

Desert Hawk

**By Katherine E. Standell
aka Archangel**

DEDICATION:

To my parents whom I love
dearly, and to my soulmate,
who knows she hold my
heart. I also dedicate this to all
the courageous women
warriors, past and present.
Thank you for breaking the
trail.

Chapter 1

October 2004

The setting sun made the golden sand turn dark caramel in its waning light, but even now the heat was incredible. There was no wind, only the gently shifting sand and the deceptive beauty of this place, belying its deadly nature. The stillness was broken by a figure staggering in the heat; it was a woman running, stumbling, alone. She ran on; just a few more steps, just a few more and she could stop. Her breath, like fire, burned her lungs as she gulped and gasped the scorching heat. She felt the sweat roll down her back and between her breasts, the salt drying on her skin and causing it to itch unbearably. Her head pounded, her nostrils felt on fire with every wisp of inhaled air and her muscles ached, but she ran on. With her hat removed, the sun beat down on glossy black hair, burning her scalp and adding to her discomfort. The once neat knot of ebony had become loose, allowing tendrils to escape and stick to the sweat on her forehead and neck. She did not stop to wipe them away or to brush the constant rivers of sweat from her brow to keep the salty water from burning her eyes.

Captain Dylan Hawke ran beneath the hot October sun, away from the camp and out into the desert. Behind her, in the distance, she'd left the Army outpost. It was little more than a sprinkling of tan colored tents and olive drab vehicles, low, flat and nearly invisible in the Saudi Desert. Far ahead, she could see a ridge sloping upward. Her First Sergeant, 1SG James Beckham, having already done reconnaissance for the area when they'd first arrived, had verified the location of a spring fed oasis and possibly

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some caves in the foothills, which she hadn't yet verified. The existence of the oasis bore examination and after a day like today, had been too tempting to delay.

She ran on, feeling her booted feet sink deep into the soft sand, her footprints disappearing each time those same boots stepped forward. Her thigh muscles burned from the exertion and the tan trousers did nothing to stop the hot rays from searing her flesh. Finally she reached the foot of a small dune, the edge of a cooling pool of fresh water. Pushing herself even further, she struggled to the top of a small hill of sand.

"Damn! Finally," she swore as she stopped and fell to her knees, panting out her exertion. She was kneeling on the top of the sand hill looking down on the beautiful oasis. In front of her was the only fresh water for miles around. Dylan knew that the nomads of the area stopped and drank from the cool water occasionally, but today, she had the pool to herself. She coughed the dry air from her throat.

Water in this part of the world was scarce, but this pool was an anomaly and a fairly well guarded secret in the area. The pool had been there for thousands of years, fed by a large underwater spring. The spring actually bubbled up from the ground beneath the pool and several small ponds had developed as a result of the constant flowing liquid on the soft sandstone and sand. These pools were often used to wash clothes while the main pool was kept as clean as possible for drinking water. It was one of these small ponds that Dylan stared down on.

"That was so stupid," she said aloud as she slowly shook her head. The soldier knew better than to run in the extreme heat, but she had needed to get away, to feel her muscles move, to spend some time in solitude. Something had been bothering her all day and when she

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could not find the cause in camp, she knew of only one real way to try to understand what her second sense was telling her. She needed to run.

Dylan shifted from her knees, turned onto her rear and slid down the embankment a bit until she came to rest with her back against the side of the dune. Here, she could take advantage of the small amount of shade the tiny sand hill offered. She sat with her legs bent and her arms extended to rest on the tan knees of her BDU trousers. Bowing her head, she sucked in the sweltering air. Finally she glanced up, watching as the sun glittered on the water, causing it to shimmer like a mirage. The oasis was incredible. A deep blue pool in the heart of a shaded area, it included three ponds within a stone's throw of the main pool. The oasis was bordered on one side by steep cream colored rocky hills, pitted with caves and dense brush and on the other by smooth hot sand dunes dotted with tall, swaying desert palms. The center of the pool was stirred by the bubbling of the underground spring. It was a dream to her tired, over-heated body.

She was surprised by how exhausted she felt. She was from the Blue Ridge and Piedmont regions of the Carolinas. The hot and humid summers spent in her home in North Carolina had prepared her for heat, but not for this dry, desolate waste of barren land. The Carolina summers took your breath away not so much from the heat, but the humidity. Here, in this dry heat, every breath was like inhaling the hot sand; every blink reminded her of how fast her eyes dried and to keep her sunglasses handy.

Dylan stared up at the nearly cloudless sky, the sun blazed back at her with an angry golden glare. No matter how many times she looked at it, she marveled at how close it seemed to the earth. The problem most soldiers

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seemed to have, as a result, was severe sunburn and sunstroke. Luckily, she never seemed to burn; her naturally golden skin simply darkened a bit more under the unforgiving sun, turning a burnished bronze. She had been here now for two years and had one to go before returning to the United States for Command General Staff Course (CGSC). As a result she had acclimated to the heat a bit and, though sunstroke was still a possibility, she had been lucky enough to make it so far without encountering that problem personally.

Finally catching her breath she turned her head to look around. Unable to see past the next hill, her searching eyes quickly scanned the sand to see only vast nothingness.

Here I am, thousands of miles from home in some God forsaken land, training green troops. She shook her head in disbelief. I can't believe I asked for this. Next time, I better be more careful what I wish for. She grinned. Damn, the Chinese sure knew what they were doing with that proverb. I'm sticky, hot, tired and figure I probably smell strong enough to attract any interested male camels within 100 miles. Not to mention that there are no bathing facilities at the camp and the recycled water showers just don't cut it like an honest to God bath. Hell, I've got sand in places that God just didn't intend sand to go. Her lips quirked into a sly grin.

That was the other reason she was here. She rested, catching her breath and waiting for the sun to set a bit and for the water of the pond in front of her to cool enough for bathing. While she waited, Dylan tried to explain to her ever-active mind, the sense of urgency she felt, the nearly overwhelming sense of threat. The bath would be fantastic, but what she was really hoping for was the time and space her mind needed to figure out the cause of her

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unease.

I'm not sure what's going on, but I know it wasn't a sudden desire for better hygiene. She chuckled to herself.

She had been jumpy all day, biting off the heads of any soldier stupid enough not to recognize the signs of a woman on the warpath. Her First Sergeant had initially avoided her like a PMS plague, but after she chewed out the last soldier for allowing the dust from his Hummer to roll into her tent, he had pulled her aside and strongly suggested she might *enjoy a swim*. He told her that it might help her “sort out her issues.”

Humm, now I have 'issues', and here all along I thought I was just pissed because the map I've been working on all week just got a healthy dose of sandy reality, along with everything else in my tent.

Still she could appreciate her senior NCO's idea. The cool water and clean skin **would** make her feel better. Plus it would allow Top the time to get her quarters squared away and clean before she got back, thus sparing the life of one young terrified Hummer driver.

The feeling of irritation was still with her even after her run. It was the same feeling she had wakened with that morning. The hair at the nape of her neck tingled; all her instincts were on full alert, warning her. Something was wrong, she just didn't know what. She had prowled the camp in the early morning hours, checking the sentries on guard and the barbed tape that surrounded the camp. All was secure. She cleaned her weapon and checked her ammo; she went over the training assignments, all to no avail. The feeling just wouldn't go away. Finally, by dawn she was feeling so jumpy that even she knew she needed to get away for a while. It had reached a point where she couldn't breathe there, surrounded by millions of tons of sand. Everything seemed to be closing in on her

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in the camp.

As she sat on the hot dune pondering her tense feelings, she knew that she should follow her instincts, but they really didn't make any sense. She felt no threat from her unit, her NCO's or her training mission. This environment had always been comfortable for her. The men, the activity, the smell of gun oil and gasoline; it was all normal, safe, and home to her. That thought really surprised her.

The Army is home. She smiled. *It's kinda weird, but still...* her mind provided. The smile faded. Something was not quite right.

She sat there a few minutes longer, mentally going over every nook and cranny of her tent and then every tent at camp and she just couldn't put her finger on it. Yet. *Maybe that swim and bath will help.*

Dylan pushed the worrisome feeling aside and with a sigh followed by a deep breath, she stood. Swatting her butt with both hands, she brushed the sand off her rear and made her way to the edge of the pond. Kneeling down, she reached a hand out into the sun-heated water. It was still overly warm. It was more like tepid bath water than cool swimming water.

It's either this or let the troops know I'm coming. The smell should arrive a good five minutes before me. She chuckled.

Still uneasy, Dylan turned and surveyed the surroundings again. Closing her eyes, she concentrated, *seeing* with her other senses. This was a skill taught to her by her Grandfather. Grey Hawke was a powerful man with strong convictions. Years ago, he had been elected as the honorary war chief of the small Cherokee village where she had grown up. Though it was a title supposedly in name only, he had taken the elected

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position quite seriously. He made it a point to insure that all the young men of the tribe were taught the old ways. He had explained to her that the young people of the community needed to learn something about their heritage and themselves. He had re-instituted the training of young men as warriors and often took groups of them on summer-long camping trips into the hills. They dressed in traditional buckskin, carrying only bows, arrows, a hatchet and a small blanket. They learned to build shelters, hunt and fish. They learned to respect nature and live off the land just as their ancestors had hundreds of years before them. He had instilled in them a sense of pride and self-reliance. Dylan had spent more than one long hard spring day begging, screaming, pleading and attempting to bribe him into allowing her to attend these secretive, all male training sessions. He had balked for years, but finally and very reluctantly he had given in. After hiking deep into the Blue Ridge Mountains, the group set up a small campsite. The young men set about cutting trees and stripping bark for shelters and shaving and sharpening the ends of young saplings for fishing spears. Dylan helped in all the assigned tasks and caught more of the swift moving fish than any of the young would-be warriors. Throughout the entire adventure she proved her prowess over and over again, much to the surprise of Grey Hawke. The War Chief was both amused and proud to discover that his granddaughter repeatedly out performed all the young bucks of the tribe, a feat Grey Hawke bragged about to this day.

Focusing her senses inward, Dylan cocked her head to the side. *Don't hear anything out of the ordinary.* She breathed deeply. *No strange smells.* She opened her eyes. *No startled critters. Coast clear.*

Reaching down, she untied the bottom of her trousers

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and cuffed them, then removed her tan boots and socks, carefully stuffing a sock inside each boot to prevent any crawly visitors from setting up housekeeping in her footgear. The little critter's bites were painful and bothersome though not usually fatal. Standing, she unclipped the large belt from around her waist and shrugged out of her LBE [load-bearing equipment]. Her shoulders felt an immediate relief as the weight of the pistol, ammo and gear slipped down her arms. She carefully unclipped the two 9mm ammo pouches and checked all four clips. She slipped the magazines back into their pouches and reattached them to the LBE, upside-down. This allowed the magazines to fall into her hands when she opened the pouch while wearing her gear. Rolling the beige suspenders neatly, she laid them across the toes of the boots careful to keep the pouches and pistol clear of the sand and within lunging distance of the pool's edge. Next she unbuttoned the BDU [battle dress uniform] shirt, slipping it down bronzed arms and rolling it into a neat package as well. Carefully she stuffed the rolled outer shirt into a boot top to keep it out of the sand and free of sand fleas.

LBE, BDU, God, does the Army love acronyms or what? Everything gets a new name. I bet they would name bras something really weird, she mused to herself as she removed first her tan undershirt and then the beige bra. Hmm, FTBSG. Yep, that works. Female Tactical Boob Suspension Gear. She chuckled, placed the bra on top of her undershirt and removed her belt. She paused, checking the pistol once more to ensure the safety was on, re-holstered it, and laid it neatly across the LBE on the toes of the boots. Slowly slipping the still sweaty trousers down her sore legs, she stepped out of them, shaking them out and folding them in half. She reached into one of the

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large cargo pockets on the side of one pant leg and removed a two-inch square cake of soap and a washcloth. From the other pocket she pulled her neatly folded BDU cap. She rolled the pants and stuffed them into the other boot, shoving them far into the toe. She stripped out of her panties, rolled the last two items up with her bra and slipped them into her cap and set it top down into the sand behind her boots.

The tall Military Police Officer stood naked on long, tapered legs and stretched, flexing taut muscles beneath smooth supple skin. Arms raised, she reached for the sun, feeling her spine pop as the vertebrate re-aligned. Her face turned towards the sky, she inhaled deeply and released a primal groan of satisfaction.

"Ugh," she sighed in relief. Unpinning her hair, she tossed the glossy length of it back over her shoulders. Letting her arms drop, she shook them as she stepped toward the gently rippling surface of the pool. She stopped to glance at the lightly shimmering reflection. "Not bad for an old war horse."

The woman reflected back at her from the water was tall, almost six feet, sleek, and toned. Blue-black hair had been cut into efficient bangs over raven wing eyebrows now arching as she stared into her own reflection. The waist length hair, released from its pins, tumbled past her shoulders, sections falling forward to hide full firm breasts and tickling a lean muscular back before reaching the slim, tapering hips. The face shimmering up at her was striking with high cheekbones, chiseled features, and coral lips. She stared for another moment and then shook her head, wishing again for the gentle brown eyes of her mother's people. Instead, what she saw were startling ice blue eyes, standing out sharply against bronze features. This was a constant reminder of her absent father. *No*

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need to wish for the impossible. She shrugged sleek, powerful shoulders and stepped into the water.

Bathing in a pool of water in the middle of the desert, who would have thought it? She smiled and lowered herself until she lay in the shallows. Leaning back, she let the water bear her weight as she enjoyed the warmth of the sun on her breasts and the warm water on her back. She soaked up the heat, letting the clear water melt away the salty sweat. Stretching her arms out with a smile of pure bliss on her lips, she thought she probably looked like some sort of ancient sun worshiper.

Resting the washcloth and soap on her stomach, Dylan floated, almost dozing off. *God, this really feels great. I know there is a lot to get done today, but I really needed this.* She thought about the things she wanted to accomplish: find a new field location with better strategic opportunity for the next field exercise, make her daily report to Colonel Gerry Fowler, Commander of the 159th MP Battalion (her immediate supervisor), and call for more supplies. They were low on training ammo, barbed concertina wire and MRE's. *I hate those MRE's; they should be called corks in a bag. Can't go to the field without those damn Meals Ready to Eat killing my stomach. Oh well, if there's any time left maybe Top and I can speak to some of the locals. Hopefully we can get some real food for the rest of our training. Would really be nice to have a good meal before we go check out those caves tomorrow. I sure wish I spoke the language better. Hum, maybe next trip I'll have more time to devote to meeting the people.*

Dylan made it a rule to learn as much about the native culture and language as possible whenever she was in a foreign country. It seemed to help relax the locals when you spoke the language, especially once they found

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out you were a cop - and a military cop on top of it all.

*No matter where ya go in the world, people just can't seem to get over the "cop" thing. Male, female, black, white, no real biggie, they eventually adjust, but **be** a cop, man, then they freak for sure.* She smiled. Chuckling, she closed her eyes against the sun's nearly blinding glare.

Finally finished with her sun bathing she stood, wrapped the washcloth around the small bar of soap and began scrubbing the dirt from her now relaxed body. After bathing, Dylan rolled back into the water's warm embrace.

Oh well, better not stay too long or they'll send out a search party looking for me. Now there's a thought. She grinned, imagining Top's face if he ever caught her out of uniform. Literally. *He'd probably die of apoplexy.* She snickered, but realized that she shouldn't be so hard on her first Sergeant. He really was a competent soldier and she liked him. Lately she had relinquished more responsibility to him as the trust and mutual respect grew.

It took her some time to get over his reason for being assigned to her unit; after all, he hadn't asked to baby-sit her. The smile disappeared as she thought of her over-protective, self-serving father. *Father? Hell, more like a sperm donor.* A sneer came, unbidden, to her face. Her father had "requested" that First Sergeant Beckham be assigned to her unit and his primary mission was to keep a watchful eye on Captain Dylan Hawke. Beckham was a well educated, specially trained, and very highly qualified Military Police Officer, but his area of expertise had been Personal Security and she was, after all, the Senator's only child and a political asset to boot.

She sighed in resignation. Ever since the man had "rediscovered" his daughter, at the tender age of fifteen, Senator Cameron was determined to be a part of her life.

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It had been a while, since he decided that politics were more important than family and had distanced himself from his wife and daughter. Years ago, when he was in the early stages of his career, an interracial marriage was considered political suicide, so he had told everyone that his wife had disappeared following a tragic accident. Later, when it became “fashionable” to be associated with blacks, Native Americans and other minorities, his wife and daughter were suddenly "discovered" safe with her Grandfather on a small reservation in the Carolina Mountains. The "mystery" of her disappearance was swept under the rug and the “lost” family was reunited.

Initially, Dylan had been thrilled to discover that, like the other kids at her school, she had a father. That, however, only lasted until she became aware of his true feelings.

He forbade her to attend her Grandfather’s classes, believing it was inappropriate for a young lady, insisting that she take more feminine instruction instead. He forced her into singing classes and ballet, one of which she hated with a true and unique passion. Though she loved the singing classes, she hazed her ballet instructor to no end, often to her own immense pleasure. She occasionally even drove the poor woman to tears by showing up for class in full Brave regalia. It really pissed her off that her father dressed her up too, but in frilly ruffled dresses and patent leather shoes, parading her out for the cameras at every opportunity. All those years she’d been without him, she had dreamed of meeting him, of being his little girl and their doing things together. Then he entered her life and destroyed her world. All of a sudden he wanted to be the perfect Daddy with the perfect family.

Dylan grinned, remembering one final exhibition. He had been exhilarated. Dylan was turning into a beautiful

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young woman and he was looking forward to a family photo shoot. It was her eighteenth birthday. The day was going smoothly as far as Dylan was concerned. She had managed to piss off her father earlier and was spending the afternoon “relaxing” in her room. Her father had been out most of the day and that suited her just fine. She knew he was out kissing up to some important client. Begging for more contributions. He basically left her alone, only bugging her when he wanted to present his perfect family to the public. He loved trotting her out for the public. *That is 'til he discovered his little darlin' liked girls. Guess he figured having a gay daughter wasn't good for his political career.* Reflecting quietly, her mind turned again to that pivotal incident.

She had failed to present the appropriate, sweet little mixed breed picture her Daddy wanted. He'd arranged a huge, very public, very expensive photo shoot. He had purchased a special dress for her with matching hat and bag. Instead, she showed up in tight jeans and a traditional native beaded shirt with a few modifications: it was missing half the front and all the back. She had made plans to party with her school friends. Unfortunately she neglected to explain her plans to her father who had arranged for a publicity photographer to take more pictures of the elaborate party that he had organized. When she showed up for the photo shoot he was appalled. In his anger he had struck her, leaving a vivid red handprint on her cheek. He then restricted her to her room without benefit of friends, presents or even so much as a hug from her mother.

That evening, Dylan sat in front of her computer screen reading a hot lesbian love story, one of her favorites, **Mysti: Mistress of Dreams**. She had just gotten to a steamy love scene involving a sofa pit group

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when her phone rang. Deeply engrossed in the story, she was startled by the sound and fell out of her chair onto the floor. Cursing under her breath, she jumped onto the bed, reaching for the bright red peanut M&M shaped phone. Hoping that it was one of her friends offering to rescue her from the boredom of the four walls, she pressed the candy colored earpiece to her head. Leaving the story in plain sight on the screen, she lay on her stomach to talk to her rescuer. Distracted by the conversation, she completely forgot she hadn't locked her door. It's amazing how fast your heart can beat and still stay in your chest. The bedroom door burst open. Her father stood there, fists balled up and firmly planted on his self-righteous hips.

"You, young lady, are not allowed to have any entertainment when you are grounded. That means no phone calls and no... WHAT THE FUCK IS THAT!" He pointed to the monitor. Turning her head to look at what had caught his attention, immediately a rather graphic description of a hot love scene jumped out at her.

"Oops!" She had thought of coming out with her parents, but this was not exactly the way she had planned to do it.

Still angry over the slap and reacting instinctively to the attack, she responded, as usual, without thinking. "Well, Father, what confuses you the most? The fact that it's two women or the fact that they're enjoying it?"

Her father hit the roof. Her mother, who had come into the room after hearing all the screaming, stood with her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide and tears streaming down her cheeks. Her Grandfather, the only one whose opinion really mattered to her, had been visiting. He walked into the room and glanced quickly around. Assessing the situation, he guessed that Dylan's

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father had finally discovered her not so well hidden, secret. He felt that the Great Spirit had blessed his Granddaughter. His son-in-law should be grateful to have such a powerful spirit living with him. He walked into the room and straight to Dylan. Turning to face the angry younger man, he stood with his arm encircling Dylan's shoulder in silent support. He seemed unsurprised and was taking it all in stride.

Pulling Dylan from her Grandfather's arms, her father shook her angrily. "Why Dylan? That's some sick shit. What is wrong with you? Answer me! Answer me!" He slapped her again and again. Her grandfather caught the hand in mid-air, glaring at the man silently. Still staring he slowly tightened his grip on the younger man's hand and pressing downward, forcing Dylan's father to his knees.

Finally her mother pulled Grey Hawke away and helped her father to his feet. Dylan turned back into her Grandfather's arms, burying her face in his chest. She cried, frightened by the anger she had seen and unable to stop her tears. Her Grandfather's soothing voice finally penetrated the fog of her misery and she gathered her courage like a shield around her.

Grey Hawke felt the slender shoulder stiffen as Dylan's tears stopped. He felt her straighten her spine and turn to face her father.

"I hate you. You have brought me nothing but misery since your return. I wish you had never come back!" she whispered. She turned her back on the man that was her father and folded her arms, closing herself off from the stranger behind her.

Though Dylan loved her mother and her grandfather, she knew that her lifestyle would make it almost impossible to stay home. She glanced up at her

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Grandfather through tear-filled eyes and silently said good-bye.

That was the last time she spoke to her father and mother and the last day she was home. That evening she packed a small bag and, under the cover of darkness, slipped quietly out of the house. Dylan Elizabeth Cameron ran away from home.

John Cameron was already a well-known name in the Carolinas and she knew that the name, together with her distinct looks, would bring unwanted attention. That same evening she stopped at the teller machine outside the little souvenir shop in town and withdrew all but \$20 dollars from the account. It was her entire life savings: \$138.00. From there she grabbed a ride to Spartanburg and waited outside the town hall for the offices to open. Walking inside, she asked a slender older woman for directions to the records office. After presenting identification, under the counter cash, and doing some pretty slick negotiating, she legally changed her name. She abandoned her father's name of Cameron in favor of her mother's name, Hawke. Dylan Hawke walked directly from the courthouse, down the sidewalk and into the U.S. Army recruiting station.

Chapter 2

Basic training was something of a challenge. Dylan had always been a leader and having to follow directions became a trial. Her Drill Sergeant gave her one sage piece of advice: “Open your head, take out your brain and stick it in your back pocket. You’re not gonna need it while you’re here.”

It took a few head-butting contests and several of what her Drill called “inspirational moments”, up close and personal with the ground, to persuade Dylan that perhaps going with the flow was a better idea than bucking the system. By the time the first two weeks of training had passed Dylan was an expert at push-ups, sit-ups, leg lifts and the majority of the Army Physical Fitness test. She also learned that following the NCO’s directions resulted in her increased proficiency and an increase in responsibility. Once she discovered the secret of following directions, she found herself loving the structure of the military. She found that she was very good at tactics and strategy, that self defense and hand to hand came as second nature to her and that her skill with weapons won her expert badges in rifles, pistols and grenades.

Dylan found herself loving every moment and every day of her time in the Army. Each day brought a new experience and each success brought her more confidence.

Following Basic Training, Dylan received her Advance Individual Training assignment (AIT); she was headed for Fort McClellan and the Military Police School. Fun time was definitely over. The training NCO’s of the

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MP School did not play. The instruction received here could save the life of the soldier, his or her partner and the lives of innocent people they may be called upon to protect. Dylan again excelled and upon graduation moved up quickly in the ranks. Senior Non-Commissioned Officers saw her potential and recommended her for OCS [Officer's Candidate School]. At the tender age of 21, she graduated at the top 5% of her class. When she pinned on the bars of a Second Lieutenant, virtually no one knew she was the daughter of Senator John Cameron: Democratic Senator from North Carolina and closet homophobe.

Dylan learned that there were few things in life that were free, but just about everything in the military could be earned with enough hard work and determination. She had never found life to be easy and here, in the Army, it seemed that every day was a challenge. Her assignment to the Military Police Corp meant there was yet another hill to climb.

Women were still few and far between at the Officer level in the Corp and successful minority women were more rare still. Simply put, Dylan Hawke was an anomaly. Her father's position could have made it easier in many respects. There were always unscrupulous people ready to "assist" in the advancement of an attractive woman or to assist in the promotion of a VIP's kid. She knew how to handle the first one, and since most did not know of her parentage, and she intended to keep it that way, she did not worry about the other. She wanted to be a success in her career and she knew that, for her, the only way to really succeed was to follow the rules. If and when she succeeded she would know she had earned it, she felt good about that. The respect she now enjoyed was all hers. She knew she had earned it on her own. It

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was not the result of her father's position.

Initially Dylan was concerned about her sexual preference, but the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy made her lifestyle a moot point. As long as she was discreet, and she was, there were no problems. Dylan was very popular within the lesbian community and was quite well known. It wasn't that she was loose; all the women knew that Dylan had a 'no commitment policy' and they were more than happy to be a one-night stand for the beautiful young soldier.

Life was good, and Dylan was enjoying every minute of it.

Lying back in the warm water of the desert oasis, the beautiful woman contemplated her career and decided that she was happy with things just the way they were.

Returning to the moment at hand, she reluctantly but realistically considered her bath.

Well, if I stay in here any longer I'll get water logged and sink.

She rolled the bar of soap into the washcloth and rubbed them together briskly, building up a soft foamy lather. Washing her face first, she quickly and efficiently covered herself with the soapsuds then with a complete submersion she finished her bath. Sighing, she swam towards the shore. Reaching the bank, Dylan stood; the warm water sliding from her sleek form glittered on her skin. Turning a smiling face upwards once more to the sun she drew in and let out a deep breath, enjoyed one last moment of peace, then turned and walked gracefully towards her clothes. Shaking her hands to rid them of the remaining droplets of water, she realized she had forgotten one critical thing: *No towel, drip dry*. She retrieved her clothes and dressed quickly. Dusting off her BDU's, she adjusted the LBE and pistol on her hip. Then

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reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a plastic bag. Peeling it open she dropped in the damp washcloth and still wet soap. She slid the bag back into her pants and from the other pocket she pulled out her dark glasses. Sliding them into place, she reached back and pulled her canteen from her belt pouch as she strolled to the large, spring fed pool. She sighed, enjoying the peace of the oasis, thinking that she would have to make another visit here before she left. Capping the container Dylan slid it back into its pouch and with the sun slowly setting, she headed back towards the camp.

After a ten-minute walk she finally crested a hill. She paused, remembering her first sighting of the camp's location. She had arrived two days earlier, selecting the site, which was just northwest of the town of Riyadh and on the very edge of the NATO installation. This site had been selected because of its location and the surrounding terrain. Because of activity earlier in the year, the "Powers That Be" determined that more realistic ground training was necessary. While stationed in the US the troops had been inundated with Urban Terrain tactics but seemed to be lacking in basic movement and maneuver training. Her job was two-fold. Teach the troops to move, shoot and communicate in the desert terrain and acclimate them to the harsh environment of the Saudi Desert. The site was perfect; it had a bit of all aspects of the local terrain. There were hills on one side, huge sand dunes that bordered the edge of the NATO military reservation and scrub grass and plains to the front. The hills were nearly impossible to scale at night and clearly visible during the day. The dunes on the side were immense and rolled out for miles. Once you passed beyond the second or third dune you were virtually out of sight of anyone in the camp. She wasn't really happy

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about that, but since they were inside the secure area of the reservation, they were well within reach of the rapid response teams.

The front of the site as well as the area between the camp and the hill was sparsely covered with bushes and small, deformed trees. These provided some break in the terrain and were ideal for the site, as the bushes lent themselves to the camouflage and helped in hiding the camp and the gear.

As she watched, the men went about their daily routine. A small group was gathered to one side by two of her Corporals, receiving a training class. Sergeant Griffin, or “No Neck” as she liked to call him, was waist deep in the front of a Hummer, cursing and swearing and her LT was bent over a field map with her First Sergeant. Forty-five soldiers, including a Second Lieutenant, her First Sergeant, two NCO’s and four Corporals accompanied the enlisted men, many of whom were new to the Army. Four Humm-V’s along with six, half-ton trucks full of men, gear and equipment all took the bumpy ride out to the site. There were also two ancient jeeps, one for her and one for her First Sergeant, which had led the way to the field location. Truth be told, she still preferred that old reliable Army workhorse to the Hummer. The old jeep was lacking in suspension as well as all the modern bells and whistles and was very small, but it was able to get into spaces that the wider Hummer just couldn’t go. It rarely broke down and had no need for extensive adjustments to deal with the excessive sand; basically you just put fuel in it and go. Plus she could drive the hell out of it and not worry about lost pay for damages. *Gotta love the old “yeeep”*. She grinned, nearly skipping as she trotted down the hill towards the camp.

