

The Capture of Kelly Winchester



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The Capture of Kelly Winchester

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Dedication:

To Dawn

Chapter One

She watched the last missile streak over the jungle and strike the target, obliterating it.

“Look out! Look out!” screamed the voice of POPEYE, her wingman through the headphones. The warning buzzer blared at her, alerting her to an enemy missile locked on to her aircraft. “VIXEN, you’ve got a missile on your tail.”

She wrenched the stick back and to the right. The plane responded nimbly and climbed up and to the right in a gut-wrenching 3 Gee maneuver.

Then the missile exploded. It didn’t actually contact VIXEN’s plane, but it was close enough, blowing the tail apart and sending the plane tumbling back down toward the jungle.

“Eject, VIXEN, eject!” yelled POPEYE.

Realizing that she only had moments to react, the pilot quickly punched the eject button. As the explosives beneath her seat exploded, the cockpit canopy flew off and the seat exited the aircraft. She hoped she wouldn’t be killed by the tumbling aircraft before clearing the wreckage.

The wind almost knocked her unconscious as she

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was thrown clear. Then the parachute deployed, slowing her down. Suddenly it was very quiet. She looked down at the jungle. She watched as her plane crashed and exploded in a tangle of twisted metal.

She manipulated the controls of her chute, steering away from the target she had just demolished and toward a stream, just visible beneath the trees. She dropped toward the ground as quickly as she could. The sooner she got down and had a chance to hide, the more likely she could elude those on the ground and, hopefully, get picked up by a rescue helicopter.

She skillfully guided the chute between the trees and over the little stream. She swooped down over the rushing water. She lifted her legs and landed in the middle of the stream on her butt. The water was warm like the humid air. She surfaced as quickly as she could in the rushing water and stabbed her feet into the mud. The water was only about four feet deep and she stood up, all five feet, eight inches.

She hurried to strip off the chute harness and gather it into a ball. She fought her way against the current to the shallows and up the bank to dry ground. She rolled the chute into a ball and pushed it into a hollow between the roots of a tree on the bank. She covered it with some leaves, a few twigs, and a strip of moss she stripped from the ground.

She heard a dog bark. She heard voices. Someone was coming, rather noisily, through the underbrush. She slipped back into the water and out into the current, lifting her legs and drifting downstream. She pushed herself ahead by stabbing at the mud on the bottom with her boots. For rescue, she needed to stay

near the plane, but to elude pursuers, she needed to get moving. She reached down to her thigh and retrieved the service pistol from its holster. She moved faster and faster as the current swept her along.

She couldn't hear the pursuers anymore, but as the current got swifter, the channel got shallower. When it got up to about two and a half feet, she stood up and waded to the bank opposite the side where she had heard the pursuers. She climbed up the bank and slipped into the dark forest. She shook the pistol to get rid of as much of the water as she could, then she pulled the slide back and chambered a round. She thumbed the safety off.

The underbrush made it difficult to move quickly, and she couldn't help leaving a trail. The flight suit hadn't kept her dry and it was soggy, slowing her down. The helmet on her head seemed heavier than it had in the cockpit. Every step she took seemed like it made too much noise. She kept listening for the sound of a pursuit, and eventually she heard it.

She looked around for a tree to climb and hide in, but there were none with branches low enough for her to reach. She hunkered down between some bushes at the edge of a small clearing and covered herself with some damp leaves.

It didn't take long. She watched as several men following her trail, entered the clearing. There were two young men, boys really, one old man, and a strong-looking man carrying an AK-47 who seemed to be in charge. It was obvious that the trail ended in the clearing. The men just couldn't tell where she was

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hiding.

They flailed around at the brush with sharp, wicked-looking machetes. As they came closer to her, she stood up and leveled the pistol at them. Her sudden appearance elicited an excited exchange in a language she could not understand, but they were all laughing at her.

She was suddenly hit from behind and thrown to the ground. Her attacker landed on her back as she fell face down in the mud. The pistol went flying as she had the wind knocked out of her. The attacker grabbed her arm and twisted it back into a hammerlock behind her back. She was yanked to her feet.

Another man, wearing a jungle uniform, came around from behind and stood nose to nose with her. He yelled at her incomprehensibly, his face thrust close to hers. He had bad breath. Then he yelled at her in English.

"Yankee pig!" He reached up and yanked off her helmet. As her blond hair shimmered around her shoulders, the startled man staggered back a step and the others fell silent.

"You're a woman!"

She smirked at him.

"Surprised?" she said softly.

He spoke to the man behind her in gibberish. Her arm was suddenly twisted and she writhed in pain, falling to her knees. The man in front of her stepped forward again and slapped her face, snapping her head to the right.

"Yankee pig," he said again. "Now your witches

are flying planes and killing us. You will rue this day, bitch."

She struggled to her feet, smirking at him again.

"Kelly Winchester, Lieutenant, 51593373."

"Ah," said the man with a grin as he recovered from the shock of capturing a woman pilot. "Name, rank, serial number—the Geneva Convention." He laughed, wickedly. He slapped her once more and nodded at the man behind her, who twisted her arm again. "We were not signatories. We were not invited to sign."

Lieutenant Winchester writhed in agony again and dropped to her knees. She looked up at the man in defiance.

"Bring her," said the man. He turned on his heel and led the way back down the trail. He was speaking again in his own language to the others.

The man behind her jerked her up by the arm twisted behind her back. The pain was getting to her. She was pushed to get her going. She followed the others along the trail and into the forest. It was starting to rain. In the distance, she heard a helicopter. Then she heard small arms fire. She hoped they couldn't damage the chopper.

Chapter Two

The sadist behind Lieutenant Winchester released her arm as soon as they got started down the trail. She flexed her muscles and massaged her elbow with her other hand. The pain diminished and eventually went away. She was pushed periodically, causing her to stumble, but she wasn't hurt as long as she kept going.

Gradually, her bladder started to complain. She put up with it as long as she could, but she finally had to say something.

"Hey," she called out to her English-speaking captor. "Hey, you."

He ignored her and kept on walking.

"Hey," she yelled again. She stopped and the man behind her bumped into her. He pushed her and said something incomprehensible.

"Hey, I've got to go to the bathroom," she said. She stopped and stood her ground. The man behind her tried to grab her arm again. She swung her balled fist down and backward into the man's groin. She turned around as the man doubled over. She brought her fists together and slammed them down on the back of the man's head. As he lost his balance and fell toward

her, she brought her knee up into his face, then stepping back, she kicked him again in the face.

She was about to kick him again when she was grabbed from behind.

"OK, bitch," said her captor, "that's enough of that."

The man she had kicked was squirming on the ground in a fetal position, cradling his genitals and moaning.

"I guess we'll have to tie your hands," said the man. "I didn't think a woman would give us much trouble." He looked at the man on the ground. He slapped her face.

He spoke to one of the other men who produced a rope. They pulled her hands behind her back and tied them together.

"Hey," she said again, "I've got to go to the bathroom."

"Oh, yeah?" said the man. "Gee, that's tough shit, isn't it?"

He looked her over. The flight suit was less than flattering, and Kelly Winchester was not particularly attractive, but a woman getting naked and squatting to pee, surrounded by men, could not help but invite unwanted attention.

"I probably ought to let you pee in your pants," he said, "but then you'd stink. How the hell do you get out of that thing, anyway?"

He grinned at her. He reached down and unbuttoned his fly, reached in, and pulled out his penis. It was erect. He aimed it off to the side and proceeded to urinate on the ground. Watching him

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relieve himself made her need to go even more.

"Please," she said, "I've really got to go."

"OK," he said. "Go ahead." He grinned at her again as he finished and shook his penis prior to putting it back inside his pants.

Kelly was exasperated. "Untie my hands. I can't just go, standing here. I've got to take off my flight suit."

"Oh," he said. "I see. You want us to untie you so you can attack one of us again, don't you?" He licked his upper lip, smirking at her. "I suppose you expect us to let you go squat in the bushes where we can't watch you, too, don't you? I'm sure you won't run away, will you?"

Kelly just looked at him. She knew they wouldn't let her out of their sight. She pressed her thighs together to keep from wetting her pants.

"Just untie my hands so I can get the flight suit off. I won't try anything. I promise. I've really got to go."

He leered at her.

"I guess you can't do anything unless you just about get naked, can you?"

He was right. She would have to take the one-piece flight suit off her arms and drop it down around her ankles. She decided to brazen it out.

"That's right. I hope I won't embarrass you." She smiled sweetly at him.

The man looked back at her, his expression wooden. He said something to one of the others. She felt hands untying her hands. He stepped forward and reached for the zipper at her throat. She ignored him. He was nothing more than a degenerate pig. He

unzipped the flight suit down to her crotch and let his hand brush against her panties. He raised his hands and pushed the suit off of her shoulders. She shrugged it off, letting it drop. He looked at where her breasts were hidden behind her T-shirt.

"Thanks." She pulled the sleeves off her wrists and dropped the garment to the ground. She stood there half-naked as the men ogled her.

"OK," said the man, "go ahead, right here where we can watch you. You won't have a chance to escape."

She knew this was how it would have to be. She reached down and slipped her panties down as she squatted just above the ground, pushing the flight suit out of the way. She urinated immediately. She thought about asking for toilet paper, just for the hell of it, but then she wondered what would happen if she had to crap. She decided to cross that bridge when she came to it. Hopefully, they would get to a place where they had a proper bathroom she could use by then.

She finished emptying her bladder. She looked up at him. He was watching her intently.

She stood, pulling her panties up. Then she bent over and pulled the flight suit up, inserting her arms in the sleeves and shrugging back into it. She quickly zipped it up.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope you enjoyed getting an eyeful."

"You are very beautiful," he said. "I see you really have blond hair. You have lovely skin, too, don't you?"

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She was a natural blond, a fact revealed by her pubic hair. Her fair skin was flawless, but she knew she certainly wasn't beautiful. She didn't even think she was that pretty. She had always been told she had a face like a horse. Kids had even called her *Horse-Face* when she was a little girl.

He must have known what she was thinking.

"Compared to the few women we see, you really are an exceptional beauty. You are clean and well groomed, too. You even smell nice. All that will change, unfortunately. We live in the mud. There are no bathrooms. And, whatever you might think, I'm a gentleman compared to some you'll encounter."

The man seemed to know what Kelly was thinking before she did.

"Life here will be difficult for you, especially as a prisoner," he said. The man with the rope was tying her wrists together again. They started off again through the jungle. The man she had kicked pushed her ruthlessly.

Chapter Three

They stopped to rest and eat several times. She was tied more securely when they slept. All they had to eat was some steamed rice. Kelly wasn't offered any. Eventually, she did have to defecate. She was given some leaves to wipe herself. She was watched carefully. The only thing she was allowed to consume was some water from a stream. They didn't untie her, so she had to lie down and put her face right in the flowing water. She was thirsty enough to slurp some of it into her mouth, even though she had no idea how polluted it might be. Her captors drank it, too.

They passed several small villages and finally came to a paved road. It was being repaired. It had apparently been damaged by an air strike. *Serves them right*, thought Kelly. It continued to rain.

They walked along the road for several miles. It seemed to have very little traffic. Then, suddenly, several large military trucks came speeding around a curve toward them. They all jumped off the road. Kelly was jerked after them into the ditch beside the road by the rope still binding her wrists. She fell on top of one of the men. He squeezed her breasts before

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she could roll away from him. His laugh sounded evil.

After the trucks passed, they continued their journey. They had to get off the road to let trucks go by several times. Then, a jeep pulled up with a small truck behind it. An officer got out and approached them. Kelly's captor stood up in the ditch, climbed up to the road, and saluted. The two men conversed quietly in their language.

"Bring her here," said the officer.

The rope was yanked and she was pushed up the bank to the road. They approached the officer.

Kelly's captor turned to her.

"This is the Assistant Warden. He's rounding up captives. There are other downed pilots in his camp. I almost feel sorry for you. The life of a prisoner will be difficult, especially for a woman."

He turned back to speak in gibberish to the Assistant Warden, then he turned, grimaced at her, said "Goodbye," and led his small band back along the road the way they had come.

Kelly watched him go, then she turned back to face the Assistant Warden. He grinned at her.

"I've never had a female prisoner," he said in English. "This might be interesting."

He looked her up and down. He reached up to grab her hair. He yanked it back then, looking at her reaction.

"If you are criminal enough to attack our people," he said in a menacing whisper, "don't expect any special treatment just because you are a woman. You will be treated the same as every other criminal

aggressor in my camp. I do not like criminals."

He yanked her hair again, then released her. He turned to a guard.

"Put her in the truck," he said, and he turned to board the jeep.

Kelly's wrists were still tied, so the guards had to push her up into the back of the canvas-covered truck. She tumbled into it facedown and she felt hands on her buttocks and legs pushing her in. Her face came up against a pair of boots.

"I would help you if I could," said a youthful voice, "but my hands are tied, too."

Kelly twisted and sat up. She looked at her companion. He looked like just a young boy.

"Damn," he said, "you're a girl."

"Yeah," said Kelly, "Kelly Winchester, Lieutenant, U. S. Navy. Who're you?" She looked at him expectantly.

"Billy Zagoras, Second Lieutenant, U. S. Marine Corps."

They looked each other over.

"I got shot down yesterday," he said. "I never even got to release my missiles. A burst of flack blew off most of my wing and I lost control. They just picked me up a few hours ago."

"Mmmmm," said Kelly.

"They must be kind of mad at you," he said. "They've all been talking about you, and some of it was in English. What did you do to piss them off so much?"

"Well, I suppose I did do a little damage before I took a missile up the ass." He was grinning at her. He

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looked so young. Kelly felt old at thirty. He looked like a teenager. "I leveled a power plant and had an extra missile left over, so I blew up a bridge. Target of opportunity."

"Damn," said Billy, "I was on my first mission, and I never even got to fire."

"Mmmmm," said Kelly.

The truck was bouncing around violently.

"I knew the Navy had some lady pilots, but I never met any," said Billy. "Have you flown a lot of missions?"

"Yeah, I guess I have. It looks like I flew one too many, doesn't it?"

"I guess. What do you think they'll do to us?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure it won't be nice."

"Quiet back there," said the guard in the front of the truck. Kelly and Billy looked at each other, and then just sat there in silence, bouncing around. Kelly was tired from all the walking and weak from lack of food. It had been three days since she was captured and she hadn't had anything but water from a stream and a push in the back to keep her going. She fell asleep.

Chapter Four

Eventually, the truck slowed as it traversed some rough terrain, and then it stopped.

Voices called to each other. Kelly awoke as the tailgate was slammed open, and she was grabbed roughly by the ankle. She was yanked out of the truck along with Billy. They were pushed over to join a group of other prisoners. There must have been a dozen or more. They were all in U. S. uniform, all in flight suits, mostly Navy, a couple of Marines and Kelly thought she saw one Air Force uniform. She got some curious looks, but nobody spoke.

They were standing in mud, next to a stockade. It was made of wooden stakes with sharp points, up on end and wired together. A gate in the fence opened. They were herded inside and had their wrists untied. They were in a large compound. It looked like it might be close to fifty meters on a side. The stench of human waste was overwhelming.

"Watch the punji stakes," said a voice through a bullhorn. "Stay on the path."

They were herded into the middle of the compound. It was getting dark, but Kelly could still see some of the details. There appeared to be cages

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hung around the wall. There were men in some of the cages.

The bullhorn crackled again, "Strip off your uniforms."

The prisoners looked around at each other as if they didn't understand. Those close to her looked embarrassedly at Kelly.

The bullhorn came to life again. "OK," it said, "Strip down. Do it now."

A guard approached one of the prisoners. He had a cattle prod. He aimed it at the crotch of one of the men. The man howled in agony and fell to the ground as thousands of volts coursed through his genitals.

The guards laughed.

The prisoners got the message. They stripped off their flight suits.

"Boots too," said the bullhorn. "You won't be able to travel very far without boots in the event of an escape. Mind the punji stakes."

They all bent over or sat down to remove their boots.

"OK, now," said the bull-horn. "Move over toward the gate. Mind the punji stakes."

They were herded over. A couple of little figures rushed behind them to pick up their uniforms and boots.

"OK, now, back to the middle," said the bullhorn. "Remove everything else now, socks included."

The men started to comply, then milled around, not knowing what to do about Kelly.

One of the guards approached her, cattle prod extended.

"You first," he said.

"OK," she murmured. She pulled her T-shirt over her head.

"Everything," said the guard with the prod.

"OK, OK." She undid her bra and dropped it on the ground. By that time, the men were stripping down, too. Kelly sat down to take off her socks. As she stood up and removed her panties, she looked up to see Billy dropping his boxer shorts. He had a hardon and he was trying to hide it from her, but he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

ZZZzzzap!

Billy's testicles were fried by a cattle prod.

The sadistic guards thought it was terribly funny.

Billy howled and writhed in agony on the ground.

Kelly bent over to help him.

"Leave him alone or we'll zap you too, lady," said one of the guards, brandishing his prod.

"Come on, Billy," said Kelly, "get up."

He looked up at her, holding his genitals in both hands. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

"OK," he whimpered. He got to one knee, and finally got to his feet. Kelly noticed that all his pubic hair was singed.

"OK, now," said the bullhorn, "stay put. We'll take you one at a time."

They led one of the prisoners away.

Then they came and took another one.

Kelly was next. They pushed her away from the group. She couldn't understand their language, but she understood the tone of voice. It was universal. She was afraid they might rape her. She determined

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to put up a fight if it came to that, but it didn't.

They took her into a small room. They pushed her down into a chair. A man with a razor whacked at her hair.

"Be still or he'll cut you up," said a man sitting behind a desk in the shadows. Somehow she was sure he meant it. The man did a poor job of shaving her head, but he left very little hair and only cut her once.

"We didn't know you were resorting to female pilots," said the man in the shadows. "This could be interesting. Would you like to tell me anything?"

"Winchester, Kelly, Lieutenant, United States Navy, 51593373."

"Oh, come now," said the man, "you can do better than that. What ship were you on? Where were you born? Where did you grow up? Why did you join the Navy? Are you married? Why did you attack my country and kill innocent people?"

Kelly didn't say anything.

"OK," said the voice from the shadows, "we have plenty of time. Next."

With that, she was led back out of the room into the compound. She wasn't taken back to the huddled group of new prisoners, though. She was taken along the wall past several of the cages with men in them. The cages were hanging from hooks attached to a bamboo structure overhead. The floors of the cages were about head high. There was a pile of filth under each one with punji stakes sticking up in a circle.

They stopped at one hanging just off the ground. She was pushed into it. It was lashed shut and then raised up level with the others.

Kelly looked around in the dim light, but she couldn't see much. She was exhausted. She crumpled to the floor of the cage. She fell asleep quickly.

Chapter Five

She was startled awake by singing. Not just any singing, a screechy woman's voice over the loud speaker. The voice was singing a martial tune in their captor's language. It sounded like it was a record being played on a turntable, kind of scratchy.

"Wake up! Wake up!" blared the loudspeaker.

The guards were walking around, hitting the cages with sticks and yelling at the prisoners. It was still dark and dew was forming on everything in the warm humid air. At least it wasn't raining like it had been since the day Kelly was captured.

"OK, Yankee Pigs," the guards were yelling, "Go ahead and piss. Go ahead and shit. Stand up. Stand up. No food if you don't stand up, and no talking."

Kelly shook the cobwebs out of her head. She looked at one of the cages next to her. A naked, skinny, unshaven man was squatting down in his cage, holding his penis and urinating down through the lattice that made up the floor. He didn't notice Kelly watching him.

She had to go, too. She squatted and urinated. That was all she could do. She hadn't eaten in days.

She looked at the cage on the other side. Another skinny naked man with a scraggly beard was standing up within its confines. He was holding on to the upright bamboo bars. He didn't seem to notice Kelly, either.

One of the guards came by again, banging his stick against the cages. He stopped at Kelly's cage. She stood up. He looked up at her. He licked his lips and scratched his crotch.

"We're going to have fun with you, bitch," said the guard.

She looked down at him through the bars.

"I'm hungry," she said in a hoarse whisper.

The guard smirked up at her.

"I bet you're thirsty too, aren't you?"

Kelly nodded her head unsteadily. She felt tears starting to form in her eyes.

"Don't worry," he said, "you won't starve. We feed all the prisoners every day."

She looked down at him. Then she looked at the men in the cages next to her. They had both become aware of her by that time and were staring at her. She noticed that they were both getting erections.

"We feed you every day," said the guard again as she looked at the skin-and-bones examples of humanity around her, "just not very much. I'll be back."

Then he went on to the other cages, banging them with his stick and badgering the prisoners inside them.

"Go ahead and piss. Go ahead and shit. Stand up. Stand up. No food if you don't stand up. No talking,"

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he yelled. "Get up, Yankee Pigs."

Kelly faced in toward the center of the prison compound. She looked at the man on her left. She took a breath as if to speak. The man noticed. He shook his head, putting his finger to his lips. His motions told her to stay quiet.

Another guard came along.

"Wake up. Wake up. Go ahead and piss. Go ahead and shit. Stand up. Stand up. No food if you don't stand up. No talking. No talking." He banged his stick on the cages. He paid little attention to Kelly and kept going past her.

They kept up the racket for about a half an hour. The day got lighter as the sun peeked above the trees. The oppressive heat gathered its strength to wear on them for the coming day. Kelly Winchester began to sweat. She was slowly surrounded by more and more flies. They were everywhere. The stench of her own body appalled her, but the stink of human waste beneath the cages was even worse.

Eventually, the guards tired of their taunting. They were replaced by little men in loin-cloths with big straw hats. Some of them carried large pails on yokes over their shoulders. The others dipped small amounts of the contents into much smaller bowls suspended on strings, which they expertly raised up on poles to hooks attached to the sides of each cage.

Each prisoner grasped for it greedily as soon as he could. When they got to Kelly, she discovered that one was filled with warm, foul-tasting water. The other held a small amount of mushy steamed rice.

"Psssst!"

Kelly looked around.

The man on her right was wolfing down his rice.

"Psssst!"

She turned back to the man on her left. He was the one who had warned her to keep quiet.

"Save the water," he whispered, "it's all you'll get."

She looked at him.

He reached through the bars of his cage and carefully feasted on the rice. The bowls were too big to pass through the bars, so he had to tip it and carefully lick the rice into his mouth. He had to be even more careful with the water.

Kelly watched him, then her hunger drove her to her own bowls. She was clumsy and wasted some of the rice. When she tried to drink the water, half of it dribbled down her chin. It was all quite disgusting, but she was so hungry and thirsty that it was better than a feast. Her stomach rumbled. It was in turmoil, being so empty and then being invaded by the water and rice.

It went right through her. She heard, rather than saw, her neighbors squatting and loosing their watery excrement onto the ground below their cages.

Suddenly, she had to join them. Diarrhea. She wouldn't get much nourishment if it went through her so fast, but she couldn't help herself. Then she was sick to her stomach as well. She vomited through the bars. She continued to excrete watery filth from her rectum.

The men who had fed them had disappeared. Kelly scrunched down in her cage. There wasn't enough

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room to lie down, but she could sit. She drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Six

She was rudely awakened by a guard poking his stick up through the bars at her backside. If she hadn't moved quickly, she might have been impaled on it.

"Get up, Yankee Bitch," he yelled. "No sleeping. No resting."

He poked the stick up at her again. Then he went on to the other cages. He poked at the men in the same way he had poked at Kelly.

"Get up, Yankee Pig," he yelled, poking up at a prisoner's rectum.

The man in the next cage whispered at her, "They will stick it up your ass if you let them. They might even try something worse in your case. They take great pleasure in making us miserable."

Kelly struggled to stand up.

"You have to stand up or they will hurt you," whispered the man. "By the way, I'm Mark Flemming, Colonel, US Marine Corps."

She looked at him. "Kelly Winchester, Lieutenant, US Navy," she whispered. She looked over at the man in the other cage next to her. He didn't seem to be aware of her.

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"That's Lieutenant Kittle," whispered Flemming. "Army helicopter pilot, only one here. They've screwed up his mind real good. He doesn't even know where he is most of the time."

He nodded at her, then he put his finger to his lips again.

They stood in their cages, sweltering as the sun heated everything up. The guards watched them. If anyone collapsed, they swarmed around him, banging the cage with their sticks and poking at the prisoner.

The temperature got hotter, then it drizzled a while. Kelly tried to sip some water without dribbling it down her chin. She got better at it. She was weak and hungry, but she was able to stay standing.

They came for her about mid-day.

"Come on, Yankee bitch," yelled one of the guards, "the Warden wants to see you."

They lowered the cage and unlashed the door.

"Watch out for the punji stakes," they warned as they opened it up and reached inside to pull her out. They didn't hide their lecherous designs.

They pushed her along the pathway toward the office. They took her in the door to the dark little room where her hair had been whacked off. They held her there as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Gradually, she saw more of the drama unfolding inside.

A man was sitting in a chair, facing a naked prisoner tied into another chair, legs apart. But the chair the prisoner sat in had no seat. The prisoner's butt and his genitals hung down through the opening.

"What ship were you on?" asked a deep, raspy voice from the shadows.

"O'Connor, Captain, US Marine Corps, 734aaahhhhh!" he finished with a scream of pain. His tormentor had swung a wooden paddle up under the chair to slap his testicles.

"What ship?" asked the voice.

"Ahhhhh!" he yelled again as the paddle slapped upward.

"Get him out of here," said the voice.

A guard entered the room and untied the prisoner. They dragged him out of the room past Kelly. Her eyes made contact with his. She saw pain, and despair, and humiliation.

She was pushed into the room.

"Should we tie her in the chair?" asked the guard holding her arm.

"Hmmm," said the voice, "Yes, I guess so. We'll start with that."

The guards pushed her down, into the chair. Her buttocks protruded through the opening. They tied her arms behind the chair back, and, spreading her legs, they tied her ankles to the front chair legs.

"Well now," said the voice, "aren't you a challenge?"

The voice paused.

"You don't have any balls for me to torture, do you?" said the voice. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what ship you were on, do you?"

"Winchester, Kelly, Lieutenant, United States Navy, 51593373," she said.

"Yes, yes," said the voice.

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The paddle slapped up against her butt. They couldn't hurt her the way they could the men.

"Don't bother with that," said the voice. "I'll have to think of something creative for you. Perhaps I'll just let all the guards rape you, over and over again. I know they're hoping for it."

Kelly stared back at him. As abhorrent as the suggestion was, it was not unexpected. She had known that rape would be a possibility if she was ever captured. She was as prepared as any woman could be for such a disgusting event. She won the staring contest as the man looked away from her eyes and drifted lower to gaze at her breasts, then lower still to her crotch.

He lifted the paddle on edge and rubbed it into the crease between her buttocks. Kelly felt terribly vulnerable. He rubbed the infernal paddle against the exposed lips of her vulva.

"Your body is desirable," he said. She was proud of her firm, muscular body, but she had never been considered pretty, and her current state made her feel downright repulsive. She hadn't eaten much for days. Her mouth tasted horrid, she was dirty, and she smelled of sweat. And, she had urine and excrement clinging to her lower parts and her legs.

The man switched the paddle to his left hand. He reached out with his right hand and felt her left breast. He flopped it up and down, then he squeezed it and pinched her nipple.

"Owww!" she shouted. "That hurt."

"Mmmmm," he said. "Good. I enjoy hurting people who don't cooperate." He pinched the other

nipple. When Kelly resisted the urge to cry out, he pinched it harder. When she still didn't cry out, he slapped her face with the paddle.

