan shifted his attention to Meghan. "I always told him he should be a teacher somewhere, because he's great at sharing information in a way that's easy to understand."

"Only about the way things are done in Afghanistan." Basir dropped his gaze to his plate, apparently intent on studying the piece of cucumber he poked with his fork.

"Eh, that's beside the point." Ryan speared a ham chunk. "So, are you ready to learn how to be an alpaca

farmer?"

Basir lifted his head, interest shining in his eyes. "Is it very different from being a sheep farmer?"

Ryan opened his mouth, but Meghan spoke first. "Not really. We have to take good care of the animals and shear them when their wool is ready. Did you live on a sheep farm before you became an interpreter?"

"My grandfather raised sheep." Basir sighed. "He always said I would take over when he grew too old, but that was not to be. Now a cousin owns the farm."

"Is it because of your injuries?" Her heart went out to him at the thought he might not be able to do farm work because of getting wounded. If that was the case, she would find ways for him to help out that weren't physically taxing.

"No, it is because I chose to help the Americans."

Confusion filled her, and she looked to her brother. "I don't understand."

Ryan took a sip of his tea before speaking. "It's hard to explain exactly what happened, but basically his family disowned him to protect themselves from the Taliban."

"Oh, that's so sad." Meghan blinked back tears and turned to Basir, who silently moved the food around his plate. "Basir, as long as you're here, we'll be your family. I know it's not the same, but..."

He briefly met her gaze. "Ryan has been like a brother to me since we first worked together. It is an honor to be included in your family."

Ryan moved the conversation on to the farm and his work on it. Basir seemed comfortable with the topic of farming, but Meghan only half-listened to the men talk. How could she help Basir heal not only from his time working with the American military, but also

from the loss of his family?

~*~

Basir sat on the foot of the bed and stared at the multicolored oval rug covering the center of the wood floor. He had known for years that Afghanistan was a poor country. His family, although better off than many in the area, had struggled to survive. But he had never really understood just how poor they were until he came to America. Even his time working with the American military hadn't prepared him for the shock of going from small mud-walled houses with dirt floors to this large two-story house with polished wood floors, rugs, and smooth walls painted in light colors.

The most difficult part for him to grasp was that Meghan, a young unmarried woman, owned the house, land, buildings, and animals surrounding it. Ryan said she hadn't inherited it from a family member. She had saved and bought it for herself. And yet, according to Ryan, she wasn't wealthy.

"America is a strange place," Basir muttered for what felt like the thousandth time since leaving his homeland.

A pair of taps brought his gaze to the open door. Ryan stood in the doorway, a look of inquiry on his face. "You ready to see the farm and meet the animals?"

"Yes." Basir stood and grabbed his baseball cap from the dresser. Then, he picked up his sunglasses and met Ryan's gaze with a sigh. "I hate these things."

"I know, but your eyes are too light sensitive to get rid of them."

"I just wish I didn't have to choose between hiding my eyes and suffering searing pain." Basir sighed again and followed Ryan out of the room. "Thankfully, the doctors think I will not need them forever. Only until my eyes finish healing and adjust to the damage that was done."

Ryan clapped a hand to his shoulder as they headed for the stairs. "Then you can look forward to the day you no longer need them."

"If only I could look forward to the day I would no longer have migraines, but the doctors tell me I will always have them because of the traumatic brain injury."

"But there is a chance they'll become less frequent, right?"

"There is a chance, yes. At least I no longer have them every day."

"We'll just have to pray for your continued healing."

"Thank you, my friend." Basir turned at the top of the stairs and placed his right hand over his heart to show his sincerity.

"No need to thank me," Ryan said with a grin. "I've been praying for you since I heard you got injured. It'd be wrong to quit now just because you're out of the hospital."

"Perhaps." He started down the stairs, and the sight of Meghan waiting in the hall below took his mind off his problems.