The campsite was well camouflaged; the splotchy tan

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netting broke up the outlines of the tents and vehicles, making it nearly impossible to see from above and difficult, at best, from a distance. As she stood looking down on the busy site, she could make out the shape of one large tent, which they used for briefings, meals and general operations. Nearby sat a mid-sized tent that served as a command post and commo center. Her spacious Commander's tent was on the other side under a separate net with several smaller tents encircling it. Barbed wire tape, its sharp, razor-like blades glittering, surrounded the perimeter, completing and securing the site. All in all, it seemed to be a pretty tight location.

Slowly making her way down the hill, she entered the busy camp by way of one of the two entry/egress breaks in the barbed tape. She was unaware of the relieved looks sent her way by the soldiers.

These were young troops, untried in war but willing and able. They had seen the Captain leave the area and were concerned when she remained gone for so long. Most of them had learned that she was more than capable of taking care of herself and those who had not been present for the training experience had been informed by the ones who had. But that still did not stop them from worrying. She was, after all, the first female commander who had ever been assigned to this type of unit and the protective streak in the all-male NCO ranks came out in full force.

Her NCO's had all been briefed prior to her assuming command. They were well aware of the qualifications of the beautiful Captain, yet they felt the inherent need to protect her. Many still remembered their first meeting two years ago, when they were all introduced to the tall, deadly beauty.

Most of them had arrived early that morning, had

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been in-processed, and were settling in and storing their gear when they were called out of the barracks to stand in formation in the hot August sun. That was when they first heard that the unit was to have a female commander. After the initial shock wore off, the junior NCO's began to grumble. Many voiced their opinions of females in the Army and a few made crude suggestions about positions they felt were much more appropriate for females in general, all to the chuckles and jibes of their comrades. The laughter quickly died down when they noticed the approaching duo.

The First Sergeant was trailing a tall, dark woman in tan BDU's. The first thing they all noticed was her walk. She moved with a graceful, powerful stride that gave the immediate impression she knew exactly where she was going and what she would do when she got there. The next and far more obvious thing they noticed was her height; she was very tall and very well built. The smiles and chuckles began again but were quickly squelched when she removed her sunglasses and stared at the laughing offenders with one raised dark eyebrow over startling crystal blue eyes.

The First Sergeant called them to attention and they pulled themselves together. As she stared up and down the ranks, the men slowly straightened their spines as the smiles slipped off their lips. Each man felt himself break out in a cold sweat standing there in the 100 plus temperatures under the icy glare of the imposing woman. They all felt the chill as she stared into each and every soldier's eye; at least, that's the way the men later said it felt. She finally broke the silence and with a quirky half smile she placed her balled up fists on her hips and spoke in a clear, calm voice.

"All right, I know what you were expecting.

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Something a bit hairier, that pees standing up. Well, guess what? Instead ya got lucky, you got me; and fellas, get used to it because I am here for the duration. So let's try to get along, shall we?"

The Motor Sergeant, the main offender in leading the crude remarks, grunted and sneered, "I ain't working in no danged field with no got damn woman." He mumbled just loud enough to be heard by the tall Commander.

"You got a problem with me, Sarge?" the Captain asked, turning icy daggers towards the hulking figure of her new Motor Sergeant. Getting no reply, she strode forward. Passing through the ranks to the last row of troops, she sauntered up to the bull-necked shorter man. "I asked if you have a problem with me," came the cold comment from the tall officer. She stepped up to the cinderblock that called itself the Motor Sergeant, pleased to note that she could look down on the man. She bent her head and came nose to nose with the disgruntled NCO.

"I got enough sense not to answer that, Cap'n. I ain't gotta tell you nothin' and I ain't gonna get myself into no trouble arguin' with no officer," the shorter man grumbled.

"Oh, so you do have a problem," she said, adding a not so happy smile. She turned and walked back to the front of the formation. Speaking loud enough for all to hear, she turned and once again faced the ranks, "I understand you have something of a reputation for boxing and wrestling, Sergeant. Well, I always love to learn new combat skills. What say you try and teach me a few moves? Let's say we meet in the Fitness Center at 1800, just soldier to soldier and maybe you can find time to talk to me then. Company! Attention! Dismissed! "

Turning on her heel, the Commander headed back

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towards the Command Center, the First Sergeant at her elbow trying feverishly to change her mind. "Ma'am, you can't Fight Sergeant Griffin, he don't fight fair. Hell, he's been in the brig more times than you can shake a stick at. The only reason he's still in the Army is he can fix anything with wheels. I'm telling you, that guy came out the chute fightin' and he ain't never fought fair."

The beautiful woman simply said, "Good, I need the work out." Turning, she gave the Motor Sergeant another sweet smile that did not reach her sparkling blue eyes.

At the time Dylan had no idea the stir she had caused. Word got out that the new, beautiful MP Captain was going to "talk" to the Motor Sergeant at 1800. The betting was on. Suddenly most of the occupants of the small installation became fitness conscious. They decided that work could wait, they needed to do some weight lifting, or aerobics, or laps at the Post Fitness Center. Everyone from the post Command Sergeant Major to the Post Commander's Driver was planning on being at the gym at 1800.

Dylan arrived in the gym in her BDU's with a green and gold MP gym bag slung over her shoulder. The Motor Sergeant was already there, dressed in his gray ARMY sweats. Captain Hawke slipped into the women's locker room to change. She brought out her favorite t-shirt. University of North Carolina, Pembroke was emblazoned in bright gold letters over black cotton, now stretched across her chest. Grinning, she slipped her legs into a pair of soft gray Army shorts, almost completely unaware of how they hugged her slim thighs. Quickly and efficiently she braided her hair into a glossy black braid, tied the end off with a small gold scrunchy and casually flipped the heavy braid over her shoulder.

Stepping out of the locker room, Dylan was entirely

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focused on what she needed to do next. It was a practiced skill and she was purposefully unaware of the admiring glances her long tanned legs were drawing. For the moment she chose not to notice the sidelong glances from both the male and female inhabitants. She stepped barefoot onto the blue mat in the center of the gym floor, sat down and began to stretch. The Motor Sergeant snickered and nudged his cronies but Dylan dutifully ignored them and continued her stretching. As she stood and turned toward the NCO, the smile that played on her lips was anything but pleasant.

"Well, Sarge, you had something you wanted to talk to me about didn't you?" she asked.

The Sergeant flexed his shoulders and rolled his head around on his stump of a neck. Grinning at the tall, lean woman before him, he reached for her with one meaty hand and suddenly realized that he was no longer standing. As a matter of fact, his view of the world had completely shifted. He was laying flat on his back, staring at the iron girders lining the gym ceiling. His arm and hand were twisted and gripped in an iron hold while a slim foot rested on his throat and a pair of ice blue eyes looked down at him.

"You want to try that again?" The deep, silky smooth contralto voice asked.

He rose to his feet and turned his back on her, shaking his head as if confused. It was a ploy, a move he had used successfully in the past. Spinning quickly, he swung, anticipating the feel of his powerful fist striking flesh. The problem was there was no one there. Dylan had dropped quickly to a squat, allowing the arm to pass over her harmlessly. She rose as the sergeant's follow-through momentum threw him off balance. Bringing up one powerful leg, she spun and caught him on the right side of

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the head, staggering him. She followed through with a leaping front kick taking the stunned NCO to the mat. Straddling his chest, she used her knees to pin his shoulders to the mat while pressing a forearm into his throat.

The Sergeant looked up at the grinning MP and smiled in chagrin and defeat. Dylan folded her arms over her chest and sat back, still resting on the soldier's chest. "Truce?" she asked.

"Beer, Ma'am," he offered with a grudging smile.

That had been nearly two years ago and the men still talked about it. The Motor Sergeant bragged about his commander. This frequently led to further "discussion" off the cantonment area and often ended with both parties facing their commanders and a medic or two.

Yes, they all knew how deadly she could be but were still amazed.

"How could anything that looks that good be soooo bad?"

There was no doubt that the Captain could take care of herself, but that didn't stop them from worrying. They kept an eye on her whenever they were in the field. Plus, they all agreed it didn't hurt one bit that the officer was easy on the eyes.

Seeking out the First Sergeant, Dylan found him observing a block of instruction on the use of Night Vision Devices [NVD's]. She remembered her initial meeting with her Top; she had not been overly enthusiastic. She needed a strong NCO since the unit was short junior officers. When she learned the name of her Senior NCO she did a bit of background investigating and what she discovered pissed her off. Oh, it wasn't that he was not a competent soldier nor was he hard to get along with; like her, the man was a car buff. As a matter of fact

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he was a Porsche fanatic. If you ever wanted to get on his good side or to distract him just bring up, say a 1967 Carrera and off he went. Between that and his habit of constantly chewing gum - he swore it kept him from smoking - he reminded her of an over-sized teenager. His chestnut hair was now liberally sprinkled with gray but his care-worn face still showed signs of the telltale freckles he had sported in abundance as a youth. No, he was likable and easy to get along with. What she had initially disliked was the fact that he had been hand selected by her father.

The Senator had finally located his daughter again and now he had a spy in her camp and she was not happy. She had opted to refrain from passing judgment until she had learned more about the man and, strangely enough, she discovered that she liked him. He had been assigned to the unit because she was the daughter of a US Senator and his area of special training was personal security. As it turned out he was also one damned fine First Sergeant, and she liked that.

Noticing her silent arrival, he turned and nodded in deference to her rank.

"Evenin', Capn'," he drawled in his mid-Western accent.

"Evening, Top. How are things going?" she inquired.

"Bout as well as can be expected," he sighed in resignation.

They looked at one another; her eyes twinkled and he quietly grinned. They both knew that this group of newbie's was far better and much more advanced than the last few they had trained and they were silently pleased with the progress so far. It was a closely guarded secret among the cadre, hidden from the troops for fear that they would find out and get cocky or let up on their training.

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"All right then, keep at it, Top. Maybe a little actual night training will whip them into shape," she stated, smiling at the audible groan she heard from the troops. Turning her back to the troops, giving her First Sergeant a grin and a wink, she strolled off towards her tent.

Her mind returned to the jumpy feeling as she walked back towards her tent. Deep in thought she glanced around again, her eyes scanning the perimeter and landing on First Lieutenant Milner. The young man was standing at a table near the command tent; she was pleased to note that he was checking his copy of the small map they all carried. As she got closer she noticed that he was marking off the location of the caves she was interested in. The Lieutenant was an earnest young man anxious to make an impression on the stalwart Captain. Whenever he was near her, he had an irritating habit of following her around like a puppy looking for a home. She noticed that he often emulated her movements, her mannerisms and her actions. When she had mentioned it to Top she was informed that the LT had a serious case of hero worship. According to Top, "the LT wants to be just like ya when he grows up." The old NCO chuckled. At first it had been aggravating, but she had learned to deal with it and after several discussions with the young man she was pleased to note that he was beginning to develop his own leadership style.

Milner was a fresh-faced California boy. He reminded Dylan of a poster child for clean living, if there were such a thing. His blond hair, streaked with red from the sun, intensified his sparkling green eyes. The troops all loved him for his quick wit and willingness to listen. He had the makings of a fine officer. The one thing that she found unsettling about him was his clothes. It seemed that no matter where he was or what type of situation he

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was in, he always managed to appear freshly pressed.

That is just too freaky for words, Dylan thought, shaking her head and continuing on to her quarters. Pushing the outer netting aside she ducked her head and entered her tent. *Since he already has the location marked on the grid map, maybe I'll take the LT with me instead of Top*, she considered. Still thinking of the caves mentioned by her First Sergeant earlier, she pulled her map from her breast pocket, opened it and laid it on the field table. Grabbing her duffel bag, she began searching it for the flashlight and the Bowie knife given to her by her beloved Grandfather. As she turned back to the map, the eerie sense of 'something wrong' returned suddenly and with a vengeance. The hackles rose on her neck and her head jerked up as her focus immediately centered on her hearing, as if by some unspoken internal command.

"What the hell? A tank? Here? I know we didn't plan for any tanks on this exercise."

Dylan ran from her tent, eyes frantically searching and finally landing on an old M1 Abrams rapidly approaching the perimeter. Dylan's head turned towards the command tent. It was empty.

"Milner, report! Where the devil are you? Milner! Who the hell is driving a damn tank through my camp?" The rapid popping of automatic rifle fire caused a dark brow to rise. "We're under attack! Who the fuck **are** these guys?"

She watched as the red streak of tracers illuminated the camp in twilight and helped locate the soldiers' direction of fire. The sight was terrifyingly beautiful.

Turning, she ducked back into her tent and snapped up her M16, the extra clip and any other ammo she could find, stuffing it all into a cargo pocket. As she stepped back out she heard it, the rattling cough of machine gun

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fire nearby and realized her men were engaging the attackers and holding their own. She needed to locate Top. Remembering the location of the NVD class, she ducked and headed in that direction. Her feet pounded the ground and her heart raced as she searched the area looking for her senior NCO. Hearing the growling voice of the 1SGT, she turned on the speed and angled toward the sound. He was near the Motor Pool.

Fuck, gotta move faster. We need some help. To reach the Motor Pool, Dylan knew she had to pass the communications tent. Pouring on the steam, she made a mad dash towards it. Her feet slid in the sand as she charged, out of breath, into the comms tent. Her ice blue eyes adjusted to the darkness as they darted around, looking for the communication specialist. She found him, lying on the ground with a surprised look in his glassy eyes and a large hole in the front of his BDU's. Hearing a voice stammering out grid coordinates, she looked again at the radio and was surprised to see LT Milner on the mike calling for support.

"Good man, LT. We need some back up, we're out-gunned." She pressed closer, listening as the young man stammered out the information to headquarters.

Glancing outside, she saw something that made her skin crawl. More enemy soldiers were coming over the rise. The attackers were Arabs. Some wore Eastern block BDU's but the majority were dressed in desert robes; blacks, tans, and browns over jeans and trousers. Most wore boots with cloth leggings, their heads covered in old BDU caps or turbans.

Dylan turned back to Milner, as the young officer seemed to be listening to a reply.

"They're on their way, Ma'am. Should be here in about twenty minutes. They couldn't get the coordinates,

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something's wrong with the radio, but they said they were gonna zero in on the signal."

Dylan nodded her understanding as she turned back towards the tent opening. What she saw there made the sweat break out on her brow. Troops, lots of enemy troops. They crested the hill in ragged formation, some with sabers, others carrying vintage carbine rifles. Still others were armed with modern Tech 5 sub-machine guns. The strange hodge-podge of men and weapons seemed endless. Dylan turned back to the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, get back on the horn with them, keep trying. Tell them we are out-gunned and out-manned, at least three to one. Tell them to get their asses here pronto or there won't be a here left to salvage." She looked back at the young officer. Seeing the fear in his eyes, she unholstered her pistol and handed it to him along with her spare clips. "Hurry up and send that message, then gather up anyone you find and head up into the hills. We will regroup there."

Pulling her M16 from her shoulder, she reset it to fire in automatic. Laying her hand on his shoulder, she gave him a squeeze then exited the tent. Running low and fast towards the Humm-V's, she glanced over her shoulder at the ammo tent one more time. Then she watched in utter disbelief as it exploded into a flashing ball of fire, flaming canvas drifting to earth like dancing scarlet butterflies. Caught in the horrid beauty of destruction, Dylan was momentarily distracted by the shivering earth and charred smell of burning flesh, but her mind was quickly jerked back to reality by a chilling sound. It was the grinding of the turret as the tank; its main gun still smoking from the discharge, turned its big 50-caliber machine gun towards her.

RUN! her mind screamed. She turned and felt her

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feet dig into the soft earth. Dodging, she scrambled across the open space towards the Motor pool, the sand at her feet leaping in small eruptions of tan dust.

First Sergeant Beckham looked up, startled by the explosion of the communications tent. What he saw made his heart skip a beat. The woman whose very existence he was assigned to protect was in the open, drawing fire and running for her life.

The Captain ran a zigzag pattern across the open terrain, heading for his location. When the initial firefight started he had gathered what men he could and taken up a secure location in the Motor Pool behind a Hummer. His small group were holding their own with their M16's when he saw her. Cursing under his breath, he put his rifle down. Quickly assessing the situation, he sprinted forward, towards her. As he ran closer a movement to the right caught his eye. A lone enemy rifleman was taking aim on the young woman. Inhaling deeply, he forced his straining legs forward in one last burst of energy. Reaching the officer, he wrapped his arms around her and twisted his own body, dropping them both to the ground at the same time.

Dylan saw Sgt Beckham running towards her, a look of desperation in his eyes. The instant he reached her, she felt him throw her to the ground and roll, immediately putting her completely beneath him. His body jerked and shuddered; Dylan grabbed the man's arms and looked upward into his surprised brown eyes. The rounds meant for her had found a target; cutting through the back of his flack vest, through his body and lodging in his lungs, shredding his liver and exploding his left ventricle.

As Sgt. James Beckham felt his body go numb, he stared down at his Captain, surprised at the sadness he read in her eyes. There was a strange hissing in his ears

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and he felt unbearably chilled. *It must be late; it is getting dark and cold*, his muddled brain told him as the darkness swallowed his final thoughts.

Dylan watched the man's face. First there was a look of intense shock and unimaginable pain; then a stillness and peaceful expression crossed his lips. She heard a faint sigh as a soft smile became frozen on his face and then his eyes stilled and glazed over.

"NO!" she screamed as she wriggled and crawled out from beneath the dead man, suddenly realizing he had just saved her life. Climbing to her feet, she grabbed her fallen rifle and looked up, her eyes locking with those of the shooter. She shouldered her own weapon, took aim and squeezed. A sense of satisfaction filled her as she watched a blood colored puff rise from the stricken man's chest. Her smile was quickly extinguished when she turned to survey the field; the sight that greeted her was chaos.

Dylan swallowed her shock and fear; gathering her strength, she headed at a dead run towards the NCO's tents. She knew that allowing her fear to control her could be fatal. Her decisions could affect the outcome on her unit and its potential to survive. Gripping the rifle tightly in her hand, she shoved her thoughts down deep inside, feeling a knot in her throat as she swallowed. As she ran towards the camouflaged tent she scanned the burning camp. This was her place, her home, albeit temporary, and it had been ravaged. She saw her men fighting, falling, and dying. She thought of the overwhelming odds, the unfairness of the situation and she became angry. She now had a new and powerful weapon. It began as a small knot and built inside her heart, ice-cold controlled rage. She would use this new weapon; she would destroy them with it.

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The tank, followed by several rough-looking soldiers in ragged uniforms, rolled through the center of camp, cutting down everything in its path. Dylan ran on, weaving and dodging around fallen men. She had no time to help the dying; she had to save those that could be saved. She started to leap over a dead man but pausing to bend over the smoking body, she carefully rolled the soldier over. Smiling, she reached out and unhooked the belt and strap, slipping the mobile radio from the dead soldier and hoisting it onto her own back, securing the belt around her waist. While she was partially sheltered by the fallen body she looked around for the remainder of her men. Spotting a small group still by the motor pool she called out to them.

"Stay where you are, I will come to you." She broke cover and dashed to the nearest vehicle, the First Sergeant's old jeep. "All right men, we are gonna head into the hills and regroup. If you get separated from the group stay calm and wait for an opportunity to move, then run for cover at the base of that hill." She pointed towards the large mound of broken boulders and sandy ridges to their right. *Got to regroup*, she thought. If we can hold on long enough for help to get here maybe we can counterattack and kick some sandy butt. "DAMN, these guys just keep coming!" she whispered under her breath, very aware that the young soldiers were all watching her. She turned and watched in surprise as even more dirty enemy soldiers rushed from the sand.

Shaking her dark head she flipped the M16 on its side and slipped the magazine out. Checking the rounds she nodded, *a full clip, that should get us there. I hope.* Looking up, she took a head count, noticing that this was the group from the Night Vision class, all young and all inexperienced. Mentally shaking her head she stared out

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at the enemy, they were ragged and dirty but they all looked like hardened fighters compared to her green troops.

Damn, this is what has had me jumpy all day. Hell, I knew something was up, I gotta learn to listen to my instincts. Fuck, fuck, fuck. No time for regrets, gotta get these guys outta here.

She inhaled deeply and gathered her strength. "Let's move out. Now!" She had to shout to be heard over the sound of gunfire. She leapt to her feet and dashed around the jeep, laying down covering fire and allowing the troops to head towards the low-lying hills. The tracers from her clip screamed out in the darkness, tiny deadly comets, their beautiful brilliant light burning out lives. She noticed that the last soldier in her small group had reached safety and she ran a staggered pattern to the hill, rifle fire again aimed her way. As she reached a large boulder her eyes searched the hillside for the caves the First Sergeant had mentioned earlier. Seeing the Lieutenant's map in her mind's eye she tried to remember the location he had marked for the caves. Shouldering her weapon she grabbed the hillside and prayed that the darkness now provided by the setting sun would hide their movements. Climbing slowly and steadily, she headed towards the center of the hills, fairly sure of where she was going.

Her eyes seemed to see everything in red and she was almost too angry to realize what she was doing. The men following her rushed through low-lying bushes and finally into the mouth of a small cave, happy to be out of the line of fire. Dylan used the last of her strength to guard the entrance. Going in last, she staggered to a stop. Falling to her knees, her rifle clutched tightly in one hand while the other, trembling, brushed the hair away from her face.

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Placing the rifle butt on the ground, she used it as a crutch to lever her exhausted body up. Slowly she walked to the far wall and leaned the rifle against it. She felt her body sway and she reached out for the soft sandstone to steady herself. Pressing her forehead against the warm wall she sucked in the heated air. Turning, she faced the small group of soldiers. They all stared wide-eyed at her, waiting for her to reassure them. She couldn't. She closed her eyes and took a moment to gather her senses, then unhooked the belt from her waist and let the radio slip from her shoulders. She reached back and pulled the canteen from her hip and loosening the cap, gulped large mouthfuls of the still fresh water. Finally recapping the canteen she squatted down next to the radio and turned it towards her. That was when she noticed that the radio had taken a direct hit. It had spared her injury, but now it was just an expensive doorstop. Angrily, she tossed the useless equipment aside as she straightened, pulled herself to her feet and turned towards the cave mouth.

Silently she stared down at the camp, her mind creating and discarding scenario after scenario. Her intent was to rescue the men she had been forced to leave behind. Movement below in the shadowy darkness drew her attention and she watched in shocked disbelief as the ragged enemy herded the soldiers they had captured into a group. The soldiers cried out, cursing and fighting, to no avail. The terrorists turned the heavy turret-mounted 50 caliber towards the unarmed and utterly defenseless prisoners. Her mind could not register what her eyes were seeing, but her ears did not deceive her. There was no mistaking the distinct bark of the big 50-caliber machine gun and the horrifying screams of dying men. Her dying men.

"NO!" Dylan yelled as she lunged towards the edge

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of the cliff, her eyes intent on the broken bodies below. She did not see the soldiers move behind her until she found herself on the ground. They had tackled her, forcing her to the ground. Despite her valiant struggle they didn't budge and she couldn't move.

A Corporal, placing his hands on either side of her face, shouted: "No, Ma'am, no! You can't go out there. You can't help them. You can't help them now. You have to help us. Do you hear me? We need you. We need you, Captain."

Dylan stopped struggling. She stared at the young NCO, his words at first a garble of sounds; her ears still hearing the rattling cough of automatic gunfire. Slowly she realized he was right. Getting captured or killed would do no good; those men were gone, dead.

"Let me up," she said. "Now!"

Struggling to her feet again, she staggered to the cliff's edge and stared down. The corpses of young men lay contorted and writhing at the edge of the camp. Some had been thrown onto the barbed tape by the force of the bullets impact; some were cut nearly in half. The terrorists were laughing; some were going through the pockets of the dead men. Others were removing watches and jewelry. The bodies were dragged into a pile and fuel was poured on them, a flare was shot into the pile igniting it. Long oily black tendrils of smoke first streamed then billowed from the pile as the bodies all caught fire. Her insides rolled with tension and nausea as her eyes took in the sight. She stepped away from the edge of the cliff, holding onto the rocky face of the cave as she leaned towards the side and emptied her stomach into the small bushes near the cave's entrance. Even with her eyes closed she could still see the ragged bleeding bodies everywhere. Tan BDU's splattered with blood, the torn

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cloth shifting gently in the light breeze of early evening. She heard the rough sounds of the victors, her shaken mind unable or unwilling to translate.

Her throat burned from throwing up, her mouth was again parched from gasping the dry air and her eyes hurt from holding back tears. Her head pounded from the fear, anxiety and hatred she was feeling - all at the same time. The smell of burning flesh and gunpowder singed her nostrils as she inhaled great lungs full of foul air. Fists were balled in tension and rage at her sides as she stared at her camp, her men, and her home: all violated.

The sound of rustling branches and footsteps caught her attention; there was movement in the bushes below. She watched as three figures emerged, two were dragging a blackened third between them. As they approached, Dylan recognized the red sun streaked hair of the Lieutenant.

"We need some help here!" she bellowed, as she rushing forward sliding down the rough hillside to help bring the horribly burned junior officer to the safety of the cave.

A young E2, the only member of the unit who was a trained medic, bent over the young man and examined his wounds. His face, hands and arms were all badly burned. If not for his brilliant hair color Dylan would not have recognized the young man. Pulling her canteen from her hip, Dylan knelt down close to the younger officer. She gently lifted his head and trickled water over his lips.

"Cap'n, I tried, but I don't think I made it through. I don't think they know..." he whispered, his voice harsh and dry.

"Shhhh, quiet now. It's alright LT, we got it covered," she whispered, pouring more water across his lips.

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He smiled at her, a gruesome site with his face cracked and peeling. He reached down towards his LBE belt.

Dylan noticed the movement and realized that he was trying to retrieve the pistol she had loaned him. “No, you hang on to that kid. You are gonna need it.”

The Lieutenant smiled again and nodded, staring up at Dylan. He patted the pistol and then sighed.

The medic looked down at him in surprise, and then laid his head on the burned chest. He paused a few seconds then raised sad eyes to hers. “Sorry Ma’am, he’s gone.”

Dylan bowed her head a low deep moan coming from her chest. She sprang to her feet and rushed again to the cave mouth. The terrorists were now standing around the pile of burning remains, laughing as they kicked and prodded the burning bodies of the dead soldiers, unaware of the piercing blue eyes that watched and planned.

The sun had been down for several hours now, the cremation pyre had finally died down and Dylan sat staring silently into the small fire in the back of the cave. The men sat nearby attempting to clean their virtually useless weapons. What good were guns without bullets and the escape had used up nearly all of theirs. Still they continued, gaining some small measure of comfort in the routine as they silently watched the Captain.

Dylan had not moved, had not so much as blinked, in what seemed like hours. Slowly she stood, her head bowed, still staring down at the fire. Finally, she turned and moved to squat near a pile of equipment. Methodically she searched the gear, pulling out two grenades; she attached them to the suspenders of her LBE.

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Standing, she walked to the gear that had belonged to the Lieutenant where she bent and retrieved her pistol. She clicked the release button and dropped the magazine into her hand. Examining the clip she nodded and slipped it back into the weapon pushing the safety into place. She turned back to the small fire and slammed the weapon into her holster. Quietly she began adjusting her LBE, tightening straps and removing excess gear and attaching an additional magazine pouch. Finally, she jumped a few times to settle the additional equipment and check for rattles. Seemingly satisfied, she nodded. Looking up, she quickly glanced around taking stock of the remaining men then motioned for her most senior NCO. Squatting again, she picked up a canteen and poured some of its water onto the dark dirt at her feet. Waiting a few minutes she stirred the mixture with two long fingers. Flattening the ground with the edge of her hand, she began to form a rough terrain map. A young black man came to her side and watched as she piled the wet sand into miniature dunes and valleys. As she worked she spoke softly in calm tones, addressing him without glancing up.

"Corporal Hatters, you are the senior NCO, I am leaving you in command. I need to find out what is going on and I am the only one with the training to get in there and back out. We need support to get out of here and the best way is if we can somehow activate a signal for Command and Control to lock on. I'm not sure who these guys are or why they attacked, but I do know that they have some firepower. I would rather our reinforcements come prepared for that. So, I'm going down there. I have to try to find out what's going on and get an idea of their capabilities. I'm gonna see if I can contact Headquarters or activate some form of communication to get us some help."

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Pointing at one of the hills on the rough map, she continued. "This is our present location. There is a small oasis here," she stated, pointing to a small indentation on the map. "I'm going down and recon the enemy. If I can, I'll call for support and have them fire on the camp. You keep the men here – away from ground zero, the possible impact zone.