Kelly collected enough moisture in her mouth to spit at him. She missed, but she made her point.

The man sat back. They looked at each other.

"Guard," the man called. A guard entered. The Warden spoke to him in gibberish. The guard left and then returned with another guard. They carried a table between them and placed it next to the chairs. Then they turned to Kelly.

They untied her ankles first, then one of them went behind her and untied her wrists. Each of them took an arm and they dragged her over to the table. They pushed her facedown across it. Kelly struggled, but she was weak from lack of food and sleep. They spread-eagled her, tying her wrists to the corners. Then, as she bent over the side, they tied her ankles to the bottoms of the table legs, spreading her legs wide.

"Comfortable?" asked the Warden. He spanked her buttocks several times with the paddle. Kelly heard the men speaking in gibberish. She heard laughter. She felt hands moving over her body. Someone was spreading her buttocks. She couldn't move much and when she tried, she heard more laughter.

Finally, the moment she dreaded came. The rape was short and violent. After the first one, another man entered her, and then another. She couldn't see any of them, but she figured it was the Warden and the two guards.

They untied her. The Warden watched as they dragged her out. She managed to get to her feet. She

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was sore. She was humiliated. She was angry. They put her back in her cage and raised it up.

Kelly crumpled to the bottom of her little prison. She began to cry. The semen deposited inside her vagina by the rapists oozed out and down her thighs.

Colonel Flemming was watching her.

"Did they rape you?" he asked softly.

Kelly just looked at him. She didn't say anything.

"I suppose you knew it would happen, didn't you?" he said. "You've seen how they torture us?"

Kelly raised her tear-streaked face towards him. She nodded.

Chapter Seven

The rest of the day was a boring succession of hours when they were left alone, interrupted by minutes of shouting and taunting by the guards. The sweltering heat drained her strength. The small amount of rice and water didn't last long. Whenever she slumped down in her cage, it seemed that a guard was there to poke her in the ass and yell at her to make her stand back up.

It was exhausting. In mid-afternoon, it clouded over and rained in a short cloudburst. It only lasted about fifteen minutes, but it was a relief from the sun. She raised her face and opened her mouth, trying to catch raindrops on her tongue. Her small water bowl caught a little water and she quickly devoured it. She noticed that the other prisoners reacted the same way.

The temperature dropped at least ten degrees. A mist floated up from the ground. Then the guards came out, yelling and whacking the cages. It didn't take long for the sun to heat everything back up again, though, and the guards retreated into the shade of their shelters.

Every now and then, they would lower a cage and

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take a prisoner off to the shed for interrogation. Kelly noticed that they were usually able to walk in to see the warden but they were always dragged back out. She could see on their faces the evidence of excruciating pain. She could not imagine the pain from the kind of torture she had witnessed being administered.

Kelly acknowledged that men were physically stronger than women in almost every way, but women had no parts as vulnerable as a man's testicles. She wondered at the level of pain they must have to experience. It was more than she could imagine. The screams punctuated every interrogation. The Warden liked it that way so every prisoner would dread the next one.

Late in the day the Warden came out to see her. He stood looking up at her, leering.

"You know, half the prisoners have hardons because of you."

He scratched his crotch.

"Did you have fun earlier?"

Kelly looked down at him with loathing.

"It's a lot more satisfying to screw you than it is to screw one of these guys in the ass." He looked at her for an indication of surprise. She didn't show it, but she was surprised at first. She quickly remembered that nothing should surprise her here.

"Oh, yes," he said, "we fuck your fellow Yankee pig prisoners in the ass on a regular basis. Some of them prefer it to having their balls smashed and squeezed. Of course, now that you're here, we don't have to resort to queering them. We can all screw

you.”

He looked up at her for a reaction. She deadpanned an expressionless look back at him.

He motioned to the guards.

“Get her down from there,” he said.

Oh no, Kelly thought, *not again*. She didn’t think she could take being gang-raped again, especially so soon.

They lowered the cage and pulled her out of it.

“Give me a piece of rope,” said the Warden. “Get down on your knees.” The guards pushed her down. He walked around behind her. He put his knee between her shoulder blades and pulled Kelly’s arms back. He tied them together at the elbows, straightening up her posture and pulling her breasts up.

“Get up,” he said, “walk around the path, past the cages. I want all the other prisoners to get a good look at you. Wiggle your ass nicely for them.”

“Fuck you,” she said. She stayed on her knees.

“Would you like a cattle prod stuck up your ass?” said the Warden. “We might find a more creative place to stick it in your case.”

One of the guards approached her. He turned and stabbed up at Colonel Flemming’s testicles with it. There was a crackle of electricity and a howl of pain from the cage.

“Get up,” said the Warden, “or I’ll fry your insides.”

The guard approached once more.

Kelly looked up at them. Then she struggled to her feet.

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"Good," said the Warden, "we're making progress. Now walk along the path. Mind the punji stakes."

She started walking. Suddenly he spanked her with his paddle.

"Wiggle your ass for us," he said. Kelly stopped. She didn't know what to do. "Wiggle your ass and jiggle your tits for us." He raised his voice so all the prisoners could hear him. "Wouldn't you all like to see the Lieutenant wiggle her ass and jiggle her tits? Come on, Lieutenant Winchester." He spanked her again. "Maybe we should fry someone else's balls."

She looked back at him. He was leering at her with a lopsided grin. "I'll do it, you know."

Kelly sighed. She did the best she could to wiggle and jiggle the way he wanted her to. As weak as she was and with her arms tied tightly behind her back, it was difficult. She had never done anything like that before.

"Good," said the Warden, "Good. Like what you see, boys?"

The Warden pushed her along the path. All the men had hardons. Some of them were trying to hide their gonads. Some were playing with themselves.

"No jerking-off!" said the Warden. "Anybody caught jerking-off will have his nuts crushed in the ballcrusher."

"Got one!" yelled one of the guards. It was getting dark and it was harder to see. They removed the prisoner from his cage and dragged him over toward the Warden. It was Billy. Semen was dripping from his penis.

"I didn't mean it," pleaded Billy, "honest. I

couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I won't do it again."

The warden laughed softly.

"We haven't used the crusher for a while," he said. He spoke to the guards softly. They grinned. Two of them left and quickly returned with one of those chairs that had no seat in it, but this one had an addition. Under the seat, attached to the legs, was a large vise with wooden jaws. Billy saw it.

"No!" he screamed. He struggled and they hit him repeatedly with their bamboo sticks. One zapped him with a cattle prod between the buttocks. They forced him into the chair and secured his arms behind the back and his ankles to the chair legs. His testicles hung down between the jaws of the vise. The Warden slapped his face several times. Billy finally calmed down, realizing there was nothing he could do. Tears streamed down his face.

"Tighten it up," said the Warden, "let's see how much he can take." His words were greeted with evil laughter.

One of the guards started tightening the vise. The jaws crept closer together. Billy's testicles hung down between them. Closer and closer together they moved. They entrapped the sensitive organs and began to squeeze.

Billy screamed. The guards held him in the chair.

The jaws squeezed harder. Billy screamed louder.

The guard twisted the vise another turn. Billy howled again.

Then, the pain was too great. Billy passed out.

"O.K.," said the Warden, "get him out of there."

The guards released the vise. Then they released

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Billy from the chair. He slumped to the ground, unconscious. They kicked him and whipped him with their bamboo sticks. A zap with a cattle prod finally roused him.

They dragged him, groaning, back to his cage.

The Warden raised his voice again, "That little demonstration was for all the new members of our little community," he said. "He is in an incredible amount of pain, but he will recover. We will still be able to cause pain, but it will be a while before he recovers. Now this..."

The Warden approached Kelly. He fondled her breast. He reached down and inserted a finger into her pussy, rubbing her clitoris.

"Watch as she walks around for you, but no jerking-off. If we catch anyone jerking off, we'll crush his nuts. Understood?"

The Warden looked around the compound.

"Understood?" he yelled again, louder.

The prisoners mumbled an assent. The Warden grunted.

"O.K.," he said to Kelly, "now you. Let's walk around the compound." He gave her a little push.

Kelly walked ahead of him. She was stunned by what she had just witnessed. Every cage they passed held a man with an erect penis. They passed every cage. Kelly noticed that there were punji stakes everywhere, under every cage, between them, and in varying spaces out into the path. The Warden made her stop to wiggle and jiggle a few times. Finally, they arrived back at her cage.

The guards untied her and pushed her back into

the cage, then they raised it up to hang next to the other prisoners. The sun had gone down. Dusk quickly turned into night.

"Welcome to our world, Winchester," whispered Flemming.

Kelly looked over at her neighbor. In the dim light he looked haggard – tall, skinny and malnourished.

"They do unspeakable things to us," he whispered. "The only way one of us can escape torture is to be as inconspicuous as possible and to do whatever they say. I'm afraid that won't work in your case. You're unique. I hope they're not too rough on you, but I'm worried. You know they'll rape you again, don't you?"

Kelly nodded. "I know," she whispered. "I hate it, but I think it might be easier if I don't fight them too much."

"You're probably right," he whispered back. "I hate to advise you to let them do such despicable things to you, but it might save your life. Remember, we all hope to get out of here some day. The war can't last forever, and there's always the chance of a prisoner exchange."

"How long have you been here?" she asked.

"About a year," said Flemming. "I've been here longer than anyone else here. There were some before me, but they were taken away several weeks after I was captured. I never saw them again and I have no idea where they went. I don't even know if they're still alive."

Chapter Eight

The days passed slowly. Kelly learned how to eat her rice without wasting any. She learned how to conserve her meager ration of water so it would last all day. She learned how to drink it through the bars without spilling any. She learned how to urinate and defecate through the lattice floor of her cage, without fouling herself.

She was raped and sodomized every day. Sometimes there was an interrogation. Sometimes they just dragged her off and raped her. There were always several of them. She didn't bother to keep count after the first few times. She had been taking birth control pills before she was captured, but she knew the effect would wear off quickly. She wondered what would happen if she got pregnant.

Then one day, after about two weeks in the prison, she started having cramps. That night, her period started and she woke to find blood trickling down her thighs. It didn't matter to the guards. They raped her anyway, but they did throw a bucket of water on her each day to wash off the worst of it.

She was taken to the warden.

She was tied in one of the chairs with no bottom.

"An interesting turn of events," said the Warden.
"I should have anticipated this. But, no matter."

He watched as a small drop of blood fell to the floor beneath her.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Kelly scowled at him.

"The men really appreciate what you are doing for them," he said.

What an absurd point of view, she thought. She didn't say anything.

He was watching her for any reaction. She wouldn't give him any.

"You know by now," he said, "that I'm a real sadistic bastard, don't you?"

Kelly just lowered her eyes and stared at the floor.

"I've dreamed up something special for you," he said.

Oh God, she thought, *what now?* Surely they couldn't do anything much worse to her.

He called to the guards and spoke to them in gibberish. One of them left, the others untied her and led her over to the dreaded table. They didn't tie her down bent over in the usual way, however. They picked her up and placed her on her back, lengthwise, attaching her ankles to the corners and strapping her chest securely to the table. The edge of the table was beneath her shoulders.

She held her head up, but her neck hurt.

"Relax," said the Warden.

Kelly let her head down. Everything was upside down. The Assistant Warden came in. He and the

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Warden spoke to each other, then they all laughed. Two of the guards approached her.

"Open your mouth, Lieutenant," said the Warden.

Oh God, no, he's going to make me have oral sex with him. She raised her head and firmly closed her mouth.

"Have you ever given anybody a blow job, Lieutenant?" asked the Warden. "Come on now, it's not so bad."

The guards reached out for her. One of them pushed her head down and the other pulled on her chin. She felt something cold and metallic between her thighs. She felt it enter her vagina.

"That's a cattle prod we just stuck up into your cunt, Lieutenant," said the Warden. "If you have any thoughts of biting off the Assistant Warden's cock, we'll fry your insides. We've never done it, before, so we don't know what might happen. You might not survive such an event. I suggest you just cooperate."

My God, what a sadist. She closed her eyes and prepared for the worst. The guards had her mouth pried open. She felt the Assistant Warden's cock enter her mouth and slide down her throat. She gagged. She opened her eyes. She saw the man's testicles only an inch from her face. They slapped against her forehead and nose as he slid his member in and out, fucking her mouth.

Kelly gagged and gasped for breath. She writhed on the table. The guards held her down as she choked. They kept her mouth pried open. If they hadn't, she would surely have bitten down, in reaction to the gagging.

It didn't take long, but it seemed to take forever.

The man ejaculated his semen down her throat, on stroke after stroke, as he climaxed. As soon as he finished, he backed away and matter-of-factly pulled up his pants. He looked down at Kelly. She looked up at him, gasping for breath and retching. She was able to control her urge to throw up. She was afraid she might choke on her own vomit if she did. She let the semen drool out of her mouth.

The Warden approached her. He leaned over, and brought his face close to hers.

"How was that, my dear?" he said. He had an evil grin on his face.

Kelly spit a great wad of the Assistant Warden's semen at the Warden's face. He backed off, startled.

"OK," he said. "Hold her."

Oh no, thought Kelly, not again.

The Warden dropped his pants and approached her.

Kelly thought quickly. *Try to breathe between strokes. Try to relax your throat. Try to get it over quickly.*

The man guided his cock with his fingers into her mouth and began sliding it down her throat. Kelly was able to breathe this time. The guards held her head down and her mouth open. She didn't fight them as much. She concentrated on breathing and not gagging. She found that she could do it.

The man finally ejaculated into her and pulled out of her mouth. He hastily pulled up his pants and backed away from Kelly, where she was prostrate on the table. He didn't give her a chance to spit at him again.

"Get her out of here," he said.

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Then he turned and unceremoniously left her to the guards.

As they dragged her back to her cage, she finally vomited, retching over and over again. The guards dropped her in her own pool of vomit. One of them placed his boot on her neck and rubbed her face in it.

Kelly heard laughter as she lay there.

Back in her cage, Colonel Flemming watched her.

"It must have been bad," he said.

Kelly just nodded, tears streaming down her face.

"I don't know if I can take any more," she whispered.

This time, the Colonel just nodded. He didn't know what she had been through, but he knew the feeling of despair.

"They made me give them blow jobs," she said. "They stuck one of those infernal zappers inside me and threatened to fry my insides if I didn't cooperate."

"I don't think it would kill you," said Flemming, "but it sure could mess up your insides."

"I almost wish they would kill me," said Kelly.

"Don't give up," said Flemming. "Never give up. We'll get out of here, eventually. And we can report them for war crimes. You can't do that if you're dead."

Kelly coughed and retched again, spitting out semen, shedding tears.

"I don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

Chapter Nine

Kelly's second menstrual period in captivity was light, and it didn't last long. There weren't enough fluids in her body to support much of a flow. The guards continued to rape her daily, but at least there were no more episodes of forced oral sex.

The sun burned her skin. The guards enjoyed slapping her reddened, painful body as she howled in pain. They shaved her head again. She was developing a stubble under her arms and on her legs. She was getting used to the stench of her body.

She ached all over. Every muscle in her body hurt. Inside, she was sore. Repeated, multiple rapes were torturing her vagina. She was losing weight. She was also losing muscle tone. Her ribs and her pelvis protruded. Her breasts began to sag and shrivel up. After a month, she looked as gaunt as the men who had been there before her.

Now and then, other prisoners would be brought in. Each one was made to stand in front of Kelly's cage. If he produced an erection, it was quickly reduced by a punch to the testicles. If his penis instead remained flaccid, he was ridiculed as a

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homosexual and immediately forced to submit to sodomy.

Kelly lost track of the days and months, but eventually, she was brought to the Warden, who said he was concerned.

"When should your period have started, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Kelly looked at him, bewildered. "I don't know." She couldn't believe they were keeping track of her menstrual cycle.

"Our doctor tells me it should have started by now," said the Warden. "You're late."

He looked at her, not saying anything for a moment.

"Actually, you've missed at least one period completely and maybe two. We're concerned," he said, finally. "It may be that you are just so dehydrated that your body no longer functions normally. Frankly, that doesn't bother me. But if you are pregnant, that's different. We have to do something about it."

They looked at each other for a while. Kelly dropped her eyes to the floor. She was afraid she knew what was coming next.

"The doctor says he can perform an abortion," said the Warden. "He's never done it before, but he knows enough to make sure you don't continue, if in fact, you are pregnant. He's aware of several methods, he's very thorough." The Warden produced an evil grin. "He wants to try them all."

Kelly glared at him defiantly as they dragged her out. They took her to a shed in a corner of the

compound. The wizened little man grinned at her, displaying his few remaining teeth. Red beetle nut juice dribbled down his chin.

Oh God, she thought, he's doped up.

The guards placed her on her back, on a table. She struggled as they tied her arms and torso down. Then two of them each took her by an ankle and pulled her legs apart. The others held her shoulders and head down.

The doctor approached. "This is going to hurt, young lady," he said, with a giggle.

He pushed a hose connected to a squirt bottle into her vagina and squirted a foul-smelling liquid into her. It burned.

Then he entered her again, using a crude wooden scraper to search for a fetus. It hurt her terribly and she screamed as she struggled. The guards holding her legs and torso chuckled at her agony. One of them pinched her right nipple, drawing blood.

The doctor alternated, squirting, and scraping, and sticking his filthy fingers into her. Strangely, Kelly thought about the lack of sanitation as they tortured her. Eventually, the doctor's efforts were rewarded, as he removed a small lump of misshapen flesh from somewhere inside Kelly and declared the procedure a success. It could have been a fetus, it might have been part of Kelly's insides. They didn't care.

They washed her down with several buckets of muddy water. The cool liquid felt good. When they let her up and pulled her to her feet, Kelly retched violently, and doubled over. There was nothing in her stomach to throw up, or she would have puked.

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"Give her a drink," said the doctor. "She's lost a lot of fluid."

Even during the countless rapes she had endured, she had never felt more violated than at that moment. As soon as the cool, brackish water hit her stomach, she vomited.

"Lay her back down," said the doctor, "give her a little more water."

They kept her there quite a while, several hours, at least. The doctor wouldn't let her go until she kept some water down. Kelly got more to drink that day than she had had in a long time. It went right through her at first, and she peed it out, but the doctor persisted until she got enough and was able to retain it. Then, wonder of wonders, he gave her some rice to eat. It even had some meat and eggs mixed in.

Kelly wolfed it down greedily. She hadn't had enough to eat since the morning of the day she left on the ill-fated bombing mission that eventually landed her in this hell. They actually let her eat more than they should have.

Finally, they dragged her back out to her cage.

She huddled down in a crouch at the bottom of her cage. She started to have diarrhea. She felt Flemming's eyes on her. She looked over at him.

"Bad?" he whispered.

Kelly sniffled. "I just had an abortion," she whispered. "And I just had a feast."

Flemming looked at her but didn't say anything.

"They fed me," she whispered. "They gave me more food than I could eat."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"I feel horrible and good at the same time," she whispered, "and guilty, too."

"Don't," he whispered.

"I've just had more to eat than you have had in a month," she whispered. "How can I not feel guilty about it when we're all starving to death?"

"Just don't," whispered Flemming.

They didn't say anymore to each other, they didn't want to get the attention of the guards. It was getting dark. Eventually, they both nodded off to sleep with the rest of the prisoners.

Chapter Ten

One day, soon after Kelly's abortion, around mid-morning, the guards took Billy Zagoras out of his cage and started to guide him toward the warden's office for interrogation.

Suddenly, something snapped in Billy's head. Even weakened as he was from captivity, he was a big, strong, young man. He struggled free from the guards. He hit one with his fist and grabbed for the man's cattle prod. He swung the evil weapon at the other guard, knocking him down.

"Wake up, everybody," yelled Billy.

The commotion got everyone's attention.

"Come on," yelled Billy as he swung the cattle prod at his captors. Other guards were running towards him. "Come on, get out of your cages."

Kelly looked over at Flemming. He was looking past her at the other cage next to her.

"No, Kittle," he yelled.

Kelly looked around the other way. Kittle was opening his cage.

"Don't do it," yelled Flemming, "those punji stakes are poisoned, and you can't avoid them."

Kittle had the cage open. All the cages were easy to open, they were just lashed shut with cord. He looked over at Flemming. He looked at Kelly. His eyes seemed to clear for a single lucid moment. He straightened. He saluted. He turned. He jumped.

He landed flat on his front on the punji stakes beneath his cage. There was no need for poison. Twenty or thirty punji stakes punctured his frail body. He died instantly.

Meanwhile, Billy had figured out how to turn on the cattle prod and was waving it at the guards. The two who had been sent to get him had scurried out of range. He was surrounded. More were coming. Billy kept them at bay with the zapper.

"Look out," yelled someone in one of the cages. The guards threw a net at Billy, but the warning had been just in time. He ducked and avoided the net, but the guards began to gather it immediately for another try.

Billy turned the other way and charged his tormentors. They scattered. Billy grabbed one of them. He viciously poked the cattle prod in the man's eye and squeezed the activator. The guard screamed. Billy pushed the man to the side, under a cage, onto a ring of punji stakes. The man screamed in terror. Billy kicked him in the face. The poison would kill him, but Billy smashed the man's head in with the prod.

The net went over Billy's head, but he ducked it again. Unfortunately, he lost his balance and fell onto another group of punji stakes. The net finally went over him on the third throw, as Billy tried to get up. He had multiple wounds from the punji stakes. The

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poison was weakening him.

He charged the guards once more, but the net tripped him up and the guards finally got him down. They wrested the cattle prod away from him and then turned it around. They fried him over and over again.

The Warden arrived. He stood back, watching dispassionately. Billy struggled less and less. The guards beat him and shocked him. They kicked his testicles mercilessly. They kicked in his young face. Eventually he stopped moving altogether.

The Warden walked over to the body. He toed it with his boot. Billy didn't move.

"Get him out of here," said the Warden. He looked over at the guard that Billy had had killed. "That, too," he said.

He turned on his heel and marched back toward his office.

As the guards dragged the bodies away, someone noticed Kittle.

They jabbered at each other, then one of them went to get the Warden. He came. He kicked Kittle. He said something to the guards, then he left. They dragged Kittle away, too.

Later that day, the Warden came out again. "Attention! Attention!" yelled the guards. "The Warden has an announcement!"

The guards went round and round, banging on the cages. They got every prisoner's attention.

The loudspeaker crackled to life. "Yankee pigs!" the Warden spat. "I hope you all learned a lesson this morning. Yes, the punji stakes are poisoned, and they are all infected with your own human waste. Let me

assure you, we have positioned them underneath your cages so you can't get out without falling on them unless we let you down ourselves. I assure you, it is a most unpleasant way to die."

The Warden paused to let that sink in.

"Lieutenant Zagoras suffered considerably. So did Lieutenant Kittle." The Warden didn't mention the guard that Billy had killed.

"If any of you thinks he can escape, let me assure you, it is impossible. If any of you tries, and is not killed in the attempt, let me assure you, we will make life very unpleasant for you. We can make your existence even worse than it already is."

The Warden looked around at the compound.

"That is all," he said.

He turned and walked back to his office.

Kelly looked over at Flemming.

"What do you think he'll do to us now?" she whispered.

"I don't know," whispered Flemming, "but I think he's rattled. I don't think anything like that has ever happened before." Then he put his finger to his lips.

Kelly turned just in time to see a guard passing her cage and looking up at her. He looked her over, licking his lips, then kept on going without saying a word.

"Maybe they're all rattled," whispered Kelly.

Chapter Eleven

The new Warden arrived a week after the three deaths. It was announced over the loudspeaker but didn't go into much detail. The old Warden had left during the night.

They came for Kelly right after the announcement. She was allowed to walk to the office, instead of being dragged. The chair with no bottom was off to the side and the table was still there, but there was a three-legged stool in the middle of the room, in front of the Warden's desk. The guards brought her to the stool and gently pushed her down onto it.

"Kelly Winchester, Lieutenant, U. S. Navy, 51593373," said the woman behind the desk. "Since we already know all that, don't bother to say it again."

Kelly and the woman looked at each other.

"I'm the new Warden," said the woman. She reached down into a box beside the desk, and picked up something. She handed it to a guard who brought it over to Kelly. She didn't recognize the guard.

"Put that on," said the Warden.

It was the T-shirt and panties Kelly had been

wearing when she was captured.

"Do you want to tell me anything?" asked the Warden.

Kelly didn't answer.

The Warden searched Kelly's face. Kelly stared back. The new Warden was a wrinkled old woman with a weathered face. She had gray hair done up in a bun. She wore a khaki uniform. As Kelly watched, she put out the cigarette she was smoking and immediately lit another one.

"Put on those clothes," said the Warden again. "I'm not as much of a savage as the old Warden."

"What happened to him?" asked Kelly.

"Oh," said the Warden, "he's been promoted. He and all his guards are now on combat status. I know where they're going. I was there last year. I imagine they'll all be dead by next week. I don't have much use for animals like him."

She and Kelly looked at each other again for a moment.

"I'm tougher than he was. No one will escape while I'm here either. And I'm not above hurting you if I deem it necessary, but you won't be raped. You won't be naked. And you won't starve."

Kelly slipped the T-shirt over her head and pulled the panties up. She couldn't believe how much more human she felt. She had to hold the panties up with her hand. She had lost so much weight that they were too loose, and would have fallen down on their own, but at least she had something.

"You know, we're winning the ground war, don't you," said the Warden, "even though you have the

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sky pretty much to yourselves.”

Kelly didn't answer.

“O.K.,” said the Warden. “We have plenty of time. We'll chat again, often.”

The guards took Kelly by the arms and helped her up off of the stool. She walked out into the sunlight and back to her cage. She exchanged a glance with Flemming, but they took him away as soon as they had Kelly back in her cage and raised up over the punji stakes.

While he was gone, Kelly looked around at the compound for the first time in a long time. It was basically the same, but she didn't recognize any of the guards. The same prisoners were in the same cages. Some of them had noticed that Kelly had clothes on. Some of them grinned at her. One of them waved and gave her a thumbs-up.

When they brought Colonel Flemming back, he was wearing his boxer shorts. He had to hold them up with his hands, too.

One by one, the prisoners were taken in to see the new Warden. Each one came back to his cage wearing his underwear. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Conditions improved over the next several weeks. Each day, they were fed twice and given water several times. Some of the prisoners were formed into work details each day and they started cleaning up the filth. The punji stakes stayed where they were and the cages continued to be suspended over them, but the human waste was washed away. Latrines were dug and the prisoners were allowed to use them in

the mornings and evenings, one at a time.

There were thirty-six prisoners in the camp. Kelly counted them while cleaning under the cages one day. She didn't recognize any of them from before her capture, and no one was allowed to talk, but all of them were men, except her. She assumed they were all pilots.

Interrogations continued, but there was no torture. Between, the food, the water, and the exercise, they began to gain back a little weight and to firm up. Kelly gained back enough weight so that her panties almost fit. At least they didn't fall off every time she stood up. The prisoners were even allowed to wash off under a shower made out of a fifty-five-gallon drum full of holes, hung from a tripod. The next time she had her period, the warden even furnished Kelly with some rags.

As primitive as the camp was, it was so much better than the savagery of the former Warden, that Kelly almost found herself liking the new Warden. She confessed her feelings to Flemming in whispers one night.

"Don't let her fool you," he said. "If she can get you to like her, she'll try to get information out of you. You might not even know you're giving it to her, so be careful, and keep your mouth shut."