When Ryan had first mentioned his twin sister one day in Afghanistan, Basir had half-way expected her to look like a female version of the marine. Then, Ryan showed him a photograph, and Basir had been blown away. Although Meghan and Ryan both had brown

hair and green eyes, the similarities ended there. Where Ryan was tall and solid muscle, Meghan was petite with just enough curves to attract the attention of any breathing male. She wore her hair long, almost to her waist. Today she had it pulled back in a single braid down her back, but Basir vividly remembered the soft waves it had in Ryan's photo.

She gave him a warm smile and then glanced past him to include her brother in it as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "So, are you guys helping with chores or just checking the place out this afternoon?"

"We will help you," Basir said without checking for confirmation from Ryan. Although Meghan owned the farm and apparently ran it well, he couldn't shake a sense of guilt at the thought of leaving her to do all the heavy labor. Where he came from, men did the farming while the women took care of the house and children.

Her eyes lit up, and he had to force himself not to stare. He shouldn't even be looking at her this much, but despite his best efforts, her beauty kept drawing his gaze.

"Awesome," Meghan said, her sweet voice more than making up for her flat American accent. "Let's go."

She led the way through the house to the back door, and Ryan fell into step with Basir. "You're in a hurry to get started working."

Basir shrugged, regretting answering Meghan so quickly. He should have realized her brother would pick up on it and question him about it. Showing interest in her so soon was a bad idea. Ryan didn't know how much Basir had wanted to meet her since he first saw her picture. Besides, Basir had nothing to offer

her. He had no home, no family, no job. Even his honor had been destroyed by his work with the Americans and his inability to protect the people closest to him from retaliation by the Taliban. Ryan would never approve of him as a suitor for his sister.

Ryan slung an arm across his shoulders, bringing him out of his thoughts. "Yeah, I'd be in a hurry to do something too, if I had just spent the last several months in hospitals and physical therapy. All that sitting around and doing the same exercises over and over has to get boring real fast."

"I kind of liked it," Basir said, aware of Meghan listening as they passed through the kitchen. "The security, not being shot at, sleeping in a comfortable bed every night...it was almost like a vacation."

Meghan opened the back door but paused before going out. She turned toward them, her gaze clouded with concern. "Was it really so bad over there that getting injured and spending months recovering is pleasant?"

Basir glanced at Ryan, who lowered his arm and gave a small nod. Clearly, he expected Basir to be honest with her, but he didn't want to tell her too much. Part of his job as a man was to protect women, and in this case it meant telling her as little as possible about the terrible realities of his time helping the Americans.

He glanced at her and found her waiting expectantly. "Maybe for Ryan it was not so bad. But for me...yes, all the time recovering from my injuries was pleasant compared to what I endured before getting injured."

"Wow." Meghan stepped forward and before he realized what she planned, she laid her hand on his

forearm. "Basir, I'm sure you must miss Afghanistan, but if it was that bad for you there, I am so glad you're here instead."

His breath caught in his throat as she gave his arm a quick rub and went out the back door. Her sympathy warmed him almost as much as her touch, but the memory of the pressure of her hand wouldn't let him go. He turned to Ryan, hoping for some insight.

"She touched me."

Ryan chuckled and nodded. "Yes, she did."

"But she's not related to me."

"That doesn't matter here." Ryan put a hand on Basir's shoulder and guided him toward the door. "American culture is different, remember? What Meghan did is show you sympathy for what you've been through and let you know she cares. While she normally wouldn't show it through touch for a stranger, she knows you're a good friend of mine."

"And that makes a difference?" Basir struggled to remember everything he had learned about American culture during his time as an interpreter and since coming to America.

"To her, yes. She knows you're trustworthy because I wouldn't have asked about you staying here if you weren't." Ryan patted him on the back and grinned. "She also knows you wouldn't dare do anything to hurt her because you'd have to deal with me if you tried it."

Basir nodded and followed his friend to where Meghan waited beside a large plot of vegetables. With no more time to talk without Meghan hearing, he could only hope Ryan knew he wouldn't dream of hurting her or any other woman. After all the time they had spent together, after all the talking they had done

during downtime, surely he knew Basir well enough to trust him with his sister.