She paused, staring at the map, her eyes darting from one sandy feature to the other, her mind picturing possibilities.

"It should be full dark soon. If, for some reason I'm not back by 22 hundred, take the men and head for the oasis." She pointed again at the small scooped out indentation in the sand. "Stay in the shadows of the dunes as much as possible. When you get there, fill all the canteens, then hide in the rocks there until nightfall, then head east. There is a small village about 30 clicks from the water. Travel steady and slow, you have injured and you don't want to lose anyone. The best time to move will be at night, but even then stop often and make sure everyone drinks. You should make it by early evening two days from now. Make sure to brief the Colonel on what happened and send back help. Any questions?" she asked.

The Corporal looked into the piercing blue eyes, then down at the map. Shaking his head in resignation he muttered, "No Ma'am."

There was a slight pause and Dylan heard a whispered, "Damn stubborn woman."

An eyebrow arched in well-practiced intimidation. "What did you say, Corporal?" Dylan had heard the statement, but asked anyway.

"Uh, Good luck, Ma'am," he stuttered, embarrassed at having been caught, but still glad that he had voiced his

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opinion.

Dylan poured more water on the temporary map. Reaching over, she scooped a handful of ash from the edge of the fire and added it to the sand resulting in a thick patch of goeey mud. She stirred the mixture until it formed a soft paste; she watched her hand as if it were attached to another's body. Her mind was a thousand miles and a thousand days away. In her mind's eye, stately pines and the voices of the young men of her village surrounded her. She remembered the lessons taught by her grandfather and unconsciously began to hum an ancient Indian chant, swaying back and forth as she streaked the high planes on her face with the thick, black mud.

As the soldiers watched their commanding officer, a vacant looked glazed Dylan's face. Slowly she stood and turned to face them, her blue eyes startling in the now blackened face. The anger that radiated from her sent shivers up more than one spine. Making eye contact with each individual, Dylan watched as every soldier nodded his head in silent acknowledgement and understanding. They knew that the men who remained in the camp were not prepared for what was about to happen and they each fully understood that she was going to do whatever it took to accomplish the mission. The eerily synchronized nod was their acceptance as well as a silent tribute to her unimaginable courage. The atmosphere inside the small refuge shifted dramatically. Once filled with a sense of desperation and terror, it now pulsed with hope and a burning desire for vengeance.

Dylan moved wordlessly to the mouth of the cave. She stopped and motioned again to Corporal Hatters.

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“Take this Hatters, I won’t be using it down there.”

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She handed him her rifle and spare magazines.

“But Captain, you are gonna be unarmed,” the young man stammered taking the rifle.

“Believe me Hatters, I am never unarmed. But no worries, I have my pistol and plenty of ammo.” She smiled, “Not to mention the grenades.” She reached out and shook his hand. “You take care of my troops for me, you got it?”

“I got it, Ma’am,” he replied, his eyes locking with hers, his spine straightening with the new responsibility.

Turning briefly, she stared back into the faces of her young troops and smiled. Then Captain Dylan Hawke disappeared into the darkness.

Chapter 3

Focus, Dylan thought as she moved like a shadow through the small bushes at the mouth of the cave. Pausing, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness before continuing. She entered a small boulder strewn area covering the base of the hills. Stealthily she moved to the outer edge of the camp. Using the darkness to help hide her movements, she ghost walked towards the edge of the camp. The barbed tape that had once delayed the enemy had now been pushed aside by the aggressors to allow for better access into the camp. Cautiously she stopped again to listen for movement, mentally placing the location of any sound as a possible sentry point. Crouching, she quietly made her way around the edge of the site. A movement to her right caught her attention; a man was bending over the remains of a young soldier, searching through his pockets for any salvageable property. He reached into the back pocket and pulled out the soldier's wallet; flipping through the pictures he found there, he smiled as he noticed the folded bills. Tossing the wallet aside he slung his rifle onto his shoulder and began counting the money, totally oblivious of his surroundings.

Dylan crept up behind him. Reaching between his legs she grabbed his crotch, pulling back and up at the same time she reached up to slam a hand between his shoulder blades. The surprised man fell face first into the dirt. Stunned, he lay motionless for a second too long, Dylan reached around his face, grabbed his chin and jerked. The loud snap sounded like the breaking of dry wood. A second man called out and approached through the darkness and Dylan knew she could not move fast enough to avoid detection. She squatted down next to the

dead man and mimicked an attempt to revive him. The second man approached and crouched across from her on the other side of the dead man. He too looked at the fallen man. He questioned Dylan in a heavy accent and when she did not respond he looked up, startled to see a woman looking back. Smiling he began to rise, but Dylan was faster and she wrapped her right arm behind the man's neck as he was leaning towards her. Quickly rising she tightened her hold, choking off his air and crushing his windpipe. The man fell flailing to the ground, struggling for air.

Turning, Dylan oriented herself and headed in the direction of her command tent. Entering through the rear opening she quickly searched her now scattered gear. In their haste to find valuables, the enemy had overlooked a small pile of clothing and blankets shoved into a corner under her cot. Under the blankets was her spare duffel bag that carried additional equipment, ammo and a small two-way Land Sat-radio with a solar battery. Reaching under her cot, she pulled out a tan backpack, located her Grandfather's bowie knife and another clip for her 9 mm.

Clipping the knife in its sheath to her LBE, she stuffed the remaining equipment, ammo and radio into the pack and shouldered it; then she took a final look around. With a sigh of regret she pulled the pin from the first grenade. She was about to roll it under her cot when she heard the rustle of canvas. Her head jerked up and she stared at the front entrance as the canvas flap was drawn back. Standing there was a handsome dark-eyed Arab, his sharp features back-lit by the burning fires behind him. He stepped towards her in a smooth graceful stride, his nearly black eyes intent on hers. A leering smile spread across his face. As he came within an arms distance from her he stopped. Glancing up and down her body, his eyes

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paused at her nametag and he spoke in a perfect English accent. "Well, the Hawke has returned to her roost. Welcome little hawk."

Dylan drew herself to her full height and glared at the stranger with narrowed, angry eyes. "Are you the bastard who is leading these animals?"

The man bowed at the waist, arrogantly touching his hand to his chest then his forehead then flicking it outward in an arrogant greeting. "May I introduce myself? I am Sharif Kadine. And you, beautiful lady, are my prisoner." He smiled and reached for her.

"I think not, asshole," Dylan replied, grasping his hand in a firm grip and pushing the thumb back. The man gasped in pain and dropped to his knees. Tipping her head slightly to one side and lifting a single dark eyebrow, the officer quietly held up the grenade in her other hand. She relaxed her grip on the small metal ball and allowed the spoon to fly off with a chiming 'ping'. "See you in Hell, dick head." She smiled broadly and tossed the now live grenade to the kneeling man.

Kadine caught it purely out of reflex and stood, gaping at her. Dylan turned, still smiling, and ran from the tent, glancing back in time to see the man throw himself out the entrance just as the tent exploded into a fiery ball of flames and canvas.

"Damn, missed him!" she exclaimed.

Knowing she was on borrowed time, she ran straight to the tank, the steel behemoth that rested near her quarters. She stopped by the tread and, pulling the pin, placed her last grenade - shoving it into the rubber matting of the left tread. She heard the sound of rifle fire and dirt jumped at her feet. She scrambled, dodging bullets, her hands covering her head in a futile attempt to stop any stray rounds. The shouts of the enemy soldiers

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rang in her ears. Darting to the right she headed towards the oasis, knowing that she would be followed and hoping to lead them away from her men secreted in the cave.

That's when she heard it, the sound of cheering. Glancing over her left shoulder, she looked up. Through the shadows of night she saw her men standing in the bushes at the mouth of the cave. She noticed the frantic Corporal, trying to get the men back inside. Behind her, mixed with the sounds of rifle fire she heard him. Kadine was laughing, loudly, insanely laughing.

Aw shit, she thought, her eyes seeking and finding her young troops. They think this is some kind of game. They just gave away their position.

Hearing the explosion of the second grenade, she desperately hoped it had drowned out the sounds of her men's cheers. Turning, she headed towards the cave, frantic to reach it, knowing that the young soldiers were in terrible danger. Their youthful exuberance had targeted their location. Arms pumping and feet flying, she dodged bushes as she scrambled to reach the cave, diving in just as she heard the explosion of the big gun on the tank. Cursing silently she knew she had stopped its capability to move, but not to fire.

The rocks resting above the mouth of the cave exploded violently, throwing sand and rock into the dark opening. A second round hit the ground directly in front of the cave.

They're bracketing our location, she thought, seeing the young soldiers dive into the cave.

"Get back, get to the rear of the cave. Get down NOW!" she screamed and felt the air rush by her as a third round whipped past her head and into the rear wall of the sanctuary scattering bits of broken rock and shrapnel, sharp deadly projectiles, throughout the cave.

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Another round whistled in, slamming into the roof of the cave entrance. The ground trembled and the air filled with dry chalky dust. Dylan felt herself being lifted, spun around and thrown backward into a wall of stone. She was vaguely aware of her head and shoulder slamming into the rock, and bright white lights flashed behind her eyelids, a loud thunderous vibration. Then, there was nothing.

She opened her eyes, panicked at her pain and inability to take a breath. She rolled to her knees, her arms wrapped around her chest in an effort to squeeze air into her starved lungs. Her eyes darted around trying to see through the darkness and the dust. The ringing in her ear grew louder and soon it was followed by the sound of a buzzing like a thousand bees. Her throat closed preventing her from losing what little she still had in her stomach. She felt herself floating, not realizing that she was falling forward and then the earth seemed to reach up and slap her in the face. Blackness and silence covered her.

The almost blessed nothingness was temporary. Pain again invaded her world, jolting her back to reality.

By God, I hurt. Where? What happened?

Her head throbbed, her ears still rang and her side was on fire. Dylan drew her legs up and tucked them close to her bruised body. The movement caused her side to ache. Slowly she brought her feet beneath her and stood on shaking legs. The ringing in her ears grew louder and the ground swayed beneath her as she reached out blindly for the wall. She waited there, grasping the wall as if a lifeline to sanity. Gradually, her vision cleared as she looked around. Her men were broken, bloody and dead. All of them were dead. Silently she fell to her knees, pitching forward, as the world again, went mercifully

black.

As she surfaced again, Dylan began to remember the events of the past few...what was it? Had it been hours, minutes, or days? Holding a shaking hand to her head in a vain attempt to stop the world around her from spinning, she stood. Staggering from body to body, feeling for a pulse, she was to be disappointed again and again. She gathered the dog tags from the bodies, one from each, leaving one to identify the remains. As she wandered through the destruction her scattered wits told her to help her men. In confusion she gathered body parts, arms, legs, even boots with feet still in them, placing some near the appropriate remains and stacking others that she couldn't properly identify into a pile at the rear of the cave.

Dylan stopped often, stumbling to a corner to empty her stomach. Finally her efforts ended in dry heaves when there was nothing else left in her empty stomach. She turned back to continue her gruesome task, her mind not yet fully grasping that her efforts were in vain. The parts would not reattach. The men would not stand if she shoved their feet back onto the mangled legs, but still she continued. Finally she came to the last body. Corporal Hatters, his eyes locked open in shocked amazement, stared at her. The expression on his face reached deep into her subconscious. He was DEAD! Her brain finally kicked in and the numbing shock became gripping, indescribable terror. She had to get out!

Still clutching the bloodied dog tags, she scrambled towards the entrance. The explosion had virtually sealed the cave. The terrorists had not bothered to break through the barrier that sealed the entrance. Noticing a small opening at the top of the mouth, she began to climb. The smell of burnt stone, the sickeningly sweet metallic smell

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of fresh blood, a strange smell of roasting pork and the putrid stench of urine and feces were heavy in the air. Dylan was frantic to escape.

By the time she reached the tiny opening she was babbling and incoherent. Forcing her bruised, bloodied and battered body through the jagged hole she felt the cool air of night strike her face. Lacking even the strength to stop herself, she rolled down the other side of the mound of stone and landed in a heap at the bottom. Dazed, but alive, she staggered to her feet and began walking.

Chapter 4

October 2007

Night had fallen and the shifting sands stilled as if resting for the next day. A light breeze filled the air but no sounds were heard except the faint whisper of cloth lifting and being embraced by the still heated air. A tiny oasis sparkled in the night, the water reflecting a glowing moon and the twinkling stars on its black surface.

A figure sat on the crest of the dune looking past the water and out into the desert, quietly staring across the darkness of the sand. If not for the gentle breeze moving the cloud of black hair she may have been mistaken for a long forgotten statue, half buried in the sand, abandoned by some ancient desert tribe.

Icy blue eyes focused on an unseen target somewhere in the distance, imagining her objective. It was three years now. Three years since the rabid animal had visited insanity upon her life, laughing maniacally as her world blew apart around her. Now she guarded this portion of the desert and sought out the man responsible for the destruction. For these past three years the people of the area had lived in peace and security, protected by a being they considered almost mythical. Here in the hot desert sand, the myth sat alone - watching, remembering, planning and waiting for the moment when justice would at last be served and rest would come for the memories.

Through all of this Dylan was surviving. The desert had been a harsh and bitter taskmaster but she had learned. The lessons were difficult but the options were not acceptable. She knew that she could walk out of the desert at any time and rejoin the living, but as long as she had the strength, she intended to stay until the job was

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completed and Kadine had been punished. The majority of her unit had been found while she had been unconscious but she and the men who had died in the cave had been listed as MIA, missing in action. This allowed her the freedom to remain virtually invisible to the world. It also allowed her to protect the natives whose kindness she was still repaying.

Dylan thought back to the day they'd found her. Even now, the memories were sketchy. Once she had escaped the cave she had stumbled down the embankment and through the destruction of the camp. Staggering, dazed and in pain she wandered out into the desert. They had found her near the oasis, torn, bloody and unconscious. For three days she'd remained that way. With no thought of reward and little thought of the possible dangers involved, the people of the desert had cared for the strange woman, dressing her injuries and seeing to her needs, but she did not wake. The tall stranger screamed and mumbled in her sleep but her eyes did not open. She had fought them whenever they lay hands on her to help her. Finally they were forced to tie her hands and legs to feed her and treat her wounds. After days of agonizing pain, she woke.

They knew instantly that she was different. She had the evil eye, blue eyes, glazed with hate. They feared her but were more afraid to abandon her in the greater fear that she would curse them. They nursed her back to health, all the while terrified and afraid of the vengeance she may rain down on them. They prayed to Allah for salvation. First they had Kadine, now a blue-eyed demon. They initially feared her, but now they knew she had been sent, not to curse them but to curse the desert raiders, to curse Kadine - the man who raped their daughters, stole

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their food and beat down any resistance. She was their answer from Allah. She killed the men of Kadine. In return, they provided her with food, clothes and, when needed, medical attention. They ran messages to the nearby villages for her and dutifully turned over the men she captured alive to the authorities, those few she let live. They knew her only as 'Hawk' for that was the name she gave them.

Whenever the raiders attacked, a silent killer appeared like a dark apparition, bearing down upon their enemy. She fought with dead eyes, feeling nothing and remembering only the smell of scorched stones and the faces of soldiers dead now for three years.

For three years, Dylan had hunted Kadine. For three years she had made it her reason for living. She killed the raiders who worked for him. She destroyed the links to the arms dealer that supplied him and she "enlightened" the towns that supported him. She had cut off his supply lines again and again. Each attack was more brutal than the last until it became clear that to support this man, to help him, would bring a visit from the demon Hawk. Men would die.

Now only a handful of his most loyal soldiers stood between her and the mad man. She knew it would be over soon, he was desperate.

Kadine had initiated the entire action; he had literally assigned her this mission. Her hatred of the madman had fueled the methodical destruction of his empire. It had also made him desperate. He needed men and money to rebuild and now his greed had brought him back here, back to her, and she had been waiting.

Dylan stood, slapping her hands on her rear, brushing off her trouser bottoms; the robes she now wore had replaced her BDU's. She had opted for the dress favored

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by the natives and used them to blend in whenever she needed to go into the nearby village. Though her height and eye color were impossible to hide, she did make a more convincing native in the robes. In addition, the robes allowed her to hide weapons and the loose fit allowed her body to remain cool in the stifling heat.

Since the assault on her unit she had not been able to return to her old site nor had she returned to the cave that had almost been her tomb. She had heard from the locals that NATO had sent a unit of Infantry to the old site and had retrieved the remains of the dead. There had been a ground search for the missing men but no one had thought to check the cave dotted hillside. To this day the men buried in the cave were still listed along with her, as MIA, Missing In Action. Every once in a long while she would pull out the dog tags she had collected and stare at the blood stained bits of metal, putting the faces of young men long dead to the names and social security numbers.

She turned from the view of rolling sand and retraced her steps back to her camp in the foothills near the oasis. She always returned here after each battle, to recover, to bathe her wounds in the cool waters of one of the small spring fed pools. Now virtually on the eve of her long awaited meeting, her mind drifted back and she thought of the time before, when the desert people found her. Though she remembered very little clearly, she did recall the hands that had cared for her. Her body was broken and in pain. They treated her wounds and gave her what little food and medicine that they had. They had saved her life, but healing her body had not healed her mind. The nights were the worst with their dark and quiet. Her mind drifted back again and again. She constantly thought of the "What if's". What if she had not gone for that bath, would she have spotted the attack sooner and

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been better prepared? What if they had not gone into the caves? What if she had waited to check the site? All these questions came back to her at night. Her mind replayed the possible outcomes over and over. She questioned her decisions and, on occasion, her existence. Why should she have survived when the men in her unit were all dead? Night after restless night, the thoughts racing through her mind kept her awake. She found herself fighting harder, taking bigger risks, and placing herself in more and more dangerous situations, until she usually collapsed from injuries or exhaustion.

Now, whenever she needed a retreat, a place to heal, or a quiet environment to fight the demons in her soul, she returned to this place. Sometimes the demons allowed her to rest, sleeping without dreams, but most nights she found herself back on the dune staring out at the star filled sky. But for some reason this night was different. The air was awake with electricity. Something was getting ready to happen. Something bigger than a raid, bigger than an attack on a village. This was the same feeling that she had felt three years ago, only this time she would listen to her instincts.

What has me so jumpy? I hate this feeling; I have been at it since yesterday. Something is wrong. Her thoughts turned inward, thinking of possibilities, but nothing came to mind. Maybe it's warning me that the final battle is here. I know he's desperate. Maybe he'll make the move I have been waiting for, she thought with a grim smile. Then, I can finish it.

Reaching her tiny fire, Dylan squatted and stirred a pot of shepherd's stew; the aroma of cooking mutton filled her senses. She smiled grimly while thinking back to the MRE's that had been a mainstay during those early days.

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"I still hate those damn things," she muttered to herself, reaching into a small bag at her side for a pinch of salt. She hummed to herself as she slowly sprinkled the salt into the stew, staring as it dissolved, her mind wandering, images, memories, appearing unbidden to her mind's eye.

Some days the pictures were vivid, filled with laughter and fun, memories of the events before Kadine. Other days, like today, were more difficult. She had started the morning early, a headache waking her to the predawn light. Her sleep had been even more disturbing than usual. This particular dream had always been the same; she relived the explosion in the cave again and again. But last week the dreams had begun to change. First there were subtle differences, now they were much more pronounced. In the past, the dreams started each night with the sound of screams. At first they had been the screams and shouts of her men, but last week she heard a new sound, the sound of a woman's screams. Initially she thought they were her own but gradually she realized that they were coming from deep inside the cave. She could see herself in the dream; she was searching for someone, the screaming woman. In the dream, the woman's voice was as familiar to her as her own and she knew that the woman was in danger. Dylan knew that she would do whatever was necessary to protect her. Last night, like so many nights this week, the woman had screamed Dylan's name and, in the dream, reached out to her. She knew the woman in her dreams she knew what she looked like, smelled like, tasted like. On more than one occasion the soldier woke sitting straight up with her hand outstretched, the woman's name still on her lips, but forgotten in the light of day, she could never remember it. Dylan closed her eyes and tried desperately to recall the

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details of the dream, but all she could see was a face surrounded by a veil of blond hair and the impression of green eyes.

Frustrated, she would sit for hours, her head in her hands, cursing under her breath at the fates that had put her there, so far from everything she knew.

Taking a deep breath she stood and slipped silently back to the edge of the camp. Her appetite was gone. She paced in the fading light, finally stopping on the crest of the dune. She stared out at the distant hills, unmoving, the light breeze catching her dark flowing robes. Once again she became a silent sentinel appearing like an eerie apparition silhouetted against the night sky.



Lura stared out the window of the decrepit 747, watching the ground creep closer. Everything in sight was one monotonous color: tan. The ground was tan, the runway was tan, hell even the trees and grass were tan. She smiled at that thought.

Damn, I bet if I stare long enough the sky will turn tan, she chuckled to herself.

She brought her mind back to the view and caught site of her own reflection in the scratched Plexiglas window. Her soft green eyes, large and haunted from lack of sleep, her short blonde hair that just reached her shoulders seemed like a tossed cap of gold on her head. She studied her eyes, trying to see the truth there. She had no idea what had drawn her here or why; she simply knew she had to come.

Shifting uncomfortably in the seat, she tightened the ancient seat belt and brushed the wrinkles from her travel worn trousers. She really hated flying, it made her ears pop and her stomach flip, but she would do anything for

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this story, even fly to God knows where in an overcrowded excuse for an airplane with nearly nonexistent air conditioning. To make matters worse, she was seated next to an older man who seemed to think that she was a lounge pillow. He took any and every opportunity to lay his head on her shoulder and attempt to wrap an arm around her waist. Rolling her eyes towards the ceiling, Lura sighed and, faking a stretch, politely elbowed the offender in the nose, gasping in mock surprise at the grunt of pain from the man. She smiled and stared at him until he turned away, only to lean on the shoulder of the passenger on his other side.

Turning back to the window Lura stared again out at the barren landscape that flowed like a huge brown ocean below her. She still could not believe she was here. It had taken every bit of her charisma and ingenuity to talk her boss into allowing her to take this trip, but she knew a story when she heard one and this was definitely a story.

God, it had better be a story. I sure have a lot riding on this. Only eight months left to prove myself. Why did I make that stupid deal with Mother? Maybe I should have just worked my way through school like I threatened to do. Sometimes tradition and money can bite donkey's butt. Mother and her Southern ideas will be the death of me yet. Well, more likely the death of my career if I don't make this work. Only eight measly months between the career I've always dreamed of and being a frigging romance writer in the nauseatingly grand tradition of knights on white horses and wussy females waiting to be rescued. There is only one thing that could be worse, becoming another Richmond high society housewife. Not! I can't think about that right now. I have to think about the Hawk. He exists. I know he exists. Why else would I be so damned obsessed?

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Lura thought back to the rumors she had heard of the mysterious Hawk. All through college the national rags had carried stories, most unbelievable, about the sole desert warrior.

Why is it that all the weird shit happens in some out of the way place half way round the world? Why can't it happen someplace nice like Las Vegas, or the Bahamas? And who the hell came up the name Virgin Islands? What the devil kind of name is that? Oh well, this Hawk better turn out to be the real thing or I am in deep doo. I can't go back without this story.

Her worried eyes turned back to look out the window at the quickly moving ground. Her mind drifted back to the Hawk.

For years the people of this region had spoken of a mythical being they called "Hawk". The legend had become so large that the stories of his exploits had reached the ears of the American people. He had become a modern day Robin Hood, but he was also a mystery as no one had ever seen his face. If they did they were either dead or not talking. Some people claimed he was a myth, a figment of a sun-touched imagination. Now, thousands of miles from home, she would actually have the chance to investigate the stories.

In college she had stumbled on the story in one of the trash papers in the dentist's office. She had picked it up and browsed through it in an effort to distract her mind from the thought of impending doom, also called a filling. She absolutely hated the dentist. It was nothing personal, but the idea of a man with a sharp needle rooting around in her mouth just gave her the heebies. So she had arrived that afternoon almost an hour late for her appointment, hoping that they would be forced to reschedule and thus giving her an excuse to delay the torture, but her luck had

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run out. There had been a cancellation and she had arrived just in time to take the cancelled appointment, lucky girl. So she sat waiting and sweating and swearing. She glanced around at the available reading material and was torn between reading about the slaughter of Bambi and his kin or how she could trim those extra inches off of her hips with a little starvation diet and Special Forces exercises. Totally disgusted, she had almost resigned herself to total boredom and counting cracks in the ceiling when she noticed the rag paper in the seat two rows in front of her. She casually strolled forward pretending to be looking at the latest issue of Glamour when she “accidentally” stumbled on the rag. Snatching it up she returned to her seat for a bit of quiet reading distraction. After reading the short item about the two headed piglet born to the fifteen year old pot bellied pig she turned the page and read her first story on the Hawk. She was hooked. She had pretended to forget to leave the magazine and had slipped it into her bag when she left the dentist’s office. From that day on she had purchased or copied every magazine article she could find on the elusive hero. Finally, in an effort to keep track of her notes, she purchased a scrapbook and began pasting the articles in it. That was three years and five scrap books ago. The Hawk had become an obsession. When the opportunity arose to conduct an in depth investigation and report on myths and legends, she had brought out her scrapbooks. She remembered how the guys back in the newsroom had laughed at her, offering to pay the travel expenses for her next story, a trip to Loch Ness to find the Monster. She’d laughed along in good humor, but days later she was the one with the last laugh as she strolled out the door to the waiting cab. She’d waved her ticket at them as she went. That had been two long days ago. Now,

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just beneath her laid the deserts of Saudi Arabia, a country fought over for as long as humans could remember. She was about to touch down in a land bathed in mystery, steeped in history and, she hoped, holding the key to her future in journalism.

Could I have come up with a place more different than home? This dry, hot, unending land is such a sharp contrast to the cool soothing greens of Virginia. Here there's sand as far as the eye can see, where at home there'd be rolling hills and ivy covered walls. The genteel southern charm of Virginia versus the harsh, brutal reality of this barren wasteland. This is going to be great. I hope our connections in Saudi can get me an interview. I can't wait to meet this Hawk fellow.

She opened her journal and reviewed her notes. The Hawk was believed to be the spirit of an ancient warrior, returned to once again protect the needy people from marauding killers. He was said to protect the innocent from the horrors of the roaming armies of terrorists who called themselves holy soldiers. The people described him as incredibly tall, with cold blue eyes that could penetrate the bodies of the wicked and steal their very souls. If one believed all the locals said, this being was amazingly strong, never felt pain and was never injured. He could walk through the sand and never leave tracks; he would simply appear when needed, diving in during the heat of battle, silent, deadly and unstoppable then leave before anyone could touch him.

Yep, and he leaps tall buildings in a single bound, Lura chuckled. Why am I here? Is this guy for real or am I on some kind of wild goose chase? Here I sit, trying to psyche myself up to do what? Not be frightened that I won't find him or be terrified that I will?

If I were being honest with myself I would realize I

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didn't come here only for a story, but I would also have no other clue as to why I am here. I just know I had to come.

Ever since she had begun hearing stories of the Hawk, even as far back as her journalism classes at the University of Virginia, she had been drawn to this point, this place in time. For the last two years she had seen him almost every night in her dreams when she closed her eyes.

She saw the tall dark figure standing alone in the sand. The wind whipping his robes, he always stood alone facing a small quiet pool. She tried every night to see the features she knew would be reflected in the still water. She never did. It didn't matter, she had known who he was. He was Hawk. But lately the dreams had changed. The image that to her dreaming mind had always appeared distant, powerful and very masculine had begun to soften. The image of the flowing robes had changed. Now Lura could tell that it wasn't just long black robes lifted by the desert wind but also long jet-black hair. The profile had begun to clarify, to sharpen into the profile of a beautiful woman with crystal blue eyes. Eyes that held unimaginable sorrow in their icy depths. Lura felt drawn to the strange apparition. She felt the need to protect her, not her body, but her soul. Every night now she dreamed of the beautiful woman. Every night she felt the pull of a battered soul calling to her own. But why was she imagining the Hawk as a woman or was this woman someone who was destined to have an impact on her meeting with the Hawk? Did the strange beautiful woman need help? Did she care? YES!

I don't know who you are or where you've gone, but I know that we will meet. I'll be there for you. I will find you.

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Lura was startled from her thoughts by the sudden jarring of the plane as it touched down, the huge body shuddering as the ailerons lifted to slow the ancient craft.

I'm here; finally, I'm here.

Chapter 5

Well, my instincts are telling me something is up and if it's right, and I am sure it is, I had better get ready for it.

Finding herself short of supplies, Dylan decided to venture into town. Dressed again in the dark desert robes, she wandered through the local market looking for material to replace her worn sleeping blankets and stock up her food supplies. As always, she kept her ears opened for leads on the monster she hunted. That's how she heard about the visiting television crew.

Gossips in the markets were godsend to her.

Better than CNN, she smirked.

She moved towards the fresh fruit vendors, this was where the more affluent natives gossiped. If there were critical issues to discuss this was where she would hear about them.