Kelly hadn't thought of it that way. This could be nothing more than a variation of the 'good cop, bad cop' routine. She was careful to remember that their captors were the enemy, and that they could not be trusted.

Chapter Twelve

One day, it started to rain. It didn't rain for only a few minutes, or an hour. It rained for a solid week. It also started to get colder. Colonel Flemming told Kelly, in whispers, that the monsoon season was starting – the rainy season – winter.

For a while, the change in temperature was pleasant. The rain helped to keep the camp clean and it washed the stink of body sweat away. The new Warden still insisted on regular haircuts, regular showers, use of latrines, enough food and water to live on, and regular interrogations. Her methods rarely resulted in more than a slap across the face, however. Torture was no longer a regular part of the prisoners' lives.

The rain made their clothing a burden, however. It stayed wet, and it chafed the skin. Kelly almost wished she could strip down and just let the rain wash over her body. At least the cloud of insects that usually surrounded each cage had dissipated.

Then, one evening, they awoke to the sound of jet engines overhead. A few days passed, and then it happened again. Soon, it was occurring every night.

They occasionally heard explosions, the kind associated with missiles, rockets, and bombs. The guards seemed edgy. The warden seemed more irritated during her interrogation sessions.

Then they started hearing what sounded like artillery, during the day. Whispered speculation among the prisoners favored advances by ground troops. Some even dared to hope that liberation might be at hand.

"I wonder who they are," whispered Colonel Flemming.

"You don't think they're ours?" asked Kelly.

"I'm sure they're not," said Flemming. "Things could have changed a lot since I was shot down," he said, "but I don't think the United States would commit the ground forces necessary to advance this far. It's probably some warlord that the CIA has recruited and bribed. Those are our aircraft, but I'll be real surprised if we see the U.S. Army rolling into camp anytime soon. We might be freed, or we might just change hands. These people have been fighting each other for centuries. We're relative newcomers, and they're all just using us to further their own objectives, just as we're using them."

Kelly thought that over. "You mean, we might not get out of here, even if whoever is out there runs off the guards?" she whispered.

"That's more likely than U.S. troops coming to the rescue," he said. "In fact, the most likely scenario is that those planes mistake this place for an enemy camp or staging ground and blow us all to bits by accident."

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The more Kelly thought about it, the more what he said made sense. They were a long way from any large scale force of Americans, and committing U.S. ground forces to a major offensive, with lots of casualties, was less than likely, unless something drastic had happened at home, something like the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, or worse.

"Be ready to move quickly, Winchester," whispered Colonel Flemming, "there might be an opportunity for escape. Then again, we might actually be liberated by friendly forces. It's just that I've learned to be prepared for the worst."

Kelly drifted off to sleep. She was awakened several times during the night by the sounds of low flying aircraft and explosions. As the night began to give way to the light of the new day, the guards came out and began lowering the cages. The screechy morning music was not played. The Warden came out into the compound.

As each cage was lowered, it was opened and the prisoner was removed. The prisoners were then tethered together in a line. They placed Kelly at the front of the line, followed by Flemming. They were marched to the gate, which was opened. The Warden walked out to the side so she could address them.

"Prisoners," she said in a shrill voice, "We have to leave this place. We will be moving on foot. We will be traveling to the north, so we will stop at another camp and you will be issued some warmer clothing. We will be traveling fast, as fast as we can on foot. Anyone who cannot keep up will be shot. Anyone who tries to escape will be shot. We will rendezvous

with a truck convoy in a couple of days if we are lucky, but until then, we will be on foot. The guards are returning the uniforms and footgear you had when you were captured. You will be untied, one at a time, to put it on. The porters will be issuing a bowl of rice to each of you. This may be the last food you will get for some time, so enjoy it."

After they all were dressed, they were herded together and marched out the gate. The mud and the rain made the footing slippery. Wearing boots for the first time in ages made their feet hurt, and blisters arose on most of the prisoners' feet.

Fortunately, they were in relatively good condition because of the Warden's care. They were not starving at least, and they hadn't been tortured or beaten lately. They slogged through the mud at the side of a road for several hours. They were not allowed to talk to each other. Even the guards were quiet.

Then a group of soldiers came marching the other way toward them. They passed each other on opposite sides of the road. The officer in charge of the soldiers met the Warden and they talked guardedly for a few minutes. Then the Warden quietly told the guards to stop the column. They were bunched up close together again so she could talk to them without yelling.

"We're leaving the road for a while," she said. "Stay close, and don't try to escape. We have to move cross-country for a little bit to get to where we need to be and to meet up with another group. We will not tolerate any laggards. If any of you has to pee or crap, do it now. We won't be stopping for a while." She

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looked straight at Kelly.

Kelly took the hint. She undid and dropped the flight suit, squatted, and urinated on the ground. Most of the men also urinated. Modesty was not an issue. It hadn't been for a long time, anyway.

With that, they were strung out again, single file, still tethered together at the ankles. They left the road and started across a field, toward a stand of trees at the edge of a forest. When they reached the trees, they found that the underbrush was scant and they were able to move through the woods relatively easily. They moved as fast as they could get Kelly to walk. Eventually, it happened that someone in the middle of the line tripped on a root and fell down, stopping the line.

"Get up! Get up!" admonished the guards. They used switches cut from branches to goad the prisoners onward. Some of the guards still had their cattle prods, but they didn't use them. "Come on, get going!"

"No talking!"

"Quickly now!"

"Don't stumble! Don't be so clumsy!"

Then another man stumbled and fell. He howled in pain. The Warden swiftly went to see what had happened.

"He's twisted an ankle," said the guard. "It's either sprained badly or broken."

"Damn," said the Warden. She raised her voice.

"OK, folks," she said. "I don't want to have to do it, but we cannot spend time dragging injured prisoners along with us. We have to move quickly and we can't

wait for anyone like this.”

She turned to one of the guards.

“Untie him,” she said. As the guard knelt down, the Warden pulled out her pistol and shot the injured prisoner in the back of the head.

“I’m afraid that’s how we’ll have to deal with anyone who might slow us down.” Then she turned to the guards and said, “Leave him. Let’s go.”

And the column started off again. Strangely enough, no one was surprised, and no one seemed to care. They just trudged onward. Kelly hadn’t known the man. He’d been in a cage on the far side of the compound. Flemming might have known him. She wondered if he had a family or anything. He looked old, but they all did.

She was most interested in not falling down and hurting herself. She tried to find the easiest path. It seemed the right thing to do, especially after what had just happened.

Chapter Thirteen

There were no more incidents like the killing. When it got dark, they finally halted. The prisoners were tied together, two at a time, back to back, with their wrists behind them. Kelly was tied up with Colonel Flemming. When the guards moved far enough away, tying up other prisoners, Flemming whispered to Kelly,

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm O.K.," she whispered back, "how about you?"

"Oh," he said, "I'm doing all right. I wish I knew what was going on."

One of the guards was coming back. The Warden strolled by as well.

"No talking," she said. "Get some sleep, we'll be off again at first light."

Kelly and Flemming lay down on their sides. Tied together as they were, it was difficult to get comfortable, but comfort was a condition long forgotten, anyway. As tired as they were, they fell asleep easily. They were not exhausted, just tired. They slept fitfully, but without any dreams.

In the morning, they awoke just as the light was

beginning to brighten. It was a chilly, dreary, drizzly morning. They were hungry.

"Wake up. Wake up," said the guards. They proceeded to untie them.

"Get up and pee," said the Warden. "Crap if you have to. We won't be stopping much, and we have a long way to go."

The prisoners roused themselves as the guards untied them so they could go to the bathroom. As soon as they appeared to be through, they were lined up and the Warden said, "Let's go."

They shuffled off into the forest again. Fortunately, no one else stumbled. They came to a shallow stream and were allowed to drink. They crossed it and continued on. The trees began to thin out, and eventually, they left the forest and started across a field.

There was concertina wire at the far end of the field, so they turned left and walked parallel to it. There was a packed dirt road on the other side of the wire between two ditches. They came to an opening in the wire and went through it to gain the road, continuing on in the same direction they had been going.

After a couple of miles, only an hour or so, they rounded a curve and saw several trucks. There was a group of men tied together and squatting on the side of the road next to them. Some of them appeared to be Americans, but some of them were not. They were all in either flight suits or jungle fatigues.

The Warden halted Kelly and the line queued up behind her. The Warden walked over to the trucks.

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She spoke with someone in the cab of one of them, then she walked on toward another truck back further in the line. A man got out and they spoke for a while, then the Warden came back toward Kelly and the group of prisoners tethered together behind her.

"O.K. folks," said the Warden. "This is it. I'm leaving you with these men. They are from the far north, and they'll be transporting you, along with these others, to a camp in their country. I'm to go back south to fight with our forces against your allies. If you think life has been hard here, I assure you it will be worse where you are going. It will be cold, but I think you will be given blankets. I don't know when you'll get any food. I've treated you as well as I could. I fight to defend my country and my people, but I'm not a savage. Good bye."

With that, she spun on her heel and led the guards away, back the way they had come. Kelly, Flemming, and the others watched them go, wondering what was to become of them, and what was next.

A man's voice, with a guttural sound to it, came from behind the prisoners. They turned to see a short, rotund man in heavy clothing and a fur hat. He had heavy boots on his feet.

"I am just a transport officer. I have no interest in you, except as cargo. I must deliver each of you to our destination. I don't care whether you are alive or not when we get there, but all of you will be delivered. Anyone trying to escape will be shot. Is that clear?"

He looked around for a moment.

"Load them into the trucks," he said.

Several guards dressed in a similar manner

prodded the prisoners into the trucks. They had to untie them, and there was not enough room for all of the American pilots in one truck, so they were split up. Flemming and Kelly were able to stay together. They were packed together on the bed of a truck, which had a canvas cover. The tailgate was slammed up.

They heard shouts and directions being given. Then the trucks were started up and began to move. The roads were bumpy, and full of ruts and holes. The mud made the driving perilous. They didn't seem to be going very fast, but the truck was laboring. They appeared to be going up and down hills and around sharp curves, sometimes quite violently. Kelly and the other prisoners were thrown around and from side to side as they huddled together.

They drove for hours and it started to get dark. As it got dark, it got colder. Suddenly, the truck lurched to the side and they were all thrown into a heap on the left side. The truck slid to a stop in the mud. They heard voices and shouts outside, then the tailgate was pulled down and a bearded man motioned them out. They had a flat tire.

The prisoners were herded together, about twenty feet back from the truck. Two guards with rifles stood over them. The driver and one of the guards brought out a lug wrench and a jack. One of the other guards came over and faced the ditch. He proceeded to urinate, then he turned to the prisoners and indicated that they should do the same. Kelly and Flemming exchanged glances. The man apparently didn't know about her.

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"I've got to go," she said.

"Well," said Flemming, "I guess you'll just have to drop your flight suit and do your stuff, then."

He looked around. "Gentlemen," he said, "let's give Lieutenant Winchester some privacy. Gather around, and let's not watch. She's had enough humiliation for one lifetime already, and it's not over, but maybe we, at least, can act like gentlemen."

Some of the prisoners realized for the first time that Kelly was a woman. As rough as they all looked, and wearing the same flight suit as any other pilot, her gender had not been obvious. The men welcomed the chance to act civilized. But the guards didn't know what they were doing. They just thought that the prisoners were trying to hide something. They rushed over, shouting and waving their guns at them, until they saw Kelly squatting to pee, with her flight suit down around her knees.

One of the higher-ups came to see what was going on, then the one who spoke English came up.

When he realized what was going on, he laughed. He waved to the guards to back off.

"We didn't know there was a woman in your midst, although I did hear a rumor about you," he said, looking at Kelly. "We have to keep an eye on you. We can't just turn our backs and let you go to the bathroom. I'm sorry about that. But, if you others wish to shield her from sight, we'll allow it. I understand, and frankly, I would just as soon not give rise to any prurient urges among my men."

Kelly was finished and she stood up, pulling up her panties and shrugging back into her flight suit.

"Thank you," she said.

"I know better than to ask you for a promise not to escape," said their captor, "but we can be civilized. We will shoot to kill, however, if you do make any attempt to escape, and my men are all very good shots. We don't miss."

As soon as the tire repairs were completed, they were all herded back into the trucks and the caravan started off again.

"I wonder where we're going?" said Kelly.

"I don't know," said Flemming, "but it appears that we won't have to worry about the heat for a while."

They continued to bounce along on poorly maintained roads. It seemed that they were going higher into the hilly country. The sun, when they got a glimpse of it, confirmed that they were headed to the north. It began to get cooler, then downright cold. During one stop, they were assaulted by a cold rain, slicing into them horizontally, and propelled by a vicious wind.

Their captors were not inclined to answer questions, but they watched the prisoners closely. There was no opportunity to sneak off undetected, and it was clear that to run would be to invite a bullet in the back.

They stopped only to get fuel from tanker trucks that met up with the convoy, and for breakdowns, which were frequent. These stops were the only times they were given any food or allowed to go to the bathroom. The nourishment consisted of a hot, watery soup with some shredded vegetables and little bits of

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some chewy kind of meat.

They went through several small villages but never stopped. Four days after the trek north started, they stopped at a military compound with a concrete wall around it. They were issued blankets and locked up inside a large open compound, where they slept on the ground for the night. They awoke to find frost on the ground, and snowflakes in the air.

They were treated to a breakfast of the usual watery soup, but at least it was good and hot to warm them up. Then, wonder of wonders, they were allowed to use real bathroom facilities, inside the building that formed one side of the compound. They were allowed to wash their hands and faces with hot running water, and Kelly was allowed to have the luxury of privacy. Finally, they were herded back into the trucks and the journey continued.

After another two days in the trucks, on steadily improving roads, the convoy apparently encountered traffic. The prisoners, of course, couldn't see outside, but the trucks had to stop and go, and turn corners. The sound of other vehicles was also apparent. When the trucks finally stopped and the tailgates were opened, it was pretty clear that they were in a populated area—a large town, at least, if not a city. There was a high brick wall around the area.

"I wonder where we are?" said Kelly.

"It's hard to say," said Flemming. "We've been traveling north for almost a week. We seem to have passed over or through some mountains. It's gotten colder, every day. But I'm as much at a loss as to where we are as you are."

"At least these people seem a bit more civilized than that bunch at the camp."

The Colonel looked hard at her for a moment.

"I don't know what we're in for," he said. "I certainly hope you don't have to endure anything like you did back there. But I wouldn't trust this bunch any more than the last group. They may have even more hideous ways of treating prisoners."

"I just hope they don't rape me any more," said Kelly. "I don't think I could stand it if I had to go through something like that ever again."

They searched each other's eyes for a moment.

"I know how they tortured you, too," she said, "and I hope they don't do anything like that to you, but I just don't think anyone could endure what I have, ever again."

Flemming closed his eyes. He took a deep breath and exhaled. He looked up at Kelly again.

"I sure hope nothing like that happens again, but you never know. I don't know where we are, where we're going, who our new captors are, or what they might do to us. I just hope the fact that you're a woman doesn't make things any worse for you than for the rest of us."

They were fed and allowed to use the bathroom, then they were herded to one side of the outdoor area. The Transport Officer strode over towards them. He put his hands on his hips and glared around at the prisoners.

"Well," he said, "I'm through with you. I'm turning you over to another transport officer, but he's not here right now. My trucks are being loaded with

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troops who will join the battle as soon as I can take them back south. We will be victorious, you know. You people are too soft. You have no idea how much you are hated. You don't even know why. But enough of that, I've said too much.

"You will continue your journey by train. We have a freight train heading east in a few hours. You'll be on it. I'm afraid the accommodations will be less than luxurious, however. All of you will have to fit into one boxcar. I don't think you will stop until you arrive at your destination, and that might be several days. It will not be a comfortable ride, but it is necessary. You have an hour, maybe two, before you leave. If I were you, I'd make the most of it."

He looked around at the prisoners, then turned and walked swiftly out of the compound.

"It sounds like we have a difficult trip ahead of us," said Flemming. "It almost sounds like the cattle cars that the Nazi's used during World War Two—no food, no way to go to the bathroom, and maybe not even enough room to sit or lie down."

Kelly looked at him. He looked tired and worried.

"Don't worry," she said, "we'll make it. With all we've been through, I'm sure we can make it through this."

"I hope you're right," he said. "I hope you're right."

Chapter Fourteen

They heard whistles and bells and the sound of railroad cars backing and coupling, as their captors put the train together. There was a lot of shouting as well. Those two hours went all too quickly for Kelly and the Colonel. Several ferocious-looking guards watched them constantly from the top of the compound's walls.

The gate opened and a pompous-looking little man strode into the compound with several heavily armed guards at his back. They were all dressed for cold weather. The man planted his booted feet about two feet apart and crossed his arms across his burly chest.

"I am Khan." He looked around at the prisoners. "Khan is my name, as well as my rank. I will be your best friend and your worst enemy during the journey on which we are about to embark. We will be riding to the North and to the East on a train that is also carrying other prisoners on their way to meet their varied fates. Some are traitorous political prisoners and some are criminals. All of them will be delivered to their places of incarceration before we arrive at our destination. We are going to the End Of The Line, so

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to speak.

"The trip will take us over the mountains, across the desert and into the frozen uplands of the North. From there, my homeland, you will be taken to your prison. There will be no escape."

He glared at the prisoners. He turned on his heel and strode back out through the gate.

"March 'em out and load 'em up."

"O.K.," said the guards, "on your feet. Let's go."

They motioned with their rifles to the prisoners. Kelly and Flemming stood up and joined the line of prisoners filing out the gate. They were marched, single file, across a street, right, to a corner, and down the sidewalk of a wide boulevard. There was no traffic, and all the buildings were locked and boarded up. They crossed the boulevard about halfway to the next corner and entered an alley between two multi-story buildings. Kelly could see that there was some traffic further down the street, but this part of the city seemed abandoned—or evacuated.

As they emerged from the alley, they saw the train. It was an antique. The engine was a huge, old, black iron steam engine with a wisp of black smoke wafting out of the stack and steam hissing from countless places. There were six boxcars, loaded with people peering out from between the slats. They were packed so tight that they all seemed to be standing.

Ahead of all the others was an empty car with the door open. The prisoners were marched up a ramp onto a siding and into the open door. The door slid shut behind them with a certain finality. But they were not as crowded as those in the other cars seemed

to be.

"This is almost roomy," said one of the prisoners.

"He's right," said Flemming to Kelly. "This is luxurious, compared to those other poor souls."

"It smells awful, though," said Kelly.

"I wonder what this hole in the floor is," said someone. There were three holes with metal grates covering them in the middle of the floor, one up front, one in the middle and one in the rear.

"I know what it's for," said another. He was sitting apart from the others, in a corner. "It's the drain where the crap goes when they wash the car down. These cars are used for transporting cattle and other livestock. I've seen them full of hogs, chickens in cages, even horses."

"You've seen these before?" asked Flemming.

The man nodded.

"That's Shepherd, Colonel," said another man.

"He got away once," said another, "but they caught him and brought him back to our camp a few months ago."

The man looked up at Colonel Flemming.

"Is that so?" asked the Colonel.

The man sighed. "Yes sir," he said, "it's true. I've been on this train before. I managed to slip away once, when they slowed down. I didn't get far, but the train had already gone on. I headed south, but they caught me when I was asleep. They have some pretty good trackers, and anyone who looks like a Westerner sticks out like a sore thumb."

Most of the other prisoners were settling down in their own private worlds, wrapping themselves in

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their coarse blankets. Some sat, others lay down. A few stood and looked out through the slats.

"This is a pretty long trip," said Shepherd. "We used those holes to go to the bathroom so we didn't make the car any more foul than it already was."

Kelly and Flemming eased over to where Shepherd was sitting. They sat down next to him.

"I'm Colonel Flemming," said the Colonel, "and this is Lieutenant Winchester."

"Hi," said the man, "Mike Shepherd, U.S. Army, Chief Warrant Officer. I flew forward observers around in Bird Dogs for an artillery unit. All these other guys think they're real pilots and sort of look down their noses at a lowly Bird Dog pilot. I guess when you fly fast jets armed to the teeth, you don't understand what it's like to fly an unarmed tube and fabric taildragger, with nothing but a dinky little fixed prop Lycoming for propulsion. Low & slow, that's the name of the game, calling in fire missions for the grunts. I'm really just a grunt, too."

"Were you shot down?" asked Kelly.

"Damn," said Shepherd with a shock of recognition, "you're a woman."

"Yeah," said Kelly with a hint of a smile, "I'm glad you can still tell."

"We've been through a lot," said Flemming, "Lieutenant Winchester, especially."

Shepherd searched the faces of Kelly and Colonel Flemming. He looked directly into Kelly's eyes. "I can guess at how you might have been treated, Lieutenant. Some of these people are animals. They're vicious and brutal. And I'm sure they don't care

whether you are a woman or not.”

Kelly didn't elaborate on the special disadvantages she had to endure as a woman, but it was clear that Shepherd understood. He just didn't say anything about it.

“But,” said Shepherd, “to answer your question, yes, I was shot down. I had a young Second Lieutenant aboard, a forward observer. We were calling in fire from a base that had some eight-inch Howitzers, particularly nasty artillery – very effective against tunnels. The jungle was swarming with bad guys that were trying to bring in rocket launchers to return fire against all the Army firebases. We had just told them to fire for effect on a large group, when someone got off a lucky shot at us that must have severed the fuel line. Those little Bird Dogs are remarkably hard to damage, they're so uncomplicated, but the engine quit, and as I watched the fuel level drop, I figured out what had happened.

“Those little planes glide nicely, and we were too low to bail out, so I turned and glided back as far as I could toward our people. We lost altitude, little by little, and I finally had to put her into a stall, so we could drop into the trees without getting hurt. I got our airspeed down to about fifteen knots, before we mashed into the jungle canopy. The plane dropped through the branches to the brush underneath as both wings broke off.

“The plane crumpled up, but we both got out without a scratch. It was a damn fine landing, if I do say so myself.”

Shepherd smiled at them. He had a smug look on

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his face as if he was very pleased with himself. He looked almost happy, quite a contrast to his expression when they first noticed him.

"What happened then?" asked Kelly.

"Oh," said Shepherd, "we didn't get ten meters. They were all over the place. The Lieutenant pulled out his .45 and tried to shoot it out with them, but he never even got off a shot. They filled him full of lead before he could even chamber a round. I surrendered. Sometimes I almost wish I hadn't. Sometimes, I almost wish they had killed me too."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"So what's your story, Colonel," asked Shepherd, "and yours, Lieutenant."

"Hm," said Flemming. "I was just lining up to deliver some rockets to a chemical factory, when a MIG came out of nowhere and shot up my wing. I bailed out and my plane crashed in a populated area. Some people were killed on the ground, civilians. They were pretty mad at me when I hit the ground. Since it was in an urban area, they could watch my parachute coming down. I was surrounded as soon as I landed."

He looked over at Kelly. She cleared her throat.

"I had already delivered all my ordinance and destroyed my targets, when I took a SAM up the ass. It was already locked on to me when my wingman yelled at me to eject. I tried evasive maneuvers, but the damn thing stayed right with me. Blew the tail right off. After I ejected, I landed in a stream and managed to elude the bad guys for a few hours, but they got me, eventually. I ended up in the same damn

camp with the Colonel here. We went through hell with that sadistic bastard who ran the place, didn't we, Sir?"

"That's behind us, Lieutenant," said Flemming. He turned back to Shepherd. "Do you know where we're going?"

"Well, Sir," said Shepherd, "I never got there, the last time. I got away and then was re-captured. But I understand that it's about as far north as you can get, out across a desert where there's no water, no vegetation, and damn few living things—mostly snakes, lizards, and oversized insects, scorpions and spiders. A pretty nasty place."

"Where'd you hear all that," asked Flemming.

"Oh," said Shepherd, "The Warden at the camp where they held me at first, used to threaten us and tell us that they'd send us—to the End Of The Line. That's what he called it, the End Of The Line. He said they had land mines all around it and the only way in or out was by train or by helicopter. He said it was right up on the Arctic Circle and cold, cold, cold. I get chills just thinking about it."

"Hm," said Flemming. "It sounds pretty nasty to me." He looked over at Kelly. He sighed.

"It sounds like a place I'd rather not have to go to," she said.

They both looked back at Shepherd.

"How'd you get away the last time?" he asked. "Do you think there is any chance we could do it again?"

"Damn, Colonel," said Shepherd, "I don't know. The last time, I slipped out through a place in the roof

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of the car that had some rotten wood. I've already looked around this car. I didn't find any spots I thought I could bust out. Then you have to wait for the train to slow down. Jumping from a speeding train is a good way to get killed, or crippled. They only seem to slow down when they're near a city, or when they stop to pick up coal and water for the engine. I got off the last time when they slowed down to go around a curve. It was in some pretty desolate country, mostly farmland. At least I was able to forage for something to eat. But these people hate us. No one will help us escape. We'd be on our own, and it's a thousand miles to get anywhere close to friendly forces."

Flemming and Kelly looked at each other. It was obvious that they both had thoughts about escaping. It was also pretty obvious that they were disappointed in Shepherd's evaluation of the situation.

The train kept going, on and on. It swayed gently and the boring clickity-clack of the wheels tended to lull a person to sleep. They didn't seem to be slowing down much for any of the curves.

As it got darker, a chill entered the air. The wind blew in through the cracks in the walls of the car. The prisoners huddled together in the front of the car where there was less of the cold wind. Each one wrapped himself in his blanket and tried to sleep sitting up, leaning against the guy next to him. Kelly and Flemming leaned against each other.

The night seemed to last forever, but eventually, the sun rose and it began to warm up a little. The

train kept going. The tracks were laid straight. The curves were long and wide, so they didn't have to slow down. There were hardly any hills.

"We're taking a different route than last time," said Shepherd.

"Maybe it's because of your escape attempt," said Kelly.

Shepherd seemed pleased with that thought.

Another night. Another dawn. Then they stopped on a siding next to a station with a water tower and a big pile of coal on the ground. They were out in the middle of a prairie with tall grass waving in the breeze. There were armed guards everywhere. There were shouts and a commotion.

The cars behind the prisoners were uncoupled and the train went back and forth several times, but eventually, they blew the whistle and started puffing back onto the main line. There was only the engine, the tender, the guard's car, and the prisoner's car, followed by another guard car. No one came to talk to them during the stop. They were not fed. They were getting hungry, but there was nothing they could do.

The train seemed to be going up, slightly. Looking through the cracks, they could see mountains in the distance. It was getting colder. The grass was less abundant. Night fell again and the train continued on. It got even colder. The train labored upwards. The prisoners huddled together.

When the sun came out in the morning, they were high in the mountains. The chilled air didn't warm up much. Several hours after sunrise, it began to get dark. Clouds masked the sun. It got even colder.

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Then, it started to rain.

Actually, it wasn't rain. It was more like sleet. Ice formed in the cracks of the walls. As miserable as the prisoners were, they realized that the ice was blocking the cold wind. Icicles formed on the ceiling and, when they got large enough, fell off whenever the car wobbled or shook, falling like a knife thrown at the prisoners from above. In the dark, they couldn't see them, and they were too high to knock off by hand.

After a couple of men were hurt, they covered themselves with their blankets to blunt the effect as they fell. As the dark began to fade in the morning, they could see them. Some of the men were able to knock down the biggest ones before they fell.

They sucked on them like Popsicles, slaking their thirst. They hadn't had any water for a long time. They were hungry, and thirsty, and cold. But they were still alive.