Then again, maybe knowing him so well was the issue. Could it be Ryan had already figured out that Basir was attracted to Meghan? More importantly, would he approve?

2

Two days of watching Basir and her brother interact, and Meghan still didn't know much about the Afghan man now living in her house. At first, she'd thought he was abnormally shy, but then Ryan had explained that an unmarried man speaking with an unmarried woman at length just wasn't done in Afghanistan. With that bit of knowledge tucked away in her mind, Meghan began to look for other clues about Basir's culture. He fascinated her, and she couldn't deny a budding attraction to him. What woman wouldn't be attracted to a handsome man who showed her respect at all times?

All she'd managed to learn about Basir in the two days since he moved in was that he was as close to Ryan as a brother, he went out of his way to avoid being alone in a room with her, and he watched her when he thought no one was looking. That last bit was cute, the way he would suddenly feign interest in the walls or the sky whenever she glanced in his direction. And if Ryan happened to look over, the most adorable guilty look flashed across Basir's face before he said something completely mundane to her brother.

Still, she hoped he would relax and adapt to life in America soon. Although fascinated by his foreign upbringing shining through so strongly, she wanted to talk to him without worrying she had crossed some cultural line she didn't know existed. When she laid

her hand on Basir's arm his first day there, she'd thought she was offering comfort. Then, Ryan had talked to her that evening outside of Basir's hearing and explained that a woman touching a man, especially one she wasn't related to, was taboo in Afghanistan. While it explained Basir's shocked expression, she hated knowing she had made him uncomfortable by behaving in a way considered disreputable in his homeland.

So now she observed quietly, hoping to find some indication of how she should interact with Basir so she could get to know him without making him uncomfortable. She had a feeling Ryan was working with him to help him understand American ways, but she longed to understand Afghan culture. Outside of the rules for interaction between sexes, she wanted to know why Basir seemed so surprised and impressed with the meals she prepared. After learning he preferred to avoid pork and alcohol due to his upbringing in a strict Muslim home, she had set about making meals with a variety of options so she could learn what he liked and didn't like through observation. She still had no clue about his preferences, but she had learned that he would eat almost anything she offered.

The sound of approaching male voices reached her over the quiet whir of her spinning wheel. She paused in her work and glanced at the door as her brother and his friend stepped into the workshop.

"How's the barn?" she asked, since that was where she'd last seen them.

"Cleaner than it was." Ryan dropped onto his usual spot on the bench, and Basir sat beside him. "We're getting ready to head into town for a little

while. Do you need anything?"

"Nothing comes to mind right off hand." She started spinning yarn again. "Will you guys be here for dinner?"

"I don't know yet. We'll have to see how it goes."

Meghan stopped the spinning wheel and lifted her head. Her brother's guarded tone reminded her way too much of when he'd first moved in with her. Ryan met her gaze, but the slight shift of his eyes toward Basir spoke louder than any words he might have said. She studied his friend and noted the same fidgetiness she'd seen in Ryan so many times at the beginning of his stay.

She smiled and nodded, certain her brother would realize she understood that where they ate depended on how Basir was handling everything. "Well, if you decide to grab something to eat while you're out, give me a call so I know not to fix dinner for you."

"No problem, sis." Ryan stood and Basir rose with him. "We'll be back later."

"Have fun."

They left the room, and Meghan looked at her spinning wheel. Making yarn was far from appealing at the moment. She couldn't get Basir out of her mind. Despite his close friendship with Ryan and the way he threw himself into helping out around the farm, he still seemed lost, as though his only goal in life was to endure whatever came his way.

"Father God," she whispered, "please help him to find his way. Guide him to the path You have chosen for him." The memory of Basir's fidgetiness intruded, and her eyes stung. "Lord, please heal him and bring him peace. I want so much to help him and comfort him the way I did Ryan when he first moved in, but I