Two elegantly dressed ladies were puttering about testing the ripeness of the fruit and chattering away at each other excitedly. Dylan moved in closer in the pretense of selecting a small citrus fruit, her ears perked to pick up the now familiar tones of the language. Apparently the ladies were discussing the upcoming visit of a camera crew. The women were very excited and wondered if their husbands would permit them to see the crew filming. Things had changed dramatically since the war, but they were from the old school and though the infidels from the east tempted them, they still followed the old ways.

Dylan listened as the women spoke in hushed tones and giggled at the prospect of their images captured on film. Knowing that this would most likely be forbidden made the idea even more exciting. She leaned in closer

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trying to hear when the crew would be here.

Since she had started her search for Kadine three years ago, Dylan had tried to keep abreast of world changes and those in the US in particular. But, some things were almost impossible to monitor. She was lucky to know who was at war with whom and to keep up with which political party was in control of the Senate. The idea of learning anything as minor as the name of a new anchorman would be impossible. This fellow, LG Evans, was a complete unknown. Though she had never heard of Evans, the idea of a camera crew in the area was fantastic. Not only had the idea excited the locals she knew that this could be the thing to pull Kadine out of the desert and into her sights. All of this was great news, that is, until she heard that this crew was here not to find the leader of the terrorist group, but searching for the mysterious Hawk.

Having learned enough, Dylan hurried to complete her shopping and head back to the oasis. She intended to have enough supplies to stay hidden until the crew gave up and left. The last thing on her agenda was to blow her cover with a news story.

I need to pick up some meat and fruit, and then I'll head back to camp.

Having purchased a cured leg of mutton, she wandered back towards the fresh fruit stands intent on tapping that source one more time and to pick up a bit more citrus to supplement her diet. As she walked closer she noticed the vender speaking to a slovenly dressed man. Moving closer she overheard another discussion, this one sent chills up and down her spine.

The vendor of one stand was speaking to a roughly dressed man. Apparently, Kadine was intent on kidnapping the anchorman and his crew. He planned on holding them for ransom and selling the camera

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equipment on the local black market. The equipment alone was worth a fortune, not to mention the value the news company and the US government would place on the crew and anchorman.

Initially, Dylan felt anger; Kadine was going to try to screw with another group of Americans. Her fists clenched, her lips formed a hard line that slowly turned into a grim smile.

What the hell is wrong with me? This is perfect. Finally, the opportunity to be in the same place as Kadine. Now all I have to do is wait.

Hurriedly she completed her shopping, then headed back to her secluded camp. There was a lot to do, and the sooner she began to get ready the sooner it would be over. It had taken three years to reach this point, but soon, she would have the chance to bring an animal to justice. Dylan knew Kadine's intentions; he would ransom the men and then turn around and sell them to the highest bidder. He would try to use the money to restore his ravaged army. She intended to throw a very large, very angry, blue-eyed wrench into the works.

As she hurried back to her site, she began to formulate a plan of action. Since she had begun her one-woman war on Kadine he had made some changes in his SOP, Standard Operating Procedures. In the past she had not only been able to counter his attacks on the local villages, she had entered his camp at night and destroyed valuable equipment. The training she had received as a young girl all those years ago in the Carolina Mountains had come in handy. She was able to slip in to and out of the campsites without leaving a trace. This had spooked many of the men and sparked sporadic desertions in the ranks. Kadine had really gotten frightened when she had entered his private tent one night and left a hawk's

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feather, her calling card, on his pillow. The next morning, his screams had drawn his personal guards in. The verbal abuse that followed still made her chuckle. The result had been the death of two on his private security guards and the weekly relocation of his camp. She had only been able to locate it once since that time and that had been months ago. She knew he was down to a small group of loyal followers and one more attack would destroy them. She just had to find his newest hiding place. Now there was a way to do just that.

She knew she needed to allow the kidnapping to occur, and then she could follow the men back to their camp and finally destroy the viper in his pit.



The hotel room was stifling and miserably dark. The yellowed walls showed signs of age in every crack. The once gold curtains had faded to a sickly yellow. The formerly deep green carpet was now what Lura liked to refer to as “baby upchuck” green. An ancient desk crouched in a corner by the room’s only window; a wobbly wooden chair provided the only seat, with the exception of the bed.

Lura sat gingerly on the edge of the chair, trying to avoid getting splinters in some very uncomfortable places and stared into the colorful screen of her laptop, reviewing the notes she had compiled for her story. A disgusted expression appeared on her face as she read her interview comments from earlier in the week.

She had met with a horrible little man named El Kadine, who claimed that he was the savior of the people. The impression Lura had gotten was that he was, in fact, exactly what all earlier reports had called him: a greedy, disgusting, self glorifying terrorist. A slime ball that fed

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on the misfortunes of the poor and ignorant. Thoughts of him conjured up pictures of slimy eels and the feeling of needing a steaming hot shower, preferably with lye soap.

They had been in Riyadh for three days now, and Lura had visited every restaurant, bar and dive in the town. No one was talking. No one would tell them anything useful about the Hawk. After all their efforts, they had little or no more information now than they had when they arrived. Lura knew the Hawk had a habit of appearing when most needed. She knew that he was tall and incredibly strong. He apparently had startlingly blue eyes and could kill a man with little regard or provocation. It seemed like very little information for three days worth of hard work, but that was all they had. There was no way she could possibly write a feature article with what little she had, she needed to meet the Hawk.

“I would do anything, pay any price just to spend five minutes with him.” She spoke aloud, to no one in particular.

For days she had questioned the townspeople. The inhabitants of the town were either in fear of the Hawk or loved him to distraction. Most would rather turn in their fathers than betray this supposed hero. Whenever she asked for a description of the man, they would smile, shake their heads and look at her as if she had lost her mind.

My god, you would think we were asking them to give up information on national security, Lura thought. Well, one more chance. Bob said something about a small village in the desert where the Hawk was supposed to hang out. If we stay there long enough he may show up. I just hope the paper lets us extend our visit.

Shutting down her laptop, Lura closed the lid and

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slipped the slender computer into its padded carrying case. Zipping it shut, she set it on the floor next to her small suitcase. Still mentally preoccupied, she walked into the tiny bathroom and began packing her toiletries. She paused as a sudden thought popped into her mind. Glancing up into the foggy ancient mirror she stared into her own startled eyes.

What if we do meet him God I hope I don't make a complete idiot of myself. I had better review my interview questions again. I doubt he will be in the mood for any long conversations, so I have to narrow them down to really pertinent things. That means asking about his girlfriend is a definite No, No. God, why am I so interested in his love life? What is it about this Hawk?

Now angry at the thought of being tongue-tied or embarrassed, she stomped out of the bathroom and roughly stuffed her toiletry bag into the top of her suitcase completing her packing. Still mumbling to herself, Lura shouldered her laptop bag, picked up her suitcase and headed out the door. She stalked down the stairs past the front desk and outside to her waiting camera crew.

Bob stood in the hot sun by the van waiting for the reporter. He smiled when he saw the young anchorwoman. She was dressed in khaki walking shorts, a short sleeved white top, and a tan sleeveless vest with lots of pockets finished her outfit. Her arms and legs had still not tanned in the hot desert sun- her skin was a soft pearl tone. The sunlight had brought out the burnished red highlights in her golden hair, making her sparkling hazel eyes appear light green. Feeling more like an over-protective father than the senior member of the crew, Bob grabbed Lura's bag and tossed it into the back of the rented van. He then held the sliding rear door open and helped the petite woman inside. Making sure that she had

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fastened her seat belt and that the door was secure, he slid into the front passenger seat and gave Richard, the camera man, a nod to head out.

Lura reached back and pulled her laptop from the bag; opening it she turned it on and began typing out her thoughts as they traveled along the bumpy road towards the village. After attempting to retype the same sentence three times unsuccessfully she determined that she was just too geared up to write. She shut down and stored the small computer, then glancing down at her watch was surprised to learn that she had been working on her notes for just under an hour. She knew that the village was about two hours away so she decided to nap the rest of way there. Reaching up she loosened the seatbelt then turned sideways and curled her legs up under her. She laid her arm across the back of the seat and pillowed her head on it. The gentle rolling bump of the van put her to sleep in minutes.

Damn, I bet that woman could sleep sitting on a flagpole, Bob thought, as he glanced back at the young woman. He smiled when he noticed that she had not removed her seatbelt. *Smart move kid, rough as these roads are you don't want to take chances.* He turned back around and tugged on his own belt to reassure himself that he was securely strapped in. Leaning his head against the glass window he shut his eyes and nodded off.

The street was lit by sunlight; the wind blew clouds of dust up in tiny tornados. She walked between two very large tan buildings and down a long brightly lit alley. Through the light she could make out a dark silhouette. She squinted her eyes in a vain attempt to make out the features on the figure at the end of the path. It was dressed in black flowing robes, long ebony hair danced in the breeze, a scarf covered the lower portion of the face,

but she could make out the glitter of crystal blue eyes. Lura stepped closer and her hand reached out to touch the face of the figure.

Suddenly she felt her body thrown sideways, she was jerked away from the shadowy figure in black. Screaming, Lura felt herself falling. Her eyes flew open and, for a moment, she didn't know where she was. She heard the sound of tires squealing and the van swerved again. Lura looked out the window and saw a sport utility vehicle swerving into their path. The vehicle slammed into the side of the van causing it to jerk wildly.

"HEY! Richard, what's goin' on?" Lura screamed in confusion and alarm, her hands grasping the back of the seat as she twisted and the seatbelt tightened to keep her in place.

"Hang on Lura!" Richard yelled, struggling with the steering wheel to keep the vehicle on the road. "I think we are in trouble here. Some asshole is trying to run us off the road." Richard pulled the van back onto the road, pressing on the gas. The battered vehicle shot ahead of the SUV, but the more powerful Utility Vehicle quickly caught up with them.

As it positioned itself to ram the smaller van again, Bob yelled out. "Watch out, Richard! Hit the brakes man, Hit them NOW!"

Richard slammed his foot onto the brake pedal and the van's rear wheels locked as it skidded to a stop. Richard pulled the wheel around and turned the van around, heading back toward Riyadh.

Lura stared out the rear window and watched as the SUV turned off the road and in a large circle. In a cloud of dust it pulled back on and headed for them. She watched in horror as it got closer and closer, never slowing.

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She screamed as the van was rammed in the rear quarter panel by the SUV. She looked into the face of the determined driver and saw hatred and anger there. Dressed in dark brown robes he smiled as he approached again determined to force them from the road. Beside him, the passenger waved a semi-automatic rifle and gestured wildly, screaming at the driver.

"Get down, Lura!" Bob yelled. Spotting the weapon, he reached back to force the young reporter to the floor just as bullets shattered the windshield. At that moment, Richard lost control of the vehicle. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. The truck slammed into the side of the van. The left front wheel of the van caught on a boulder on the edge of the road. A loud grinding was followed by a harsh metallic snap and the wheel went flying off. The front of the van dropped, its bumper burying itself in the soft sand. The weight of the vehicle forced the front end to go instantly into the dirt, stopping the forward movement suddenly. Lura felt herself torn from her seatbelt, thrown forward. She saw the headrest of the seat in front of her coming towards her at an alarming speed, then nothing.

It was the throbbing that woke her. The entire right side of her face was on fire. Lura frowned trying to remember what had happened.

THE VAN! The man with the gun. BOB! The memories came flooding back. She gasped and opened her eyes. It was dark and she couldn't breathe. The air smelled moldy and damp. Raising her hand to her head, she realized that there was a blanket covering her face.

What? Why? She grunted in pain as the scratchy blanket rubbed a raw place on her cheek. That is when she heard them, voices, angry voices; some in English some in Arabic.

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Shoving the blanket aside she quickly closed her eyes as the light from a nearby lamp shone in them. *Well, that explains the breathing problem and the darkness,* She thought. *What the hell is all the screaming about? For the love of Zeus, don't they know I have a splitting headache?*

Sitting up and throwing the blanket completely off, Lura turned towards the sound of the voices. There was Bob, some strange man was yelling at him. Three other men stood behind the first man, all carried weapons. Staggering to her feet she approached the men. Richard, his hands tied behind his back, was on his knees next to Bob, she watched in stunned amazement as the man in dark robes raised the rifle he held, swinging it down towards Bob's head. The older man turned at the last minute; taking the blow on his shoulder, his arm going instantly numb from the impact.

What the hell? What are they doing? I have got to stop them! Lura started towards the men. The man with the rifle now stood over Bob threateningly. His eyes caught Lura's movement and a smile creased his face. He turned away from her and slapped Bob on the side of his face, yelling and pointed back at Lura. She only understood bits and pieces of what he was saying. Something about hiding something from him.

Lura did not hesitate; she sprang onto the back of the armed man. Wrapping an arm around his neck and her legs around his waist, she hung on for dear life, her small fists pounding on the man's back for all she was worth.

"Run Bob!" she screamed, reaching around and landing a solid blow squarely on the man's nose. She smiled when she saw blood trickle from one nostril.

The strange man twisted his body, throwing the frantic woman to the ground. His hand reached up towards his battered nose coming away with a heavy

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smear of blood. Looking down at the fallen woman he grimaced, drew back his foot and kicked her in the side. Glancing over his shoulder he looked at his friends, gestured wildly and commented in Arabic. They pointed first at Lura then at the angry man with the rifle and laughed. He turned again and looked down at the small blonde, a smile appeared on his face as he knelt beside her. Gathering her shirtfront in his fist, he stood, exclaiming loudly in rapid Arabic, as he shook her. He repeated his words over and over. Finally he drew his hand back and slapped her across the cheek. The men behind him laughed and gestured, encouraging him. He turned to them, still holding Lura by the shirt, he gestured at them to be quiet. They continued to laugh as he turned still angry eyes towards the stunned woman. He sneered at her and repeated the same phrase again.

Lura, her ears ringing from the blow, simply stared angrily at her assailant.

The large man slammed his fist into her chest and flung her away from him like a used rag.

Lura lay on the ground where she curled tightly into a ball, struggling to control the scream of pain. She felt as if her chest had been caved in. She drew her legs up closer to her body in an effort to ease the pain.

Bob watched in horror as the man in dark brown beat the young woman. As the attacker bent towards his small target again he and Richard both sprang to their feet and charged the armed guards.



Dylan stared into the fire, her hands methodically sharpening her bowie knife. The sound of the whetstone sliding against the blade's edge seemed to calm her. She smiled, thinking of the night ahead. She knew that Kadine

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would have to set up a more permanent camp so that he could film his demands. He wouldn't be able to move fast, his hostages needed to be in good condition if he expected any return on his "investment". The anchorman, LG Evans, and the two-man camera crew were worth their weight in gold to any despot who was willing to pay the price. Most wanna-be dictators would love to set up their own propaganda television show and be capable of televising it worldwide. The technology and equipment the crew possessed would allow anyone access to satellite bans around the world. No, endangering the crew would be foolish.

Dylan had seen the burned out hull of the crew's van and the trail that led from the van to another vehicle. She had followed the tire tracks into the desert and now she had him. Kadine was camped within five miles of her location. She would wait and watch. Kadine would force the crew to film his demands; he would have those demands sent, via satellite, worldwide. For once in his miserable life, he would be the center of world attention, and then she would move. She would take all of that from him. The key to screwing up Kadine's mission was to rescue Evans and that crew right from under his nose. He would be humiliated in front of the entire world; he would lose face and the faith of those few remaining troops. Then she would return to destroy whatever was left of his army.

I think I will pay little Kadine a quiet social call tonight and stir up the pot a bit. Dylan smiled and returned the knife to its sheath. Standing, she melted into the darkness.



Kadine was furious; he stormed into his tent

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screaming at the top of his lungs. His men would ruin everything. They were endangering his entire plan just because they could not limit their needs to the camp whores. The men would be dealt with as an example to others, they would be executed so that others would profit from the example. This thought brought a grim smile to the handsome face, but it faded as he realized that his dream of fame was slowly slipping through his fingers.

He had his personal physician look in on his hostages. One man had fought with his hands tied behind his back. The fool died bravely, but a brave dead man is just a dead body to bury. The other man, older but very strong, had a broken collarbone, several broken ribs and a deep puncture wound in the chest. The doctor said his chances would be better if he was taken to a hospital, but that was not possible. Last and most important, the woman had taken a brutal beating. Her face was bruised and badly swollen; she also had several cracked ribs, apparently from being kicked by the men. There were deep gashes on her chest and arms from both nails and knives when the men had tried to rape her and cut off her clothes. The doctor felt she might live if cared for.

The worst part was that without the crew they would have to depend on her knowledge to use the camera equipment. Not only was this demeaning, but she was so badly beaten that she had still not regained consciousness. How was he going to be able to film his demands now?

"Idiots!" Picking up a small folding table he threw it into the tent wall. Still frustrated he kicked over his cot and threw blankets and pillows through the door. He screamed and raged as he paced the length of his tent.

He finally tired himself out and paused by the tent opening. Throwing aside the canvas flap he bellowed, "Rashiem!" Moments later a swarthy giant lumbered

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into the tent and knelt on one knee before Kadine.

"El Kadine," he said with his head bowed in respect for the angry smaller man. Rashiem had been with Kadine since the early days and though he was older and much larger than the other man, he looked upon him as a mentor. After all, Kadine had taken him from a lowly village bully to be second in command of his army. That army had slowly dwindled over the last few years, but he was confident that El Kadine would restore it and he would once again stand at the head of a great and terrifying force. His devotion to this mad man was driven by greed but was still almost fanatical.

"Find the families of those idiots and kill them all," he ranted, his eyes sparking in the dim light.

Rashiem could see the madness dancing in those black eyes and for the first time in his life he was afraid.

"Do it. Now!" Kadine bellowed, flicking his wrist and dismissing the giant to carry out his bidding. Kadine closed his eyes for a moment and willed himself to calm down. Taking a deep breath he turned and stalked to the large mirror attached to the pole in the center of his tent. He stood there, staring angrily at his own image. After a few minutes he began to smile at himself, posing and grinning at his own reflection. He had always thought himself a rather handsome man and he evaluated himself as he stared into the mirror. His slick black hair was cut in a fashionable style, which could not hide the receding hairline. His nose was fine boned and not at all the prominent beak of his father. His skin had always been a soft golden brown, but that had changed. It had darkened to mahogany now since he was constantly exposed to the desert sun. Still he thought he was irresistibly handsome. Most women would agree with him until they looked into his cold dead eyes. After admiring his image in the tall

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glass he turned, speaking aloud as he paced the length of the tent, trying to decide how to revive his plans.

"I must ensure the girl lives. I will need her to train another camera crew. We can still sell the men back to the government, they do not know they are dead." He smiled at the thought of making a fool of the American government. "I think I will keep the woman. She will make a fine wife, and if not, I can always sell her. After I have enjoyed her."

With a plan now in mind, he began to remember the face of the woman when she had interviewed him earlier. Blondes were quite rare here and this one had hair of yellow fire, her eyes were the cool soothing green of the desert palms. He understood the fascination of his men; she was indeed a rare treat. If the government did not pay for the camera crew, he knew that she would sell quickly on the white slave market.



Lura lay on her back in the dark corner of the hot tent. Bob Carter propped himself into a position closer to the girl and wrung out a cloth of lukewarm water. The doctors had told him to keep her injuries as clean as possible and try to keep her calm. He was just glad she was still out; at least she did not feel the pain. Wiping the girl's bruised and battered face he grimaced as he remembered the beating she had taken.

*Dumb kid, should have just let them slap us around.
We would have never told.*

The cameramen had hidden the girl in a depression in the back of the tent and covered her with the torn blankets and pillows they had been given to sleep on. They had seen the looks the guards had given the small woman when they had first carried her in and knew that it would

only be a matter of time before one of them acted on their thoughts. The guards had come in that night and, not seeing the girl, had assumed that the cameramen had somehow helped her escape. They were taking out their anger on the crew when Lura had awakened, thrown off the covers and attacked the largest of the guards.

"She's got guts. Not real smart," he smirked with a proud grin, "but she does have guts".

Bob smiled sadly at the memory of the fiery young woman attacking. Then he could still see two of the guards first driving them both off, then turning their attention to the helpless fallen woman. The third guard knocked Richard unconscious with the butt of his rifle then held the gun on Bob as the other began to beat the girl into submission. They had torn at her clothes and kicked her after repeatedly throwing her to the ground. Finally, as they began ripping at her shirt, Richard came to. Unable to sit and watch Lura get raped, they attacked again, driving back the guards. Richard had fallen under the blades and fists of one of the guards, while Bob had struggled with the other two, getting stabbed repeatedly in the process. The noise had alerted Kadine who rushed into the chaos screaming obscenities, all the while beating the guards with a riding whip. Bob had fallen to his knees by Lura's small huddled form and shielded her with his own body, but the damage had been done. Lura lay half naked and still, her eyes clamped shut in pain and her arms wrapped around her midsection, Richard lay in a growing pool of blood, not moving.

That had been hours ago and Lura still had not awakened. *The doctor, if that is what you could call that quack*, Bob thought, *said she might have a concussion and would most likely be out for hours*. He had injected her with something that was supposed to help her to relax

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and ease the pain. Now, partially dressed, she was stretched out on a torn blanket, her head rested on a thin pillow. Bob looked at the battered pale face again. Her lips were split and bloody, the entire right side of her face from hairline to jaw was swollen and bruised from the kick she had taken to the side of her head. He knew that her body was covered with angry red marks that later would turn to livid bruises.

That is really gonna piss her off, he thought with a grin.

His smile soon disappeared when he remembered seeing her small body thrown to the ground again and again. The brutes who seemed to be angered by her defiant will ignored her moans of pain. He had been glad at first that she had lost consciousness, knowing that she would be in a great deal of pain once she woke. He thought she might have some bruised or broken ribs, which had been confirmed by the quack. What he was afraid of now was the possibility of internal damage. He did not trust the doctor after watching his brief examination of Lura. It seemed his attitude was the same as most of the men he had met since arriving at the camp. Bob was worried his injuries were severe and he was still losing blood.

The older man inhaled sharply, the stinging feeling reminding him of the slowly bleeding gash that ran the length of his side and across his midsection. The doctor had bandaged him up, but Bob had refused the painkillers that were offered. He didn't think he would ever wake up from them and someone had to protect Lura.

She's been out for too long, I need her to wake up. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be here for her and she's got to protect herself.

He again rinsed out the tattered rag and gently wiped

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the battered face, saying a silent prayer for help.

Chapter 6

Dylan crept along the edge of the camp, slowly low crawling, closer and closer. Kadine had been smart about this location, if she had not seen the tire tracks she might have overlooked it. The majority of his tents had been stolen from her former unit and were the standard tan canvas tents issued to desert field units. He had fewer men than in the past so he was only able to provide a minimum of security. With this in mind he had selected an easily defended site. His back was to a steep hillside and he had cleared most of the small bushes from his front and sides. There were only enough to break up the profile of the site and provide cover for one very determined young soldier. As she slowly dragged herself along, she paused occasionally to check her surroundings. She was only a few feet from a line of brush that edged the camp. A slight breeze kicked up small dust devils and brought the smell of blood to her nose. Cautiously she lifted her head and glanced in the direction of the airflow. To her left she noticed a strange, oddly shaped rock. She turned her body and inched towards it a feeling of dread creeping along her spine. On closer inspection, the rocks were not rocks at all but the naked bodies of three men. All had been severely beaten then shot in the back of the head, execution style. It was too dark and without a light source Dylan was unable to tell if they were members of the film crew or not. A sudden feeling of dread ran through her body. *What if I waited to long? What if I could have saved them? No, I have a mission, the mission comes first.* Nodding to herself she crawled around the bodies and continued towards the camp. Crawling towards a large grouping of bushes her hand brushed something cold and rubbery. She stopped and let her

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fingers search the curious object. It was a child, a young boy, and he was very dead. Dylan pushed herself up and quickly glanced around, in the dull moonlight she could make out several bodies. Four men, stripped naked but who appeared to have been soldiers, three fairly young women, an elderly couple and two young boys, all dead and left for the desert beast to feed on. At least the boys and the women had been killed quickly, Dylan thought, noting the strange angles of each neck. *Kadine needed to set an example. Wonder why?* The feeling of dread returned, this time it crept up her spine and closed around her heart. It brought with it one thought. *HURRY! I have to hurry.* A cold sweat broke out on her forehead; Dylan started to rise but paused shaking her head in confusion. *Where did that come from? I gotta get it together, gotta focus. I'm too close to fuck this up now.*

Back down in the prone position she began moving silently through the shadows. Pausing for a moment she got her bearings and headed in towards the perimeter. Stopping only long enough to allow the guards to pass her location she crawled towards a larger bush close to the concertina wire Kadine was using to surround the site. Rolling onto her back Dylan used her shoulders and hands to lift the wire and push herself under. Once clear of the wire she jogged closer to the rock wall where she crouched in the darkness and waited. Her patience finally paid off, the guards were called up one at a time to collect their evening meal. A large plate of meat, cheese and bread along with a cup of the local coffee was handed to each man. He then returned to his post and ate. When the guard closest to her left she trotted across the open ground and up behind a small tent placed close to the center of the camp. Squatting there she carefully pulled her scarf across her face to further darken her features. She drew

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her knife and neatly slit the seam in the back careful to follow the stitches so that once she had passed through the opening would fall naturally and close, hiding her entrance. Slowly dragging herself inside she lay motionless, allowing her senses to adjust to the dimly lit interior, trying to pick out a target. Movement drew her eyes to a still, dark corner where she made out the form of a man sitting hunched over. Slowly she rose to her feet and silently stepped towards the figure. As she approached she noticed the man's clothing. He wasn't dressed as a native.

A Westerner, maybe one of the kidnap victims. I wonder where the others are?

She paused to see what the man was working on. He appeared intent on his task.

Dylan eased in for a closer look, her hand slowly reaching for her knife. She had no idea if this was a member of the crew or not. There were no other people around, so for all she knew he was just another greedy terrorist, here to make a buck.

As she drew closer she could tell from the shape that he was tending to someone. She leaned in to see the face of the prone figure and startled him with her gasp.

Lying wrapped in torn blankets was a woman with a hauntingly familiar face. *I know you*, Dylan thought, as she stared down at the battered face of the young woman.

Bob had an uneasy feeling, he felt a presence in the tent, and then a shadow fell over him. He glanced quickly behind and was startled to see a figure there, seemingly having materialized from thin air. He gasped in surprise, his heart jumping into his throat.

The person was in dark flowing robes, obviously a native. He gathered his strength to rise and face this new threat.

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The man tried to stand to confront her. Dylan's eyes left the prone figure on the blanket for a second to watch him. He was a large, older man and he held his arm close to his midsection as if in pain. Dylan dismissed him almost instantly as no threat and turned her attention back to the figure lying so still in the blankets.

Bob saw the dark mantled head turn away from him towards the helpless woman on the pallet. He called out to draw the native's attention back away from Lura.

"Who are you? I'm warning you, come any closer and I'll kill you," Bob stated, his eyes squinting to focus on the tall silent figure before him. He was at least six feet tall, his face ominously covered with a black cloth leaving only the eyes visible. Those eyes now turned toward him, icy blue pools that reached deep into his soul and sent shivers down his spine. He watched the eyes turn away again and relief flooded through him. It was short lived. They had first stared at the girl in confusion, then anger, finally dismissal. The head turned again and those eerie eyes lifted to meet his. Bob was no coward but what he saw there made him swallow as a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

Dylan saw his fear and was initially surprised. She watched as he first stepped back then seemed to draw courage from somewhere inside. He moved forward to try and step between her and the woman on the pallet. It was apparent to Dylan that this man was in no shape to take on anyone, but she admired his tenacity in trying. *But enough of this, I am not here for this man; I'm here for Evans.*

A low rasping voice whispered through the stifling cloth, "Are you LG Evans?"

Bob was at first stunned that the apparition spoke and more so that it spoke in perfect American English.

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"You're the Hawk. You're a woman!" he exclaimed.

Dylan paused in confusion; staring at him, surprised at his comment. "Yes, and yes," Dylan answered, frustration evident in her voice. "Are you LG Evans?"

"No," Bob responded glancing back at Lura. "She's hurt."

"I don't have time for this. Where is LG Evans?" Dylan demanded.

"I told you," Bob said, pointing at the small prone figure wrapped in the tattered blanket. "She's hurt."

"She is LG. Evans? LG Evans is a woman?"

"Yes, Lura Grant Evans," Bob stated, his body sagging in relief as he smiled at the role reversal. The smile left his face with the next comment though. "She was hurt pretty badly by the guards earlier this evening." He watched the eyes grow cold again and resisted the effort of his feet to step back from this obvious threat.

"You've gotta get her out of here. Kadine had some quack look at her, he seems to think she will live, but she has been out for a long time. She needs medical attention."

Dylan pulled the cloth from her face, turned and knelt down next to the small prone figure. Her attention now riveted on Lura, she did not hear the gasp of the man still standing.