The train stopped once. They figured that it was taking on coal and water. None of their captors made an appearance. They went over a long bridge, across a deep valley with a river in the middle. They went through several tunnels and across a number of smaller bridges.

That night, one of the men died. No one really knew him. He was a Lieutenant in the Air Force named Franklin. Colonel Flemming took one of his dog tags and put it on his own chain and hung it back around his neck.

"He won't be forgotten, at least," said the Colonel.

The train ride seemed to go on and on forever. Two more of the men died in the cold, dark, railroad car.

Colonel Flemming collected a dog tag from each one. They stopped a number of times, but no one came to check on them or bring them any food or water. It was bitter cold and they were starving. More of them would have died if it hadn't been for the icicles.

Finally, they started to descend from the mountains. It was only a slight shift in the orientation of the floor in the car, but it was noticeable. The down angle gradually increased. For short periods, they rushed headlong down steep grades. Even as weary and weak as they were, it was frightening.

During the days, they spread out and just sprawled individually, trying to get as comfortable as they could. During the nights, they huddled together for warmth. No one seemed to care or even notice that Kelly was a woman. She was just another starving prisoner, gradually freezing to death with the rest of them.

As they got lower and the mountains turned to hills, it got warmer, little by little. The ice between the slats in the sides of the car began to melt and come loose. At first, it was a welcome source of water, but as they got wetter and the wind began to seep through the cracks, they shivered in the cold. At least the sun began to shine during the day, but when they peered out through the cracks, all they could see was snow covering the ground.

They left the hills behind and started across a level featureless plane, covered with snow. There were no trees or buildings, except those little stations where the train re-fueled. The sun shone, but it didn't get very high in the sky. They figured that they must be

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getting close to the arctic. Several more died. Those who were left were hopeless. They didn't waste energy talking to each other.

Chapter Fifteen

They arrived at their destination in the middle of the night. Actually, it was about 3 A.M. local time. The whistle blew, first. Then a loud klaxon horn started blaring, on and off. The train slowed to a crawl and started going from side to side around tight curves. The prisoners were thrown around in a jumble, even though the train was going very slowly.

Finally, they came to a halt. They could hear the guards getting off the train and talking, but no one approached the prisoners' car. There were lots of bright lights focused on the car. The guards left and it got quiet, except for the occasional hiss of steam from the engine.

The prisoners peered through the slats, but were blinded by the lights.

"I guess they're going to leave us here until morning," said Flemming.

"It seems the guards have gone some place else," said Shepherd.

"I'll bet they're getting something to eat, right now," said Kelly, "and I bet they're warm."

"I wonder if we've finally gotten to our

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destination," said Flemming.

"I almost hope so," said Kelly, "I've had enough of this train."

Soon, it became apparent that standing up and looking through the slats was a waste of time. The prisoners sat or lay down, huddled together in a heap to share body heat. Most of them slept.

Kelly dreamed about her last leave in the States before being deployed to the war zone. She had gone to Cape May to visit her aunt and uncle, who owned a cottage right on the beach. She had lounged around in a bathing suit the whole time, lying on the beach and sweltering in the hot summer sun.

She woke up shivering in the cold arctic air. Colonel Flemming was snoring softly next to her. She leaned against him and pulled her blanket over them both. She closed her eyes, but didn't fall asleep.

Gradually, it got lighter outside. As far north as they were, it stayed dark later and later in the winter.

The Guards came out eventually. They removed the locks and opened the door on the side of the car.

Khan appeared.

"O.K.," he said, "everybody out."

"Let's go!" shouted the guards, "Let's go! Everybody out! Bring your blankets, you'll need them."

The prisoners roused themselves. One by one, they dropped out the door to the ground, clutching their blankets.

Kelly and Flemming waited 'til last.

"Khan," shouted the Colonel, "We have some dead men in here."

Khan swaggered over to the rail car door. He looked up at Kelly and Flemming with a grim look on his face. "I understand you are the ranking Officer among the prisoners. Colonel Flemming, I presume."

"That is correct," said Flemming.

"We always lose some," said Khan. "Believe me, if they don't survive the train ride, they wouldn't survive our prison."

Flemming and Khan looked daggers at each other for a moment, then Kahn shifted his gaze to Kelly.

"I'm glad to see that you made it, Lieutenant Winchester," said Khan. He opened his mouth as if to say something else, but then he closed it, spun on his heel, and strode away. He turned his head and said over his shoulder, "We'll take care of them, Colonel. We'll take care of them." Then he stopped and turned around. "You just get down here with your comrades. We'll take care of the bodies. You have one more leg in your journey."

Kelly and Flemming looked at each other. Then they dropped to the ground and joined the other prisoners. Khan was addressing them again.

"We have one more little way to go. You will be ferried over the mine field by helicopter, four at a time. Let's see...how many of you are left? Colonel Flemming, how many are left?"

"Twenty-seven," said Flemming.

"Twenty-seven," said Khan. "O.K., that makes it seven trips. Guards, escort four of them out to the helipad. Keep the rest here 'til the helicopter returns. I want them all delivered in the next two hours."

Then Khan turned quickly and retreated into the

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building. The prisoners stood shivering in the cold air. The guards took four at a time and led them away. They came back in fifteen minutes to get another four. Kelly, Flemming and Shepherd were the last three to go. They were led out to a large courtyard with a helicopter waiting in the middle. The rotor was turning and they had to duck to get to it. There were no windows in the bird and the door was closed behind them. There was a bulkhead between the cabin and the pilot's cockpit, so there was no way to get to them, no way to even see where they were going.

They lifted off, went only a short way, ten minutes or so, and set down again. The door opened and they were gestured to get out by guards. They were herded through a door and into a building. The other prisoners were nowhere to be seen. They were led down a corridor, through a heavy steel door that slid sideways, through another steel sliding door, and left, down another corridor lined with cells. Each of them was placed in a separate cell.

The door shut behind Kelly with a very solid sound. She looked around. There were no windows, but there was a small square opening, high up in the door with a criss-cross of bars in it. It was less than a foot square and it was just about at eye-level for her. There was also a small opening at the bottom of the door, an inch or two high and maybe a foot wide.

There was a dim light in the ceiling inside a round fixture, covered with a metal grate. There were splotches of rust on it. The light barely lit the small cubicle, which was about ten feet square as well as

high. There was a concrete slab against the left wall, rising about two feet from the floor, six feet long and three feet wide. There was no mattress, covers, or pillow, but it was obvious to Kelly that this was where she was supposed to sleep.

The only other thing in the cell was a square box in the right corner, about two feet square and two feet high. It had a keyhole-shaped hole in the top and appeared to be a commode, made for male prisoners of course. Kelly looked down into the hole. It smelled of urine, but she could hear running water down there somewhere, so it wasn't just a pit that would have to be cleaned out.

That was it. No chair, no sink, no windows. She paced it off—five paces from side to side. She could get six paces diagonally. It might have been seven, but the commode was in the way on one side, and the bed, such as it was, was in the way on the other side. She dropped her blanket on the bed and sat down. The slab was hard and cold, but at least the air was warm. She looked around again at her bleak new home. She felt so all alone.

Suddenly, she broke down and cried. It seemed so hopeless. She pulled her feet up onto the slab and wrapped her arms around her knees. She leaned over on her right side, facing the wall, curled up in a fetal position. She sobbed and sniffled. She closed her eyes. She pulled the blanket over her frail and starving body. Soon she slept, snoring softly.

She didn't dream. She was exhausted.

Chapter Sixteen

Kelly awoke to a loud banging on her door. She rolled over groggily and looked around. There was a face peering through the grate in the door at her. It disappeared as soon as she saw it. Then, a small tray was slid under the door. It made an irritating noise, grating along the concrete floor.

"Eat," said a voice from outside, "food."

Kelly blinked, shaking her head to clear it. She couldn't believe that she was actually smelling something that smelled good. She swung her legs off the slab and put her feet on the floor. She got up, and crossed to the door and crouched down to see what was on the tray.

She was amazed. There were some sliced potatoes, a slice of meat, a piece of bread, a couple of raw onion rings, some kind of green leafy vegetable, and a cup of hot liquid that smelled a little like tea. It looked like a feast. She could hardly believe it, at first. She dragged the tray in under the door, picked it up and retreated to the slab with it.

There was no fork or spoon, so she had to eat with her fingers. She sipped the tea first. It wasn't real tea,

it had a peculiar flavor, but it was hot and it warmed her insides. She tasted each treasure on the tray with her right index finger. To Kelly Winchester, everything was marvelous. She forced herself to eat very slowly. She remembered how the first food she had eaten after her capture had turned instantly into diarrhea. She made it last as long as she could. It all tasted wonderful. It was even warm and fragrant. It made her stomach feel full, even though there really wasn't that much to eat.

Eating slowly didn't make any difference. The food went right through her. It started with a gurgling in her stomach. Then gas started escaping from both ends. Within a half an hour, she was shrugging out of her flight suit and a few minutes later, she found herself sitting on the hole with some awful-smelling, watery stuff pouring out of her bowels. It startled her to realize that even losing her bowels felt good.

There was no way to wipe herself, so she just sat there for a while. Eventually, she pulled on her clothes. She looked at the tray. She picked it up and licked it clean, then pushed it back under the door. She returned to the slab, curling up with her face to the wall again, pulling the blanket over her body. She wondered if she would be interrogated. She almost hoped they would come for her so she could find out...what? Anything!

She slept a long time. When she awoke, it was dark. The light in the ceiling was off. A dim light filtered through the grate in the door. The food tray was gone. The air seemed hot, and she was sweating. She removed the blanket and stretched out on her

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back. She looked up at the ceiling, but couldn't see it clearly in the darkness. She stretched again.

Everything was quiet. She strained to see if she could hear anything, but she couldn't. She figured that it must be nighttime according to the local clocks and that was the reason for the darkness. Her biological clock had been out of whack for quite a while, anyway. She clasped her hands behind her head as a pillow and closed her eyes.

She thought about all the events that had brought her to this place. She wondered how Colonel Flemming and CWO Shepherd were doing. She wondered where she actually was. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep again. She dreamed, but couldn't remember what it was about, when she gradually woke up to a scraping noise and a light.

A tray was being slipped under the door. The light in the ceiling was back on. Morning, apparently. And breakfast. She rolled over on her side and looked at it. It smelled wonderful, again.

Kelly swung her legs over the side of the slab, planted her feet on the floor, and got up. She went over to the door, bent over, and picked up the tray. She brought it back over to the slab and put it down, pushing the blanket aside.

On the tray was a bowl of some kind of weak soup, with some chopped greens floating around in it. There was also a piece of bread and a cup of the same hot drink she had gotten the night before. The bread was stale, but everything else was hot.

She sipped some of the tea. It still wasn't tea, but she decided to think of it as such. It warmed her all

the way down. She picked up the bowl and sipped the soup. It too was hot and warmed her insides. She couldn't determine much of a taste, but it was so much better than anything she had had in such a long time, she silently gave thanks.

Then the silence got to her.

"Thank you," she said aloud. It was good to hear her own voice. No one answered.

She wondered if the other prisoners could hear her. She took another sip of soup and then picked up the cup of tea. She got up and went over to the door. She looked out the grate. There was another door across from hers.

"Hello," she said hopefully. Nobody answered. "Hello," she said again. Nothing.

She took another sip of tea. She returned to the slab and sat down. She finished her breakfast, sipping and eating everything very slowly. It worked this time. She had to relieve her bladder, but she didn't have another bout of diarrhea. She licked the bowl clean again, and picked up every crumb of the bread. Next time, she thought, she would soak the bread in the soup to soften it and make it seem like a bigger portion.

She got up and placed the tray back under the door. Returning to the slab, she sat up, watching the tray and wondering when it would be removed. Time dragged along slowly. She finally gave up and quit watching. She lay down again on her back with her hands behind her head. She nodded off to sleep again.

She hadn't actually felt comfortable in a long time. It was hard to believe. The cell with its slab and hole,

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combined with a relatively full belly, was luxury compared to the cages in her first prison, or the horror of the train. Even having a little privacy was welcome. Solitary confinement has its advantages, she thought to herself. She'd been kicked and beaten, groped and raped, starved and made to live like an animal. She'd been forced to have a painful abortion. She had been lumped in with the men and had to forget about being embarrassed. The times she had been treated as a woman rather than a man, she would rather forget.

She ached all over, but the warmth and the ability to stretch out full-length, even on a cold, hard, slab of concrete made her feel better than she had since before she had been shot down. She slept again, until she heard a tray scraping on the floor under the door. A knock on the door accompanied lunch.

Kelly roused herself and quickly crossed to the door.

"Hello," she said. "Hello?"

No one answered. They must have heard her. She guessed that they just didn't want to communicate with her yet. Maybe they were interrogating the others first. She was kind of disappointed that they didn't want to talk to her first. As a woman, she was unique.

She looked down. The tray held food that looked familiar. It held soup, tea, bread, and some sliced potatoes. It appeared that the food would be predictable. Kelly thought to herself that boring, repetitious menus would be fine, as long as they were frequent and hot. She dipped the bread in the soup this time.

The warm food was still welcome. She hoped that it would continue. She started to think about all the foods she missed from home. As she slowly sipped the soup and ate the potatoes, she thought about hot dogs, hamburgers, and pizza. Then she wondered if she would ever have lobster or steak or chocolate ice cream ever again.

After cleaning the tray, licking it clean and then licking her fingers, she replaced it, under the door. She stood up and looked out the grate. She couldn't see anything, except the cell on the other side of the corridor.

"Hello," she called. "Is anybody there?"

Suddenly, a dark, hairy, bearded, angry-looking face appeared on the outside of the grate. It startled her and she stepped back a few steps, almost tripping and falling.

"Quiet!" said the man in a loud menacing voice. He almost seemed to growl. "No talking!"

"But...," started Kelly.

"Quiet!" the man shouted again. "If you are not quiet, you will be punished. Just stay quiet, stay away from the door, eat all your meals, and you will be well cared for. If you make a fuss of any kind, you will regret it. Now return to your slab and sit down."

Then the face vanished. The tray disappeared quickly from under the door.

A bewildered Kelly staggered backwards and sat down. But she couldn't stand it. She crossed to the door and looked out. There was nothing there. She was careful to be quiet as she tried to look to the right and left. She squatted down and tried to peer under

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the door, through the food tray slot. She couldn't see anything. She rocked back on her haunches. She grabbed her knees and just sat there on the floor for a while.

She looked around the little room. It was incredibly clean. There was no dust, not even in the corners. As she thought about it, she couldn't remember seeing any insects. No flies, no cockroaches, not even any spiders. After her previous experiences, the cleanliness was as welcome as it was startling. There were not even any cracks in the concrete. She swept her hand across the floor. There was a light patina of fine concrete that coated the floor and clung to her palm, but it was so light she could barely see it. She just felt it as a little grit between her fingers.

Kelly uncurled her legs and stood up. She walked to the corner of her cell. She turned around and paced to the other corner at the front of her cell. Five paces...to the rear, march...five paces, rear, march...five paces...rear, march...

Back and forth she marched. She heard her boots slapping the floor, and remembered that the man had said to be quiet. She wasn't sure if he had meant anything more than calling out the window, but she tried to be quiet as she marched. Strains of marches drifted through her head. She had always liked *The Stars And Stripes Forever*. Several others followed. She was pleased that she could remember the words to *The Star-Spangled Banner*. She finally settled on *The Colonel Bogey March* from 'The Bridge Over The River Kwai'. It seemed so appropriate to her situation. It has been the anthem of P.O.W.s, ever since Alec Guinness

first whistled his way across movie screens as one.

She wondered what the reaction would be if she began to whistle. She quickly decided that it would be a bad idea. She marched back and forth, quietly, to the strains of her march, rolling through her mind. It felt good to be able to exercise a little. She couldn't believe her situation. She was warm and dry. She had more to eat than she could believe, and it was warm and even tasted good. No one was torturing or raping her.

She knew she should not be happy. For crying out loud, she was locked away in solitary confinement, in a prisoner of war camp, with no windows and no information about her whereabouts or even her captors. But she couldn't help it. Her situation was so much better than it had been, that she was not just happy, she was overjoyed.

She knew this was a goofy reaction to her situation, but she decided to enjoy it while she could. She determined to remain quiet and not make a fuss.

She hoped that nobody would bother her. She hoped that everyone would just leave her alone. The more she paced, the better she felt. She swung her arms. Then she had a thought. She wondered if she could do a sit-up. Better yet, she wondered if she could do a push-up. She had once been quite an athlete and had always stayed in shape. But she knew she had lost a lot of strength. She had been starving for a long time. She was flat-out weak. Her muscles had atrophied and her skin just hung on her frame. Everything in her once strong, taut figure had shriveled up and sagged. She felt awful and knew she

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looked just as bad.

She stopped pacing. She moved to the middle of the room. She swung her arms out wide and twisted to the right and to the left a few times. She bent over at the waist and stood up straight again. *Gee, that felt good.* She sat down on the floor. Then she lay back and clasped her hands behind her head. She tried to curl her body up at the waist. She huffed and puffed, but she couldn't do it. She couldn't believe she was so weak. She brought up her knees and tried again. She used her arms to try and help. She just couldn't do it. She just lay there for a while, breathing heavily.

Then she rolled over. She placed her hands palm down next to her shoulders. She tried to push her body up. She was able to move her upper torso up, just a little. She strained and strained and straightened her arms, but was only able to lift herself from the waist up. Then she had a silly thought.

What I need is a push-up bra, she thought, and she started to giggle. She couldn't stop. She giggled and giggled and when she tried to stop, she giggled some more. Then the absurdity of the situation came to her and she started to cry. She sobbed as she lay there on the floor. She crossed her arms under her face and sobbed some more. The hopelessness of her situation slammed home. She realized that there was a good possibility that she would never leave the cell in which she was a prisoner.

She closed her eyes, eventually drifting off to sleep. She rolled around, and ended up in a fetal position. She slept for an hour or so, then she roused herself. She had to go to the bathroom. When she went, she

noticed that she was producing good solid stools. Her strength would return, she was sure. She got up and went over to her slab. She lay down again and pulled the blanket over her. She just lay there, trying to go to sleep, but she couldn't.

After a while, she heard the scrape of a food tray being pushed under the door. She rolled over and looked at it. It was steaming and smelled appetizing. There was plenty, and there was a slice of meat again. Apparently, meat was reserved for supper.

She got up, went over and picked up the tray, retreating to her slab to eat. She tried to determine what kind of meat it was. It tasted a little like lamb, but it was tough. She guessed it might be mutton, or something related to it—probably something that grew locally. She ate slowly again, not wasting any.

When she finished, she slid the tray back under the door, and then she sat down on the edge of her slab. She waited awhile, giving her body a chance to start digesting the food. She rocked back and forth, hugging her knees.

After a while, she got up and marched to the corner. She marched back and forth. She found herself softly humming *Colonel Bogey*. Back and forth...back and forth. She swung her arms. She brought her knees up high as she marched. She thought to herself that marching had to be a great way to conquer her weakness. Roman Legions had conquered the Western world and dominated it for a thousand years, and they did it by marching at three to four miles per hour on their marvelous roads.

Five paces at a time. Back and forth...back and

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forth. She felt good. She just wished she was stronger. It would come, she thought. She kept going for what she hoped was an hour or so. Then she intended to try sit-ups or push-ups again, but she knew she wouldn't be able to do it yet. She had an idea. She faced the wall, then backed up about two feet from it. She placed her hands on the wall and leaned forward, keeping her back straight. She pushed away. Hey, she thought, this works. She was doing push-ups against the wall, and it felt good. She figured she could do this until she regained enough strength to do the real thing.

Kelly exercised until the lights flashed off and on. *That must be the signal to get ready to go to sleep.* She sat down on the slab. She decided she might be more comfortable if she got out of her clothes.

She removed her boots. Goodness, she thought, they smelled awful. She peeled off her socks; they were shredded and threadbare. She draped them over the boots to dry off. She shrugged out of her flight suit, too. She rolled it up to use as a pillow. She spread the blanket on the slab and then lay down on it, pulling the blanket over her.

The light went out. Kelly went to sleep.

Chapter Seventeen

Several days passed. Kelly really started to wonder if she would ever see any of her captors. She continued to pace and to exercise. The food was hot, and tasty, and apparently nutritious. She began to regain her strength. She managed to do some crunches and sit-ups. She managed a couple of straight-backed push-ups. She regained some weight and filled out a little. Her skin tightened up.

A week went by. Then another one. Kelly started running in place and doing some calisthenics and aerobics. She sweated and worked out all the time. She had nothing else to do. She left her boots and her flight suit off and wore just her underwear and T-shirt. Then one day, a cramp let her know it was almost time for her period to start. She waited for the tray to show up for breakfast.

"Hello," she said softly, "I need to talk to someone."

She waited a moment.

"Hello," she said softly again, "Are you there? Please let me talk to somebody. I have a special problem that needs to be addressed...a female

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problem. Please?"

The grumpy man's face appeared in the grate. He grumbled. "Hmmm," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

Kelly ate her breakfast. She was just placing the tray under the door, when she heard a commotion outside. As she squatted down, the door opened. She looked up at four uniformed guards. They were all dark-complexioned, stocky, and covered with great masses of black hair on their heads, faces, and arms. None of them seemed to be armed except for nightsticks.

She stood up and offered the tray to the nearest one, who reached out and took it.

"Come with us," he said.

"Let me put on my flight suit, please," said Kelly.

"O.K.," said the guard. He looked her up and down. "Hurry up."

He closed the door. Kelly retreated to her slab. She quickly shrugged into her flight suit and pulled on her socks and boots, wrapping the laces around the top and quickly tying them with bows. She crossed to the door.

"O.K.," she said, "I'm ready."

They pushed the door open again and invited Kelly to join them in the corridor. Two of them turned to the left. The other two got behind Kelly and followed her as they marched her down the hall, but not the way she had come in. There was a sliding metal door at the end. They had to give a password through an intercom, then the door slid open and they marched through.

They went down another hall, past a room with tables, where several other guards were lounging. They stopped before a door. One of the guards knocked.

A man's deep voice called "Enter," from within.

They opened the door. One of the guards behind her gave Kelly a little push. She took a step into the dimly lit room. The door closed quietly behind her.

For a moment, Kelly and the man seated behind the desk peered at each other.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," said the man. Kelly advanced into the room and sat down in the only chair, facing the desk. The man was bearded like the others, and also wore a uniform, but he was an officer.

"Have you been comfortable?" he asked.

Kelly knew she should only respond with her name rank and serial number, but she had to talk to this man. She had asked for this interview.

"Yes," she said.

"Good," he said. He leaned back in his chair and looked piercingly at Kelly. "This is a maximum security prison for prisoners of war, political detainees, and really bad criminals," he said. "We don't torture anyone. We don't do much interrogation. We already know most of the information you could give us by the time someone gets here. This is sort of a warehouse for P.O.W.s. You just exist. We feed you, house you, and make sure you cannot escape. Every now and then, some of our prisoners are exchanged and repatriated. Sometimes prisoners just disappear. We want to make sure they

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have been treated well and have no reason to say we treated them badly.”

They looked at each other for a moment. The silence stretched into minutes.

“I understand you need to talk to me about something,” said the man.

Kelly looked down at the floor for a moment. She looked back up at him.

“I’m a woman,” she said. “Women menstruate. I could use some pads or Kotex or just some rags, if you have any. Frankly, I’m surprised at how well I’ve been treated here. Nobody’s paid any attention to my needs for a long time, but you seem to be civilized, so I thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask you.”

“Yeah,” said the man. “Well, that’s one thing we didn’t think about. We’ve never had a woman here before. But we can probably do something. They bring in food and medical supplies frequently, so I can ask them to include something for you. I’m afraid I don’t personally know anything about it, but I’ll ask them to send something appropriate.”

“Thank you,” said Kelly. She really meant it. She couldn’t believe they were treating her this well.

“How soon do you need it?” said the man.

“I’m not sure,” said Kelly, “my body’s all messed up, but probably in the next couple of days.”

“O.K.,” he said. “Do you need anything else? Have you had a shower yet?”

“No,” said Kelly, “I haven’t had a shower yet, and I sure could use one.”

“We let the men shower, one at a time,” he said. “We don’t want any of you talking to each other. If

you are allowed to talk to each other, you might conspire and make trouble or try to escape. You will be watched, of course, but you should have been allowed to clean up by now. You should have been issued prison clothes, too. I'll see to it. I'm afraid we only have men's uniforms, but I'm sure we can find something for you."

Kelly didn't say anything. She wasn't sure she wanted to give up her flight suit and her boots again.

"Have I overlooked anything else?" he asked. "Do you have any other special needs?"

"No, I don't think so," said Kelly. "I don't suppose I could see any of the other prisoners. Are they all O. K.?"

"You won't see anyone while you're here," he said. "You will be confined alone in your cell. We will bring you your meals. You will be allowed to shower periodically, once a week, at least. Other than that, we expect you to keep your cell clean and to take care of yourself. If you need medical attention, we can supply it. As to your fellow prisoners, all those who endured the journey here and arrived alive, have survived and are being treated much like yourself. Nobody is allowed to speak to anyone else. Everyone is in solitary confinement. No one ever escapes, but we take good care of those who are here as far as their physical needs."

He looked at Kelly for a moment.

"O.K.," he said with a sigh.

He got up from behind the desk. Kelly got up too. He walked past her and opened the door.

"Get her a shower," he said, "and issue her a

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prisoner's uniform."

He placed his hand in the small of Kelly's back and gently pushed her out the door. Then he retreated back into his office and closed the door.

"Come on," said the guard. They started back down the hall the same way they had come. They went through the metal sliding door. They turned several times and ended up at a room with several showers in it.

"We have to watch," said the guard. One of the other guards produced a towel and held it over his arm.

"O.K.," said Kelly. She knelt down and undid her boots. She pulled them off and peeled off her socks. Then she shrugged out of her flight suit and dropped it on the floor. She looked around.

"Like I said," said the guard, "we have to watch."

"O.K.," said Kelly. She stripped off her T-shirt and dropped it on the floor with the flight suit. Then she turned away from them and undid her bra.

"I would like to have that back," she said as she dropped it on the pile. She bent over, slipping her panties off, and walked over to the showers. She turned on the water and stood aside to test its temperature. It started cold but it warmed up quickly.

"Lieutenant," called the guard.

Kelly turned to look at him.

"Here," he said. He held up a bar of soap and threw it to her. Kelly caught it, but it slipped out of her wet hands and she had to bend over and pick it up. She got under the shower, closing her eyes and ran the soap over her body. She soaped up her short

hair and rubbed the suds into her scalp. This was pure luxury. She forgot that there were four men watching her. She soaped up every part and every crevasse of her body. Then she bent over, placing the soap on the floor and rinsing off, after standing back up. She wished she could shave her legs and her underarms, but she hadn't felt this clean in such a long time. She just let the water run over her.

Suddenly, she realized where she was again. She looked over at the men who were staring at her. She turned off the water and walked over to them. She covered her breasts with her hands and tried to show as much modesty as she could. The guard handed her the towel. She used it to dry her hair first, then did a quick dry-off and wrapped it around her body.

"Thank you. I'm sorry you had to watch and I hope I didn't embarrass any of you."

"Oh, that's O.K.," said the guard. "We haven't seen a woman in months, except for you. You are very pretty."

"No, I'm not," said Kelly with a chuckle. "I know better."

"Well," said the guard, "you're the prettiest woman we've seen in a long time, and we never get to see someone like you with no clothes on. These men are too disciplined to even think about bothering you, but you are very nice to look at, with no clothes on, in the shower."