My God, she's beautiful! Bob thought. *Who is she and what is she doing out here in the middle of this hellhole?* He completely forgot that train of thought however, when the strange woman reached towards Lura.

"What are you doing?" he asked, instinct causing him to reach out to stay her hand. He had almost touched her when his wrist was grasped in a steel vice and bent backwards. Pain radiated up his arm, into his shoulder and he found himself on his knees.

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A cold whisper came from the strange woman, "Don't touch me." She had his arm in an unbreakable hold and he had not even seen her move.

The dark woman spoke in a harsh, bitter voice. "Never touch me. Ever." She released his arm, throwing it back towards him and forcing him to fall backwards onto his butt with a painful grunt.

God she's strong, Bob thought.

Dylan reached out again towards the blonde, laying a surprisingly gentle hand on the pale, unbruised cheek.

Lura was in pain. She did not want to open her eyes. Then she felt it, a warmth her body seemed to relish.

"Who?" she whispered, slowly raising a single eyelid and revealing one soft, moss green eye. "You're here. I remember you. I knew you would come."

She closed the eye and sank deeper into the darkness, into a place without pain, sensing she would be kept safe now. She was here now. Everything would be OK.

Dylan froze. "What did she say?" she asked the strange man, her eyes never straying from the still face. She felt herself drifting as memories flashed through her mind. They were memories of this woman, the one in the dreams. The same woman who was calling out to her for help or smiling at her.

Bob watched the tall stranger, confusion written on his face. She sat there in a daze, not moving, not speaking, just staring.

"Hey, you have to get her out of here. Please." He reached out to touch her but remembered the last time he had done that. "Please!" he pleaded, louder this time.

The dark head turned towards him. He was struck again by the icy stare.

"Who did this to her?" The voice was harsh, deep and quivering with anger. When no reply was

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forthcoming, she spoke again. "I asked you a question. Who did this to her?" This time Dylan's hand shot out, gripping the man's throat.

"Please, I can't breathe. I'll tell you if you just let go." Bob gasped for air, clutching at the powerful hand, trying to ease the vise-like grip on his throat.

Dylan loosened her hold and lowered her hand, her voice barely more than a growl. "I will not ask you again. Who is responsible for this?"

"The guards, they came looking for her. She was out cold then, so we tried to hide her. They got rough and I guess the noise woke her up. The next thing we knew she was all over them. Small as she is she tried to protect us. A little thing like that against three big men. We couldn't let her get hurt so we tried to stop them but, they killed Richard. Cut me up a bit, then they turned on her. They beat her pretty good, they were trying to...to..." He had a hard time saying, 'rape her'. "But that guy Kadine heard the noise and came rushing in here. He had the guards dragged off." He finished out of breath, his body remembering the fight.

Dylan closed her eyes, lowering her head. "Where are they?" she asked softly.

"Dead, I think. I heard screaming then some shots then, nothing. I think he had them killed."

"Kadine?"

Nodding his head, Bob replied. "Yeah, he came in here with some huge man and drove them off. He was screaming and yelling about how he couldn't sell the dead. Then he had them taken away by more guards. I think he had them killed."

Dylan closed her eyes remembering the bodies she had seen earlier. The women, older people and the children must have been their family. *Why kill them all?*

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Kadine must be insane.

"Listen," Bob said, "you gotta get her out of here. He'll be back and she may not survive another mix with him or his men."

"Yeah, we're getting out of here." Dylan stood and looked around for something to carry the woman on.

"No," Bob said. "You go. Take her with you. I prayed someone would come and you did, but I'm hurt. I'd slow you just enough to get caught. Please, just take her and get her out."

Dylan looked closely at the older man, for the first time she really looked. The man was so pale he was almost gray, his lips had a blue tint to them and his eyes were dulling. She had seen that look before. This man was dying.

"Where are you wounded?" she asked.

Bob moved his shirt to the side and raised a rough bandage, revealing the gaping wound. The blood had not stopped and was still slowly oozing from his side. Dylan knew the wound was fatal, he had lost too much blood and there were no medical facilities close enough, or with the proper equipment, to save him. She raised her eyes to his and saw that he knew the truth.

"I'll get her out of here. You have my word." She knew she would never leave the small blonde behind but had no clue why.

Bob glanced up at the tall woman with a tired look of gratitude. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Dylan, I was Captain Dylan Hawke," she stated, glancing down again at the smaller woman and missing the stunned expression on the face of the dying man.

Captain Hawke? But she's dead. The Army had turned out in force to search for her body when her camp was discovered destroyed three years ago, he thought.

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"But you're dead!" Bob blurted out, then realized how that sounded. "I mean, well, you know what I mean."

Dylan found herself smiling at his confusion.

"Damn, woman! Some hotshot Senator from your home state showed up here raising Holy Hell. Called out every unit in Saudi looking for you. Never seen anything like it." Bob exclaimed excitedly before being stopped by a fit of coughing ended in a dry rasp. "Damn, that hurts," he whispered, falling forward into Dylan's arms.

She gently lowered the man to the sand.

"Hey, take it easy. Breathe slowly," Dylan admonished, rolling the man onto his back, easing his breathing.

Bob smiled up at the beautiful woman above him.

"Shit!" He moaned in pain. "Lady, you almost caused Desert Storm Part Three. The Saudi's did some fast-talking to get out of that one. They never found the rest of your unit. The Government here said it was terrorists, but that Senator didn't give a shit. Hell, he's still lookin' for you!"

Dylan stared at the wounded man in confusion. "He's still looking. Why?"

Bob lay gasping. "I'm not sure. Everything they found pointed at you and the other missing men as dead, but that guy was determined to find you," he said, smiling sadly. "Wow, this is one helluva story. Dylan Hawke, missing hero. Found," he sighed softly "I got the biggest damn story this side of the Mason Dixon and I don't even get to film it," he admitted regretfully. "Damn."

Dylan stared silently down at the brave man, then, with a slight nod, turned and gathered Lura into her arms. Gently wrapping the blankets around her charge, she carried her to the rear of the tent, through the cut and outside into the night air and darkness.

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Bob rolled onto his side then to his feet. He staggered to the opening and watched as the figure disappeared into the night. He glance back at the empty tent then stepped out into the cool sand. He knew that Kadine would come looking for Lura and he hoped to lead him astray long enough to allow Captain Hawke to get the younger woman to safety. Slowly he followed the tracks that the soldier left until he reached the edge of Kadine's camp. He smiled noticing that the tracks led into the rocky hillside. *That is one smart woman. No wonder no one could find her. Bet I would have never met her if she didn't come to me.*

Bob shook his head and moved towards the hillside; removing his shirt he dragged it behind him, smudging the tracks as he went.



Dylan gazed again at the still, blonde figure lying on the rough, well-worn blankets. It hadn't been easy getting the woman out of the camp. The hardest part was getting her out of the camp unseen. Then there had been the trek back to the camp, carrying her precious burden, afraid to shift her too much for fear she may cause her further injury.

"God, I must be out of shape," Dylan mumbled, grinning as she rubbed her tired arms. She had had to stop several times to rest during the arduous trip. After finally reaching her camp, near dawn that morning, she had gone out again to backtrack and hide as much of their trail as she could. That was when she had found the man. He had followed their tracks into the hills and died on the path. What surprised her was that he was on the wrong path. He must have known that they were on the other trail; she had not had time to cover their tracks yet. Then

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she realized that he had used the last of his dwindling strength to lay a false trail. He was trying to throw off anyone following them. She felt bad for not burying his body, but she knew that to do so would tip off the trackers and his sacrifice would have been wasted. So she simply paused and sent a quick prayer to the Great Spirit to protect the soul of this brave man.

Stepping off the trail she quickly located a small boulder and, carrying it back to the body, she walked up into the hills. She made an effort to avoid leaving too many tell tale signs, but left tracks leading up a slight grade towards some small shallow caves. Going into and out of several of them, she walked to a cliff edge and threw the boulder over. Then she carefully stepped onto the rocky edge and began making her way down. Reaching the ground, she stole back into the terrorist camp and laid a second false trail leading into the shrouded foothill. Breaking branches and turning stones she tried to give the impression of an injured woman fleeing in terror, with little regard for stealth.

They should follow one of these trails. That should keep them busy for a while, Dylan thought, as she moved silently back through the low-lying bushes. Her mind had already returned to the helpless woman back at her tiny camp.



Lura was dreaming there was a handsome woman bending over her and speaking in a soft low voice. She was safe. Then, as she watched, the woman became a giant bird that reached down and picked her up.

Okay, I have to be dreaming; there is no way I'm being carried off by a giant hawk. That is just too weird.

Her brain was telling her that this was all very

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impossible, but her body felt it as the great bird set her down. She even felt the sun shining on her face. It felt so...

Painful! "Ow, that really hurts." She tried to raise her hand to soothe the sore area, realizing only now that her eyes were closed and she couldn't move her arms. "What the devil? Not again, it's too hot for blankets," she mumbled. Slowly opening her eyes she gazed around. Things seemed flat and distorted. Gradually, she realized only one eye was opened and the 'sun' was really a small campfire. "What's going on? What's wrong with my eye?" The voice sounded horrible to her ears, a harsh croaking noise. Smiling though, she recognized it, it was hers. Her throat hurt terribly and her tongue felt swollen and dry. "Ugh, I hurt all over," she moaned, finally able to press one hand to her forehead.

"Hey, easy there." A voice, soft, low and soothing spoke from the right. She turned her head, trying to focus her one good eye in the direction of the voice. It was her again, the beautiful apparition that had glided out of the darkness. Silent as a shadow, the woman moved closer and knelt at Lura's side.

"It's you. You're here. You're real. Aren't you?"

Dylan looked at the confused swollen face, startled by the softly spoken questions. "Yes, I am real. How do you feel?"

"Well, I'm not real sure, but I hope you got the tag number of the eighteen wheeler that ran over me. Ow."

Dylan chuckled at the sarcastic humor of the smaller woman. *Well, she has a sense of humor and apparently it survived. I guess she'll make it,* she thought with a smirk.

Still dazed, Lura squinted her one good eye in an effort to get a better look at the face behind the intriguing voice, but the other woman had her back to the fire,

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effectively putting her face in shadow.

Trying to sit up, the smaller woman glanced around with her one functioning eye.

"Where are the guys? Where are Bob and Richard?" the blonde asked in a soft voice. When she received no response she felt her heart jump in her chest. "Hey, where are the guys?" she asked again. "Where are we?" she asked, struggling again to look around. "Hey? Answer me...please. What is going on?"

Dylan reached for the canteen and knelt closer to her charge. "Hey, easy there. Easy, now. Lie still. You have some badly bruised ribs, they may be broken. I haven't had the chance to check you over yet." she said, lifting the canteen to gently touch the cut lips. "Here, swallow slowly." She paused, allowing Lura a chance to quench her thirst while she thought of a way to tell her the truth.

Frightened of upsetting the injured woman she decided to tell her as little as possible.

"You're in my camp. I brought you here from Kadine's camp," Dylan said in a hushed voice.

"So where are Bob and Richard? Are they still there? Are they okay?" Lura asked, her head suddenly feeling like the inside of an over-inflated balloon. Her heart beat loudly in her ears.

Dylan paused in her explanation, unsure of how to continue. Lowering her head in thought she finally raised icy cold eyes to the face of the smaller woman.

"The men...the men, didn't make it." Dylan had tried but did not know how to put it gently. She watched her words sink slowly in, watched the blonde woman close her eye as a single tear crept from beneath the swollen lid.

"What do you mean, dead? They're dead?" she whispered.

"I'm sorry," Dylan stated quietly, the guilt of her poor

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timing weighing heavily on her. "I couldn't save them. I...I was too late. Please, you have to drink some of this," she said, once again lifting the canteen to the bruised lips. "You've lost a lot of fluids and you're dehydrated."

If only I hadn't been so concerned about getting Kadine, I might have been there sooner. Lura wouldn't be in this condition. Two men are dead because of my stubbornness.

Lura took a small swallow, forcing the tepid water past the tight lump in her throat. Once it had settled she took another swallow, and then another, allowing herself time to accept the truth behind the words.

She turned to look at the woman, statements and accusations on the tip of her tongue. *She could have saved them. It is all her fault, she should have been there, she... Wait, she is only one woman; she couldn't have known what was going to happen. Even if she had known, she would still be just one woman against an entire camp. It would have been suicide.*

Lura looked at the bent head and sunken shoulders. Her heart reached out to the stranger. *She must be feeling the guilt. Here I am blaming her for something she had no control over and I never realized she was already blaming herself. God who the Hell do I think I am? We should have never been there, we should have been more careful. Now they are dead, for what? A fucking story. It isn't worth it. It isn't worth it.*

Finally, she spoke in a halting voice. "It's not your fault you couldn't save them. It wasn't your fault, it's just that...they were my friends, my... my family. I wish..."

Dylan watched helplessly as the small blonde broke - first into soft weeping, and then ragged sobs. She shifted closer to the sleeping bag unsure of how to comfort the battered woman. Gently, she gathered the other woman

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onto her lap. Rocking slowly, she hummed an old Indian lullaby her mother used to sing to her into the smaller woman's ear. Her breath gently brushed the soft silky hair, the heat from her body warmed Lura's as she held her gently.

Finally, Lura cried herself out and drifted into a fitful sleep. Dylan carefully eased her back down onto the sleeping bag, careful not to lay her on her bruised side. She stared down at the small blonde, noticing once again the torn clothes and dark purple bruises standing out on the pale face. Her belly knotted when she thought of how those marks had gotten there. She inhaled, flaring her nostrils and curling her lips as if she could catch the scent of the dead men. The bitter taste of acid burned in her mouth.

Why was she reacting like this, as if she had taken the beating herself? She didn't understand it at all. She knew only that she felt each and every bruise marring the small body in front of her. It was in that instant Captain Dylan Hawke realized that she would not allow it to happen again.

"I'll make sure no one ever hurts you like this again, Lura," she vowed. A sudden and fierce possessiveness descended upon her. "I found you and you belong to me. You just don't know it yet."

Here in the desert if you possessed and protected, you owned. The small blonde now belonged to the Hawk.

Dylan was startled by this thought but knew it for the truth.

Gently she unbuttoned the torn blouse to expose the bruised flesh. It was difficult to see all the injuries in the darkness, but she needed to make sure that the other woman was not critically injured. A quick examination revealed that, thankfully, the doctor was wrong, she had

been unable to detect any movement in the rib bones, but there was definitely a possibility of internal injury. The blows she had taken in her side were hard enough to have left livid bruises and swelling. Dylan brushed back the soft reddish blond hair to better examine the injury to Lura's temple. *From the look of the lacerations and the swelling, she may have a concussion.* Dylan wasn't sure if she should let the woman sleep yet, but she didn't want to waken her. She knew that the best cure for her now was food and sleep.

Dylan got to her feet and moved deeper into the cave. She returned with a bundle of bandages, some clean rags and a small jar of salve. Carefully she slipped the shirt off the sleeping body, a dirty tan bra soon followed it. Quickly and efficiently Dylan rubbed the salve in and wrapped the ribs tightly. A small dab of salve was touched to the wound on her head, but it was left open to the air to heal. Her task completed, Dylan wiped her hands on a bit of cloth and put her salve and bandages away. She replaced her medical supplies and returned, kneeling beside the pallet to check on her patient.

The injured woman had not moved. Dylan knew she was attracted to this woman; Lura Grant Evans was beautiful that much was obvious so it was normal to feel this attraction, but it was more than that, it was deeper. She reached down and gently wiped a tear that trailed down a dirty cheek, and then tenderly pulled the blanket up across the still form. Leaning forward Dylan started to stand when a small hand reached out and wrapped itself around hers. Glancing down she saw that the young woman was still asleep. She smiled, sighed and stretched out next to her, pulling some of the blanket over her own body and closing her tired eyes. Still holding the small hand in hers, she drifted into sleep.

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Back at his camp, Kadine was sleeping too, the smile on his face also caused by the small blonde. His dreams shifted constantly, he dreamt of the day he would rule the desert. He dreamt of television interviews conducted by the beautiful blonde, his face on TV screens all around the world. He dreamt of being waited on hand and foot, his every whim satisfied. That dream always seemed to lead him to his most recent and now favorite dream. He dreamt of her, helpless beneath him, fighting, struggling to get away. He saw her pounding at him, her small fists and frightened screams driving him on. He loved it when they fought; it made breaking them that much more pleasurable. In the morning he would have her treated and moved to his tent. Once he had gained her confidence, the training could begin.

“Yes. Tomorrow,” he thought, “tomorrow would be an interesting day.”



Dylan woke slowly, feeling constricted and warm. Struggling to awaken fully, she felt a weight across her mid-section and, looking down at her body, she saw a pale arm encircling her waist. The little blonde had moved in her sleep, drawing closer to the lean warm body next to her. As she watched, Dylan saw the gentle face drawn into a frown. The blonde brows lowered and a painful whimper eased from the other woman's throat.

In her sleep, Lura was fighting the guards again, trying to protect herself from their vicious attack. The large angry men were grabbing at her again and again

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hitting her, kicking her. She had to escape. She had to get up, get away. As Lura struggled with her nightmare she struck out in self-defense.

Dylan felt the first blow land on her cheek, the second was heading for her nose and she quickly sat up. Turning, she faced the disturbed, nearly hysterical woman, reaching for the blindly flailing arms.

"Lura, Lura wake up. You're having a bad dream. Wake up."

Lura felt the guards grab her arms, holding her down. "NO!" she screamed. They would hurt her so she struggled even harder.

"LURA!" Dylan called out, frightened that the young woman would injure herself further.

"Please, help me. Make them stop. It hurts, it hurts."

Dylan listened to the painful pleas. They tore at her heart. Folding the trembling body into her arms she pulled the crying woman to her. *Those bastards. If they weren't already dead, I'd hunt them down and kill them myself.*

"Please Lura, wake up. I'm here. They won't hurt you. No one will ever hurt you again, I promise," she soothed.

The voice drew her from the dark place. Lura opened her eye, drawn awake by the gentle tones. She wiped the tears from her face with a trembling hand; her head turning, one eye searched the dimness of the cave. "Where are they? Please, keep them away from me. I can't take anymore," she whispered.

"It's all right, they're gone. You're safe now. They're gone." Dylan repeated the soft assurances, pulling back slightly and hoping the young woman would realize the truth of the statement.

"I hurt," Lura moaned, finally looking at the other woman.

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It was full daylight and Lura finally got a chance to see the woman who had saved her life. Her breath caught in her throat.

She's beautiful. Wait, I know her. I've seen her in my dreams.

"I know you," she mumbled softly as Dylan stood and turned away, unaware of the comment, her mind preoccupied with the need to help Lura.

Dylan was searching through her limited medical supplies. She grimaced, wishing she had something other than ibuprofen for her young charge. She frowned thinking of Lura's possible internal injuries, weighing the possibilities of relief for the pain against the possible consequences. She tapped two white pills from the small bottle and returned to the pallet.

"Lura, do you have any pain here?" she asked gently laying her hand on the other woman's stomach, her face reflecting her concern.

Lura shook her head, her eyes closed in pain.

"Here, take these," Dylan said. Turning, she knelt next to Lura. Holding out two white tablets, she reached down and shook the nearly empty canteen. She gently held it while Lura sipped. There was just enough to wash down the pills. "Now lay still. You've got to give your body a chance to heal."

"What's your name?" Lura asked trying to distract her mind from the pain.

"My name is Dylan, Dylan Hawke," she stated, distractedly as she repacked the supplies.

"Dylan Hawke, the missing Military Police Captain? I've heard of you, but everyone said you were killed in a terrorist attack," Lura half blurted, half gasped, her stomach cramping as she attempted to sit up. Her excitement caused her to forget about her injuries.

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Dylan turned quickly, seeing her charge grimacing, she gently eased the young woman back onto the pallet. "Yeah, I know. Pretty lively for a dead person, don't ya think?" Dylan remarked, sitting back on her heels and holding her arms out wide. Smiling down at the battered face, she wanted desperately to make the little blonde smile.

Lura smiled back feeling an instant bond with this tall dark woman.

"Yeah, I guess so. Do you have any more of that water? I'm awfully thirsty."

"Sure," Dylan replied, thinking it was a good sign that the younger woman was willing to drink. *That means there is little chance of internal injury*, she thought in relief.

"I'm sorry about being so much trouble, it seems like I'm real good at finding that," Lura stated, shyly.

"Humph," Dylan snorted. "I think this time it found you and, between you and me, I think you handled it pretty well. Not too many people are willing to endanger themselves for others."

Lura remembered the men. "Yeah for what little good it did. They're gone. They killed my friends because of me. It's my fault, you know. My fault. If I hadn't insisted on doing this story..."

Getting more and more upset as she remembered the events of the previous days, Lura struggled again to sit up. She wrapped her arms around her tender ribs and rocked back and forth, crying silent tears.

Dylan picked up the canteen that lay on the sand between them and moved it aside.

Lura, noticing the movement, panicked and reached out to Dylan, her arms outstretched. "Please, don't leave. Don't leave me. I'm sorry, I'm such a baby, but I'm so

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frightened."

Dylan quickly slid closer to Lura taking her into her arms. "It's all right, I'm not going anywhere. You're safe, shh. I've got you, I got you." Dylan drew the smaller woman closer, trying to pull Lura into her heart, tears pooling in her own eyes. "No, it's not your fault. They were big boys and they knew what they were getting into. Bob told me what happened. It didn't matter what you did; it would have ended the same way. It isn't my fault, and it isn't your fault."

It is Kadine's fault, and I owe him big. Dylan thought. Wrapping her arms more securely around the smaller woman, she began to hum again.

Chapter 7

Kadine couldn't wait; he wanted the woman moved to his tent now. It was early morning and he had been up since dawn thinking about her. He quickly left his personal quarters, moving towards the small dark tent near the center of his camp, a crooked, confident smile on his lips.

Reaching the tent he paused and brushed his hair back again. He had taken extra time with his morning grooming hoping to impress the American.

Humph, he snorted. She should feel honored that I have decided to take care of her. I could have left her to my men. Yes, she should feel very honored.

His self confidence bolstered, he reached out, pulled the flap open and stepped into the darkened interior.

"Lura Grant, where are you? Come out! You can't hide, I know you are here." As he taunted his prey he lit the candles on the table in the center of the tent and turned full circle.

In one corner he saw a shrouded figure too large to be the girl. He stomped over to the figure and jerked the blanket away. There lay the young male member of the American crew, dead. *Where is the girl?* He began throwing blankets and pillows. *Where is the old man? He was too injured to escape.*

"Where are you? Where are you?" he screamed. Rashiem and Kadine's guards rushed in, guns ready, expecting to find him under attack. "Find her! Find the girl. NOW!"

The guards scattered, some inside the tent, some outside, all remembering the death of the last four guards and their families. They quickly found the cut in the rear of the tent and the footprints leaving.

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"Find her, find the girl!" he screamed again. The men shouldered their weapons and hurriedly followed the prints into the foothills. Kadine was close behind them. The men pointed and followed the tracks, sometimes stopping when they lost the trail. They ran through the brushes and undergrowth, hot on the young girl's trail. Kadine and Rashiem followed the trackers through the sand and towards the hills. Suddenly they stopped.

"Why have you stopped? he bellowed. "Keep going. I want that girl!"

The men tracking Lura separated going in different directions looking for more tracks. After several minutes one man called out from the foot of the hills. They rushed to his side and followed a set of partially obliterated tracks.

"The foolish Americans, trying to hide their tracks from us." Kadine laughed, confident now that he would soon have the woman.

The men trotted along the track following it to a body, the older man.

Kadine kicked the body over in disgust.

I would have made it farther, he thought to himself, puffing out his chest and spitting on the body.

"Keep going, this one is dead, you can come back later for the body. I want the woman. Find her."

The men ran on like hounds on a hot trail. They followed the tracks to the edge of a cliff and stopped, stunned.

"What are you doing? Why have you come here? Have you lost the trail again you fools?" Kadine asked impatiently, standing behind the men, his fists planted on his hips.

"No, El Kadine, we have not lost her tracks. We can't follow her any further," Rashiem replied. "The

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tracks have vanished. It's like she flew away."

"WHAT? She is human! A simple girl! She cannot fly! Keep searching! Find her!" the madman commanded.

Rashiem bowed and with a flick of his wrist sent the trackers back to the trail. Kadine sat near the edge of the cliff and stared out at the desert below.

"Flew away, she flew away?" he muttered to himself. "The Hawk! Damn you, Hawk. I curse the day we met. I should have killed you then, I was too generous. This time you have gone too far. The woman is mine and I will have her. DO YOU HEAR ME, HAWK? I WILL HAVE HER!" he screamed to the empty sky.



Several days later, Dylan was toying with an idea. Dawn came to the small camp near the oasis and Dylan had risen with the sun. Having relieved herself, she decided that her idea might be just the thing to cheer up her patient. For days now Lura had not spoken much, simply eaten her meals and slept. Whenever Dylan had tried to start a conversation the other woman simply responded in short answers or complained that she was tired and needed to sleep. Her ribs were healing nicely as was the large bruise on her face. Her eye was still swollen shut but much of the swelling had gone down and Dylan expected to see two green eyes soon, but for now she was contemplating a bath.

Bet Lura would enjoy getting clean, she grinned. She moved into the corner where she stored her supplies, pulling an old but clean blanket. From her gear she used her Bowie knife to cut it into large towels. Reaching into her pack, she retrieved a new larger blanket and a small bar of soap. Taking these items and a canteen down to the water's edge she quickly returned to roust her sleeping

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charge.

Dylan approached quietly, calling Lura's name. The smaller woman had not moved. Dylan stopped for a moment and simply looked at the blonde. She was small - maybe 5'4". Her hair, Dylan thought at first was blonde, but in the sunlight she had noticed red highlights. Her skin was pale, possibly from the beating she had taken, but Dylan suspected that most of it was her natural skin tone.

She is as bright as I am dark, she thought. Complete opposites. I wonder if it's true what they say about opposites attracting?

As she watched, she saw the gentle sweet expression change. The girl began to mumble and toss in her sleep. Reaching out a sun bronzed hand she gently shook the small blonde's shoulder.

"Hey, time to wake up, civilian, daylight's burning."

The other woman's response was immediate. A startled gasp was followed by an arm flung up over her head in an attempt to protect herself. Her body quickly curled itself into a fetal position as she cringed with a strangled cry.

"Hey, easy, it's only me. You're safe. No one will hurt you now, I promise," Dylan whispered. She stroked the soft skin on Lura's arm gently, as she would a spooked colt.

"Easy, take it easy, you're safe, you're safe."

As if penetrating a thick fog, Dylan's words sank in. Lura felt her heart rate pounding in her throat. She took a deep breath and realized where she was and who she was with.

It's her. I'm safe. She waited for her heart to return to her chest so she could swallow. Slowly, she relaxed and raised her head, looking around and dispelling the

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remains of the nightmare.

Dylan watched the fear slowly leave the frightened face. Anger was building as she thought of the cause of the woman's fear.

I hate him so much. Unconsciously her nostrils flared as if to catch his scent. She could almost taste the bitter flavor of her hatred and rage. Knowing that her feelings would reflect in her eyes, Dylan made the effort to calm herself, to think of more pleasant thoughts.

"Hey. I figured you civilians liked bathing at least once a month so...your bath awaits, my lady," she said, holding out her hand and smiling.

Laughing, Lura smiled back and placed her small hand into the larger, rougher hand of her tall friend. Feeling the strength and warmth in the long fingers, she let the other woman help her to her feet.

"A bath? You do mean a real bath? Not some spongy thing like out of your canteen, but an honest to God, I can wash the desert out of my hair and lotsa water and soap bath?" she asked her eye wide in excitement.

At Dylan's nod she held her hand to her chest and grinned

"God, you are my hero," Lura said, trying to relieve some of the tension and embarrassment she felt.

Dylan led her charge slowly out of the cave and down the hillside to the warm pool of clear water. Reaching the soft sandy edge she came around and faced Lura. Bending slowly she allowed the other woman to lean forward resting her hands on Dylan's strong shoulders as she helped her out of her shoes and socks. This done, Dylan stood again and steadied her patient. Once she knew that Lura was all right alone, Dylan bent again to retrieve the soap and towels. She placed a towel at Lura's feet and laid the bar of soap on top. Then she

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stood again with her hands on her hips facing her charge.

"Now, we have real soap, for your bath and you can use it on your hair. I have towels for drying and a blanket so you can soak up some rays after your bath if you like. You aren't shy are you? Cause I could really use a bath too." Dylan smiled, hoping that the young woman would not object. She was really using the excuse to be able to assist Lura if she stumbled while in the pool.

"No, I'm not too shy. I went to an all girls school and you get over shy real quick" Lura commented with a grin.

"Do you need some help with your clothes?" Dylan offered.

"I'm not sure, but I think I can handle it."