One of the other guards had picked up Kelly's clothes.

"This way," said the guard.

They led her down another corridor to a locked

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door. After a knock, the top of a Dutch door swung open.

The man inside looked out at Kelly.

"Oh yes," he said, "the Warden called me about you."

He reached down behind the door. He placed a striped top and a pair of pants on the shelf. Then he reached behind the wall and produced a T-shirt and a pair of boxer type men's underwear.

"That's the best I can do," he said.

He reached down and produced a pair of slippers. "See if they fit," he said.

The guards stepped back to give her a little room.

Kelly pulled the underwear up her legs. They were a little bit loose, but they stayed put.

"That's the smallest I've got," said the supply man.

"They'll be OK." She turned around, away from the guards and dropped the towel, slipping the T-shirt and the top over her head. Then she pulled up the pants and slid on the slippers.

"How does it fit?" asked the supply man.

"It's a little loose," said Kelly, "and the arms are a little long, but they'll do just fine."

"I'm afraid I don't have any brassieres."

"Can I keep the one I have?"

"We'll wash it for you," said the guard. "It looks kind of beat up, though."

Kelly looked at it. It was filthy and she had to admit, it had seen better days.

"Do the best you can, if you would."

She'd done without one for a long time and her breasts weren't that big, anyway. It actually might be

more comfortable to just leave it off.

"Tell you what," said Kelly, "don't worry about it. I'll just do without it."

"Good," said the supply man, "I know I couldn't get one. I don't think our women wear them and yours looks pretty bad. It looks like it would be pretty uncomfortable, anyway."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

They headed back down the hallway. After several turns and sliding doors, they arrived at Kelly's cell. Lunch was waiting for her. The door closed firmly behind her. She ate, sat for a while, and did some exercises. The prison garb was fairly comfortable. She had to roll up the sleeves and pants legs, but the loose-fitting clothes felt like pajamas. After supper, she just relaxed on the slab with her hands clasped behind her head. It felt so good to be clean. She slept soundly.

Chapter Eighteen

The days dragged on. Eat and sleep, eat and sleep. The days turned to weeks. The weeks to months. Kelly continued to exercise and her body firmed up. She stayed in just her underwear most of the time, unless she was leaving the cell to take a shower. She gained strength and muscle tone. She was able to do sit-ups and push-ups. She ran in place and sweated, doing calisthenics and aerobics. They allowed her to shower every couple of days. They supplied her with pads for her feminine needs, and even gave her a roll of toilet paper.

One day, just before her shower, they introduced her to a new guard—a woman. She was short and stocky like the men. She looked like a pretty tough customer, but at least Kelly didn't have to shower with a bunch of men watching anymore. They cut her hair. They cropped it close to her head, but at least they didn't shave it. Then, luxury of luxuries, they let her have a razor to shave her legs and underarms.

After she got dressed, she was shown into the Warden's office.

"Sit down, Lieutenant," he said.

She sat in the chair facing him. The guard stood behind her.

"Lieutenant," he said, "you look healthy. How are you feeling?"

Kelly looked back at him. She hated to admit that she felt pretty good.

"I'm OK."

"Hmmm," he said, "that's good. I'll get right to the point, the International Red Cross is coming to visit. They want to interview some of the prisoners, especially you."

"And you want me to tell them how well you have been treating me?"

"Just tell the truth. Just tell the truth. I think you will agree that we have treated you well."

"I suppose. It's just that I get so lonely. Is every other prisoner treated like me?"

"Of course," said the Warden. "This prison is a showplace. We pride ourselves on the condition of our prisoners. We are not the barbarians that your people think we are, and this prison was built to prove it."

"Hmmm. What about some of your other prisons? Remember, I have had to endure some pretty awful circumstances. And that train that brought us here... several men did not survive the trip. Although I appreciate the way you've treated me here, I see what you're doing now. This place is here to keep the International community off your back, isn't it?"

"I can't comment on any of your experiences before you got here," said the Warden. "I can't say anything about other prisons. All I know is that my

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job is to take care of you and your fellow prisoners, once you get here, and to make sure that nobody ever escapes. I do the best I can, and I hope you will tell that to the Red Cross."

Kelly thought for a moment.

"I'll tell the truth. I can't say anything bad about you or any of your people since I got here. But I can't ignore everything that happened before I got here."

"O.K.," said the Warden, "fair enough."

"Sir," said Kelly, "Is there any chance that I could see Colonel Flemming?"

"No. You might see some of the other prisoners while the Red Cross is here, but I cannot allow any interaction between you. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is."

"Oh." She hung her head in disappointment. "I see."

The Warden motioned to the guard. The guard tapped Kelly on the shoulder.

"Let's go," she said.

Kelly stood up. She looked once more at the Warden, then she turned and left with the guard. They didn't see anyone on the way back to Kelly's cell. The door closed behind her. She crossed to her slab and sat down.

She was disappointed that she still couldn't see anyone, but the news that the International Red Cross would be inspecting, was encouraging. It lifted her spirits. She couldn't help but think that this might be the first step towards going home. She stripped off the prison uniform. She flexed her muscles, rubbing her arms and legs. She felt so good physically, and

now she had something to look forward to.

She worked out especially hard, working up a good sweat. She didn't stop until they brought her next meal. Then she slowed down, relaxed, and slowly ate her food. It was still the same boring but reliable and nutritious stuff: hot tea, hot soup, sliced potatoes, some greens, bread, and a slice of meat. On her tray she noticed something special. There, under the bread, was a small piece of chocolate. She couldn't believe it. She saved it for last, savoring it, biting off little pieces and letting them melt in her mouth. The taste lasted long after the candy was gone.

Kelly was almost cheerful for the next couple of days. Then one morning, after breakfast, the guard came for her. She showered and shaved herself, and dressed in clean clothes. Then she was marched to join several of the other prisoners in a small room equipped like a sickbay or infirmary.

"Winchester," a voice whispered.

It was Colonel Flemming. Kelly was overjoyed to see him.

"Colonel," she said softly.

"How are you doing?" he asked, "You look pretty good."

Kelly looked at the older man. He had filled out and looked healthy. "You look pretty good yourself. They've taken pretty good care of all of us, it appears."

"Hmmm, yes. I wonder why, though?"

"You don't think it's because it's the right thing to do?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "I'm not sure I know

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what's going on here, today."

"You don't? They told me it was because the Red Cross was coming to see us. Isn't that what we're here for?"

"The Red Cross?" he chuckled. "I don't think so. I saw a so-called doctor with a Red Crescent emblem on his jacket, but I'm not sure it was even genuine. I have a feeling we've been fattened up for something else."

Someone poked Kelly in the back. She turned around. It was Shepherd.

"Hello, Winchester," he said, "glad to see you looking so good. Wish I could give you some good news."

He had a worried look on his face.

"Are they here?" asked the Colonel.

"Yes, Sir," said Shepherd.

"Damn," said Flemming.

A bewildered Kelly looked from one to the other. "What's going on?"

Flemming sighed. "You thought we were about to go home, didn't you?"

Kelly searched his face. She nodded.

"Hmmm," said the Colonel. "Well, I wish I didn't have to tell you this." He paused, trying to find a way to give her the bad news. "It appears..."

Just then the guards came into the room making a lot of noise.

"Quiet, everyone!" said one of them, "The Warden has an announcement."

The Warden entered the room. He looked around.

"O.K. everybody. Your medical exams will

commence immediately. The buyers will have an opportunity to inspect you individually and then the auction will begin. If you haven't figured it out yet, The Red Cross will not be here. In fact, your governments don't even know you are alive. The International community doesn't care, either. You don't have any information worth torturing you for, so you don't have much value to us as prisoners of war. But you do have some value. All of you here are strong and healthy. You will make great slaves, and Lieutenant Winchester, you will draw a premium. We're saving you for last."

Kelly turned to look at Flemming. She had a worried look on her face.

"We're being sold as slaves?" she asked in a whisper.

The Colonel closed his eyes. He nodded.

"Well, damn," she said. "How the hell did you find out about it?"

Shepherd leaned close and nudged her. "This is the second time they've done it since we've been here," he said. "I guess you weren't involved in the last one, neither was the Colonel. But I was. Nobody bid enough for me, so I was returned to my cell to fatten up. I guess I was too scrawny back then, hell, I had been just about starved."

Kelly looked toward the front of the room. There were six guards, armed only with nightsticks, and the Warden.

"Colonel," she said, "why don't we fight? Hell, we outnumber them. We're all trained soldiers."

"It's been tried, Winchester," said Shepherd.

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"There are more guards who are better armed. If we tried anything right now, they would flood the room with gas and the Warden would make a quick exit. They've done this too many times. They know what they're doing."

Kelly wasn't listening. She moved towards the front. She pushed past the other prisoners.

"Winchester, no!" said Shepherd.

Kelly got to the front and looked right into the eyes of the Warden. There was a rope barrier holding back the prisoners. She was about ten feet from him. She raised her arm and pointed at him. "You lied to me!" she shouted. "You said the Red Cross was coming to see us."

"I lied," said the Warden with a slight smile. "You'll be quite a prize on the auction block, but you wouldn't have been, when you got here. You were too scrawny. We've never had a woman for sale here, and everyone is looking forward to it."

"Well, I'm not going to stand for it," she shouted. She kicked one leg over the rope and started to make for the guards. She was grabbed and dragged across the floor and pushed down on her face. A boot across her neck held her there. She squirmed and another boot across the small of her back held her down. She flailed her arms in an attempt to get up. The Warden kicked her in the ribs.

"Stop it, woman."

They dragged her past the Warden and out the front of the room. They pushed her down on the floor again and the female guard sat on her back. She twisted Kelly's left arm back into a hammerlock.

Other guards had rushed into the room. A few of the other prisoners had followed Kelly and had been quickly subdued by the guards and pushed back into the room, when Kelly was pulled out of the room. The Warden retreated and the guards started taking the other prisoners back to their cells.

"Lieutenant Winchester," said the Warden, "I'm disappointed in you. Haven't we treated you well? Aren't you feeling better than you have since being captured?"

Kelly twisted her head so she could look in his direction. All she could see was his boots. They were shiny and smelled of new leather and polish.

"Don't make me kick you again, especially in the face. I can't sell damaged goods for near as much as a healthy, sexy, woman."

Kelly squirmed. "Go ahead and damage me, you son of a bitch," she rasped.

"Oh, no," he said. "You're going to make me wealthy."

"Fuck you, asshole."

"Ahhh, now. Don't take it too hard. The life of a slave can be quite luxurious, if you cooperate. It depends on if the man who buys you is a prince with a palace or a desert sheik who lives in a tent. They're both wealthy, and they're both here. I can guide the bidding, somewhat, if you cooperate."

"Kiss my ass," said Kelly.

"Oh, no," said the Warden, "I'll leave that to your new master. Meanwhile, I suppose we need to teach you some manners. Have you ever heard of the Chinese water torture?"

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Kelly had, but she didn't say anything.

"Take her out of here."

The guard sitting on her back got off and Kelly was yanked to her feet. A soft rope was quickly tied, very tightly, around her wrists as they were held behind her back. She was led back to her cell. A guard took the blanket off of her slab.

"O.K.," said the female guard as she untied her wrists, "strip down."

Kelly turned and spit at her. It was a good shot, a big gob of saliva right in her face.

"Ahhh!" yelled the guard in anger as she wiped her face with her hand. "I'm tired of catering to you, you arrogant pig."

She slapped Kelly across the face with the back of her right hand.

"Hold her," said the guard.

The two men grabbed Kelly's arms. The female guard grabbed Kelly's top and pulled it up. She pulled it over one arm at a time. Kelly was determined to make it as difficult as possible for them. They did the same thing with her T-shirt. Then they pulled off her slippers and her pants. When they tried to pull Kelly's underpants off, she squirmed and kicked so much that they almost couldn't do it, but they finally got her completely naked. They tied her arms and wrists behind her back, then they tied her ankles together.

"O.K., pick her up," said the female guard, who seemed to be in charge. Kelly was lifted and thrown over the shoulder of one of the male guards. His coarse clothing felt rough against her skin. They

carried her through several of the sliding doors and to an elevator, which went down. When they exited, they went along a low corridor with pipes along the ceiling. The light was dim and it smelled musty. Kelly surmised that this was a place where people didn't come very often. They entered a large room. They dropped Kelly onto a cold metal table. She immediately tried to squirm off of it, but they turned her over on her back and used straps attached to the sides to hold her down. They untied her arms and placed a strap across her chest, just below her breasts and across her arms. They tightened it up. Then they placed another strap across her throat. They untied her ankles and strapped each one to the side of the cold stainless steel table, spreading her legs slightly and making her feel very vulnerable. Last, they placed over her head a box that was capable of width adjustment. They adjusted it to hold her head in place, looking upward. They slid the top cover off the box so Kelly could see and they peered down at her.

"Comfortable?" asked the female guard.

"Fuck you!" said Kelly.

The female guard grinned down at her. "I'm enjoying this, you pig. Pleasant dreams."

Then she slid the front cover back over Kelly's face so she couldn't see anything. There were just enough small holes in the sides of the box for Kelly to be able to breathe, but it got hot and humid from her breath quickly. Kelly struggled to breathe. It was just barely adequate.

"Can we touch her now?" asked one of the male guards.

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Oh no, not that again.

"Pigs," said the female guards. "Go ahead. But don't bruise her in any way."

Kelly suddenly felt rough hands touching and fondling her body. They rubbed all the way from her lower legs to her neck where it disappeared into the box. They caressed her breasts and licked her nipples. Hands slipped between her legs, rubbing her clitoris. Fingers entered her vagina. She felt a tongue licking down from her navel to her mons. It slid over her clitoris. A rough, stubbled chin chafed her thighs.

"O.K., that's enough, you pigs," said the female guard. "Let's get out of here. That doctor gives me the creeps."

Kelly heard their boots cross the room and exit the door, which closed with a noticeable metallic clank. Then everything was quiet. She was blind with the box over her head. She didn't know if there was even anyone else in the room. She tried to squirm a little, but the straps were well designed and held her tightly.

What's next? And who is this doctor that they were talking about? What the hell have I gotten myself into now?

After a while, she fell asleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Kelly awoke to a warm feeling around her pubic area. The box still covered her face and head, so she couldn't see anything. She didn't feel anything touching her, but she could feel the difference in temperature, like the sun hitting you when you're sitting in a shaded area. She wondered if it was her imagination or if someone had turned on a heat lamp, somewhere over her.

She tried to wiggle, but she was still strapped down securely. Suddenly, she felt something cold hit her tummy, just like a little pinprick. She wondered if there would be another one, and she kind of expected it. Chinese water torture. She figured it must have been a drop of water. But after a while, she started to doubt if she had actually felt it. She wondered if it might have all been her imagination.

"Hey." The box muffled the sound and talking made it hard to breathe. "Hey," she said again, "is anybody there?"

Nobody answered.

She was just about to dismiss everything—the warmth around her tummy and legs, the cold drop,

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the thought that the mysterious Doctor might be out there hovering over her – when another cold drop hit her tummy.

She thought it was in a different place, but she couldn't be sure. It was so quiet. She wondered if there really was anyone there. She wondered if maybe one of the pipes she had seen running along the ceiling might be leaking. She wondered especially, if she might have been just imagining all of it.

Then a drop hit her shoulder. It was not her imagination; someone was playing with her mind, through her body.

Suddenly, there was a loud noise, like something big dropping on the floor. It scared the hell out of her. She couldn't help it, she farted and peed, just a little. She would have jumped if she hadn't been strapped down so tightly. She screamed. Her heart raced. Tears flooded her eyes.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Stop it."

Then there was nothing but quiet. She kept expecting another noise, or another drop of water. Gradually, she realized that the warmth around her pubic area was no longer there. In fact, she slowly realized that it was getting quite cold. She shivered, lying there with nothing on.

"Oh, please," she said, "stop it."

But there was nothing but silence. Eventually, she warmed up. The cold air was replaced by a comfortable warmth. Silence. Nothingness. Her alertness dulled and sleep finally overcame her.

The Doctor and his Assistant watched Kelly for signs that she had drifted off to sleep. The assistant

held a large caliber pistol and pointed it into a box packed tightly with newspapers to stop a bullet. As soon as it looked like Kelly was again relaxed and unaware, when it looked like she might have drifted off to sleep, the Doctor nodded. The Assistant fired the pistol.

The loud noise sounded like a rifle shot to Kelly and it startled her awake. She woke up screaming. It scared her so much it made her pee again, and she probably farted too, she couldn't tell. She realized that she was still screaming.

"Damn you!" she screamed. "Damn you to hell!"

The Doctor and the Assistant watched her grimly.

Nothingness again. Silence. Eventually, sleep.

She woke up screaming again. A wave of cold water splashed over her body. They had thrown a bucket of ice water on her. The Assistant used a high-pressure hose to spray cold water at her—from the right side, then up between her legs, then at her left side. Then nothing. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. She was almost asleep.

Then a stream of high-pressure water squirted directly down, into her navel. Then again, straight up between her legs at her femininity. It hurt—and it scared her each time they did something unexpected to her.

Kelly screamed over and over and over.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Please stop it. My God, please stop."

Tears and a racing heart. Nothingness. Silence. Warmth. Dry warmth. Cold. Noise. Water.

She couldn't go to sleep. She couldn't stay awake.

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What's next? My God, what's next?

"Dear God, please make them stop," she pleaded. Kelly rarely prayed, but she found herself praying then.

The Doctor observed her. He sat on a tall stool. He was a tall man, slender, almost gaunt. His wispy white hair was thinning and his scraggly beard needed trimming. He wore a white lab coat and thick glasses. He rarely smiled. He was very good at what he did, which was to drive people insane and bring them back to relative sanity, but willing to do whatever he wanted them to.

The Assistant was almost as tall as the Doctor, his bulging muscles straining against his white lab coat. His thick black hair was cropped close, as was his beard. His piercing black eyes peered out of a round face with a long scar that stretched down from his right eyebrow across his nose to the jaw on his left side. His right eye sometimes didn't point in the same direction as his left one. The Assistant had been working with the Doctor for a long time. He really enjoyed his work. He was sadistic enough to really get off on torturing helpless victims.

Kelly squirmed. "Hey, I've got to go to the bathroom."

The Doctor and the Assistant glanced at each other. They didn't answer her.

"Do you hear me?" said Kelly. "I've got to go to the bathroom."

Her bladder was full and her bowels were rumbling uncomfortably.

The Doctor and the Assistant were unconcerned.

They waited to see what she would do.

Kelly waited for them to answer. She was sure that if there was someone there, they would do something. She was sure that they didn't want her to just make a mess on the table. She didn't want to make a mess on the table. It would be embarrassing, for one thing, and she sure didn't want to lay there in her own filth.

She squirmed, trying to hold back. It was getting painful. The Doctor and his Assistant sat on their stools and waited for her to relieve herself. They were experts in determining the sorts of things that would be most degrading to a person.

Finally, she couldn't hold it any more. She urinated on the table and it ran under her legs. Some of it ran off onto the floor and the Assistant swiftly and quietly mopped it up, but they let her soak in the urine that stayed on the table.

The Doctor took a cotton swab and swirled it in the pool between her legs. He applied a small amount of the smelly liquid to the air holes in the box holding Kelly's head. The smell in the small confined area of the box nauseated her. Eventually, she had to defecate, too. They let it ooze out onto the table and pile up between her legs. Then the Doctor took a stool stick and applied a little to her air holes.

At first Kelly was nauseous. But eventually, she got used to the smell, and finally, she drifted off to sleep.

As soon as she appeared to be asleep, the Assistant pressed the button on a loud Klaxon horn and jolted Kelly back to wakefulness. It was apparent that sleep deprivation was one of their methods. Kelly was tired and sleepy, but she couldn't get to sleep without

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being immediately jarred back to consciousness.

The Assistant used an eyedropper to drop an occasional drop of ice water on Kelly. They used a heat lamp to heat up small portions of her body. They turned the heat up and down to chill her or make her sweat, and they continually let her drop off to sleep, only to startle her in some jarring fashion. The Assistant especially liked firing the pistol.

After letting her rest in her own filth for a while, they sloshed a great quantity of warm water on her and cleaned it up. Then the Doctor positioned a bright arc lamp over the box holding her head. He turned it on. He slid the top off of the box. Kelly had no idea how long she had been in total darkness, but it had been for a long time, days she thought, and the sudden change to blinding light shocked her system and essentially blinded her. She closed her eyes as tightly as she could, but the blinding light penetrated her eyelids. The Assistant removed the box. He cleaned the air holes and replaced it over Kelly's head. The Doctor used the eyedropper to drip a drop of water on Kelly's lips—just one drop. Her lips were cracked with thirst and she licked them with her dry tongue.

"Water," she croaked. "Please let me have some water."

The doctor used the dropper to dribble water on her cheeks, in her tightly closed eyes and all around her lips, but only one or two drops actually went onto her lips and into her mouth. The heat from the arc light was burning her skin as well as blinding her eyes. She was turning red and the water drops

evaporated as soon as they touched her face.

Then the Doctor filled the dropper full. He jammed it into Kelly's right nostril and squirted it into her sinuses.

Kelly screamed. She squirmed. She tried to snuffle and blow her nose at the same time. A very little bit of the water finally made it down her throat. He did it again in her left nostril. Kelly almost choked. She could hardly breathe. She instantly got an intense and painful headache. Then the Assistant replaced the top of the box over her face and the Doctor turned off the arc light.

Back to nothingness. Quiet. Darkness. Kelly whimpered and cried, while trying to breathe, trying to clear her nasal passages and her sinuses. She snuffled moisture into her throat. Her burned face hurt terribly, like a bad sunburn. The Doctor and the Assistant took turns watching Kelly. Each one left to get something to eat, get some sleep, and go to the bathroom, while the other one made sure that Kelly was unable to accomplish any of these functions.

The Doctor was sure that Kelly was getting hungry. He had a small electric hot plate on a counter, attached to the wall. While it was heating up, he cut an orange in half. He placed one half on each side of the box, under the air holes and squeezed gently. The intense scent wafted into Kelly's nose. She was hungry, and the smell of food made her feel it even more. The sweet smell of the oranges made her mouth water, and she almost choked on her own saliva.

Then the Doctor moved the hot plate over to the

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table and placed a little slow moving, plastic fan behind it. He put a little olive oil in the hot plate. He added some onions and sautéed them. He added some sliced potatoes and then some peppers. He added some meat. Finally, he added some aromatic spices. The food smelled delicious. He and the Assistant would eat it later, but they wanted to intensify Kelly's craving for food first. They didn't give her any, just cooked it and made sure she smelled it. After cooking the meat and vegetables slowly for as long as they thought they could without ruining the meal, they removed it, ate it and listened to Kelly whimpering and watched her squirm.

Then the Doctor placed an open container of peanuts next to the box. Lastly, he broke open a chocolate candy bar and let the sweet smell of chocolate waft into her nostrils. Kelly wasn't really starving yet, but it sure felt like it. Tears welled up in her eyes constantly. Her stomach rumbled. Her mouth tasted like the bottom of a birdcage and she could hardly stand her own breath.

She started to drift off to sleep again. The Doctor let her. He produced a feather duster and slowly ran it over her body, up and down her torso and her legs, then from side to side. It tickled a little, but in Kelly's state, it was soothing. They warmed up the air. They placed the heat lamp over her pubic area again and warmed it up.

Then the Doctor unlocked a drawer and opened it. He removed a battery-operated, vibrating dildo from the drawer and handed it to his Assistant. The Assistant was excited. He had been waiting for this

opportunity.

He twisted the end of the object he held in his hand. It started to vibrate. He approached Kelly as she lay stretched out on the stainless steel table. She was strapped down and immobilized, with her legs spread slightly. He gently applied the vibrator to Kelly's body, first on her legs, then up and around her mons, and eventually, directly on the portion of her vulva that hid her clitoris, peeking out from under its fleshy hood.

Kelly squirmed.

"You bastards!" she screamed. "Get your filthy hands off me!"

The Doctor continued to stroke her with the feathers. The assistant slipped his hand between her thighs and made room for the vibrator to directly stimulate her clitoris.

Kelly squirmed some more, but she couldn't avoid the waves of pleasure assaulting her body. She couldn't help admitting that it felt good. She was aghast at her own thoughts and feelings. She started to squirm in a different way. Suddenly, she shuddered. As soon as it happened, Kelly was ashamed of herself. She had just had an orgasm.

"No!" she cried, "please no. Don't do that. Please leave me alone."

But the Doctor and his Assistant continued to stimulate Kelly's body. The Doctor put away the feathers. He produced a bottle of baby oil. It was warm. He poured some on Kelly's belly and squirted a little on his hands. Then he expertly began to rub it on her body, massaging, caressing, fondling,

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stimulating, exciting...

All the while, the Assistant continued to stimulate Kelly's sexual organs with the vibrator. He slowly and gently manipulated her vulva between her labia, gradually stuffing the infernal instrument into her vagina.

Kelly screamed. "Stop it!" She sobbed. "It hurts. Please stop." She squirmed, and sobbed, and screamed, every time the Assistant tried to push it further into her.

The Assistant and the Doctor glanced at each other. They recognized that they were hurting her, and that was counterproductive. Their goal was to make her compliant, so she would make a good slave, amenable to sex with her new master. She had to recognize the hopelessness of resisting, fear a return to this torture, and at the same time, enjoy sex, regardless of the fact that she might find her master abhorrent. Some slave masters enjoyed raping their slaves, but most wanted a compliant, subservient victim. It would be rape anyway, but after the Doctor got through with a slave, it would be less trouble for the master.

The Doctor shook his head. The Assistant pulled the dildo out of Kelly's vagina and went back to stimulating her clitoris. Kelly hated what they were doing, but at least it didn't hurt the way it had. She felt dirty. Dirty. Hmmm... She thought of a way to perhaps get back at them.

She suddenly peed as hard as she could and tried to crap, but all she could do was fart. The urine got all over the Assistant, and he retreated in surprise. The

Doctor chuckled quietly. He loved a challenge, and there was no question he would condition this woman, but he couldn't help admiring her weak attempt at resistance.

The Assistant turned off the vibrator. He crossed to a sink on the counter and washed his hands. Kelly heard the water running and smirked. She felt that she had won a small battle. The Doctor had continued to massage her body, but he stopped to help the Assistant clean her up. They did it by sloshing several buckets of cold water on her.

It shocked Kelly's system. She was becoming weaker the longer she stayed there without food or water, and without being able to move, or to resist the Doctor's assaults on her body and her mind. The Assistant used the high-pressure hose to wash away the filth. He splayed the stream up and down her body, soaking her with freezing cold ice water.

The Doctor turned down the thermostat and turned on the air conditioner. Cold air flooded the room. They placed fans where they could blow a steady stream of cold air across her naked and shivering body.

Kelly shivered. She closed her eyes as tightly as she could. She cried and sobbed. Her wet, naked body shook uncontrollably in the cold environment. Her heart pounded. She lost consciousness.

The Doctor darkened the room and slid the top off the box. He flashed a light at Kelly's face. Her eyes were tightly closed and her lips were turning blue. He left the box top off. He turned on the bright lights. He crossed to the wall and turned up the thermostat. He

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turned it all the way up and warmed the room as quickly as he could. He used the heat lamps to warm Kelly quickly. He turned on the arc light. She regained consciousness, screaming. Heart pounding! Uncontrollable shivering! Shock chilling followed by shock warming.

Soon, Kelly's body was covered with sweat. They replaced the top of the box and used the small plastic fan to force hot humid air into it, making it hard for Kelly to breathe. She got hotter and hotter. The sweltering heat assaulted her and the sweat rolled off of her. The Assistant waited with a large bucket of ice water for the signal from the Doctor. At a nod from the Doctor, he sloshed it over Kelly. They turned down the temperature.

Freezing cold. Blazing heat. Cold. Heat. Cold. Heat.

Kelly didn't know if she could take it. She seriously doubted her ability to survive for the first time in her life. She was hungry, nauseous, cold and hot, and getting weaker and weaker. Finally, the torture stopped. The temperature normalized and the fans were removed. Silence reigned. Kelly was finally able to relax. She was exhausted and she fell asleep.

The Doctor set the lights low. They removed the box holding her head and undid the straps on the table. Kelly slept soundly, unfettered, on her back, on the table. The Doctor heated up the hot plate and cooked up a delicious smelling combination of tender meat strips, sautéed in vegetables with some spices. He placed a large plastic glass of water next to the hot plate. They left the room, locking the door. They observed Kelly through a combination of one-way

mirrors and video cameras.

They let her wake up on her own.

A groggy, exhausted, Kelly struggled towards wakefulness. She smelled food being cooked. With her eyes still closed, she hadn't realized that she was no longer constrained and she thought that they were just torturing her with the delicious smell of food again. Gradually, she realized that there was a little light beyond her eyelids. She blinked her eyes open and suddenly realized that the box was gone and she could move her head. She rolled her head to the side and saw the steaming hot plate. She was about to strain against the straps holding her down on the table but realized that they were gone. She bent her arms. She bent up her knees. She sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. Her muscles were all stiff from being immobilized for such a long time. It felt so incredibly good to be able to move.

She rubbed her arms. Then she rubbed her legs and her sides. She looked over at the hot plate. Boy, it smelled good. She looked around the room. She was sure that she was being observed. She was tempted to tell them to kiss her ass and to refuse to eat their offering, but she was terribly hungry and, especially, she was thirsty. She knew she was weak and getting weaker. Even though she figured that it was what they wanted her to do, she knew that she needed to eat something if she was going to stay alive. She wanted to resist, but she needed food for strength, so she could resist. Vicious circle.

She swung her legs over the side of the table. She slid off onto the floor. She walked over to the counter

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where the food was simmering. She inhaled the delicious smell. She turned the control to off to let it cool down. Then she turned her attention to the water. She took a long drink, sipping a little at a time.

Ahhh. The cool water tasted delicious. Kelly stuck her right index finger into the hot meat and vegetable concoction. She brought the finger to her lips and tasted it. Marvelous. And it looked like there was a lot of it.

She was still stiff and creaky from being strapped on her back for such a long time. She squatted and bent and stretched, twisting her body and moving her muscles. She looked around the room to see what was there. There were several doors, which were locked, but there was one, which opened when she tried it. It was a bathroom. She didn't waste any time. She sat down and relieved herself. Luxury of luxuries, there was a roll of toilet paper on the wall. She washed her hands and exited the little room.

She continued her exploration of her prison, opening drawers and cabinets. Most of them were empty, some of them were locked, but one of them held eating utensils. She took out a fork and a spoon. She found some plates in one of the cabinets. She put some of the food on her plate and took it over to the table on which she had been constrained. She brought the water, too. She picked up one of the tall stools, brought it over to the table and sat down.

She felt almost civilized as she ate. She ate slowly, returning to get some more each time she finished her plate. She went back to the bathroom when she needed to. After she had finished eating all the food

and drinking as much water as she wanted, she marched around the room at a three-mile-per-hour clip. After enough circuits to allow her digestive tract time to process most of the meal, she did some running in place and other aerobics, followed by calisthenics, sit-ups and finally as many push-ups as she could do. She felt good. And she felt that she had probably not conformed to what the Doctor expected.

Chapter Twenty

The Doctor watched her every move as Kelly explored, ate and exercised. Kelly was correct in thinking that she had not reacted the way the Doctor had expected. He didn't expect her to do all those things. He had expected her to eat, and then sit down to wait for him or go right to sleep. He expected her to weep and sob in despair and hopelessness.

Kelly was determined to stay awake as long as she could and to fight them if they came in to strap her down again.

But the Doctor had the time to wait her out. He and his Assistant kept watch. Kelly tried to break into things and find a way to pry open the doors, but pretty much everything was locked securely in steel cabinets. Eventually she sat down on the stool. She tried to stay alert by solving simple mathematical problems in her head, long division, quadratic equations, standard deviation of a small population... She ended up trying to remember the logarithms she had memorized when she was a little girl interested in navigation.

The Doctor wondered what she was thinking

about, just idle curiosity, but all he was really interested in was when she would fall asleep, even if it took several days. Eventually it happened. She slipped from the stool. She groggily got back up on it a couple of times, but finally, she slipped to the floor and leaned up against a cabinet. Soon, she lay down, falling sound asleep.

After a suitable wait, to be sure she was really asleep, the Doctor and his Assistant entered the room. They lifted Kelly gently and placed her on the table. They strapped her down, replacing the box over her head. They started a slow drip, drip, drip over her torso which dropped just one drop of water between her breasts every thirty seconds. Then they let her sleep for awhile.

When Kelly awoke, it was to a pistol shot and she was screaming. Her heart was racing and she strained against her restraints. After she recovered from the startling noise and shock of a pistol shot, she realized it was quiet and dark. She was again strapped down. She became aware of the drops assaulting her chest and the pool of water created by them as they rolled off to her side.

Oh no! she thought. She began to wonder whether she really could survive.

Drip.

Damn, that's annoying, but at least it doesn't really hurt. They must be real sadistic bastards, and they must be terribly good at what they do.

Drip.

"Hey," she called. "What do you guys want?"

The Doctor smiled. It was a start. He didn't answer

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her. He wanted to let her stew for a while.

Drip.

"Hey," she said, "I know you're there."

Drip.

"Come on, answer me."

Kelly squirmed, trying to move against her constraints.

Drip.

"Come on, you bastards," said Kelly, "what the hell do you want?"

Drip.

Damn, that was annoying.

Kelly had an idea. Maybe it would just amuse her tormentors, but it might irritate them.

Drip.

"Oh, say can you see," she sang in her screechy voice, "by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hailed..."

Drip.

"...at the twilight's last gleaming? Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight, o'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming."

Drip.

Kelly imagined that fateful night at Fort McHenry. She wished she could sing better. "And the rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air, gave proof through the night, that our flag was still there,"

Drip.

"Oh, say does that Star Spangled Banner yet wave, o'er the land of the free, and the home of the brave."

Drip.

"Oh, beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain's majesty, across the fruited plain. America, America, God shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good, with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."

Drip.

"What do you think of that?" asked Kelly. "I can sing some more, if you want me to."

Drip.

"Why don't you say anything?" she asked, "What? Are you afraid of me? You cowards."

Drip.

"Kiss my ass. Don't you know, I'm from the Home of the Brave. I might not be free right now, but I'm not going to let you defeat me."

Drip.

The Doctor watched her with interest, keeping his silence.

Drip.

"If X plus one, times X plus one, equals zero."

Drip.

"Then X squared, plus two X , plus one, equals zero."

Drip.

"And if X plus two, times X plus one, equals zero."

Drip.

"Then X squared, plus three X , plus two, equals zero."

Drip.

"But if X plus one, times X , minus one, equals zero."

Drip.

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"Then X squared, minus one, equals zero."

Drip.

"What do you think of that, Doctor?" she sneered in the darkness of the box. "Damn, I hate algebra! But it keeps my mind working and it keeps me sane."

Drip.

"If you intend to break me and drive me insane," she said, "you'll have to keep me from thinking, so kiss my ass."

Drip.

"The sum of the squares of the sides of a right triangle equals the square of the hypotenuse."

Drip.

"That's from Pythagoras, as quoted by the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz. I'll bet you didn't know that."

Drip.

"Did you know that Thomas Edison once said that pure research was what he was doing when he didn't know what he was doing?"

Drip.

"Do you know what Leonardo DaVinci said on his death bed?"

Drip.

"He asked for a glass of champagne and, when asked why, he said 'I want to die the way I lived, beyond my means.'"

Drip.

"Is this my deathbed? May I have a glass of Champagne?"

Drip.

"I know this farmer in Alabama and if you can't

cross his field in nine seconds, don't even try—his bull can do it in ten."

Drip.

Kelly started to chuckle. Then she laughed out loud.

Drip.

The Doctor saw an opportunity. He got out his feathers and started tickling Kelly.

Drip.

She laughed uncontrollably. She recognized the signs of hysteria.

"Leave me alone, you son of a bitch," she screamed.

Drip. Tickle. Drip. Tickle.

Kelly started screaming. She screamed and screamed and screamed. Once she started, she almost couldn't stop. Her chest heaved and her heart raced. Then she started to cry. The tears welled up and she sobbed.

Drip.

The Doctor stopped tickling her.

Drip.

Her tears slowed and she just whimpered softly.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Chapter Twenty-One

They introduced an I.V. into Kelly's left arm so they could pump fluids and nutrients into her body without having to feed her. Every time Kelly just barely got to sleep, they woke her with a loud noise or by squirting her with water or using some other diabolical trick. They kept her awake and they annoyed her continuously. They enticed her with good smells and then dashed her expectations with nothingness. They alternatively stimulated her in every possible way and then deprived her senses of all stimulation.

She held out for a long time, but in the end, she was reduced to a sobbing wreck of a woman, willing to do anything they suggested. When the Doctor determined that she was ready, they cleaned her up, dressed her in her prison garb, and delivered her back to the Warden, a submissive slave. A special sale was arranged for the potential buyers he had identified.

Kelly was led out onto a platform in front of them. She was stripped naked and left to stand under a harsh bright light. The potential buyers each had a chance to examine her up close. When the first one

approached her and put his hand on her skin, she shrank from his touch. But he had soft hands and he seemed gentle. She had been told to be compliant, and she knew she had to do what she was told.

There was a burly, hairy, dark-haired man in heavy clothing, there was a small weak-looking man in Arab robes, and there was a tall man with a thick black mustache in Western dress who wore thick glasses and smelled of tobacco.

Each of them checked her teeth. She couldn't help thinking that they were treating her like a horse. She thought that that was appropriate, since she had always thought she had a horse face. And they each ran their hands over her body. In spite of what she had been through, her body was still that of an athlete, firm and strong. They had shaved her legs and her underarms to make her more attractive. They had brushed and combed her hair. Her skin was clear and unwrinkled. They had applied lipstick to her lips, and they had brushed her teeth after washing out her mouth with a minty mouthwash.

She had been told that she was quite a prize and that everyone thought she was very beautiful and sexy.

The auction began. She didn't understand the language, but she understood what was going on. She hoped she wouldn't end up on a camel with some sadistic bastard who would beat her. But she was resigned to her fate. The Doctor had broken her spirit. There was no telling how long the conditioning would last. It would wear off eventually, but for the time being, Kelly would do whatever anyone told her

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to do. She would even smile on command.

She closed her eyes as she stood there, naked on that platform before them. She hung her head, and awaited her fate.

The auction took quite a while and she was inspected again more than once by one or another of the buyers. There was a squabble at one point and the Warden had to mediate between two of the men, but eventually, a winner emerged. It was the tall man in Western dress.

Kelly was led away. They took her to a small room with a large mirror on the wall and furnished with two chairs and a small table. She was given clothing and help in dressing by two old women and a scrawny, wizened, old man with a bald head.

"Don't worry," whispered one of the old women, "we'll take care of you now. Just keep quiet until we get out of here."

All three of them smiled at her grimly. One of the women winked at her.

She was given soft women's underwear, real panties and a bra that almost fit her small breasts. Then she was given real panty hose, a half-slip, a nicely tailored tweed skirt with a white cotton blouse and a little jacket that matched the skirt. She couldn't believe it when they made her sit down and squeezed her feet into high-heeled pumps. Apparently they had several pair to choose from, so they could find a pair that fit.

When she stood up and looked in the mirror, she felt almost civilized for a moment. Then she realized again where she was and that she had just been sold

as a slave.

As they led her out, she wobbled unsteadily on the new shoes. She never had liked those things, they always hurt her feet, but she managed to walk along with the three old attendants. They were met by the man in the Western suit.

"I understand your name is Kelly Winchester," he said, "is that correct?"

Kelly looked at him. She nodded and then looked down. He reached out and cupped her chin in his hand, raising her head.

"It won't be so bad. Your new Master is a kind man. It might help for you to understand that you have been rescued from a very bad situation. Most of these people are ruthless, uncultured criminals. Terrible people. Our Master, however, is kind to us and is able to protect us from the dangers of our world. If you give him a chance, your life might be significantly better than it ever could be anywhere else. Cross him and you will regret it."

Kelly just looked at him. Her eyes watered and a tear rolled down her cheek.

"You'll be O.K.," he said. "I am our Master's messenger. My name is Mustafa. This is Saleeb, Hera and Sasha."

The old attendants nodded and smiled as they were introduced.

"We all speak English," said Mustafa, "but we don't talk very much to strangers. Give us a chance to overcome our shyness. We'll all come around eventually."

They were escorted out of the building to a waiting

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helicopter that took them over the minefield. Two cars were waiting for them. They were both large, old Rolls-Royces. There were two men in the front seat of each one. Mustafa and Kelly got in the back of one and Saleem, Hera and Sasha got in the other one. They started off across the plain, following the dusty, unpaved road.

Kelly sat there, head down, rocking back and forth as the big, old saloon rolled along.

She looked sidelong at her companion.

"Do you want to ask me any questions?" asked Mustafa. "I'll try to answer anything you ask, if I can. You're a part of our family now."

Kelly raised her head and looked at him directly.

"Do you know where Colonel Flemming is?" she asked.

"Hmph," said Mustafa, "I don't know who you are talking about, but I assume he was a fellow prisoner. Is that right?"

Kelly nodded.

"I don't know what happened to any of the other prisoners," said Mustafa. "I think they're all still there. Apparently, the fuss you made prior to the last sale threw a wrench into the whole slave market back there. The sale we just attended was the first since then, and you were the only offering. Your friend is probably sitting in an uncomfortable cell back there, wondering where you are. But you are considerably better off than he is."

"He's not a slave," said Kelly.

"That's right," said Mustafa, "but he's a prisoner in a forgotten part of the World that they call the End Of

The Line. They call it that because it's impossible to escape from, and nobody ever leaves there, officially. The only time anyone leaves that place is when he is sold as a slave and is unofficially transported out. Officially, that's when a prisoner ceases to exist and moves from POW to dead."

"Oh," said Kelly.

After a moment, she asked, "Do you think he's still alive?"

"Oh, yes," said Mustafa, "I'm sure of it. Those people would never waste a potential slave. I'm sure they're still thinking of selling him, or maybe trading him off. That sometimes happens with prisoners of war. There are people who will pay good money to repatriate some officers."

Kelly leaned back. She crossed her legs, smoothing the skirt over her knees. She relaxed and closed her eyes. The big old car rocked gently. She felt so comfortable. She fell asleep. Mustafa watched over her. Cleaned up and tastefully dressed as she was, she was quite attractive. Not beautiful surely, or even really very pretty, but attractive and very sexy. She might make a suitable concubine, or maybe even a wife for the Master. Eventually, Mustafa also drifted off to sleep.

The trip took several days. The cars only stopped for gas and food, and there were very few places to stop. Kelly was allowed to go to the bathroom with one or the other of the old women in attendance. The drivers switched off, taking turns at driving and sleeping. They crossed the plain and entered the mountains. They gradually climbed higher and

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higher. The roads twisted and turned. They crossed bridges and went through tunnels. They saw very few other cars. There were some military trucks and some carts pulled by various animals, and there was some foot traffic, but it thinned out the higher they went.

It got colder. They went through fog and then some light snow. They put chains on the wheels for traction at one of the stops. They kept going, day and night. Kelly couldn't help but think how beautiful the mountains were. There were very few buildings or villages. She didn't talk much and Mustafa was mostly silent, as well.

Kelly couldn't help but remember the horror of the last time she came this way, on the train, going the other way. She shivered, both from the cold and from the memory of that trip. She slept often.

She awoke to a gentle shaking from Mustafa.

"Miss Winchester," he said softly, "Miss Winchester, wake up. I want you to see this."

Kelly shook her head sleepily. She sat up.

"What is it? Is anything wrong?"

Kelly had become accustomed to waking up to new horrors.

"No, nothing's wrong," said Mustafa, "but I want you to see this from here."

The car had stopped. Mustafa opened the window. A cold blast of frigid air assaulted Kelly. She looked out the window. Mustafa reached out to point across the valley to the next mountain. There, at the very top was a castle. Kelly looked up at it, entranced. It looked like something out of a fairy tale, high, pointed towers stretching skyward out of medieval

parapets and battlements. The whole place was shrouded in mist and fog. It looked enchanted. Enchanted and mysterious.

"That's your new home," said Mustafa.

"My God, it's beautiful."

"It is," said Mustafa, "isn't it?"

He waited as Kelly stared across at the palace.

"It's even more beautiful inside," he said, "and, I haven't said much about your new Master, but he is the head of our big family. He is very kind and I think you will appreciate him if you give him a chance."

Kelly turned to look at Mustafa. Her face changed from enchantment to sadness.

"I'm a slave," she said, dropping her gaze.

"That might not be entirely true," said Mustafa. "You were sold as a slave, but you do not have to live like one. It's hard to explain, but..." His voice trailed off. "Give us a chance. Things are not always what they appear."

He closed the window and the car started moving again. Kelly continued to look out the window as they descended into the valley and began to climb toward the castle at the crest of the next mountain. Curiosity ruled her emotions for the moment. Mustafa sat back and smiled.

Chapter Twenty-two

The road climbed a short way up the mountain, but Kelly could see no way up the sheer cliffs. Suddenly, the car left the road and went between two large boulders. They immediately entered a cave. The sudden darkness startled Kelly. A large door slid up in front of them and they went through. The door closed behind them and Kelly realized that they were in a large elevator, going up.

"There is no other way up to the Keep," said Mustafa, "except by helicopter. There used to be stairs, but they are no longer in use. This is a very old place. It has never been taken by force, although many have tried. Everybody pretty much leaves us alone nowadays, unless they want a favor from our Master. Then they usually ask politely. This is a place that history has pretty much forgotten outside this part of the world, but there are legends, even in your country."

"Legends? What kind of legends?" She had to admit she was becoming more and more curious. It all seemed so mysterious.

"Oh," said Mustafa, "I'll let you find out on your

own. You probably wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," said Kelly. She had always hated it when people kept secrets from her. But Mustafa just smiled at her and closed his eyes, nodding his head.

The elevator rose slowly through the rock. Finally, the door slid open and the car rolled out onto a large circular drive inside a courtyard open to the sky. There was quite a bit of snow on the ground. The car pulled around to a large wooden double door studded with metal. The door opened slowly, revealing a portcullis, which was slowly sliding upward.

"Ready?" asked Mustafa. He smiled.

Kelly turned to him but didn't say anything. She really didn't know what to make of what she was seeing. It was like being in a fairy tale.

Mustafa opened the door and held it open for Kelly to exit. She slid over and swung her legs out, planting her shoes on the ground. The snow had been cleared from in front of the door. She allowed Mustafa to take her hand so he could help her exit the car and stand up. She looked around. Everything seemed to be made of very old wood or stone work. She let Mustafa guide her through the doors.

Directly in front of her was another set of heavy doors. The portcullis and the outer doors closed behind them. Apparently, this was an old fortress, and Kelly was willing to bet that it would be hard to find a way out. The second set of doors slowly opened.

A young boy was waiting inside. He walked up to

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Mustafa, and they shook hands.

"You are expected," he said. He couldn't help staring at Kelly, although he tried to hide his curiosity. Kelly's curiosity was piqued as well by his perfect English accent.

"Thank you, Peter," said Mustafa. Then he turned to Kelly. "I'm sure you would like to freshen up, first," he said.

Kelly just nodded. She was a little bit bewildered.

"I sure could use a bathroom."

"Of course," said Mustafa. "Hera and Sasha will assist you."

Suddenly, the two old women were there. They seemed to appear out of nowhere. They guided her through a door and down a hallway, and showed her into a room on the left. Hera opened a door in the back of the room, revealing a small bathroom.

As Kelly headed for it, Hera asked, "Would you like to take a shower? It was a long trip. We have a change of clothing for you."

Kelly realized that these were the first words she had heard either of them utter, except for that whispered greeting in the prison. Her accent was more like Mustafa's than like Peter's.

"I would like that," said Kelly. It was becoming harder and harder to dislike any of these people. She cleaned up and even got to shampoo her short hair. Then they helped her dress in another suit—a white blouse, a dark blue, knee-length skirt and matching jacket with a light blue, sheer, wispy, silk scarf around her neck. They insisted that she also wear matching pumps on her feet.

They looked her over.

"You look very presentable," said Sasha. Hera nodded. She pressed an inconspicuous button on the wall next to the door. A few minutes later there was a knock, and when they opened it, Peter was waiting for her.

"Please," he said, offering his hand, "come with me."

Peter led her along the hallway, making several turns, going up a flight of stairs, through a large set of doors, up another flight of stairs, around several more turns, and finally stopped before a large set of richly paneled doors, guarded by two turbaned men, dressed in white suits and sporting well-trimmed beards.

Peter stopped and gave Kelly a little push in the small of her back toward the doors. The guards opened them and stood aside for her to enter. The doors closed behind her.

Inside, the room was lit only by the light from a large window behind the only other person present. A tall man stood behind a desk. He waved her forward. There were two chairs facing the desk.

"Please, sit."

Kelly moved forward and sat in the chair on the right. It had a firm leather seat and armrests. She crossed her legs and smoothed the skirt over her knees.

The man stood and looked down at her for a moment, then he sat down.

"My name is John."

Kelly waited for him to continue. This was his

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show. She was here to listen.

"We—" he said, "We have been here for a very long time. Centuries, millennia, as a matter of fact. My father was John, his father was John, and his father was John. A man who took the name John founded this Christian outpost here in the East a long time ago, preaching the Bible and using his sword to establish a small and secret, but strong Kingdom here, in the wilds of Asia. His name was John but he came to be known as Prester John. I am his direct descendent."

Kelly's mouth was open, but she didn't know what to say. To say she was floored would be an understatement. She had indeed heard legends about Prester John and the great Christian Kingdom in the East. But she had always thought it was only a legend, just a fanciful story. Now, here, in front of her, was a man claiming to be the embodiment of those stories. It was a little like meeting the Pope.

"Are you a Christian, Kelly?"

Kelly nodded unsteadily, still unable to actually speak.

"We thought you would be," he said. "That's good. Are you, or were you, a practicing Christian, before you were shot down?"

"Oh," said Kelly, "well...I went to church sometimes. Honestly, I wasn't all that religious."

John smiled at her. "We thought that might be the case, as well. It's O.K., we know that Christianity, indeed all religion, has been losing ground. Unfortunately, the only religions that seem to be gaining followers are those that promote terrorism--those that spread their views by the sword. Even the

most devout Christians in Europe, the Irish, insist on killing each other in God's name."

"I can't argue with that," said Kelly, "it makes you wonder, doesn't it? But I always like to visit my church when I get home. I'm a Methodist, by the way."

"Good," said John, "that's good. When we established this Christian outpost here in the East, almost two thousand years ago, Christians were Christians. Most of the original settlers here on the mountain had been followers of Zoroaster, with a few Jews and Greeks among them. My ancestor, the first Prestor John, gathered his followers here and built a safe haven for Christian converts. We have not been affected by all the infighting among the various sects of your Western Christianity—Protestant versus Catholic versus Greek / Byzantine, and so on. We're still just Christians, here. We're just simple folk, but we've always had to defend ourselves. That's why we have a fortress here. It was built by John's son, David. We've also kept our existence as secret as we could. That helps us in our quest to be left alone."

He looked across at Kelly. She looked down at the floor.

"A good case could be made that we were the first Christians," he said. "My direct ancestor, John's father, was one of the Magi who traveled west, following the star to Bethlehem. He was present at the birth of Jesus. He brought a gift of gold to our savior. It was mined from this very mountain."

Kelly was stunned. She knew very little about her religion, but she knew enough to realize that this was

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an astounding revelation. This man was talking about the Three Wise Men in the Bible who brought gifts to the Christ Child in the stable.

“Do you want to ask me anything?”

Kelly looked up at him. She cleared her throat. She shook her head as if to clear the cobwebs. “Yes, I do have a question.”

John waited. He smiled at her.

“Why did you buy me as a slave?”

“Oh,” he said, “I’m so glad you asked that question first. You are certainly not a slave, of course. We don’t believe in slavery. We had to buy you as a slave to rescue you, but here, you are not a slave. You are now a member of this community. You may come and go as you please. But, we are surrounded by enemies. Frankly, there is no place for you to go. If some of our neighbors were to discover the fact that you are here and that you are an American, we would probably come under attack and we would have to defend ourselves. We could do it, this place has been impregnable for centuries, but it could be difficult, so we want to keep your presence a secret.”

“Hmmm. So I’m essentially a prisoner.”

“Oh, no. If you want to leave, right now, you may. But you wouldn’t get far, even with all the help we can give you. We control the local area, our farms in the valley feed us and our craftsmen equip us. We are wealthy, in fact. But our real wealth comes from this mountain. We mine several precious substances here. We mine gold, diamonds, and we even find natural emeralds and rubies within this mountain. God has blessed us. He led my ancestor here and has guided

us and protected us all this time. Unfortunately, all these blessings make for jealous neighbors. They are afraid of us within our small area of sovereignty, but when we travel outside of the local area, we are in danger. We had to get safe passage assurances to go to the slave auction and transport you back here. If they had known who you were, you might not have made it."

"Hmmm. You know that I am a member of the armed forces of the United States of America, don't you?"

"I know. As a matter of fact, we have been in contact with certain elements of your government—unofficially, of course. We would never have been allowed to bid for you at the auction if there had been any hint that we were in any way connected to the United States. Officially, we do not even exist as a sovereign country. Officially, we are universally ignored, and anyone who refers to us is ridiculed as a believer in places like Shangri-La. It's convenient, for our enemies as well as our few friends. Actually, Milton's inspiration probably came from tales about us. They are not too far from the truth."

"Damn. Well, do I get to leave here, or not?"

"Oh, yes, at least we hope so, if you want to. We do arrange for people to go abroad, occasionally, but we have to rely on some unsavory characters. Mostly smugglers, and we know most of them. That's how we sell our gold and precious stones, but more and more of them are now dealing in drugs, and illegal arms. The oldest trade, slaves and prostitutes, is of course alive and well, too. That's how we rescued you

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and it might be the only way to return you to your country. Unfortunately, trading in flesh is the one thing everyone understands."

"Oh," said Kelly, "how nice."

"We will do what we can. Our primary objective was to rescue you from those savages in the North and give you sanctuary. If you hadn't been a woman, we could not have done it. We had to convince them that we wanted you for a slave / concubine to even be allowed to attend. That was the basis for our safe passage as well. Fortunately, they don't understand us at all."

"Now that you are here, you are safe, but you were in serious danger of really being sold into slavery and disappearing forever into a life of rape and misery from which you would not likely have emerged."

Kelly pondered what she had just been told.

"Something else," said John. "I understand you were conditioned by the Doctor."

Kelly suddenly shook in fear. She looked up at John with a frightened expression on her face. She gripped the chair and twitched as she cringed and looked around for a way to flee.