"Well, sing out if you need any help."

Lura pulled her shirt out of the waist of her pants and reached for the hem. As she tried to lift the tail up to pull it from the back of her pants she felt the pain of her bruised ribs and sucked in a hiss through her teeth.

"Hey, easy there. Let me get that," Dylan said.

Coming closer, she took Lura's arms and slowly lowered them to her side. "Keep your arms here, okay? Now, don't move. Let me do all the work."

Slowly and gently she reached around and unbuttoned the top. She slid the torn shirt down over the smaller woman's torso. The bright morning light allowing her to see for the first time, the full canvas of livid bruises that now marred the smooth skin.

My God, that's a boot print. How could anyone abuse something so small? she thought bitterly.

As she slid the shirt down Lura's arms she took in all the injuries, vowing to visit every one tenfold on the monster responsible for them.

She swallowed the bitter anger and spoke softly to her patient.

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"Okay, all done. Wait, let me get the hooks on your FTBSG," she said, smiling.

"My what?" Lura asked.

"FTBSG, it's a military term." Dylan replied cryptically. Her mind's eye remembered, for the first time in three years, the period before the massacre and she smiled.

"What the heck does it stand for?" Lura asked, turning to face her nurse.

"I would tell ya, but then I'd have ta kill ya," Dylan deadpanned, staring into one now wide-open green eye.

She turned the blonde around, facing the pool, and unhooked the lacy tan undergarment.

"What security level do you have civilian?" she asked jokingly. She stepped around to face Lura, a mischievous smile on her face. Her eyes settled on the beautiful naked woman in front of her. The laughter caught in her suddenly dry throat. In confusion she stepped back and turned, searching for something to distract her mind from the image that was burned there.

"Um, I... um I... think you can handle the rest, so..." She quickly began to remove her own clothing. "You all done?" she asked in a dull tone.

"Yep, I'm ready, just need to sit for a minute." Lura responded, feeling a light sheen of sweat break out on her body, goose bumps appearing suddenly on her arms. Slowly she sat in the sand picking up her shoes and socks.

"Better tuck your socks in your shoes if you don't want any visitors," the dark woman commented. She had been watching the smaller woman and found herself drawn to the smooth flesh of her shoulders and the gentle curve of her breasts.

"She is so beautiful. All pink and white like fine porcelain," Dylan mumbled aloud.

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"What was that?" Lura asked.

"I said you better hurry and get in. You don't want to burn" Dylan responded, feeling the blush creep up her neck.

I can't believe I said that out loud. She groaned, mentally slapping herself in the forehead.

Get a grip here Hawke. She has been through enough without your gawking at her like some idiotic teenager.

Quickly completing her own disrobing, Dylan stood and walked to the pool unaware of the startled, admiring gaze of the smaller woman.

Oh, my God. I am so in trouble here, Lura thought, catching a glimpse of long golden legs.

Oh boy, and no cold shower in sight, she smirked to herself.

Control Lura; breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

"Are you okay?" Dylan asked, turning in waist high water to watch the small woman struggling to breathe. "Maybe this bath thing wasn't such a good idea. We can go back to camp if you aren't feeling well."

She began to walk back to shore intent on getting her patient out of the sun.

"No, no," Lura squeaked quickly. "I'm just getting used to the cool air."

"Um, well, okay. Just let me know if you need help with your back or anything." Dylan offered, wading away to allow Lura some privacy. She couldn't help thinking that Lura must be in a very fragile condition indeed for the desert air to feel cool to her.

"Yeah, or anything, yep, sure, you got it," Lura commented, turning her eye away as Dylan lay back in the water to float.

God help me. She looks this good and I can only see

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her out of one eye. Lura sighed, turning that particular orb skyward in an effort to avoid the sight in front of her. Finally feeling a bit more in control, Lura grabbed the soap, stood and slowly waded out into the pool. She lowered herself into the water enjoying the feeling of the warm liquid enveloping her body. She lay back allowing her head to rest in the water then stood and worked the bar of soap into a lather in her wet hair. That done she rinsed it and began soaping her body.

Finishing her soak, Dylan glanced over just in time to catch the blonde trying to reach the center of her back with a soapy hand and grimacing in pain at the effort. Standing, she waded towards the other woman.

"Here, let me help." Taking the bar of soap she worked up a lather and handed the slippery bar back to the blonde. Gently, she rubbed the soap onto the bruised skin, enjoying the feel of the warm flesh under her palms.

Lura closed her eyes, leaning into the touch and groaning in pleasure at the strength of the hands working their magic on her back.

Dylan watched the blonde woman's good eye shut and smiled at the satisfied grin on the smaller woman's face. *She looks like a small golden falcon enjoying a good scratch,* Dylan chuckled.

The one functioning green eye opened and turned towards her. "What's so funny?" Lura asked.

"Nothing, Little Falcon. All done here. You can rinse off then go sit on the blanket. I don't want you to tire yourself out on your first trip to the pool. Wrap up in one of those towels and keep warm. I will be out as soon as I finish my bath," Dylan said while helping Lura into the shallower end of the pool.

"Sure sounds good and...hey, wait a minute. Who you calling little?" Lura replied, smiling to let Dylan

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know she wasn't truly offended.

"Just go over there and sit. You've had enough excitement for the morning. I don't want you overdoing it," Dylan commented, frowning like the mother hen she was.

Turning back towards the deep end of the small pool Dylan missed the crooked grin on the other woman's face as Lura watched the strong back and firm butt moving away from her.

"Yeah right, she tells me no excitement and trots around in the buff with a body like that. Help," Lura grumbled to herself.

"Did you say something, Lura?" Dylan asked.

"Umm, I just wondered if you needed some help," Lura piped out, embarrassed at having been caught.

"Oh. No thanks, I think I can handle it," Dylan called over her shoulder

Just stay over there so I won't drown because my mouth won't close for gawking, Dylan thought, afraid to say anything aloud that might be overheard.

Wrapping a towel around her wet body, Lura dragged the large blanket to the edge of the water. Piling their clothes into a small pile in one corner, she lay back on it to relax and admire the view.

Dylan had her back to Lura, but could feel the small blonde's eyes on her.

Well, she must be feeling better, she smiled, her mind on the thought that the beautiful woman seemed to find her attractive.

Maybe it isn't me, maybe it's my imagination or wishful thinking, the soldier mused.

There has got to be a way to figure out if she's looking. Deep in thought Dylan was unaware of the sweating blonde behind her.

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My God, please just kill me now before I dehydrate from drooling, Lura thought, rolling her eyes skyward before quickly returning them to the beautiful naked bronze body in the pool. She shook her head to clear her suddenly blurry vision as she watched Dylan bathe.

In the pool, Dylan was having her own problems.

Maybe if I just kinda stretch real casual like and peek over my shoulder. Yep, that'll work, then I can tell if she is staring.

Dylan stood up tall in the water, raising her arms towards the sun and stretched, adding a purring yawn to it to add to the impression of casualness she was trying to fake.

As Lura watched, the tall wet beauty raised her arms skyward and moaned, throwing back her head and allowing the glorious black mane of hair to cascade down her back and caress the powerful muscles of her rear.

"Oh My God!" Lura exclaimed, just before her world went black.

Dylan heard a soft THUD and quickly glanced over her shoulder to see the blonde woman sprawled out, unconscious on the blanket.

Oh no, too much sun, Dylan thought, rushing out of the pool and kneeling, naked, at the other woman's side.

"Lura, Lura, come on Little Falcon, open your eyes. Are you all right? Look at me. Look at me, please." Dylan patted the pale cheek softly, hoping to revive the strangely smiling woman.

Lura opened her eyes to see a vision bending over her. *This has got to be a dream. And since it's a dream I might as well take full advantage of it.* She reached up and wove her hands into the black hair, drawing the beautiful but startled face towards her. She smiled and whispered, "So beautiful," just before she pressed her lips

to the soft mouth above her.

Dylan felt her breath catch in her throat at the comment and was still too surprised to stop the kiss. She felt a small tingle travel from her lips straight to her groin as the blonde pressed harder into the kiss.

Whoa, she thought. *If it feels this good when she's unconscious, a conscious kiss is gonna kill me.* She pulled her head away and stared at the dazed woman.

"Lura? Hey, wake up. You fell asleep. Wake up," she stated, hoping to avoid the possibility of facing an awkward moment.

Lura blinked and focused her still blurry vision on the soldier. "You are beautiful," she stated.

"Uh huh," Dylan replied, "and you have had too much sun. Let me take care of your wounds then it's time to go back to camp."

Dylan helped Lura into a sitting position on the blanket. Separating her clothing from Lura's, she propped the still shaky blonde up against the remaining clothes and placed the canteen close at hand. Turning, she rose to her feet to dress, unaware of the overheated blonde guzzling from the canteen. As Dylan bent to pick up her underwear she heard the sound of falling water. Turning quickly, she caught the smaller woman emptying the canteen over her head.

"Are you okay, Lura?" Dylan asked, now very concerned at the red color of Lura's face.

"Umm, sure Dylan, just a bit warm. Trying to cool off, you know, gotta watch that heat stroke."

"Yeah, right," Dylan mumbled, turning back to complete her dressing and wondering if the heat really had become too much for the injured woman. Glancing over her shoulder once more she noticed the strange smile appearing once again on the blonde's face.

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Later that evening, Dylan sat near the fire sharpening the bowie knife, watching Lura sleep. She was drawn to this woman. She felt a powerful need to protect her. She remembered the Medicine Man on the reservation speaking of the eternal spirits, of souls that were destined to be together. He spoke of how somewhere there was a soul mated to your own. This soul was forever searching for its mate, throughout time, he had told her, smiling. He said that the souls would try to find each other, no matter where they were or what body they were in. And if the soul missed its mate in this life they would try again and again. They would be reborn in each life with the need to find their mate, until they reached a lifetime were they were finally united. Then they would bond forever.

She remembered asking how she would recognize her soulmate.

“Dylan, when you meet the person that you would sacrifice all for, then you will know,” he had said.

She thought of Lura. She knew how she felt when she saw the bruises on her body. Would she be willing to give her life to protect the small blond?

Yes, there was no question to that.

How would she feel if her life was threatened?

But she would do the same for any helpless person. She had put her life on the line more times than she could count in the last three years. She had sacrificed all to stop this killer.

Wait. That was it. Would she give up her hunt for Kadine to protect her? Her hand stilled and her eyes widened with a shocking realization. The dreams that recurred night after night, the feelings she had when she had first seen the small woman, the thrill that rushed

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through her body when she washed the girl's smooth back. It was more than that. It wasn't sexual. Well, not all sexual. She wasn't just drawn to the beautiful body. Lura's soul called out for her. *How has this happened? How have I found my soulmate, here, in the middle of the desert? The Spirits have a sick sense of humor.* It did not matter. She was there and firmly entrenched in Dylan's heart where she would stay as long as that heart beat.

Dylan raised her head to stare at the woman who she now knew as her mate.

Yes, I would give up the hunt to save my soulmate.

As she watched, the girl slowly opened one eye, the other still swollen shut, and stared up at the stars, smiling softly.

"What is it? Why are you smiling?" Dylan asked in a curious voice, hoping to turn her thoughts to other things.

"It's a bear," she said.

"What?" asked Dylan, turning her blue gaze upward.

"A bear. See the tail and the little ears?" she said, pointing up at the sky.

Dylan turned her gaze skyward. "Hmmm, looks like a pitcher to me," she said, grinning.

Lura turned her smiling face towards the other woman. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," the gentle low voice responded. "How are you feeling? Would you like a drink of water?"

"Yes, please. Water would be wonderful, thank you."

Lura struggled to a sitting position, still smiling at her benefactor.

How can she be so serene after the beating she's taken? She sits there, bruised and battered almost beyond recognition, in the middle of the Saudi desert. She's sitting on a dirty camel hair blanket, drinking warm water from an old canteen. And she's smiling.

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Dylan held the canteen out to the girl and waited patiently for her to finish drinking.

After recapping the canteen Dylan spoke softly to the young woman. "Lura, I have to check your injuries. I may have to re-bandage some of them. This may hurt, but I will be as gentle as I can."

Dylan reached over to help the younger woman to lean forward. Reaching out to gently lift the stained shirt she exposed the bruised ribs. The bruises were a deep purple and yellow now. Her side still showed the print of the boot that had caused the injury. Dylan felt her hands trembling in anger.

Never again, she silently promised Lura.

Dylan quickly finished and snugly rewrapped the damaged area. Looking up she saw that Lura had her eyes tightly closed, but tears rolled slowly and silently down her pale cheeks.

Cupping the soft cheek, Dylan looked into the soft green eyes.

"Lura, it's OK to cry out, really. Your ribs have got to be extremely painful. If you don't make any noise I won't know if I'm wrapping them too tightly."

"I just don't want you to think I'm a wimp," she said. "You seem so tough all the time. I just don't ... I want..." She looked down at her bruised hands, gripping them as tightly as she could, considering their condition.

"What?" Dylan asked, "What do you want, Lura?" Lura looked up into the celestial blue of Dylan's eyes, losing herself in their depths.

"What is it Lura?" she asked again, leaning in closer.

God, those eyes are dangerous, Lura thought. Unable to look away and unable to voice her true feelings, Lura stammered, "I...I want, I want, I want you to..." Lura shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. "I want you to

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know how grateful I am for all you have done. I know you risked everything to save me and I don't want you to think I don't realize or appreciate it." Before Dylan could say anything else, Lura continued. "No. I mean it. You don't even know me and I know it probably won't make a lot of sense but what you think matters to me. I would hate for you to think me a coward. I guess in a strange way I want to make you proud of me, help you somehow. I hope that doesn't sound too stupid."

Lura watched Dylan's face for some hint of understanding. Did the tall beauty know what she really wanted? Did she want her to know?

Come on Lura, she thought to herself, what you really want is for her to kiss you. I never had this kind of feeling for any of the men I dated. Face it girl, you never had this kind of feeling for anyone, male or female. What is going on with you?

"I am proud of you, Lura. You are the bravest woman I know," Dylan whispered. Lowering her eyes she leaned back away from the woman.

What am I doing? She is hurt, in pain. I am as much of an animal as those men who beat her. Standing quickly, Dylan distanced herself from Lura. "I'm going to the pool, I have to fill the canteens up for the night. Someone had to have a shower after her bath," she added, grinning to relieve the tension.

Turning her back on the blonde she reached for the canteen and walked to the pool to refill it.

And jump in. Damn, I need to cool off.

Lura watched as the older woman glided silently away.

What just happened? What did I do? She lay back, exhausted, thinking about the mysterious woman kneeling at the pool.

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She's incredible, what would someone like her see in me? She closed her eyes to shut out the thoughts.

Down at the waters edge Dylan was fighting her own conscience.

I have got to get her healthy and then I have to get her to safety. That means away from Kadine. I have some planning to do.

Chapter 8

Kadine paced back and forth in his tent. Rashiem squatted near the opening waiting for his orders.

"I must find her. Where could she have gone? Who is helping her? She must be with that bitch Hawke, she could never have made it in the desert alone," he mumbled aloud.

Rashiem watched the angry man pace back and forth, thanking Allah that he was not the cause of his anger.

"When I find her I will punish her for running. Maybe I will give her to my men to enjoy. Then she will be grateful to return to me. I will break her. The Hawk will not win!"

He stopped, a sadistic smile on his handsome face.

"Rashiem, send out four groups, three men in each. I want them to ride out in all directions. When they find the blonde whore they are to send one man back to get me. The other two will keep the little whore company until I get there. They are not to touch her. Do it!" he commanded, waving his hand as if to shoo a fly.

"GO NOW!"

Rashiem stood smoothly and bowed out of the tent, hurrying to do Kadine's bidding.



Having returned to camp, Dylan set about gathering their equipment and as Lura rested, began moving her gear. She knew that Kadine would not give up the little blonde easily and she had to find a new camp, one that would be easy to secure as well as defend. It tore at her heart but she knew that the best chance of getting Lura out of the desert alive would be to return to the one place

she had not been to in three years. The hills by her old camp, the place of the dead. There were several caves in the hills near her old campsite that could be used to hide in. It was still part of the NATO installation so the chances were good that even Kadine would not be stupid enough to chance attacking it again. Plus he would never think that she would return there. Therefore that was exactly where she was going.

Pushing these thoughts aside, Dylan continued to pack up her gear. Some things she would need, others she would have to leave behind. The extra blankets and her extra clothes would stay here; she would pack enough for them both and a single extra change of clothing. All the medical supplies, what little there was, had to be packed, along with the extra canteen and her few cooking supplies. This all done she went to wake Lura.

Lura woke to the gentle shaking of her shoulder. "Lura, come on, wakey wakey," the voice said.

"No," she grumbled, "Don't wanna...sleeping." She rolled over to pull the edge of the sleeping bag over her head and promptly jarred her tender ribs. "Ugh." she groaned, then simply rolled onto the other side and continued to snore.

Smiling, Dylan decided to try another approach, "Come on, Little Falcon, open those pretty green eyes for me."

"Hey, who are you callin' "Little?" the indignant blonde said, now opening both eyes.

Both eyes? Lura mused, *Hmm, well, this is an improvement.* She thought, *now I can see her in 3-D.*

She turned her head to stare at the beautiful dark-haired woman leaning over her. "Wow, you are beautiful," she said. *Oops, did I say that out loud? Well, judging from that blush, I guess I did. Well, that is very*

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interesting, very very interesting, she thought with a smile.

"Uh, yeah," Dylan replied scratching her cheek. "Um, can you stand?" she asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Yep, got the standing bit down. What I really need now is a convenient tree, cactus, boulder, small pile of rocks?" Lura said with a blush.

Dylan chuckled and led the small blonde to the bushes at the foot of the hills. As she waited for Lura to finish she went over the basics of her plan aloud.

"We're going to move into some caves near the foot of those hills. I can protect you better there. Then, I'm going to see about your little friend, Kadine."

"He's no friend of mine," Lura replied, surprising Dylan with the bitterness and venom in her voice.

Lura came from behind a clump of bushes tucking her torn shirt into her shorts. Her recently opened eye looked red and painful as she squinted against the morning sun. "If you are going back to his camp could you look for my laptop bag and cameras? It's all I have left to tell this story. I owe it to the guys," she said, sadly looking down at her tightly balled fists.

Taking Lura's hands in hers she brushed her thumbs across the bruised knuckles. Dylan realized how important the equipment was to Lura, but she wanted to make some things very clear to the blonde reporter.

"I can't make any promises, but I will try. You have to understand, if it comes to endangering you or getting that equipment, we can buy more film."

Lura looked up at that final comment and noted the determined look in Dylan's eyes.

When did she become my bodyguard? Not that I'm complaining. She smiled up at her friend.

Dylan turned and picked up a large backpack,

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securing the shoulder straps over her shoulders and clipping the nylon belt around her narrow waist. Leaning forward she rolled up the sleeping bag that Lura had been using, wrapping one of her two canteens in it. This neatly rolled bundle she tucked under one arm, offering the other to the smaller woman.

"Let's go. We have a ways to travel and we are going to go slowly. Let me know if you get tired and we'll rest."

As they climbed down the hillside, Dylan often stopped to put her bundle down and gently help the injured woman over small crevasses, boulders and bushes. They moved very slowly and very carefully. At first Lura found herself using the strong arm for support to steady herself but after a few minutes she found that she needed it much more to simply walk without falling.

Dylan finally simply wrapped her arm around the small waist and pulled Lura closer to her, supporting the weight with her stronger arm.

"Attached at the hip," she told Lura with a chuckle.

This is nice. She is so small; she fits right under my arm. How could anyone pound on something so little? Dylan felt the heat rising in her blood once again at the thought of the beating that Lura had taken.

Lura felt the arm tighten protectively around her waist. *Hmmm, I like this. I feel safe here. And warm, very very warm.* She grinned, thinking of the areas that were, at that moment, burning up

The two women struggled down the hills stopping occasionally to rest. Dylan insisted that Lura drink whenever they stopped, whether she wanted to or not. Dylan knew that the heat could be deceiving and though you may not feel thirsty you should drink frequently to prevent heat stroke.

Desert Hawk

Once they reached level ground, they traveled steadily, stopping only to allow Lura the chance to catch her breath and regain a tiny bit of energy. Dylan wanted to be settled into their new location as quickly as possible. She knew she would need to return and wipe out any tracks leading to the new site. The quicker she got that done the better she could protect Lura.

Daylight was burning quickly and night would make tracking very difficult. Good for her, bad for anyone following. The darkness would allow her time to put some semblance of security in place before she left to visit Kadine. She pushed the younger woman harder than she really wanted to, but she was driven by the image she still held in her head of the small beaten blonde lying bloodied on the ragged blanket. *Never again Lura, never again.* She pushed them both on.



Rashiem gathered groups of men together and set them on the hunt. He had also ordered his personal Lieutenant, Hammett, and his two compatriots to search for the escaped American woman. Hammett had located a small oasis and a rough camp. He remembered the oasis from childhood and the recent events had brought it to mind. Finding the trail that led to the small pond, they had begun to follow it. If he could find Kadine's whore he would be well rewarded. The trail led to the hills and a cave. A thorough search of the cave turned up evidence that someone had been using it and had just recently left. He stepped outside the cave and searched the ground for tracks, finding a pair. There was one large set and one very small set and he knew he was on the right trail. Smiling, he called to his two companions and began following the tracks.



They had found a tiny cave near her original MP camp inside the NATO perimeter and had decided to use it for now. Dylan hoped to locate a more suitable site tomorrow, but for now this would do.

Dylan settled the exhausted blonde on a quickly laid pallet and after wrapping Lura in a warm blanket to ward off the evening chill, she searched her pack for food. The dry meat, goat cheese and water would hold them until she was able to build a fire.

Leaving Lura contentedly eating on the pallet, she left to secure the area. Stepping outside the mouth of the cave she quickly brushed away their tracks and began concealing the entrance. Carrying a branch of scrub with her she backtracked towards the oasis, brushing away their trail. She had only covered part of the trail when she decided to turn back.

That should do until I get back. Then I can set up better perimeter security and some welcoming surprises.

Returning to the cave she was greeted by a soft snore and saw that the exhausted blonde had fallen asleep.

I had better make my little visit to Kadine and get back here before Lura wakes up, Dylan thought. Picking up a rolled blanket, she headed out again, this time towards Kadine's camp on the far side of the oasis.

Lura dreamt of her stunning friend. She saw her on horseback, black hair streaming behind her as she galloped along a black sand beach. The woman was as familiar to her as her own shadow. She knew now that the dream she had been having of the Hawk was true. The woman she had continuously seen in her dreams had been Dylan. Now she knew they were supposed to be together. Deep in sleep she reached for her, feeling a sense of dread

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deep inside but knowing that the dark warrior would help her. Her sixth sense was entering her dreams, something was coming and she was frightened.

"Help me, please help me," she mumbled in her sleep.



Having left the two other men and climbing to the edge of the hills, Hammett saw the tall figure in black leave the old burned out military camp and head towards the East. He had watched as the darkly robed image concealed the tracks and dragged bushes away. *She knows where the whore is hiding. I must get Kadine.*

Hammett made his way back to the other men. "Stay here, I think I know where the girl is. If you see her, do not let her leave the area. I will get Kadine. We will be richly rewarded for this night's work." He smiled at the other men and turned, heading back towards the camp at a trot.

Left on their own, the men sat watching the decimated campsite, eyes searching for any movement. Then one had a foolish idea. If they were rewarded for finding the site, imagine their reward for actually finding the girl. He thought, *Or even better, my reward alone, for finding the girl.*

"Stay here, I am going to take a piss," he lied to his companion. Standing, he moved deeper into the hills.



Dylan had started towards Kadine's camp, her mind whirring with her thoughts and feelings towards the younger woman. Something was nagging her, something she had missed. As she reached the enemy camp, she

scouted the area near the prisoner's tent. There were fewer men now than her first visit. She entered the tent and quickly searched for the laptop and camera bag. The laptop was tossed into a corner near a small tan bag. Inside the small bag were women's clothes. She shouldered both bags and quickly searched for the camera equipment. A few minutes of searching turned up some exposed film but no camera. She tucked the film into the tan bag and slipped back out of the tent. Darting from tent to bushes to tent again and listening for any sounds that would identify humans, her ears picked up the voices of men. Silently she approached a large tent in the center of the camp, Kadine's tent.

"El Kadine, the men are out searching as you ordered. I have sent out groups in all directions and we should have the girl back by daybreak."

"Good, Rashiem, when I get her back the training will start. I can still ransom the men. After all, no one knows they are dead. Then I can sell the woman ... someday." He laughed and patted the other man on the back.

Yes, Lura Grant will be quite, enjoyable. I have never broken an American before so this will be interesting, He thought, smiling to himself.

Dylan felt her heart jump when she heard about the search parties. She remembered the uneasy feelings she had been getting on her return to Kadine's camp.

That's it! The footprints, there were too many to have just been us. Kadine's men are near Lura! I have to hurry and get back to Lura or they may find her!

Moving silently through the camp she reached the edge and began running.



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The man moved quietly through the scrub towards the hillside caves. He knew his companion had missed him by now, but also knew that he would have no idea where to search for him. Smiling, he thought of the woman he was searching for. He remembered her hair. He'd never had a blonde before and, rubbing his groin, he wondered if sex was the same as with the dark-haired women he had bedded. Reaching the caves he began to search them one by one, listening for any sound that might give away the presence of his hiding quarry.



Dylan raced back towards the hills, her mind picturing Lura alone and facing the armed search party. Fear and anger gave wings to her feet, making them fly as she covered the distance between herself and the hills. Passing the burned out campsite she failed to notice the sole observer as she rushed on towards the caves. The man, however, saw her and followed.

Lura woke, moaning from the stiffness that had settled in from her earlier exertion.

God, I feel like I have been beaten. Wait, she smirked, I have. Ow, does this hurt or what?

Sucking air between her teeth she slowly sat up, wrapping her arms around her middle.

"Ugh, I need some water", she rasped from a dry throat. "Where did Dylan put that canteen?"

Standing, she carefully stepped towards the backpack and blanket roll, near the back of the cave. She had slowly knelt to unwrap the canteen when she heard a noise outside the cave. Thinking that Dylan had returned, she stood holding the canteen to her chest and turned towards the mouth of the cave. Her eyes widened as she saw a strange man step into the cave, his head turning to search

the interior.



Dylan felt as if her lungs would burst as she finally saw the caves.



The stranger turned and faced Lura. Seeing her eyes in the dim light of the setting sun, he smiled at the fear he saw there. He walked towards the frightened woman, his arms outstretched to prevent her escape.

"Let us play nice, little girl. Then I will take you back to Kadine. I want a little of what you have been giving him." *I think I like her fear*, he thought, *I will enjoy this*.

He sprang towards the frightened blonde, grabbing for her arms. Lura swung the canteen at the man's head hoping to off balance him long enough to run past him, out of the cave and further into the hills to hide. The canteen bounced off the man's shoulder, surprising him for a moment. Lura dodged past him and towards the mouth of the cave. The man turned and grabbed for the girl's shirt, jerking her back and into his arms.

Lura struggled as she felt the arms close around her tender ribs. The pain was immediate, but she still fought. The man finally simply picked up the smaller woman and slammed her to floor of the cave, knocking the wind from her. He followed her to the ground, falling on top of her. Grabbing the struggling woman's arms he pinned them above her head with one large hand as he used his free hand to tear open her shirt.

This can't be happening, Lura thought as she bucked, trying to dislodge the man. Tears sprang to her eyes as she felt a calloused hand squeeze her naked breast and a hot

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mouth bite down on her neck. "NO!" She screamed struggling even harder as tears streamed from her eyes. "DYLAN! Please, God! Dylan, Dylan!"

I have to fight. Dylan will get here, I know it. She will get here.

Chapter 9

Dylan heard the scream and, dropping the gear near the entrance, she crashed through the brush and into the cave's mouth. Her eyes frantically searched for Lura. She saw her; a large figure was on top of the small blonde. One hand had the girl's arms pinned while the other was trying to open his pants. Dylan heard a sound like rushing water and her vision tunneled to only the sight before her. She watched as if from a great distance and through the eyes of a stranger as her hand reached forward and grabbed the back of the man's neck, squeezed and pulled. She held the struggling man by his neck as her other hand gripped the front of his throat and squeezed, crushing his windpipe. She threw the dying man from her, watching as he flailed on the ground, his mouth open in a silent scream and his hands clawing at his throat in a futile attempt to breathe. As she turned towards the still figure on the ground, she felt a second attacker leap onto her back trying to take her down. Dylan instinctively widened her stance to accommodate the additional weight. She reached up and, cupping her hands, slapped them over the man's ears, rupturing his eardrums. The attacker fell to the ground at Dylan's feet, holding his bleeding ears. Dylan turned and, quickly grabbing the man's head, twisted sharply, snapping his neck. She let the thrashing body fall to the ground. The dark head raised as blue eyes searched the cave for other attackers. Seeing none she turned again towards the silent huddled figure on the ground.