"Don't worry, we know this Doctor. He has been around for a long time. He's actually a brilliant scientist. He lives in a shadowy world of intrigue and espionage and is known as Dr. Brainwash. He's a horrible person, but unfortunately, he is very good at what he does. You will recover from your ordeal, slowly. It will take time, but the conditioning and the memory of what was done to you will fade. We can help you a little, but it is mostly up to you. I've been

told that you are a remarkably strong-willed person. That's good."

Kelly calmed down a little.

"Don't be shocked now, but I have three wives. It is our custom. They are all lovely women and they will help you more than I can. I know your culture frowns on multiple wives, but the Bible is full of families like mine. Our beliefs and ways were shaped when the Gospels were new and the Old Testament still provided guidance. We haven't changed our ways, you have. Christianity has adopted more of our original Zoroastrian beliefs than we have absorbed from Judaism. Are you at all familiar with the teachings of Zoroaster?"

"No." She had no idea what he was talking about.

John nodded.

Kelly relaxed a little more, but the horror of the Doctor and his assistant wouldn't go away.

"You are not ready to re-enter society, yet," said John. "We will help you recover, psychologically. We will help you regain your physical strength. We will let you have the freedom to explore our little world, and we will give you the spiritual guidance you need. Then, we will try to help you return to your country. That will be difficult, but we will do what we can. It may be a long and arduous journey."

He looked at Kelly, searching her face for understanding.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked.

Kelly looked down at the floor. She shivered. Then she looked up.

"How goes the war?" she asked.

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"Hmmm, I'm not sure I know how to answer that. There appears to be a stalemate. American and Western forces control the air everywhere. They control the seas as well. And whenever they are able to fight a pitched battle, they are able to defeat any ground forces arrayed against them with little trouble. But they seem to have no answer for guerrilla warfare, and terrorists continue to plague them."

"Oh," said Kelly. "That's about the way it was when I was shot down. I thought our ground forces were pushing through the Southern jungles. I thought that was why we were moved from the first prisoner of war camp I was in."

"Ah, yes, Western ground forces did push into the jungle. But they started getting sick. Although the guerrillas deny it, most informed observers think that they used some type of biological warfare against the Americans. That area is now virtually abandoned by both sides. The civilian and native population has been essentially wiped out down there and refugees are being turned back. It's too bad, but it seems they did it to themselves. We know some people in the area—pirates—and they say that going ashore on the west coast is a virtual death sentence."

Kelly hung on every word.

"One other thing," he said, "some terrorists got control of a small nuclear weapon and managed to get up the St. Lawrence Seaway and into the Great Lakes with it. They apparently had it tucked away in a small boat, a little cabin cruiser or something. Speculation has it that they were going to try to get to Chicago, but something went wrong and it detonated

somewhere out in the middle of Lake Michigan. How they managed to get so far without anyone noticing has thrown a real scare into everyone."

"Damn." She thought for a moment, then she asked, "How about my ship? Have there been any losses in the Navy?"

"Hmmm," said John, "I'm not as well-informed as you might think I am, but I don't think so. I know there have been some losses, but I think they have all been smaller ships, certainly no aircraft carriers. I would have heard about something like that. But I understand that you have re-commissioned all four of your Iowa Class Battleships once again. I remember that, because they had to steal them away from museums and everyone was mad about it. But the Navy said that they were the only ships that they felt could stand up to anything that might be thrown at them. That, and they are still the most powerful ships in the world. I'm not sure where it was, but your Marines made a beach landing somewhere. Prior to the assault, they lined up all four of those ships and pounded the shore with their big guns, and they used them to launch missiles at other targets further inland. I remember seeing pictures. It was quite a sight. There's talk that they might even have them cruise up a river and train their guns on an inland city. It all depends on channel depth in the river."

Kelly watched John as he talked. He seemed so innocent and honest. It was almost impossible to distrust him.

"You will find some of our customs unusual," he said. "For instance, we have a public bath in the

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ancient Roman tradition where we all get together, bathe and discuss events. It's a very enjoyable experience, and it's a good way to meet others. But we bathe in the nude—all of us, men and women. Romance sometimes blossoms in the bath, but public displays of vulgarity are discouraged. It might embarrass you, coming from America, so it will be up to you if you want to join us. You can always take a private bath when you want to. We have plenty of water, a product of several mineral springs within the mountain. It's very healthy, actually."

"Oh," said Kelly, "I don't know." She had never been a prude. She had visited public nude baths in Japan without much embarrassment, but the abuse she had endured, especially the sexual abuse, made her cringe from the thought of disrobing in the company of men.

"One other thing I should tell you." He smiled at Kelly. "Everyone thinks I brought you here to become my next wife, or perhaps a concubine."

He paused as they stared at each other.

"I would, of course, be glad to consider such an event, but something like that would be entirely up to you. We do not force ourselves on each other. But some of the people you meet will expect you to be looking forward to our nuptials, my current wives included, even though I have explained that I have no such designs."

"Well, thanks for telling me. I imagine I should be honored to have a crack at joining your family. I can understand the politics and the reasoning."

"Oh, good, I thought you might understand. But,

until you really learn a lot about our society, and either decide to stay or have no hope of leaving, I don't think it would be a good idea right away."

"Anything's possible," said Kelly with a chuckle. "I suppose you are quite a catch, even if you do already have three wives. You're a King, aren't you?"

He was handsome, rich, obviously well educated, and apparently, the absolute ruler of his small kingdom. Kelly was getting older, and if she was ever going to get married, this man in this exotic setting could promise a fascinating life. But it would be like getting married and living in Disneyland. She was sure that no one in this little society would understand a Kelly Winchester who didn't jump at the chance, but...

"I'll let you know," she said.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mary was John's first wife. She was Peter's mother and the mother of his older brother, John. Esther and Ruth were John's other wives. They were all older than Kelly and they all had children. And they took her in as if she was one of them, treating her like a sister.

They were all terribly curious about America, but they were not all that surprised that she was a pilot. They were used to women being warriors. Their history was full of heroic women who fought off the enemies of Christianity, and they had been threatened almost constantly for thousands of years.

They worked out, exercising every day to keep in shape, and they worshipped just as often. They were their children's teachers and they were capable of teaching them Mathematics, History, and Religion, as well as Marksmanship and hand-to-hand Combat. Kelly found them to be remarkably tough, both mentally and physically. But they had a soft side, too. They knew what she had been through, and they were determined to help her put it behind her.

The days stretched into weeks. The weeks became

months. The snow melted. Kelly regained her strength and worked herself into the best shape she had ever been in. They challenged her to play chess as a way to put the Doctor's conditioning behind her and rebuild her competitive spirit, and it worked. They also sparred and competed physically.

She spent time with John, too, on the parapets, in the evenings before going to bed. He told her stories about his ancestors and the mysterious history of his small kingdom. He always kissed her on the forehead or the cheek as they parted. They watched the Moon and the stars over the mountains. It was terribly romantic, but Kelly always thought of him as a fatherly gentleman and he always treated her with the utmost respect.

But Kelly never lost sight of her ultimate goal--to return to the United States. She also hoped that she might be able to find Colonel Flemming and help him and any other prisoners she could find to escape.

There was little news from the outside. They had a short-wave radio and a satellite TV dish, but reception in the mountains was spotty at best. The war, or wars, since there were actually several going on concurrently, were not going well for either side. All sides had tried offensive thrusts that had been thrown back.

There was no question that the Western allies controlled the air, the sea, and every battlefield, whenever they could coax the enemy into a military confrontation. But the allies had no answer to either the guerrilla war or the terrorist campaign. And the East had an overwhelming superiority in manpower,

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to make up for their lack of sophisticated firepower.

Kelly was getting used to the food. It was quite spicy and high in protein. They had few sweets and there wasn't much in the way of starchy foods like potatoes or corn. There was little in the way of noodles or pasta or even bread, but they had plenty of greens and peppers. Most of what they served was meat, and there was quite a variety.

Kelly had never been very domestic, but they tried to teach her how to cook, and she tried to prepare some of her favorite dishes. She managed hamburgers and even made a passable pizza. But there was no seafood at all. They were out in the middle of the biggest continent in the world, about as far away from any water as a person could get.

She had as much privacy as she wanted, and she was allowed to browse through the extensive library. She eventually did go to the public bath and found it enjoyable and not the least bit embarrassing after getting in the water. She attended their worship services regularly. Everybody was expected to do that, and she found that she enjoyed it. Their services were quite different from what she was used to, very simple, but the basic belief in God and His Son remained constant.

They made her feel comfortable, in every way. She wasn't pressured to do anything. John looked in on her fairly often, but the women took care of her and looked after her needs. They even hinted that they were willing to share him with her, romantically, if she was so inclined, but the last thing Kelly wanted right then was a romantic affair with a married man.

When she looked out the windows, high up in the walls, the views were stunning. She was able to look in all directions. The sunrises and sunsets were spectacular. In the valleys were the farms that fed them. There were roads going in different directions, but there was very little traffic.

On the battlements, there was a strange mixture of weaponry, everything from antique cannons to modern artillery. There were even some anti-aircraft guns and several varieties of missiles. When Kelly asked where they were able to get all this stuff, John just smiled and said, "We have our ways."

Then, early one morning, Mary woke Kelly and said that John had a special surprise for her.

"What is it?" asked Kelly.

"Oh," said Mary, "you'll find out, but I think you'll be pleased."

They went to John's study and he was waiting for them.

"Come on in and sit down," he said softly. He had a warm smile on his face. Mary and Kelly sat down. John came out from behind his desk and leaned back against it.

"How's she doing, Mary?" he asked.

"Fine. I think she's ready. She'll need some instruction, but her training will come back to her quickly, I'm sure."

Kelly was getting more and more curious. She looked from one to the other.

"How would you like to fly a little?" asked John.

Kelly opened her mouth, but nothing came out. The question startled her.

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"Fly? Fly what?"

John and Mary chuckled as they watched her reaction.

John cleared his throat. "We have a small, single-engine airplane, Kelly," he said. "It's an old Piper Cherokee 235, one of the first ones, a 1964 model. It even has a fixed pitch wooden prop. It's not turbo-charged but it has enough power to handle the thin air at this high elevation. We keep it hidden in a hanger and rarely use it. It's been used for surveillance, mostly. We don't fly it anywhere else, as a rule. It doesn't have the range, and there are few friendly places to land. But we keep it serviceable and it's always ready to go. We bring it out and fly it around every now and then. It's a lot of fun, but you have to stay inside our local ring of mountains. If you go too far, you'll run into hostile fire. Our neighbors don't trust us."

Kelly finally got her voice back. "Well, I'll be damned. How come I never saw it?"

"Oh," said Mary, "they don't get it out very often. And, like John said, it makes our neighbors nervous."

"Would you like to fly a little?" said John.

"Do you have to ask?" said Kelly. "All pilots love to fly. I don't know any who would rather do anything else. And most of us will fly anything with wings. When I was a little girl, I took my first flying lessons in a Cherokee 180. It didn't have as much power as a 235, but they handle the same, I'm sure. They've both got that old Hershey bar wing."

"They do," said John. "We have a pilot who's certified as an instructor. He'll take you up, get you

current, and show you the landmarks you have to be familiar with. We don't want you to go astray and irritate our neighbors. They might really try to shoot you down. OK?"

"OK, when can I get a look at this little bird?" She hadn't been this excited in a long time.

"Mary?" said John with a glance at her.

"Come on," said Mary as she got up from her chair. "I'll take you to meet Inge."

"Inge?" asked Kelly.

"He's Norwegian," said Mary. "He delivered the plane here a long time ago and he never went back home. He just stayed here and all the girls fell in love with him. He's our pilot and our flight instructor. When he delivered the plane, it was new. And he decided to stay here. He married one of the girls from the valley, a farmer's daughter."

Mary turned and headed for the door. Kelly got up and hastened to follow her. She turned at the door and looked back at John. He was grinning.

"Thanks," she said. Then she hurried after Mary.

Mary led Kelly through the castle to the courtyard. It was still dark. They took the elevator down and exited into a large cavern. They walked outside and over to a small building with rock walls and large wooden doors. The doors were ajar and a padlock hung on the latch above wooden handles. Mary pulled on the handle and opened one of the doors. Kelly took her cue and opened the other one. In the shadows, inside the small building was the little airplane. What a beautiful sight.

Standing next to the cowl with the dipstick in

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his hand was a tall, slender, golden-haired man in a flight suit. He smiled at her as he replaced the dipstick and closed the engine access lid in the cowl.

"This is Inge," said Mary. "Hello, Inge, this is Kelly."

"Hi," he said. He backed away from the plane and spread his arms to offer it to Kelly. "What do you think?"

Kelly squinted into the shadows at the little craft. "Jeez, she's beautiful."

It was, too. It had obviously always been hangered and well maintained. It looked brand new.

"She's only got about 1200 hours total time on her," said Inge. "About half that on the engine."

Kelly walked over to the plane. She ran her hand over the light aluminum fuselage. She grinned like a little girl at Inge and Mary, who were watching her.

"Well, let's see if I remember how to pre-flight one of these little birds. Is that OK?"

"Be my guest," said Inge.

"Bye," said Mary, "have fun."

"Bye," said Kelly as she rounded the wing to get to the cockpit.

She climbed on the right wing, opened the door and got the fuel checker out of the seat back pouch. She dropped the flaps, got back out and walked around the plane to start her pre-flight. Check left fuselage, empennage, right fuselage, right flap, right aileron, right running lights, right wing leading edge, check the fuel level in the right fuel tank. She used the checklist and performed a thorough inspection. It was

full. Check the oil and check the fuel line to the engine for water. Check the fan belt and the leading edges of the propeller and pull it through a couple of revolutions to circulate some oil in the engine. Check the static air port. Check the fuel level in the left wing tank. Check the pitot tube and the stall warning device. Check the left wing leading edge, left running lights, left aileron, left flap, left brake, and drain some fuel from the left wing tank to check for water. Finally, remove the chocks from the wheels and check all the wheels to make sure they are fully inflated. Everything looked OK.

Her hands were sweaty, but it was supposed to be a nice day. A little dew was forming on the windshield. It would be humid. She looked out at the windsock in front of the door. It hung limply, straight down. Since there was no wind, she would be able to use any runway. She made a mental note to be careful about carburetor ice with all the humidity.

"Ready?" asked Inge.

Kelly nodded. "Did I miss anything?"

"No, I don't think so. Let's take her up."

They used a tow bar to pull the plane out of the hanger.

She got in the plane and Inge got in after her in the right seat. It was just light enough to see. She checked all the circuit breakers. Then she turned on the electric fuel pump, gave the old Lycoming three squirts of primer, set the carb heat on cold, cracked the throttle half an inch, and set the mixture to rich. Then she pushed firmly on the toe brakes, flipped on the master switch, called out the window, "Clear!"

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inserted the key in the ignition switch and turned it clockwise. The engine turned slowly, one, two, three revolutions and then it finally roared to life.

She flipped on the avionics switch and Inge set the radio to 122.0. The tail number was displayed on a plaque in front of the yoke on the instrument panel.

"Cherokee 8943 Whiskey taxiing for runway..." she looked over at Inge for help.

"5. We use the road for a runway."

"Runway 5," said Kelly firmly, broadcasting in the blind over the Unicom frequency.

As she released the brakes, the little Piper rolled ahead. She steered out of the parking area and onto the driveway with her toes. As she taxied, she raised the flaps. She pulled up just short of the roadway and checked for traffic. Then she went through the checklist and did a run-up: set brakes, set trim, check fuel cutoff and cycle the control from one tank to the other, check flight controls, set flight instruments (Inge had to help her with that), seat backs up, seat belt and shoulder harness in place, doors secured, mixture rich, carb heat off, radios on, all circuit breakers in. Increase RPM to 1700, check both magnetos, check carb heat, check alternator, check vacuum system, check the mechanical fuel pump, check all engine instruments—in the green, reduce RPM to idle, running lights on, set the transponder to altitude encoding.

She keyed the mic, "Cherokee 8943 Whiskey departing runway 5."

Then she taxied out onto the roadway, straightening out down the runway, and gently

increased the throttle to full power for takeoff. She rolled smoothly down the runway. She watched her airspeed indicator. At seventy knots, she gently applied back pressure to bring the nosewheel up. She gently rotated and felt the exhilarating feeling you can only get as a flight begins. A Piper Cherokee, even a 235, is not much of a hot rod. She rose slowly into the smooth, still air. She watched the horizon to the southeast out the right window. As she climbed out, the light increased rapidly. Then, as they passed 3500 feet and leveled off, she turned off the electric fuel pump. The sun rose slowly over the horizon. It was a thrilling sight. There were hardly any clouds. *This, thought Kelly, is why I became a pilot.*

Most of the busy work was done for a while. The sun climbed rapidly as they flew east. It was a beautiful, beautiful day.

"OK," said Inge, "come to a heading of 180."

Kelly brought the little plane to the new heading.

"Let's do a couple of stalls," said Inge, "then you can put on the hood and we'll do a little IFR, OK?"

"Sounds good to me," said Kelly. She was rusty, of course, but she was an experienced jet fighter pilot with thousands of hours and plenty of combat experience.

"This plane is not certified for aerobatics," said Inge, "so we won't do any spins or anything fancy."

"OK," said Kelly. She was really enjoying herself, for the first time in a very long time.

They did a power off stall and recovery, then a power on stall and recovery. Then they did some coordinated turns. Under the hood, Inge had her fly

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some vectors and then do an approach using his instructions.

"You're pretty good," he said.

"Thanks," said Kelly. "I guess you never forget this stuff once you learn it."

"Apparently not," said Inge. "If you had a logbook, I'd endorse it, but as it is, I consider you current, as of now. We don't have a flight surgeon, but the doctors we do have, have cleared you for flight."

"I'm glad of that."

"Now," he said, "let me show you the borders."

"OK."

They flew around the edges of the valley and Inge showed Kelly several landmarks to look for, so she wouldn't get into trouble. He had an old chart that was falling apart at the fold marks, which he let her use. There were several passes through the mountains to the surrounding valleys, but Inge warned her that they were all deathtraps, too narrow to turn around and no place to land.

"The only way to fly out of here is over the mountains," he said, "and she will do it, but you really need oxygen and a cold day to get that high. Her ceiling is only about twelve thousand feet. I know you want to get out of here, but don't try it in this airplane. It's not one of your supersonic fighters, it's just a little Piper Cherokee."

Kelly nodded. She knew he was right, but there was no doubt she had been thinking that it sure would be nice to fly as far as she could and then try to escape from wherever she was. The problem was, she didn't really know where she was, and there would

be no way to know where she might land.

"You wouldn't get far, anyway," he said, "you would probably get shot down."

Kelly sighed. She knew he was right, but... She would have to wait and see what John could come up with.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Kelly loved flying the little Cherokee. She climbed as high as the book said the plane would go. She managed to get right up to twelve thousand feet, and she could just about see over the mountains. She flew over close to one of the shear cliffs and the turbulence almost flipped the little plane inverted. She remembered that mountain flying in a light plane was a lot different than navigating through the same kind of terrain in a big, sophisticated Navy fighter loaded with electronics.

But as long as she stayed around five thousand feet and in the middle of the valley, the little plane was a dream to fly—stable, comfortable, and slow—a great little plane for sightseeing.

But Kelly was getting restless. John, Mary, Ruth, and Esther were all wonderful people, and they treated her like one of the family. And little Peter adored her. But she was bored. She was healthy, however. And she felt she was in as good shape as she could get, so if she was going to try, now was the time.

She went to see John.

"I expected to see you sooner or later," he said.

"Please understand, I'm grateful for everything you've done for me," said Kelly, "but I have to go. You understand, don't you?"

"Of course, but I will have to find a way to help you get as far as possible. The only ways out of here are going to be with some rather unsavory characters. This is an isolated little bastion of civilization, out in the middle of a barbaric continent. I can't guarantee your safety once you leave here. I can't let you take our plane. It wouldn't get far enough anyway. It doesn't have enough range."

"Oh, I understand that. I wouldn't expect you to let me take the plane. I wouldn't let go of it either, if it was mine."

"I've been giving it some thought, though. There is a group of Mongol traders who still conduct caravans to the south. They ride camels now instead of horses, they're better in the desert, but here we still remember the Golden Hoard. We might be able to get you home by starting with them. I know some other people that might help you after that. It will require some expensive bribes, but we can afford it. Your government might be persuaded to reimburse us anyway. Let me see what I can do."

"Oh, thank you. You don't know how much I appreciate all you've already done. I don't know how I could ever repay you."

"Don't worry about that. I might ask you to take some correspondence with you, but that's all the repayment I need."

Kelly was humbled by John's graciousness. But she

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had to ask one more thing.

"How about Colonel Flemming and the other prisoners?"

"I'm afraid there's not much I can do about them," he said. "I wish I could help, but it's a long way from here and our reach is short. We don't know anyone who might take on a project like that either. There are plenty of mercenaries and independent bandits, but none of them would be likely to take on an attack like that on the End Of The Line. It's as much a feared stronghold as this place is. It's considered impregnable by most, and I'm inclined to agree with them."

"I was afraid of that, but I have to try if there is any way. I'm afraid they might never get out of there."

"You may be right. Rarely does anyone leave that place alive, unless he is sold as a slave. But it does happen. Occasionally, prisoners are exchanged, and your Colonel might be valuable enough to merit such an event."

Kelly knew he was telling the truth. She knew he couldn't realistically be expected to help her mount an assault on a prison that was hundreds of miles away from his stronghold.

"Has no one ever tried to get a prisoner out of there?"

John looked at her sternly. He shook his head.

"It's in the middle of a desert of hard frozen tundra where nothing grows. There is little water, but there are glaciers. It is patrolled by violent bands of bandits and criminals, as well as soldiers. The prison is equipped with radar and other surveillance

equipment. They fly around in their helicopters looking for suspicious interlopers. The prison itself is surrounded by a dense minefield and the walls are built of rock, twenty feet high and ten feet thick. They have mortars and light artillery available for defense, as well as the helicopters, and the walls are surmounted by machine guns that can sweep back and forth in every direction."

He paused as Kelly stared at her feet.

"To my knowledge," he said, "no one has ever even tried to break into the End Of The Line. And no one has ever successfully escaped, as far as I know."

Kelly was not surprised. It did sound bleak. She had no idea what she wanted to do, but if there was any way to free Colonel Flemming and the others, she felt obligated to try.

"Don't do anything crazy," said John. "Get yourself home and tell the world that they are alive. Tell them your story and maybe there is hope that the others will be freed in a prisoner exchange or something. Just don't let on that we helped you. It would be bad for us if it came to light that we did. You are going to escape from here. As far as anyone will ever know, we are holding you against your will. If anyone ever asks, we kept you as a slave. And I am not who I say I am. I am just an evil warlord as far as anyone knows. Do you understand?"

Kelly nodded. "When can I escape?"

"Ah," he said, "When would you like to go? It's late fall. This is the best time to travel. You can escape and join the caravan as soon as they pass by. You just want to be on your way before winter."

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"I would like that. Will you let me know?"

John chuckled. "Of course I will, Kelly. We will assist you right up until the day you leave us."

He paused and looked searchingly at Kelly.

"In a way," he said, "I wish you would stay. I almost wish you would stay here and really join my family as my fourth wife, but I know that's out of the question. Your background would rebel against any such arrangement, I'm sure. But we have come to love you. Not just me. All of us. We will miss you. But I knew you would go, eventually."

Kelly sat there, stunned. She had never thought that John really wanted to marry her, but she was flattered. She would really miss this enchanted, fairy tale place, high up in the misty mountains, surrounded by clouds.

"I'm sorry, John. I never guessed. I guess I have been so absorbed with my own problems that I never noticed how you, or anyone else, felt about me."

But, she would never forget the romantic evenings on the battlements, watching the Moon and the stars, listening to John tell her about his history: the journey of the Magi, then how the first John established their Kingdom, how they fought off the Persians, Huns, Mongols, Tartars, Moslems, Manchus, Cossacks and even the Bolsheviks.

"I suppose I'll always love you and all the people here, too. In some ways, I wish I could stay here and maybe even marry you. You are quite a man, John. But I'm a fighter pilot, and my country needs me, at least I think they do. I belong to America."

"I know," said John, "I know."

He smiled at her and stood up.

"Mustafa will help you practice for your escape. It must be done in just the right way, or it won't be believable."

Kelly stood up and approached John. She put her arms around him and gave him a hug. He looked down at her. Her eyes were closed as she tipped her face up to his. He kissed her on the forehead, as he always had. He held her tight. Then they parted. Kelly felt tears running down her cheeks as she found her way back to her room.

Later, Mustafa came calling.

"I'm here to show you some escape routes," he said.

"John said you would," said Kelly.

"First," said Mustafa, "we need to get you some proper gear. You'll need appropriate clothing, you'll need some currency, and you'll need to be armed. You will be embarking on a perilous journey, and you will be surrounded by scoundrels and criminals for the most part. All of them live outside the law. You will never be able to trust anyone. You will always be in danger. So you must be vigilant and ruthless, yourself. If you feel threatened, don't hesitate to fight, and to kill if you must."

Kelly understood. She nodded.

They selected heavy canvass and leather clothing with soft cotton lining. Mustafa insisted on a hood to hide her face and hair. She was fitted for heavy leather hiking boots and she put several pairs of heavy woolen socks in a pack. She insisted on taking several pairs of cotton underwear and T-shirts, and

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put that in the pack, too.

"You will be sleeping on the ground, so you'll need a good bedroll," said Mustafa. He selected a canvas tarpaulin, an animal skin throw, actually several skins sewed together, and several woolen blankets. He even gave her a small, soft, leather pillow with a hidden space in a fold that he said would be a good place to hide a weapon while she slept. He showed her how the tarpaulin and the animal skin could be made into a small tent, Mongol fashion, using a seven-foot staff, which he insisted she take to use as both a walking stick and a weapon. The tent looked a little like an Indian teepee.

They put together a small, compact cooking/eating kit, and wrapped twenty small individual rations of dried, smoked meat jerky and hard bread.

"It may not be very tasty, but it will keep you alive if you have to depend on it for sustenance," he said. They put it all in a small animal skin bag.

They included some matches and a small, compact, antique tinderbox with a flint and steel inside. Two skins of water completed her emergency rations.

Then he brought out a special prize.

"This is from Mary," he said. It was in a small cotton bag with a drawstring. Kelly opened it and looked in. The smell was delicious. The bag was full of some confection of cookie-like stuff, baked into small cubes.

"Whatever is it?" she asked.

"It's shortbread," said Mustafa. "The recipe comes from Scotland. It's nothing more than butter, flour, and sugar, but it's hard to make it just right. It is a

valuable source of quick energy and it has saved many lives from starvation on long journeys. It is delicious, and it lasts almost forever. Guard it carefully and use it sparingly, only when you need it. It is a special gift to keep you safe. She made it herself."

Kelly didn't know what to say, so she didn't say anything, but she was sure she should feel honored.

Next, they went to the armory.

"You may take any weapons you think you might need," he said, "but maybe I can make some suggestions."

"Suggest away," said Kelly as she looked around at the impressive collection of firearms, knives, swords, bows, arrows, and bludgeons.

"You definitely need a knife, something like this dirk. It's an old Italian dirk, a stiletto, fifteenth century."

It looked a lot like a British Commando knife, but it was beautifully embellished and engraved.

"Do you have anything less fancy?" she asked.