Kneeling close to the young woman she held out her hand, palm up and softly called out, "Lura. Lura, please. Are you OK?"

Dylan reached towards the small body as it curled into a tight ball. The blonde was now on her side, her legs

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curled up, her arms wrapped around her middle, her head tucked deeply into her chest. She did not move. Dylan couldn't tell if she was even breathing. Slowly she reached out to turn Lura over.

She is so still. Please let her be alive, please don't let me have been too late again. Please.

As she touched the huddled form she felt the other woman tremble then begin to shake violently. "Lura, please look at me. It's me, Dylan. Lura, look at me."

Slowly the disheveled blonde head raised and terrified green eyes searched out tear-filled blue.

"Dylan? Tell me it's you. Please tell me they're gone," the ragged voice whispered.

Dylan felt the knots in her stomach loosen and her lungs begin to work again at the sound of that voice.

"Lura," she sighed as she drew the battered woman into her arms. Small arms circled her neck and the blonde buried her face in the dark woman's chest. Dylan felt the other woman's body tremble as the blonde released all her fear and terror in a flood of sobs and tears. "Shh, it's okay now. I'm here; I won't let them hurt you. It's okay, it's okay." Dylan wasn't sure which of them she was saying that for, herself or the distraught woman in her arms.

Slowly she rose, helping Lura to her feet. She wanted to move them to another location before Lura realized that they were sharing a cave with two dead men.

Minutes later, Dylan settled down next to her trembling charge. She had moved them from the first cave further up into the hills into another, deeper cave. After fixing a pallet for Lura she held the frightened woman until her trembling stopped. She was beginning to worry. It was obvious that Lura was in shock. Since arriving, the small blonde had not uttered a word but had just cried silent tears and watched the tall dark soldier. Now she

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seemed to have nodded off and Dylan listened for a few minutes. Hearing Lura's steady deep breathing she felt sure that she had cried herself to an exhausted sleep. Finally Dylan loosened her hold and stood.

I need to stock up a bit on the wood if we are going to have enough to last the night, Dylan thought. She pulled her black scarf over her face and headed towards the mouth of the cave.

"NO! Don't leave me here!" Lura screamed.

Dylan turned and saw that the distraught woman was trying to stand. She rushed back to her side and helped lower her weakened body back onto the sleeping pallet.

"Lura you must stay still; you have had quite a shock, your body needs time to recover. I am just going for some wood. I will be close by, if you need me just call out. I will come to you I promise."

Lura looked up into the blue eyes of the tall woman and believed. *She won't let anything happen to me. She will be here.*

Dylan stared at the younger woman's face, watching the thoughts travel across them like wind on the sand. She realized what she had asked the smaller woman for. God, please don't let me disappoint her again.

Lura reached up and placed the back of a bruised hand on the beautiful soft cheek of her protector and nodded her head.

"Alright, Dylan. You're right, we need wood for later." She spoke, lowering her eyes but not removing her hand. Instead she turned it palm up to cup the chiseled jaw. She glanced back up and Dylan watched as tears slowly ran down the pale cheeks.

Dylan felt herself lean forward, watching the green eyes for any sign of rejection. Lura closed her eyes and leaned towards the dark woman. Gently, Dylan touched

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her lips to Lura's, reveling in the softness of the blonde's mouth. Feeling Lura press into the kiss, Dylan pulled back drawing Lura's lower lip into her mouth, tasting the salt of her tears. As she looked into the face she had begun to love, she waited for a reaction.

Lura felt her heart race and her breath shorten. She opened her eyes and gazed into pools of apprehensive blue. Realizing that Dylan expected rejection she poured all her love into the gaze she fixed on the woman she now considered her Hawk. Slowly she slid her bruised hands into the dark hair of the older woman. She stared into the confused blue eyes and, tugging gently, she pulled the other woman to her. Putting everything she felt into the kiss, she melted into the embrace. *I hope she understands what I am trying to tell her.* As she pulled back she smiled into the gentle blue gaze.

Dylan felt elation as she gazed into the eyes of her love. The smile that pulled at her lips came straight from her heart.

They sat there for several minutes, each enjoying the warmth they felt in the other's gaze. Dylan was the first to break the stare, remembering her earlier task.

"We will continue this later," she whispered. "Now, you have got to rest and I have got to get some firewood."

Still frightened, but heated by the love she saw reflected in the pale blue eyes of the older woman, Lura agreed. "Please don't be long," she whispered.

Nodding her dark head, Dylan rose and glided out of the cave. Pausing to get her bearings, she thought of the beautiful woman sitting alone in the tiny, dimly lit cave. She felt a knot in her throat at the courage of the smaller woman. She lowered her head, gazing at the ground before her feet.

My God, she has got to be one of the bravest people I

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have ever met. She thought, I will not let him hurt her again, I have to find a way out. For both of us.

Dylan needed to leave the cave, not just for firewood, but to cool off and calm her jangled nerves. She paced outside the cave entrance for several minutes before starting the hunt for firewood.

I had better not wander too far, it is getting dark and I really don't want to leave Lura alone. Dylan gathered some dry branches and scrub to start a small fire and keep it going for a few hours, long enough to allow the younger woman to fall asleep. She was careful to gather dry tinder so that the fire would produce little smoke but intense heat. Bundling the branches under her arm she slowly made her way back to the cave hideaway. As she approached the entrance she heard it, the quiet crying of the small blonde.

"Lura, Lura are you okay?" Her voice was filled with worry as she approached the crying woman. Lura looked up through tear-filled eyes and held her arms out to Dylan. Dropping her bundle, Dylan lowered herself next to the small body and slowly gathered the beautiful woman in her arms. "Please don't cry Lura. I can't stand to see you cry."

Lura heard the words but was still too distraught to stay the tears.

"You can't cry; you are my brave little fighter, the falcon to my hawk."

Lura stopped crying and looked up into distressed blue eyes. "Why do you call me falcon?" she asked with a hiccup.

Dylan looked down and smiled. "I am from the Blue Ridge Mountains of the Carolinas, my people are part of the Cherokee nation. When I was a small child my Grandfather, Grey Hawke, told me stories on nights I

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couldn't sleep. There was one I always asked for. It is actually a legend in my tribe, a story of a falcon and a hawk. They were bonded, soulmated. I have always felt that my soulmate would be like the falcon in the legend, small, fierce and brave. Those are all words that describe you. You are a falcon. One day I will tell you the legend and you will understand."

"Can I be your falcon, Hawke?" Lura asked in a deep throaty voice.

Dylan looked deeply into the soft green eyes. She felt herself drawn toward the sweet lips and gentle breath. As she gazed at Lura through hooded eyes she slowly lowered her mouth. Lura reached up and felt her hands once again tangling in the silky black mane as she pulled the Hawk tighter into her embrace.

Dylan gently brushed the soft lips with her tongue, begging entrance and was thrilled to feel the lips part immediately. She dipped into the honeyed sweetness of her mouth, pressing all the love she felt into the kiss. As she drew back, she gazed again into the eyes of her love. "Lura, I can't stand to see you cry, tell me what can I do." "Make me forget, Dylan. Make me forget the sounds, the smells, the feeling of strange hands on my body."

Gently taking the large calloused hand into her own, she kissed the fingertips and placed the large hand upon her breast. "Make me forget, Dylan."

The soldier slowly squeezed the soft flesh, feeling the nipple swell in her palm.

Lura turned her face up and moaned a soft sensual sound. With her head tossed back, her graceful throat exposed and glowing hair floating across her shoulders, she looked like a beautiful golden goddess offering herself to Dylan who slowly and gently helped Lura to her feet.

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Dylan stared into enchanting green eyes as her hands expertly unbuttoned the torn blouse and slipped it from Lura's shoulders. She placed those same hands around the trim waist and pulled Lura to her, feeling the pressure of soft breasts as they pressed into her chest. She lowered her head to once again taste those willing lips and one hand slipped up a smooth back to unsnap the lacy bra. Stepping back, she pulled the bra with her, exposing soft white flesh to hungry eyes. Falling to her knees in front of her Falcon, Dylan reached for the blonde's waist again, surprised that her hands were not trembling. She looked up into green eyes as her hands reached for the single button that held Lura's shorts together. Gently, she unbuttoned the shorts and watched as her hand slid the zipper down. Lura placed her hands at the top of the shorts and, slipping her finger into the elastic of her underwear, slid both down in one smooth movement. She kicked off her shoes and socks and stood before the dark woman, naked and exposed.

Dylan stood and stepped back, looking into the green eyes for several moments before allowing her own eyes to slide down the lush body before her. Her heart pounded as she reached the golden nest below the tiny navel. Her fingers trembled, aching to bury themselves in the warmth she knew she would find there. Her hands followed her eyes as they traveled back up the compact body, stopping again as each hand cupped a perfect pink-tipped breast. She squeezed gently and lowered her head to allow her mouth to hungrily suckle an aching breast. She reached downward towards Lura's soft nest, her intent to explore the dark recesses and feast there next, but she found her hands caught by two, much smaller ones. Her head jerked up, blue eyes meeting green eyes in confusion.

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"My turn, my Hawk," a soft throaty voice whispered, as she reached for the black shirt that covered the golden skin. Slowly, Lura teasingly undid each button, kissing every exposed bit of flesh. She slipped the soft black shirt from powerful shoulders and smiled to see that her Hawk wore no bra. Her eyebrow arched and her lips curved into a smile as she leaned forward and flicked an erect nipple with the tip of her tongue. Pulling the dark soldier closer to her, she sucked the warm nipple into her mouth, her tongue dancing on the hard peak. Her hands slid down the strong back and into the waistband at the back of the black pants. Sliding her hands inside, she reached lower and gently squeezed the firm muscles she found there. A frustrated groan rumbled up from the chest and into her lips through the breast she was still enjoying. She smiled, knowing that she was the one who caused that sound. Shifting her body back a bit, she released the nipple from her mouth, blowing gently on it as she pulled back. Watching the blue eyes close in ecstasy, she smiled and her hands traced the waistline of the pants and moved around to nestle in the damp curls her fingers had found. She felt the flesh tremble as she slipped a finger deep into the curls, feeling the silky moisture hidden there. Slowly she withdrew her hand and lifted the finger to her mouth, sucking away the glistening fluid.

"Enough!" Dylan roared.

She reached out, taking Lura into her arms and gently lowered them both onto the pallet. She stood again to quickly remove her pants and boots before returning to the arms of her soulmate.

Chapter 10

Later, as she lay naked on the blanket, Dylan reveled in the feel of the soft flesh pressed against hers. Pulling a bit of blanket up over their exposed bodies, she smiled as she listened to Lura's soft snoring, her breath warming Dylan's neck as she snuggled deeper into the soldier's firm body.

WOW was the single thought dancing through the Dylan's mind. She was sure it went well with the really goofy smile plastered on her face.

I think she likes me. Okay, she likes me a lot. Dylan felt her heart soar and tightened her arms around the sleeping body next to hers, pressing it closer into her side. She heard a deep sigh and drew back to glance down into Lura's gently smiling, but still bruised face.

Slowly the joy drained from the soldier's features and the soft blue eyes turn icy cold.

"Kadine. You son of a bitch", she murmured through clenched teeth. She closed her eyes and remembered the conversation she had overheard back at the terrorist camp. She knew that she would have to act soon if she was going to save Lura. Her brow furrowed as she thought of her options.

Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, she thought, as she reviewed each idea, quickly discarding each in turn. Finally frustration yielded one last thought. *I do have one ace I haven't played yet. The question is: does he still care?*

Finally slipping out of the warm embrace of her lover, Dylan quietly dressed then walked out to the mouth of the cave. Slowly she sat, watching the moon disappear and the sky gradually brighten with the rising of the sun. How long she sat there she had no idea. Her mind was

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racing with images and memories, her head bowed in contemplation, arms resting on her knees. Finally she lifted her eyes and stared out at the morning sky then down on the burned out campsite below.

Her mind flashed back to three years earlier, the sounds and smells of that day burned their way into her brain. She had made a promise to herself and her men when she recovered from her injuries. She had vowed to remain in the desert until she had ended the reign of the madman responsible for the slaughter. Now she was so close she could taste his fear. Was she willing to give that up to save a woman she had just met? Was she truly her soulmate? Dylan forced herself to think of leaving the little reporter. Her heart pounded, her ears rang and tears slowly slid down her cheeks. No, that was not an option. She would have to either find a way to end this now or she would have to give up her mission. She thought, *there has to be a way to have both. If not ...* she left her words there, floating in the morning air, unable to complete the sentence. Her heart had already made the decision for her.

There were things she knew she needed to do and the thought of it made her anxious, nauseous and excited all at once. The sun was now up and she knew that she needed to get started if she was going to have any success at all with her plan. She also knew that she was stalling. She hated what she had to do next, but delaying it was not going to make it go away. Dylan stood and brushed off the seat of her pants. Staring at the sky, she sent up a silent prayer for strength. She closed her eyes, brought her hands up to her face and took a deep breath. Blowing out slowly and powerfully, she steeled herself for what she had to do.

I don't know if I am ready for this, I know I am really

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not going to like it, but if Lura and I are to survive, I gotta do it.

With this thought in mind, Dylan trotted back down hill towards the first cave and on past it. She had to go back. Her heart ached, her head hurt and her stomach turned, but she had to go back. She had not been there in three years and dreaded the prospect of what she might find, but she would go. For the Falcon, she would go back.



Kadine was ecstatic. Finally, he would have the blonde woman. Rashiem had assured him the one of his men had located the woman and could lead them to her.

"Rashiem!" he shouted. "Rashiem, bring my jeep around." Turning, he examined his image in the mirror again. Smoothing back his hair he smiled, "We are going hunting." He turned and with a swish of canvas was gone.

Chapter 11

As they traveled across the sand, Kadine smiled darkly to himself; he would have her soon. Maybe the chase had increased the pleasure of the hunt, but he wanted this woman more than he had ever wanted any woman.

"Drive faster you idiot," he told the jeep driver. He glanced behind him to make sure he did not lose the truckload of soldiers following them.

Yes, soon she would be with him and he had plans for breaking her. He envisioned her begging him to stop. Offering herself to him if he would only stop punishing her for running away. He had found his riding whip. He carried it with him now, slapping it against his thigh, feeling the sting of it. He saw the whip falling on the soft white shoulders of the blonde, heard her screams in his mind.

"Faster, faster!" he screamed, as his driver nervously shifted down a gear in an effort to squeeze more speed out of the ancient vehicle.



Since the attack three years ago she had not returned to the cave. Dylan had stayed in the area but had not been able to bring herself to go near the cave. She hated having to bring Lura to this place of death, but she knew that these caves there were the best for her needs. Having reached the bottom on an embankment, she quickly traveled the length of a gully and began climbing higher, back into the hills. She headed towards the several smaller, deeper caves, and one sealed cave in particular. She had only been climbing for a few minutes when it hit

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her. Her heart raced and her head pounded. She smelled again the rancid odor of charred flesh, felt the shifting of the ground and stifling heat of the air. She stopped for a moment and drew in a deep breath shaking her head holding on to the rocky side of the hill as she waited for the world to stop spinning. Tears streamed from her eyes as she continued to climb towards the cave mouth. Angrily, she brushed them aside in frustration. Thinking of Lura blocked the screams of the dead men from her mind, keeping the horrifying flashbacks at bay.

As she crested the last rocky outcrop she saw the series of caves, four in all, one blocked by rock fall, its mouth burned and singed. As she stared at the crumpled façade of rock her mind took her back three long years to that day. Her ears again ached with the sound of the blast. Dylan fell to her knees, her head in her hands as she screamed out her anger and frustration, raging at the memories.

Suddenly an old dream flashed through her mind, wrenching her from the flashback. It was the memory of a small blonde woman lying among the dead men.

"NO! That is not going to happen. I will not let it happen. I will not lose her too."

Dylan staggered to her feet and moved slowly towards the sealed cave. Reaching out a hand, she touched again the fallen rocks. She bowed her head, almost in prayer, and then raised determined blue eyes to search for the tiny opening at the top of the mouth. Pulling herself up, hand over hand, she reached it and pushed through the opening to pause at the top. Her eyes were filled with dust, her lungs burned from the hot air, but she turned her head and gulped in lungs full of the burning heated air anyway. She knew what was on the other side of the wall of rocks she clung to. She would

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rather breath in the fiery heated air that was here than the putrid smell that lingered inside. She was forced to wait for her eyesight to adjust to the darkness of the tomb, as she waited the smell of mold and dust filled her nostrils and lungs. Finally she could make out objects. Searching the ground for her old duffle bag, her eyes skimmed over lumpy forms, the remains of her troops, now only mummified flesh and rotting bones wrapped in US Army BDU's. There, near the far wall, thrown there by the explosion was her duffle.

Pushing herself through the tiny hole she rolled down the inside landslide of rock and onto the floor of the cave. Quickly making her way to the bag, she carefully avoided stepping on the remains. The smell of musk and rot mixed with the smell of heated stone. Dylan exhaled sharply through her nose forcing out the dust and clearing her nasal passages of the stench. Quickly, she reached down and located the battered duffel. Slinging it onto her shoulder she carried it back to the entrance and began to climb. Once she reached the top, she pushed the duffel through the opening and out to the ground below. With a final, sad glance back she pushed her own body through and rolled down the rocky incline and away from the silent soldiers inside the dark tomb.

Picking up the bag, Dylan walked away from the landslide that sealed the entrance. She fell to her knees and threw back her head wailing out her anger to the silent sky above. Exhausted she finally half crawled half staggered down the hill and came to rest in the gully. Finally settled she began digging into the bag. Her hands removed and discarded item after item until she found what she had been searching for, her extra ammo and clip, an old terrain map and a land sat radio. She checked the power level and discovered that the solar cells still

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worked. Relief washed through her as she abandoned the bag and climbed to the top of a rocky hill. Cranking up the volume she began searching the channels for an open NATO line.

Let's see how sincere he really is. She thought.

Hearing a NATO call sign she depressed the call button and spoke into mouthpiece.

"Sorry to intrude guys. This is the Hawk."

The Radio went silent, then crackled to life.

"Hawk, this is Sergeant John Childress, US ARMY Forces, NATO. You are transmitting on a NATO secure line. We are tracking this call. Friend or Foe?"

"Definitely friend. I am Captain Dylan Hawke, US Army Military Police Corp., Social Security Number 238-09-6454, NATO Security Clearance ALPHA 1. I think we can help each other out, but first, I need you to do me a favor."



Kadine was furious. They had arrived at the old campsite but not only was the woman not there, the two men left on guard had disappeared as well.

"Rashiem! Where are your men? Why are they not here?" Kadine called out, his back to the dark giant.

He had trusted Rashiem with a simple task. Find one small woman lost in the desert. He gave him all the support he needed to accomplish this and still he had failed. This would not be tolerated.

He turned and stared coldly at his bodyguard.

Rashiem walked to Kadine and looked at his friend, "I am not sure El Kadine. Hammid assured me that he had located them and he left his men here to guard this location. I will find them," he said, turning and heading towards the convoy of men waiting for Kadine's orders.

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Kadine watched the man turn and walk away. He smiled.

“Rashiem?” he called out

“Yes?” the man responded, turning.

He never knew what happened next. He saw a flash of light and everything went red, then nothing.

Kadine watched as the man’s head snapped back from the force of the round. He knew that a large portion of the back of his head was missing. Hollow points tended to do that. He shrugged his shoulders and holstered his weapon.

“Hammid?” he now called, “You are now Second in Command. Do not disappoint me.

Hammid stepped over the body of his predecessor and saluted smartly.

“Now, gather the men, we will return to camp tonight, tomorrow you will find the woman, or you will be ...demoted.” Kadine chuckled.



Sergeant John Childress had been in the army for 6 years. He enjoyed his job. The hours sucked sometimes, but all in all, he really enjoyed it. He had been stationed in Saudi now for a little over a year and felt he had seen and heard just about everything, but this took the cake.

Staring at the headset of the radio, he shook his head in utter disbelief. Then, realizing exactly what had just transpired, he jumped to his feet, slapping his forehead as if to knock some reality into his addled brain. His eyes bugged out of his head and he gasped for breath. He looked around for something, he wasn’t sure what but he knew he had to do something.

“Holy shit. HOLY FUCKIN SHIT!!! I don’t believe

this."

Picking up the NATO secure landline, he placed the call. It was picked up on the first ring.

"This is Sergeant Childress, NATO Headquarters, Saudi. I need to speak with Senator John Cameron," he stated. Then, still shaking his head, he began to mumble. "Hooollleee shit, he just ain't gonna believe this." The sergeant whispered while sitting back down, his knees weak in shock, waiting on the senator.



Dylan sat outside the entrance of their camp listening to the soft snoring of the woman she knew to be her soulmate. She had selected another smaller cave to hide in while Lura rested and had just spent the last hour moving their gear to a larger cave up the hillside. Now she sat on the sand at the tiny cave mouth, listening to Lura breath and going over the past and her future in her mind. The tears that streaked her face were evidence of her inner turmoil.

Getting to her feet Dylan closed her eyes and concentrated, visibly collecting herself. The trip to the tomb and seeing, once again, the battered, torn remains of her men had taken a heavy emotional toll on the soldier. That, combined with the memory of the dreams of Lura dead or injured were wearing heavy on her heart and mind.

It wouldn't do to have Lura frightened with my stupid tears. Dylan thought. She scrubbed her face with her sleeve and went inside. Pour a bit of water into her palm, she washed her face and cooled her burning eyes. Feeling a bit more human she went to wake Lura.

Squatting next to the softly snoring woman she reached out, gently shook a shoulder and softly called:

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"Lura, come on, wakey wakey."

"No." She grumbled, half opening one very sleepy green eye. "Don't wanna, sleeping."

Sometimes having normal things happen sure settles the nerves, Dylan thought, smiling.

Deciding on another approach, she called to the sleeping woman, "Come on Little Falcon, open those pretty green eyes for me. We have to move again."

Lura was exhausted and her head hurt, throbbing with each heartbeat; her insides ached and so did her ribs. She was grumpy, sleepy and achy, and thought again, *I am definitely not a morning person, or an afternoon person. Maybe I'm just 'a do not disturb 'cause I'm sleeping' person.* But she knew that Dylan would only be waking her if she had a good reason.

"Okay, okay Dylan, I'm ready." Her eyes still closed, she reached a hand out towards the dark soldier.

"Um Lura, you'd be a lot more convincing if you opened your eyes," Dylan chuckled.

Yep, normal and grouchy are good.

Dylan helped Lura to her feet and led her out of the small cave.

"Okay Lura. I've moved all our things to another cave. We're going to have to stay there a while until things settle down here. It's a good climb. Do you think you can handle it?"

"Hey, you're talking to the woman who tracked down the famous Desert Hawk. Of course I can handle it, silly. Lead on, McDuff," came the sleepy reply.

"McDuff, huh? How did I get demoted from "Famous Desert thingy" to 'McDuff'?" Dylan mumbled under her breath to the delight of a chuckling small reporter.

Chapter 12

The climb was difficult and Dylan had to stop often to allow the injured younger woman a chance to rest. Lura did not complain but simply struggled on, her concentration evident in the frown on her face. When they finally reached the summit Lura noticed that the cave Dylan selected was one of several at the top of a steep incline. Next to their new hide away was a larger cave that was obviously blocked by some kind of massive cave-in. She looked at Dylan questioningly, but the older woman simply frowned and stared straight ahead, almost painfully. Lura was not about to let her get away with that. She stopped and waited until finally Dylan responded.

"I picked this cave because it should be easy to protect. I want you to settle in the back and wait for me. I'm going to be gone for a while. I have to check the surprises I set for any unwanted visitors."

They continued up the incline and into the massive cave. Dylan helped settle Lura in the cool interior seating her again on a small boulder with a canteen close at hand.

Rising, she turned towards her gear reaching for her knife and a small entrenching tool. She was stopped by a soft noise. Glancing back Dylan stared at the younger woman's face, watching the thoughts travel across them like wind on the sand. Dylan realized that Lura was frightened. The comment of 'unwanted visitors' she had made reminded the young woman of the earlier attack.

And here I am leaving her again, in a dark lonely place. God, please don't let me disappoint her again, Dylan thought a worried expression on her face.

Sliding her knife into the leg sheath, she returned and knelt in front of her soulmate. She reached out and

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grasped Lura's hand. "Lura, I promise, I will be back. I won't be gone long."

"No problem Dylan. I'm all right. You go ahead and take care of things. I'll set up camp. Hey, if you see a Hardee's down there, pick me up a burger and fries, and some firewood to keep it warm."

Dylan smiled at the comment. "Naw, I'm looking for a McDonalds, they have better fries," she said in a parting shot as she ducked out of the cave.

Having settled their gear, Lura sat on a sleeping bag near a small stone circle. She had set up their camp, even built a small fire with some branches she found at the cave mouth and laying out their sleeping bags, side by side. *Now if Dylan would just get back with something for dinner other than dried meat and cheese, things will be perfect.*

Lura tried to distract herself from her fears and her hunger by going over in her mind, the story she planned to write. But her mind kept drifting off to thoughts of Dylan, their night of love and the men who may end what future they might share. Her heart lurched when she remembered the beating and thought of her Hawk facing these men.

No, I have to stop thinking like that. Dylan has been here for three years alone in this desert fighting these men. If they could have hurt her, they would have already. She smiled now, thinking of what her soldier would do to these men when she found them.

This worry now off her mind new needs raised their hungry heads. Lura's stomach grumbled loudly, she placed her hand on her belly as if to calm the beast. Now her mind returned to Dylan's last words and thoughts of burgers and fries cooked over an open fire. Angrily she realized that only made her hunger worse.

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I have got to get my mind off of food.

She forced herself back to the story she would write and tried not to drift off into the land of dancing burgers and flirting French fries.

Nothing seemed to be working on distracting her from thoughts of food. Finally she simply settled down to wait. She had just begun to feel her head drop in sleep when she heard the sound of footsteps outside the cave mouth.

They're back!

Lura saw shadows dancing at the cave entrance. Her mind flashed back to the men who had attacked her. She did not want to let them know she was in the cave. Still sitting she turned onto her knees she crawled to the back of the cave, pulling a tattered blanket with her. Finding an indentation deep in the rear cave wall she curled into a tight ball and pulled the worn blanket over her body and head. It wasn't much but she hoped that whoever was out there would simply think the cave empty and leave. She tried to slow her heartbeat, certain that anyone entering the cave was sure to hear it pounding. Trembling, she waited listening to the footsteps drawing nearer.

"Lura, Lura?" Dylan whispered as she entered the cave. Seeing the fire and the empty sleeping bag, a cold sweat broke out on her forehead. Her eyes darted around the interior as she began a frantic search for the other woman.

"Please Lura, where are you?"

Lura heard the familiar voice and the frantic tone. Peeking out from under the blanket, she called out.

"Here, Dylan. I'm here."

Dylan rushed and knelt at her side, pulling Lura into her arms and holding the woman tightly to her chest.

Lura felt the soldier's heart beat through her clothes,

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sorry that she was the cause of the erratic pounding.

"I'm OK, Dylan. I heard a noise and thought...well, I'm just glad you're back. Are you OK? Did you go for more firewood? Did you find a Hardee's?" she asked, trying to change the subject and calm the clearly upset woman.

Dylan stood, helping the smaller woman up. She walked back to the sleeping bag and helped Lura to sit.

"Yes, I am okay and no, I did not find a Hardee's. I was looking for a McDonald's but will this do?" she asked, holding up a small, dressed desert fowl.

"Oh, I think I can handle that," Lura replied, taking the bird and smiling up at Dylan. "So how about more wood? We only have enough to make it through the night. Don't we need to get more?"

"No, hopefully we won't have to stay through another night so we won't need any more," Dylan said, settling next to other woman on the bag and wrapping the blanket around Lura's bare legs.

My God, when I didn't see her I think my heart actually stopped in my chest, she thought. How did this happen so quickly? When this is over we are gonna have a long talk, my Falcon. That's a promise.

Dylan watched as Lura first plucked then spitted the bird and positioned it over the fire. She had forgotten how hungry she was but soon the tempting smell of the roasting bird had her mouth watering. She reached for a leg and quickly drew her hand back when the little blonde slapped it.

"No, it isn't ready yet. You can't eat it raw, Dylan. Give it a couple of more minutes," Lura chided.

Dylan grinned and stood up, too restless to remain seated for long. Stepping outside, she walked a few paces away then turned back to look at the cave entrance. She

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knew that she was in a good strategic location, the only way to the cave was uphill and the mouth would only admit one at a time. Dylan had positioned several large rocks across the cave mouth; fresh bushes had been crammed into cracks to disguise as much of the entrance as possible. She knew that Kadine's men probably had an idea of her location but were not positive of her exact position. She could use that to her advantage. Everything was set. Turning, she looked down the hill and then off in the direction of Kadine's camp. She knew she still had some time before he arrived. Now, she could put the last bit of her plan into action. Going back inside, she waited a second to allow her vision to once again adjust to the darkness.

"Lura, how is that desert chicken coming?" Dylan asked, trying to distract her own active mind.

"It's ready now. Have a seat and I'll get you some." Lura watched the tall soldier gracefully fold her long frame and settle onto one of the sleeping bags. The strong golden face turned to her, the crystal blue eyes standing out against the dark complexion. Lura sighed and smiled at the beautiful woman.

When we get out of here, my Hawk, you and I are gonna have a long talk. Yep, a real long talk. Lura smiled at the thought, causing the soldier to frown in concern at the strange look on the other woman's face.

"Um Lura, is there something wrong?" Dylan asked.

"What? Oh, no, nothings wrong. I was just thinking," Lura stammered, blushing slightly at having been caught.

"About what?" Dylan asked.

Oh boy, better think quick girl, Lura thought. She stood and carried several pieces of skewered meat to Dylan, trying desperately to find a safe subject to talk about.

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"Well, I was wondering about what your favorite food might be. I was trying to figure out what you would have as a first meal when you get home?"

Home? That was a concept that truly had not occurred to Dylan in quite a while. Since she did not have a ready response she said the first thing that popped into her head.

"A McDonalds cheeseburger, extra large fries and a giant Dr Pepper." Dylan smiled and sighed as she bit into the now under appreciated fowl.

"Yeah," Lura agreed, "But make mine a strawberry shake and I'm there."

"Hey, it's a date then. My treat," Dylan laughed, and then blushed, realizing what she had just said.

"You're on, and I'm gonna hold you to that one. Hawke." Lura smiled. "Oh, and Dylan, it is a 'date' right?" Lura asked, staring straight into a pair of startling blue eyes.

"Do you want it to be, Lura?" Dylan asked, hoping not to sound desperate and dropping her eyes to look intently at the suddenly very interesting roasted meat.

"I think I'd like that Dylan." Lura smiled, staring into the suddenly serious blue eyes.

Dylan grinned and took another hearty bite out of the leg she had been worrying, totally pleased with herself.

Lura grinned and started in on her dinner, feeling much lighter of heart.

Chapter 13

After finishing her meal and throwing the bones into the fire, Dylan stood. It was time. Though she knew that the evening was going to be far more dangerous and far less enjoyable than the night before, she gathered her gear with a lighter heart.

"Lura, I have a small errand to run. I won't be long."

"Where are you going, Dylan? I thought maybe we could sit up tonight and... well umm, maybe..." Lura turned a livid shade of red and looked down at the bone she was now picking.

Dylan grinned, remembering the soft skin and gentle kisses that had sealed the evening the night before. She looked at Lura amazed to see her blushing. Shaking her head she knew that no matter how tempting the treat, this was one job that had to be done. Sighing deeply she turned to concentrate on the task at hand.

"I have to go back to Kadine's camp."

Lura's heart skipped. KADINE! That meant she was going alone. There were too many of them. No, not alone.

"No. No, please Dylan, you can't." Lura reached out toward Dylan. "He'll kill you. I know he will," Lura said pleadingly into Dylan's face.

Seeing that the soldier was determined to go on this suicide mission she tried another tack.

"Please, can't we just stay here? He won't find us here. Please." She wrapped her arms around Dylan's neck and held on.

Dylan held her close for several minutes then gently reached up and removed the clinging arms from her neck. She let her hands travel down soft white skin and took Lura's hands in her own. She gazed up into frightened

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green eyes, surprised to see so much concern there.

"Lura, I have to go. I have to." Dylan stared into the enchanting eyes, willing Lura to understand.

"If we're gonna get out of here in one piece, we have to slow this guy down and if I have to slow him down, I might as well do it right and stop him altogether." She turned and picked up the radio. Smiling she glanced back over her shoulder at her fearful soulmate.

"Don't worry. I have a plan," Dylan said with a wicked grin.

Realizing that the soldier was determined to finish this, Lura resigned herself to the inevitable.

"Okay, Dylan, but you listen up. I know that you know what you're doing and I know you think this is kind of fun but, I just... I'm...just... Shit, be careful, please. I just found you and I will be damned if I am going to let you fly away from me now, Hawke. You better bring that cute butt of yours back here in one piece, you got that?"

Dylan smiled and stroked Lura's cheek with a bronzed hand. "I love you, Little Falcon." She kissed the blonde gently on the lips.

Then she was gone.

"I love you too, Hawke," Lura whispered at the retreating shadow.



Kadine had started out early the next morning, hoping to get a jump on the Hawk and his prey. He had gotten Hammid up and ordered him to gather some of the men. Loading up a truckload of soldiers he ordered his driver to lead the way. He wanted to start at the Hawk's last known location which was the small, cool cliff side pools. He had ordered Hammid to post two guards at the pools the previous night and they were to report any

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activity.

Kadine arrived at the oasis. Stepping from his jeep, he walked towards the water. "Hammid, where are your men?"

"Meier?" Hammid called. "Where are your men?"

"I am not sure Rashiem. I left them here to guard the oasis. I wanted to check for the woman and make sure that she did not escape. "

"How do you know she is here?"

"The tracks, the tracks lead into the NATO site and they are not sandal tracks," Meier replied.

Kadine looked at the tracks in the sand, watching them head onto NATO ground.

Of course, she has gone home. She will have returned to that death camp. I will have her and the little blonde now. He smiled as he thought of the evening he would enjoy.

"Hammid, we need more men. We will be returning to some old hunting grounds. There are many caves there and we will have to search every one. Call the camp, bring the rest of the men," Kadine ordered as he slapped his leg impatiently with the riding crop.



Dylan had traveled all night, reaching the marauder's camp around midnight. She had wrapped herself in her robes and settled in for the evening. Early the next morning she heard the growl of engines. Kadine was moving early. She watched as he loaded up a truckload of his men and headed out.

Smiling, Dylan reached into her robes and pulled out the map. Clicking the transmit button on the hand held Land Sat radio, she identified herself. "This is Captain Dylan Hawke calling the 54th Field Artillery."

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The response was immediate.

"LTC Carter here. Welcome back to the living, Captain Hawke. LT Carr is prepared to take the coordinates."

"Thank you, Colonel. Let's see if we can eliminate a big headache for you."

"Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Are you locked in on my coordinates?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I am."

"Well, remember not to shoot me," Dylan stated with a broad smile. "Let's see if we can walk a little present into Kadine's camp. Longitude 30 degrees North, Latitude 47 degrees West."

Moments later, Dylan heard a long shrill whistle and watched as a round impacted just above the campsite, causing men to scatter.

"Longitude 25 degrees North, Latitude 45 degrees West."

Another round landed directly in the center of the madman's camp.

"DAMN! You are good LT. Fire for effect!"

"Thank you Ma'am, You ain't so bad yourself," he chuckled. "FIRE FOR EFFECT!" the young officer yelled, not bothering to release the call button on the radio.

The rounds rained down like vengeful bolts from heaven. Dylan watched as the camp disappeared in smoke, flames and debris. Smiling, she called a halt to the attack and packed the map away.

"Thanks, boys. You got 'em. What are the chances of getting some manpower support out here?"

"Already on its way, Captain," the Colonel responded.

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"Thank you, sir. We'll be waiting. You know our coordinates?"

"We have them, Captain. Hang in there, help is on the way."



Kadine had watched as Hammid gave instructions to a runner. The man had headed back on foot to the camp to bring up the rest of his men. Impatient to have the women under his control, Kadine had taken the men he had and gone ahead to begin his search. He arrived at the old campsite and had ordered the truck unloaded and the site searched; that had been thirty minutes ago. His camp was not that far from the oasis, the rest of the men should be on their way by now.

Kadine glanced up, expecting to see the desert come alive with dust clouds as his soldiers arrived in force. He would have the woman and after he finished with her he would sell her to the highest bidder. The Hawk he would keep, if only for a day or so. She had been a constant thorn in his side and he would take immense pleasure in killing her after he watched his men enjoy her. After all, they would have earned a bit of fun for finally capturing her.

Then he would begin his reign. As soon as NATO discovered he had the television crew he would have enough money to fund a larger army and control more territory. Those idiots in NATO did not need to know that the crew was already dead.

Plus, they would probably pay just to get the bodies back. Sentimental fools! Who wants dead bodies?

"I am tired of waiting. Rashiem, send the men we have into the hills. I want each and every cave searched. Find the woman!" he yelled.

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Just then they heard the explosions. Kadine turned towards the sound, towards the location of his camp.

His eyes were wide as he watched flames shoot into the morning sky. There were sounds of explosions following seconds after each burst of fire. Everything he had worked for was gone in the blink of an eye and he was broken. No army, no hostages, no money.

"NO!" he screamed, "My men. Who has done this? The Hawk! Damn you, Hawk.

His eyes burned with anger. He screamed his rage out to the sky.

GONE! All of it. GONE!

No, there was one thing left, the reporter, the woman. If he could find her he could still sell her.

"I will have the woman and I will kill you!" he screamed. Angry now, he turned towards his Lieutenant. Spit was flying from his lips like foam and his eyes were wild and wide with unshed tears of frustration.

"Hammid, find the woman. Find her, NOW! Or die trying." He pulled his pistol and aimed it at the man's head.

Hammid felt water run down his leg as he stared into the barrel of the automatic.

"Yes, El Kadine. As you command." He turned and ran towards the hills calling the men to follow.

Chapter 14

Dylan ran on towards the burning camp. She had to hurry. The flames were intense and her lungs felt as if they would burst, but she could not afford to slow down. She knew that time was limited now. Lura was alone and Kadine was not in the camp. There was only one place he could be. Hunting Lura.

Dodging wounded and fallen men she searched for a vehicle, anything with wheels that had not been destroyed by the shelling. Over in a corner of a field was a tarp-covered vehicle. She ran towards it hoping that it was something useable. Giving the tarp a hefty jerk she uncovered the vehicle. Her heart jumped and her eyes teared, it was a jeep, her old jeep, Kadine had kept both old vehicles when she had destroyed his tank three years ago.

Good ole yeep, she thought patting the battered green door with a sad smile.

“Let’s see if you still got the get up and go.”

Dylan hopped in, pumped the gas three times and turned the starter. With a grumble the old jeep sputtered to life. She turned toward the oasis and stomped on the gas. The old workhorse jumped forward throwing sand in all directions.

Dylan raced out of the camp and into the dunes. She circled around the oasis and started up into the hills making her way towards the NATO site and the cave. As she reached the edge of her old camp the jeep sputtered and slowed. Glancing down Dylan saw that the gas gauge was past empty; the old vehicle had gotten her there on guts and fumes.

She pulled the jeep to a stop and slid from the seat. She could hear the sound of voices up ahead. She slowed

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down and bending forward, cautiously approached the edge of the old site. Creeping quietly up behind a pile of rusted concertina wire snarled with brush and debris she watched as men scurried in all directions searching the area. She glanced up at the hillside towards the cave that she had left the reporter in and noticed men crawling up the steep hill.

Backing up carefully, Dylan skirted around the site and entered the hills from behind. She followed a narrow trail to the cave she had camouflaged and softly called out.

"Lura, Lura, are you here? Are you okay?"

"Dylan, I'm here," the beautiful blonde whispered. Staggering to her feet she rushed to Dylan and wrapped her arms around the soldier's waist. She buried her face in the hot robes and inhaled the scent of the Hawk, glad that she had returned unharmed.

Dylan held the small woman close to her, gently laying her cheek on the cool blond hair, enjoying the feel of the woman in her arms.

"How did everything go? Are you okay?" Lura stepped back and questioned the tall woman.

"I'm fine, but Kadine has a serious nose bleed." She smiled, gently wrapping her arms around Lura again, hugging her close.

"Dylan, I heard this horrible noise and then..."

"It's okay, Lura. I called for a little help. They destroyed Kadine's camp," she said gently into Lura's hair. Feeling her tremble, she rubbed the smaller woman's back in a gentle circular motion. She continued the softly soothing motion until the trembling stopped.

"Is he dead? Is Kadine dead?" Lura asked, her voice muffled in the long dark folds of the Hawk's robes.

"No, unfortunately he decided to pick today to play

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leader. He is at my old site below us. I think we can expect some company soon."

Startled, Lura looked up at Dylan. "He's here? Kadine's here?"

Dylan felt the body in her arms stiffen. "Yeah, that guy must have nine lives." She spoke tenderly, drawing her arms more tightly around the warm body. "Please don't worry. I have a few surprises in store for him. We'll be all right, I promise, he won't touch you. "

Lura leaned into the comforting, safe embrace.

He better not try anything funny with you either Hawk or he will have to deal with me, she thought.

Finally releasing Lura, she turned towards the cave mouth. Glancing outside, Dylan watched as the hills literally crawled with enemy soldiers.

"Lura, go to the back of the cave and stay there."

"Dylan, I am not going to sit here like some hothouse lily and let you fight that ass hole alone," Lura announced. Then, seeing the stern look on her soulmate's face, she added, "Hey, I can't let you have all the fun, can I?"

The only reply was the toothy smile that graced Dylan's face. It was cold and grim and did not reach her eyes.

With a short nod, Dylan agreed. Again she turned and watched as the men drew nearer to their hideout. "Just a bit closer and to the right." She watched two soldiers fall away, into a spike filled pit she had hidden with shrub. "Yes!" she hissed.

"Two down, a bunch to go."

The screams of the men drew the attention of others and they began to turn towards the hiding place.

Crouching low, Dylan placed herself in the mouth of the cave and silently waited. She knew that in order to get

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to the small blonde they would have to get through her and that just wasn't happening.

Finally someone spotted her dark head hidden behind the rocks and let out a shout of success. It was the last sound he made in this lifetime. Dylan drew her pistol and dropped him with one shot.

"Damn!" she hissed.

"Let the games begin."

Kadine's men were now advancing in a swarm. Dylan continued to fire her pistol, the sound loud and barking in the hollowness of the cave. When it emptied she reached for her spare clip. She emptied the second clip and fully expected to have to fight hand to hand when a sharp tug on her sleeve drew her attention.

Lura wordlessly handed her the first clip, reloaded. She glanced down at the small blonde who was now concentrating on loading the other clip with the spare ammo. She had crawled up closer to the opening to lie beside the soldier and was determined to see this action through no matter what the outcome. Dylan was amazed at the strength and determination of the smaller woman.

"If we get out of this thing alive we are gonna have a long talk, you and I, Little Falcon," she commented, smiling as she continued to fire on the soldiers.

"Little Falcon? Hmmm. Who are you callin' little, woman?" Lura questioned.

"Hee-hee. Okay, how about 'vertically challenged'?" came the smart reply from the soldier, happy to hear the determination in the other woman's voice.

Lura smiled back and handed her the loaded 9mm clip. Dylan had emptied another clip and was reaching for the spare when she stopped.

"What's wrong?" Lura asked.

"They've stopped. They're pulling back," Dylan

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replied. She turned with a frown. "That doesn't make any sense. They outnumber us at least twenty to one. Why aren't they pushing the advantage? Unless..."

Her words died on her lips as she saw the frozen expression of terror on the reporter's face. Something was behind her. She turned and blocked a blow from a rifle butt. The soldiers had found a back entrance into the cave from an adjacent cave and the women were now effectively surrounded. Men poured into the cave attacking the taller woman. Dylan fought as if crazed, but was finally overpowered and pulled roughly to the ground. Dazed, she watched as Kadine, her enemy, approached Lura. A rebel soldier had pinned the other woman's arms to her sides, but it was apparent from the angry look on the man's face that she had gotten in a good lick or two before she had been subdued.

The madman known as El Kadine stared at the struggling blonde, raised his hand and slapped her sharply across the face.

"You belong to me, whore. Do not forget that. This bitch you are with will die and you will watch."

"NO!" Lura screamed, leaping towards Kadine, hands stretched out like angry talons.

Lura clawed out with all the strength remaining in her. Perhaps, she prayed, this would give her soldier time to recover.

Kadine threw up his arm, blocking Lura's blow. Calmly, he drew back a fist and drove the small, still fighting body to the ground. He smiled, enjoying the fight, knowing that he would win. He stared down at the fallen woman not realizing that he had made two fatal errors. One, he touched the woman Dylan considered hers, and two, he had turned his back on the Hawk.

Dylan shook off the dizziness that made her head

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swim. She woke to the sound of flesh meeting flesh and, through dazed eyes, saw Kadine pummeling the fragile body of the woman she loved. She saw Lura fall to the ground, she did not move, did not cry out, and did not fight back.

She's dead. He's killed her.

This was the one thought that raced through Dylan's mind.

Suddenly, the world stood still and her vision blurred bloody red and tunneled. One minute she was on the ground held by two men, the next she was standing, stepping over the bodies of two, now fallen men and approaching Kadine.

Kadine heard a scream, not unlike a wounded animal. He turned his head and faced an apparition of death with ice blue eyes. He drew his pistol from his waist and fired point blank at the thing advancing towards him. He saw its body jerk, but still it advanced, unchecked and unimpressed. It kept coming. The face of the being, for he was certain it could not be human, looked at the bloody hole then back at him and smiled. He looked around for assistance from his men, but they were to be of no help, sprawled on the ground moaning or silent in death. He fired again but the figure kept coming, hands outstretched.

Dylan did not feel the rounds hit, just the jerk of her clothes as the bullets ripped through the material and into her flesh. All she saw, all she felt or wanted to feel was the cracking of this man's throat as she crushed it in her powerful hands. He had been the bane of her existence for the past three years. He had murdered her men and now he had beaten the woman she considered her life mate. The small treasure that lay crumpled at his feet. He would die and he would die at her hands.

"No," Dylan said calmly. "You will not touch her

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again. She was no whore and she belonged to me." As she felt her hands close on his murderous throat, she tightened her grip and smiled. It was a cold, ice blue and feral smile.

Kadine pounded at the arms holding him, but this only tightened their grip. They now held him high off the ground, his feet dancing in the air. He had never felt such raw power or been so frightened.

Dylan felt cold hate and an emptiness that had once been filled by the warmth of the Falcon. She did not hear the sound of the choppers as they landed near the oasis, the sound of the booted feet as they climbed towards the cave. She only wanted to hear the gurgle and the dying breath of the monster in her hands. She heard the sound of the water leaving his body as he wet himself in fear. Finally, another sound reached her ears; she heard the moaning of a familiar voice.

She's alive!

"Lura!" she gasped. Dylan released her hold on the neck of the terrorist leader, allowing him to drop at her feet. Carefully she stepped over the body and knelt beside the battered woman. Tenderly she reached out and lifted Lura from the sand, brushing dirt from the other woman's bloody cheek. She looked deeply into the dazed, pain filled green eyes and found the unconditional love of her soulmate. Slowly the two women stood and moved towards the mouth of the cave.

Dylan heard shouting and glanced down, waving.

"Who are they?" Lura asked as she watched in amazement as men in tan uniforms fired on the remaining rebels.

"That," Dylan whispered, "is the cavalry."

Lura wrapped one arm around her soldier and looked up, smiling. That was when she felt it, moisture seeping

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through the black shirt. She looked up in horror as the arm she had wrapped around the older woman turned red with blood.

"Dylan, you're bleeding!" she said, jerking her head up again, noticing, for the first time, the pallor of the soldier's face and watching as the now pale lips moved into a grimace.

"Yes? Shot," Dylan said as the ground rushed towards her and she dimly heard her soulmate scream, then nothing.

Chapter 15

Lura watched, feeling her world crumble as the tall woman collapsed first to her knees, then backwards into the sand. Her initial shock and exhaustion was quickly replaced by a fierce protectiveness as men rushed towards them.

Reaching down, Lura picked up the discarded pistol that Dylan had dropped in the earlier struggle. Drawing back the slide, she loaded one round in the chamber and then placed herself squarely between the threat and the now helpless woman. She clasped the warm grip and pointed the pistol at the first male head to crest the edge of the hill.

"One step closer and I swear I will kill you," she said.

The man climbed the rest of the way up and slowly rose to his full height. He stood with the sun at his back, silhouetted in the bright daylight.

Unable to see his face, Lura squinted, but her grip on the pistol did not falter.

The man cautiously removed his sunglasses and stared at the small blonde with the flashing green eyes and the large pistol pointed at his head.

"Hold on, don't shoot. I only want her," he stated, gesturing towards the prone figure at Lura's feet.

Lura quickly moved to place her feet on either side of the body of the unconscious woman, straddling her. The pistol still never wavered from the forehead of the man in front of her.

"You can't have her, she's mine. You'll have to kill me before I'll let you hurt her anymore."

"Whoa there, young lady. I would never hurt Dylan. I've been looking for her for three years. I'm her father."

Lura squinted, staring up into the man's face. "Step

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over there into the light." She gestured with the pistol towards her right. The man complied, turning his face into the sun. Lura saw the same startling blue eyes that graced the face of her Hawk. She knew that they were safe. She felt the weight of the pistol pulling at her arms as relief suddenly made them weak. She lowered her hands and dropped the weapon. Turning her back on the man, she slowly knelt at the side of the fallen soldier. Gathering Dylan in her arms she gently held her woman, rocking them both and crying into the soft black hair.

Senator Cameron looked on, a deep scowl on his face.

"Dylan, we're safe. You did it, we're safe," Lura whispered into the unconscious woman's ear, gently placing a kiss on a dirty forehead.

"I want the medics here. Now!" the Senator bellowed, turning away from the scene at the cave mouth.

Four men scrambled up the hill bearing a stretcher and medical packs. They reached out to remove the small woman from the side of the unconscious soldier, but were stopped by the sound of a deep growling threat from above them.

"No, they stay together. Do what you have to do to treat my daughter, but they stay together. Is that clear?"

Lura looked up at the older man through tear filled eyes, startled to see the anguish reflected on his face.

Dragging his eyes away from the pale, still face of the daughter he had thought dead, he answered the girl's silent question.

"Dylan ran away from me once because I was too stupid and pig-headed to listen to her. She risked her life for you and even an old redneck like me can see you would risk everything for her. You were here for her when I should have been. I will not separate you now."

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"No," Lura said, her voice hard and cold. "Believe me, there is no way in Hell you can separate us, not now and not ever," Lura promised, pulling Dylan closer.

The tall man nodded in understanding and perhaps, acceptance.

"Sir?" the medic called. "We have to Medivac her. She's bleeding heavily and we can't be certain of any internal injuries here. I have to dress her injuries before we move her. To tell you the truth, if we don't do something soon I will not be responsible for her survival."

"Alright then, let's move. NOW!" the silver haired senator bellowed, unaware of how very much he sounded like his daughter.

The medics rushed forward, quickly and efficiently moving the unconscious woman onto the stretcher. They promptly cut away her shirt, exposing firm stomach muscles and the brutalized torn flesh of the bullet wound.

Lura gasped, tears falling unchecked down her face as she watched the medics work.

After inserting an IV drip and placing pressure bandages on the open wounds the medics lifted the stretcher and carefully began their descent down the mountainside.

Lura followed the stretcher down, holding Dylan's hand as often as possible. The trip down took all she had left. She limped in a gray haze toward the helicopter, each step jarring her battered body. As she walked she thought of Dylan and squeezed the too still hand in her own. Looking up at the copter she thought it strange that the blades should produce a whistle instead of the expected thump, thump. She also found it strange that the night had settled so quickly.

Senator Cameron watched in amazement as the fiery little woman struggled to stay with his daughter and was,

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in a sense, relieved when she finally collapsed as they neared the helicopter. He caught her as she fell, swinging her up in his arms, surprised at the light weight and obviously fragile condition of the small spitfire. Grinning, he thought of the fight Dylan would have on her hands once they both recovered. "If they recover," he amended mentally.

The medics air evacuated the group back to the NATO base and the hospital.

Chapter 16

Lura tossed and turned, fighting the hands that held her in place. She had been laying here for hours, she thought and she needed to be somewhere, but where?

"Please, Miss, you have to lay still. The doctor said you needed rest. You were dehydrated. Your injuries will heal faster if you do what they tell you."

Still in a gray haze, Lura stilled for a moment then began mumbling again. "I have to go. Where is she? I have to get to her."

The nurse tried desperately to keep the confused, semi-conscious woman still, but this was a hopeless task. Though quite heavily sedated, she continued to fight. In desperation, the young woman had been strapped down to prevent her from injuring herself further.

Exhausted from the struggle, the nurse finally approached the doctor.

"We have to do something, I'm afraid she's gonna hurt herself."

Dylan lay in a separate room following emergency surgery and was also strapped to her bed and struggling, though not so strenuously.

"Let's see what happens if we put them in the same room. What could it hurt?" the doctor suggested.

Ten minutes later the two women were lying almost side-by-side and, although they were both unconscious, each seemed to sense the other's presence.

"Amazing!" the doctor exclaimed. "You know, I heard somewhere that some people caught up in bad situations bond like this; but I've never seen anything like it. This is incredible."

The young reporter had finally settled down and they were able to release her from the restraints. The soldier

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still struggled violently, though weakened, and they were afraid she would tear out her IV. Her wrists remained strapped to the sides of the bed. They wheeled the blonde's bed closer and as they watched in pure amazement, a gentle smile graced the dark woman's face and she stopped struggling.

"Untie her arms. Let's see how she does now that her friend is here."

They released Dylan's arms from the restraints and watched when she turned her head slightly as if to glance at the woman in the adjacent bed.

"I swear I have never seen anything like that. I've heard about it too. Ya know? Two people bonding so closely that one would die without the other, but I never believed it, until now," the nurse exclaimed as the two left the room.

Slowly Lura awakened. She felt as if she were swimming to the surface after a dive to the bottom of the ocean. Her senses were dull and her head felt full of cotton.

Dylan, Dylan? She's hurt. I have to find her. I have to protect Dylan.

Protect Dylan.

Protect Dylan.

This thought rang through her head like a mantra as she struggled to consciousness.

"God, where am I?"

Lura glanced around at the beige walls and the silver racks with their large plastic bags of fluids, long thin tubes leading from them to her arm.

Hospital, I'm in a hospital. I remember now, they flew us here from the cave after Dylan was...?

"DYLAN!"

She glanced around frantically, her blood shot eyes

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quickly settling on the still figure in the bed next to her. The beautiful face was so pale against the white sheets. The electrifying eyes were closed in sleep.

My poor warrior, Lura thought.

As if in a dream, she rose from the bed, careful not to tear the IV from her arm and slowly staggered, pushing the tower with the IV bag to the next bed. Lifting the sheets, with her eyes still half closed, she slipped under the covers. Snuggling close to the warm body of her soulmate she wrapped her arm around the bandaged waist, pillowed her head on a strong shoulder and quickly fell into a deep restful sleep.

Dylan felt the small body snuggle under her chin and raised a bandaged arm to wrap around the soft shoulder as she too drifted deeper into the arms of Morpheus.

The next morning Dylan woke feeling a warm, heavy weight pressing on her shoulder. Glancing down, her chin brushed soft blonde hair.

Wow, she thought. *She's really here. She stayed with me.*

Unconsciously, she tightened her grip around the small waist and buried her nose in the blonde hair.

Lura, sensing the gentle cuddle of her soulmate, mumbled and pulled herself closer, causing a shift in her still healing ribs.

"Ow, ow, ow," she cried, pulling away only far enough to raise her head and stare into concerned blue eyes. Seeing the tender look she was receiving caused her to smile gently:

"How are you, my love?"

The term of endearment brought a grin to the chiseled features.

She called me her love, Dylan realized with start.

"I'm great, now," she replied.

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"Riiiiight," the blonde responded, gently patting the bandaged stomach.

"You look ready to take on an army."

Dylan graced her with a crooked smile.

"Been there, done that," she stated.

"Oh, and how did it turn out?" the blonde asked.

"Well, the good guys won," came the cocky reply as Dylan leaned down to draw the willing mouth to hers in a sweet, gentle kiss.

The end, for now.

About the Author



Katherine E. Standell is from a strong military family. The family history with the military goes back some four generations, with members of her immediate family in both the Army and the Air Force. Her father, a Korean War veteran has several awards including a Purple Heart, the Bronze Star with two oak leaf clusters and a Legion of Merit, which is the highest possible peace time award for service above and beyond the call of duty. It is second only to the Medal of Honor.

A graduate of Pembroke State University, Ms. Standell has an Undergraduate degree in Education and a Masters in Administration, however she felt compelled to join the military upon completion of school and has enjoyed the challenges the service has offered.

Born and raised in the Carolinas, Katherine loves the outdoors and spends much of her free time with her Husky/Wolf mix trekking the high trails of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Katherine served in the military for nearly ten years before injuries suffered while on duty forced her to leave. A highly trained Military Police Officer, her areas of expertise include Counter Terrorism and Personal Security. Presently, she is looking forward to retirement and hopes to have the opportunity to complete more stories in the Hawk and Falcon Series as well as two additional books with new characters.