Mustafa looked around. He consulted a sheet of paper, listing the inventory of the arsenal.

"I have just the thing." He opened a case and produced a knife just like the fancy dirk, but more a plain-Jane version.

"Perfect," said Kelly.

"It's the same knife, but just not as fancy. Have you ever thrown a knife?"

"No, I tried a couple of times, but I never got the knack."

"This knife is precisely balanced for throwing," he

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said, "But it takes practice. See that wall over there? Try it."

Kelly looked where he was pointing and saw a bull's-eye painted on a wall that had obviously been used as a target for just such practice. She threw the knife. She was surprised that it flew true and pierced the target.

"Try it again," said Mustafa.

Kelly went over and retrieved the knife. She tried again. The knife slapped sideways against the wall and dropped to the floor. She looked at Mustafa, who smiled. She retrieved the knife and tried again. After a few tries, she started to get the knack and felt a little more confident. She started throwing it harder. It didn't work. She went back to throwing the knife the way she had started, and it hit the target every time.

"You're pretty good at that," said Mustafa.

Kelly just nodded and threw it once more.

"I think that's enough," said Kelly. "This knife is made for this, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Mustafa. "It is precisely balanced for just this kind of throwing. Here," he said. He handed Kelly a sheath for the knife with a peculiar harness attached. "This was made for a woman. It is designed to allow you to hide your weapon in your bodice, between your breasts. It makes it easy to hide and easier to draw for use. I'm sure you can figure out how to put it on and adjust it for comfort."

"Thank you, Mustafa." She took the contraption and looked at it, untangling the straps. It might be a good thing to have a hidden weapon this deadly.

They rumbled around for hours in the armory and

Kelly left feeling well armed. She ended up with the dirk, a boot knife for each boot, which were good throwing knives too, and a length of cord that could be used as a garrote. She passed on a Colt Model 1911 because it was so heavy and the ammunition was heavy, too. She opted instead for a light .38 caliber revolver, a slick little Colt Diamondback. But the weapon she was delighted to find was an original Winchester M-1 carbine in .30 caliber carbine. Where they got it was a mystery.

"Now that's my kind of rifle," she said. "It only weighs six pounds, and the ammo isn't terribly heavy, but it's reliable and a great man stopper."

Mustafa gave her several boxes of ammunition for each firearm, three magazines for the carbine, and a cartridge belt and holster for the sidearm.

Kelly had never been so heavily armed, but Mustafa insisted that she would probably need it all. He wanted to give her a sword, either a scimitar from Damascus, or a gladius from Rome, but Kelly insisted she wouldn't have any idea how to use either one. What she had was heavy enough, but surprisingly light for all that firepower. Last, Mustafa insisted that she take a length of rope.

"You always need a bit of rope on a journey. You will thank me."

After several hours, they left the armory and Kelly wondered what was next. Mustafa showed her a secret passage that was only known to a few of the inhabitants of the castle. It led outside to the old stairs that led down to the valley. The doors were locked and rusty, but he forced them open.

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"You must lock these doors behind you."

"I understand," said Kelly.

"It's a long way down," said Mustafa, "and the stairs are not in good repair. They are old and have been abandoned for a long time. They were built to last, and were used for almost two thousand years, but they have not been maintained for years. Some parts have crumbled, I'm sure. No one has come this way in my lifetime.

"I see," said Kelly. "I think I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can," said Mustafa with a smile.

They left Kelly's traveling gear in the passage, then they took the elevator down to the valley. They entered one of the cars in the garage and Mustafa drove around the base of the mountain to the other side, stopping at the bottom of the old stairs. They got out of the car.

Kelly looked up at the stairs. They seemed to stretch up forever.

"Now follow me," said Mustafa.

He led her along a dusty cobblestone path for about a half-mile. The path continued along as a dirt trail, rising up into a pass through the hills surrounding the castle. It rose up into a narrow canyon between high walls that were hundreds of feet high.

Mustafa stopped and pointed ahead.

"About a mile through the pass, you will exit this crevasse," he said. "If everything goes as planned, the caravan will be camped about a half-mile further on. They will have campfires and lanterns if it is early enough, but if it is too late, they will be asleep. There

will be sentries. Find one and tell him you want to be taken to the Khan. If the sentry doesn't kill you, he'll take you to a tent where you will meet a nasty man who will probably be drunk, and will probably have one or more women in bed with him."

"Great. That's just the kind of man I need to help me escape, a philandering drunk. What do you mean, 'if he doesn't kill me'?"

"I'm afraid that's what sentries usually do when someone approaches after dark in a presumably hostile environment," said Mustafa. "You have two options, walk in making a lot of noise and call out, 'don't shoot,' or sneak up on him, put a knife to his throat, and tell him to take you to the Khan or you'll kill him."

"Which way do you recommend?"

"Well," said Mustafa, "he might shoot you anyway if you try the first way. He'll respect you and fear you if you try the second method and are successful, but he might resent it, especially if they find out you are a woman. He might overpower you in any event."

"Hmmm." Kelly pondered her options. Then she sighed.

They returned the way they had come, and Kelly was soon back in her room. She had one more thing to take care of. She went to see Mary.

"I know you're leaving," said Mary, "and think I know what you need from me."

She handed Kelly several cloth pads she could use during menstruation.

"One more thing. I know you must pose as a man."

Kelly nodded.

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"OK," she said, "come over here and sit down. I'm going to shave your head."

Oh, dear, thought Kelly, not again. Her soft blond hair was just starting to look presentable. But Kelly knew Mary was right. A bald head would help her pass as a man much better than her short tresses of blond hair.

"Thank you, Mary," she said, "for everything. You've all been very kind to me. I don't know how I could ever repay any of you."

"Just don't tell anyone that we exist," said Mary. "John's taking an enormous risk allowing you to leave. We don't want anyone to know who we are and we don't invite visitors very often, unless they need refuge, and then we expect them to stay here. We are the only refuge for Christians."

They embraced, then Kelly returned to her room.

She dreamed that night. She dreamed she was having a beer in the Tailhook Bar in Pensacola, eating a cheeseburger and watching the male pilots as they watched the dancing bares. She woke up hungry. And she was horny, for the first time in a long time. She figured she must have finally recovered from the Doctor's conditioning if she felt that way. She was excited about the new adventure that was about to begin. She couldn't wait to get started.

Several days went by. Then one night, shortly after dark, Peter knocked on Kelly's door.

"Hello, Peter," said Kelly, holding the door open while shrugging into a housecoat over her nightgown.

"Father wants to see you," he said. "He asked that you meet him in the library."

"OK," said Kelly and she closed the door behind her. Peter stood there in the hall. He looked up at her.

"Are you leaving?"

Kelly looked at the little boy. He had grown while she had been here. She knelt in front of him and gave him a hug. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

"I'm going to miss you." He wiped a tear from his eye. "We all will, you know." Then he turned and ran down the hall, away from Kelly.

Kelly headed for the library.

She found John waiting for her. They gazed at each other in silence for a moment.

"So this is it," she said.

"This is it," he said with a sigh. "I have something for you."

He handed her a small purse.

"In this purse you will find a small box. In the box are several small uncut diamonds, each jewel is one or two carats. There are also some natural rubies and one large emerald in the box. Also in the purse are some gold coins. They are old, we minted them here years ago, and they are virtually unknown outside this general area. But they are gold, and gold is still a universal currency."

Kelly reached out and took the purse in her hand. She hefted it appraisingly. It wasn't really very heavy but it jingled faintly.

"My God," she said in wonder, "how much is all this stuff worth?"

"A small fortune. Actually, a large one. Don't worry about that. It's just a gift to help you pay for

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passage.”

Kelly weighed the purse in her hand.

“But, John,” said Kelly softly, “I do need to know what it’s worth so I don’t get cheated. How much do I offer the caravan people?”

“Ah, yes. You do need to know that. You’ll need to pay for a camel, and you’ll need to bribe him to keep your identity a secret. Don’t let them know you have this purse. Keep it secret. Let them think you are a man, if you can. That way you won’t have to worry about being raped. A woman traveling alone is very unusual, so it won’t be expected, and you may be able to pull it off. Two or three of the coins should suffice for Ahmed. They are each worth several hundred US dollars. His name is Ahmed Khan. That’s both his name and his title. It wouldn’t hurt to have a knife in your hand when you offer him the coins. Never show weakness, always show strength - strength and ruthlessness. But if you brandish a weapon, be ready to use it. You may have to. Do you know how to find him?”

“Mustafa showed me the way, along the old trail to the pass where he camps.”

“Good,” said John. “He’ll be able to help you travel out of the mountains and across the southern desert. He will be able to help you make contact with somebody to take you to the small town of Kwaize on the great river. The name of the town means chopsticks, and it is famous for delicious food. There, you should look for a woman known only as the Dragon, or the Dragon Lady. She knows of us, and she owes us a favor. We met a long time ago. I’m sure

Ahmed Khan knows who she is."

"She is a brutal and vicious criminal, but she can help you get to the coast and maybe off-shore. She runs illegal houses of prostitution, opium dens, gambling casinos and she dabbles in gun running. She won't hesitate to kill you and steal your treasures if she thinks she can get away with it, but if you show no weakness, her services can be bought. She might be impressed to find that you are a strong woman, as ruthless as she is, but don't let anyone else know you are not a man if you can help it. It really could be dangerous."

John handed Kelly an envelope. It had some Chinese characters written on it. "This is a letter to her from me. As I said, she owes us a favor. She can put you in touch with certain men who she has dealings with, pirates and smugglers. They can get you to places where you will be able to contact your government."

He handed her another envelope. It had a handwritten address in Latin across the front.

"This is a special communication that I would like you to deliver personally," he said. "It is to the Catholic Pope in Rome. He will recognize the seal. He will give you his blessing. This is the only request I have of you. I hope you make it."

"Oh, John." She embraced him. She tipped her head up and kissed him on the lips. She held him tight. He kissed her back. Then he pulled away and kissed her on the forehead.

"Good luck, Kelly Winchester. Now go, before I try to talk you out of going."

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He turned away and walked around the desk. He didn't turn around but presented only his back to Kelly. At that moment, she almost changed her mind and decided to stay.

"Goodbye, Prester John." Then she turned and left, closing the door softly behind her, certain she would never see this kind, gentle man ever again.

She went swiftly back to her room and changed into her traveling clothes. Then she headed for the secret passage. The halls were silent and deserted. She entered the passage and locked the door behind her. She retrieved her traveling gear and made for the stairs. She slung the heavy pack on her shoulders and buckled on the pistol belt. She slung the carbine over her shoulder. She picked up the staff. Then she locked the outside door and began her descent.

It was a long way down, and many of the stairs were crumbling. It was dangerous, and she almost fell more than once. It took over four grueling hours, but she finally made it to the ground. It was after midnight by the time she got to the bottom of the stairs.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kelly started off along the cobblestone path and continued on the dirt path over the hills, into the pass and through the crevasse. The pack seemed to get heavier and heavier. She was grateful for the walking stick Mustafa had insisted she take. It took another hour and she was careful to go quietly. As she emerged she saw the camp. There were numerous tents and several banked fires glowing dimly. She stealthily moved behind some large boulders and watched for the sentries.

She saw a man emerge from a tent on her left and walk over to the perimeter. He was carrying a very long antique rifle. He was obviously looking for something. He came toward Kelly's position. He passed within twenty-five meters of where she was hiding. She watched him as he walked off to the right, along the perimeter of the camp. He came upon another man, sitting and leaning against a pile of rocks. He kicked the man on the ground.

The man must have been asleep because he jumped up and grabbed his rifle, another antique. The two men argued, then the one who had been asleep

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headed back towards the camp and entered a tent. The new sentry shook his head as he watched the other man leave. Then he strolled off around the camp at a leisurely pace with his enormous rifle over his shoulder. Kelly bided her time, waiting for him to come back. Eventually, he emerged on the left, having walked all the way around the camp.

He stopped at the same pile of rocks where the other sentry had been sleeping. He leaned his rifle against the rocks and sat down. He made a big production out of rolling and lighting a cigarette. He looked around and then leaned back, nodding his head.

Kelly decided it was time to act. She silently crept around behind the man and the rocks. She was only a couple of meters behind him. She could smell the aromatic smoke of the man's cigarette. He wasn't very vigilant. Kelly crouched down behind the rocks. She quietly shrugged out of the heavy backpack. The sentry heard her and stood up looking around, but he didn't see Kelly behind the rocks and figured it was nothing but night noises. He squatted back down and took a long puff on his smoke.

Kelly pulled the dirk out of her bodice. She crept around the rocks the other way and crept up behind the man. She hesitated. She knew that the man might be a lot stronger than she was and she was afraid that he might overpower her. But then she screwed up her courage and crept forward. Suddenly, she reached out, bent over and wrapped her left arm around the man's head and placed the dagger against the man's throat. The startled man jumped up and Kelly went

with him. He wasn't very tall. He was shorter, in fact, than Kelly. She surprised herself with her strength. The adrenaline was pumping and she knew she could break the man's neck with a quick snap of her muscular arms. The man knew it too, and he was afraid.

She tightened her grip on his head and whispered, "Don't do it!" as she brought the sharp blade of the knife into contact with the man's Adam's apple. Then she remembered how she had been easily disarmed after being shot down. She kicked the man in the back of his knees and he buckled. She pushed him down on his face with her body on top of his and the blade still across his throat.

"Take me to Khan." Her voice sounded raspy as she endeavored to hide her sex.

The man turned his head to get a look at his attacker. Kelly violently pushed his face back into the dirt.

"Take me to Khan," she rasped, "or I'll slice your throat right here, right now."

"He's asleep," said the Sentry. "I dare not wake him. He doesn't like it when we wake him in the middle of the night."

"I don't care if he likes it or not," said Kelly. "I need to see him. Now! And there's something in it for him. He'll be pleased."

The man tried to twist around to get a look at Kelly and she pushed his face back into the dirt again. She slowly drew the knife across the man's throat, just barely drawing a little blood.

"No," he said, "no. Don't kill me. Don't kill me,

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please. O.K., I'll take you to him. Put away your knife and I'll take you to the Khan."

Kelly wondered how treacherous the man might be. She figured he might try to turn the tables on her if he could. She tightened her grip around the man's head. Then she pulled the knife back and stuck it in her belt. She pulled the man's right arm back into a hammerlock and pulled it up hard.

"Ahhh!" groaned the man in a low voice.

"No tricks," whispered Kelly, "or I'll break it."

She slid off him and pulled him up by his twisted arm. She whispered into his ear, "OK, let's go."

She twisted his arm some more.

"My rifle," he whimpered.

"Leave it, you can come back for it after you take me to Khan." She hated to leave her pack there, too, but figured she would have to come back for it.

They headed into the camp. There was no one about. It was two or three o'clock in the morning and everybody, except the sentry, was sleeping. Apparently, there was only one sentry and they didn't need to watch much. They must have felt fairly secure around here. They headed toward the largest tent. As they approached, Kelly drew the pistol and released the man's arm. She placed the muzzle in the small of his back.

"This pistol will make a very big hole in you if you try anything," she whispered. "What's your name?"

"I'm Abdul," said the man, before he figured that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to tell her who he was.

"OK, Abdul," said Kelly. "Is this the great Khan's

tent?"

Abdul hung his head. "It is," he said.

"OK, Abdul," said Kelly softly, "go on back and don't let anyone else sneak up on you. I'll take it from here."

She quickly turned Abdul around and gave him a little push back towards the perimeter. Then she quickly pulled back the flap and entered the tent. There was a dim lantern hanging from the center pole of the tent. On a pile of blankets at the back of the tent Kelly saw a tangle of naked flesh where several people were sleeping in a pile. The remains of a meal were on a low table to the right. A large jug lay on its side next to the pile of blankets and humanity. The smell of leftovers, tobacco, and sour wine permeated the tent.

Kelly crossed to the sleepers. They were half covered. There was a scrawny, dark-skinned, hairy man and two women on the pile of blankets. They were all nude. Kelly stood there looking down at them. They were all snoring. She holstered the pistol. She reached inside her shirt and pulled out the purse. She opened it, removed two of the gold coins and replaced it in her bodice. She drew the stiletto.

Then Kelly took a deep breath and made sure the hood was still up over her head. She dropped to her knee. She placed the knife, point up, under the man's chin and reached out to grab the man's right hand. She lifted the groggy man's hand and placed the coins in his palm, then she placed her left hand behind his neck and the knife at his throat.

"Oh, great Ahmed Khan," she said softly, "wake

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up, oh great Khan."

He started to wake and tried to get up on his elbows. Then he noticed the knife being held at his throat by this mysterious, hooded apparition. Then he also noticed the coins. He shook his head groggily. The women were waking up as the commotion aroused them. They saw Kelly with a knife at their master's throat and shrunk back from her, but they stayed quiet.

"Who are you?" said Ahmed. "What do you want?"

"I need your help," said Kelly. "I will pay you well."

Ahmed shook his head again. He burped and farted at the same time. He smelled terribly foul. His breath was horrible. Apparently he had been drinking too much. Mustafa had warned Kelly about him.

"What do you want?" He hefted the coins and looked at them, then back up at Kelly.

"Can we talk?" asked Kelly.

Ahmed was regaining consciousness rapidly. He shook the coins in his hand. He grinned up at Kelly.

"I guess so," he said. "You have a dagger at my throat and I have money in my palm. What do you want to talk about?"

Kelly dropped his head and stood up. She put the knife inside her shirt again. She stood over the Khan, legs spread apart and arms crossed.

She looked over at the naked women. Her appearance was that of a dangerous, menacing, giant to those on the floor.

"Get out of here," she said to the women.

"Oh, they're OK," said Ahmed, "they're just furniture. They probably can't understand you anyway."

"OK," said Kelly. The women were pulling blankets up to cover their nakedness. She squatted back down. Ahmed sat up and faced her. He pulled a blanket over his shoulders and pulled it around in front of his body, hiding his cock. He stared at Kelly under her hood.

Kelly peered back at him.

"I need to join you in your journey to the South," she said. "I need to get to Kwaize. I have escaped from the castle of Prester John and I need to travel in secret. I need to have you hide me until we get away from here. And I need to buy a camel for the trip."

Ahmed grinned at her. He rubbed his stubbly chin. "So you escaped from the great Prester John, and it appears you managed to steal some of his gold. Are you a thief? I don't want any thieves in my caravan."

"I came by my gold honestly," she said, "but they won't let anyone leave. I had to escape. Nobody leaves that castle. You must know that."

"Hmmm," mumbled Ahmed. "Hmmm. Yes, I know. They're queer folk up there on that mountain. Queer, but they're usually honest. I've always been able to get along with them. Will they come looking for you?"

"I don't know," said Kelly. She meant it. They might just mount a phony search for her to make it look good. "They might."

"Hmmm," said Ahmed. "I don't want to make an enemy of them. They're good customers, and they're

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rich, they pay me in gold."

"I know you, too, Ahmed Khan," said Kelly. "You can hide me. They'll never notice me here in your camp. They don't want to offend you either. They won't enter your tents. I can easily hide until the caravan leaves. They won't dare try to look inside your tents without your permission. I'm not that important to them anyway. If they search for me, they'll probably give up soon and expect that I've already left the valley. If anything, they probably expect that I've followed the road back to the North the way I came. They won't expect to find me here."

"Hmmm," said Ahmed, rubbing his chin again through the stubble. He hefted the gold coins again. "OK," he said. "I suppose I can chance it. Do you have any food, or do I have to feed you too?"

"I have a little," said Kelly, "just for emergencies. I've given you enough for you to be able to feed me, don't you think?"

"Hmmm," Ahmed weighed the coins. "I'll need another coin for all that, but I'll invite you into my personal tent for meals. You can join me for dinner every day if you want. And you can share my women with me. They'll be glad to screw your brains out any time you get a little horny."

Kelly thought about that. It seemed reasonable, except for the stuff about the women. At least Ahmed really believed she was a man. "OK," she said, "one more for your hospitality and another for a camel. I'll settle with you as soon as we're away from here. OK?"

"OK," said Ahmed. "Who are you, anyway?"

"No names," said Kelly. "Just call me Traveler. That should suffice."

"OK, Traveler," said Ahmed. "I'll have to keep an eye on you. How the hell did you get in here, anyway? Where were my guards and sentries?"

Kelly smiled and chuckled softly. "Abdul was not hard to overpower," she said. "Neither were you, for that matter. I can be dangerous. But I must trust you and you must trust me. I don't want a knife in the ribs any more than you do. I'll pay you for a good camel, and I expect you to help me take care of it. I intend to sell it back to you at my journey's end, so you might want to make sure it stays healthy."

"Hmmm," said Ahmed, "fair enough. Have you ever ridden a camel?"

"How did you guess?" rasped Kelly. "No, I haven't."

Ahmed chuckled. "OK, we'll show you. They're unusual beasts. They can be terribly stubborn, but they are the most reliable animals you have ever seen. They're awfully independent. And they spit. They're really pretty nasty."

"So I've heard, so I've heard."

"Well, OK, Mr. Traveler," said Ahmed. He reached for the overturned jug. He pulled a cork out of it and smelled it, making a face. "Let's have a drink to seal the deal."

He wiped the mouth of the jug and hefted it, lifting it to his mouth and swallowing a mouthful of the wine.

He handed the jug to Kelly. It smelled repulsive. But Kelly bravely wiped the rim as he had done and

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took a sip. It was a little sour, but it really wasn't that bad. She swallowed it and handed the jug back to Ahmed.

"Agreed," she said.

"Good," said Ahmed. "Now, how about a roll in bed with one of my bitches?" He threw off his blanket and reached out for one of the women. He had an erection. The woman dropped her blanket too and crawled over to him. She reached out and fondled Ahmed's balls. He cupped one of her breasts. She glanced at Kelly and then smiled at Ahmed. The other woman started to crawl over towards Kelly. They looked for all the world like a bunch of rutting dogs in heat, being serviced by a horny old dog.

"I don't think so," said Kelly, wrinkling her nose.

"Suit yourself. I'll be with you in a minute."

He was embracing the first woman and it was apparent that he intended to have sex right there in front of Kelly. She averted her eyes for a moment, but couldn't help turning back to watch. Ahmed made short work of it. He turned the woman over and she got up on her hands and knees. He kneaded her ample buttocks, spreading them, and entered her quickly. No foreplay here. He spread her cheeks and slid his member into her vagina, thrusting in and out energetically. The other woman, spurned by Kelly, embraced and kissed him while he was screwing the one on her knees. Kelly couldn't help watching the woman's heavy breasts as they swayed beneath her body while she slammed her backside onto Ahmed's stiff prong. They made a squishing sound. The other woman moved around behind Ahmed and put her

arms around him. She licked his ear. She molded her body to his from behind and thrust with him, propelling Ahmed's cock into the one on her hands and knees. All three of them moaned as they fucked. It was as if Kelly wasn't even there— they just ignored her.

It was over quickly. Ahmed climaxed for about a dozen strokes and then pushed his still-erect penis deep into the woman's vagina and left it there for a moment as he waited for his heart to calm down and his dick to go limp. His eyes were closed. His hands kneaded the woman's buttocks. The woman behind him squirmed against him for a moment, then shuddered in her own climax.

"Ahhh," he said, a very satisfied smile on his face. "That's good."

He opened his eyes. They were all breathing hard. He looked at Kelly. He pulled his limp member out of the woman in front of him. Semen oozed out of her vagina and down her leg. She rolled over and wiped herself with a corner of one of the blankets. Ahmed stroked his flaccid cock and a bit more semen oozed out. They didn't seem to care whether Kelly was watching or not.

"Are you sure you don't want a piece of ass from one of them?" he said. "They're really juicy tonight." He slapped a large behind and winked at Kelly with a grin. Kelly was pleased to see that he had accepted her as a man, but she was wondering how to get out of this.

"They're just a couple of old whores," he said. "Come on and fuck that old bitch over there, or there

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are a couple of others in camp with us if you like." He gestured to the other woman, who was looking at Kelly alluringly, smirking, fondling her own breasts and licking her lips. Apparently, she thought Kelly was a man too.

"No," said Kelly, still rasping her voice. "I'm tired. Just show me a place to stow my gear. And a place where I can get a little sleep."

"Oh, OK," said Ahmed, "suit yourself. If you ever want a piece of ass, just ask me. I took these ladies in years ago and several others have joined us over the years. They'll be glad to service you, if you feel the urge. They were just a couple of old whores when I took them in, but they can cook and these two are both accomplished belly dancers. They are nice to me, and to my friends. I suppose we are going to be friends. Money can buy friendship, you know, as well as love and sex."

"Yeah," said Kelly, "I know."

"OK," said Ahmed with a sigh. He stood up and stretched. He was skinny, except for a little paunch around the middle. He had short, spindly, bowed legs, long arms and was extremely hairy. He was very muscular in a scrawny sort of way. He scratched his balls. Then he walked over to a dark corner of the tent, bent over, showing Kelly more of his anatomy than she really wanted to see, and picked up a pair of pants which he proceeded to put on. He sat down and pulled on his boots, stood up and finished dressing by pulling a robe over his shoulders.

"Do you always keep that hood over your head?" he asked.

"Always," said Kelly. "I'm ugly, and it bothers me to have people stare. The sunlight bothers me too."

"Oh, OK," said Ahmed. "Well, most of us are kind of ugly, aren't we, girls?" he said and they all laughed.

"Come on," he said, and he strode out of the tent.

"I have to get my pack," said Kelly.

"OK," said Ahmed, "where is it?"

"I left it out by the perimeter when I paid my respects to Abdul."

"Let's go see if anybody found it," said Ahmed.

They walked out to the edge of the camp. Abdul wasn't there. He had been replaced by Khaled. Kelly's pack was just where she had left it, behind the rocks. She hefted it up and shouldered it. Ahmed didn't seem very happy to see that no one had found it.

"My vigilant guards," said Ahmed, "not very competent, are they?"

Kelly didn't say anything. She didn't want to make things any worse for these men. Ahmed might have a mean streak, and she didn't know whose help she might need sometime. She guessed that they were a little afraid of her right now, and were impressed to see that she was being treated as an equal by Ahmed Khan.

She decided to leave well enough alone. If she could continue to pose as a mysterious and dangerous traveler, and a man, they might just leave her alone until they reached their destination.

She picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. She leaned on her walking stick. All the gear Mustafa had given her was old and well worn.

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She looked like a veteran traveler. Ahmed grinned at her.

“Come on, I’ll show you where to pitch your tent.”
He strode off back into camp. Kelly followed him.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It took Kelly less than half an hour to pitch her tent and settle in. She hid her pistol inside the little pillow and kept her hand on it as she rested her head. She was tired after the night's activities, and she fell asleep quickly.

No one bothered her. Most of the men were asleep, and the ones on watch were aware that she had surprised and overpowered Abdul, snuck in on the Khan and overpowered him, and then made some kind of deal with him. This was clearly a dangerous person, someone to be left alone. Of course they believed that she was a man. If they had known she was a woman, things might have been different. These men had very little respect for a woman. A woman was good for sex, and she could cook and do all the menial jobs beneath the dignity of the men. But, of course, they had never run into a woman like Kelly who could really take care of herself.

So no one bothered her. She slept soundly for a few hours. She awoke early to the sounds of the camp waking up. The sun was still only a faint glow from below the horizon. Men were moving around,

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resurrecting the fires, adjusting tents, and tending to the animals. Kelly emerged from her small tent, stood up and looked around. She stretched and yawned and scratched her crotch like the men did. Personal hygiene seemed to be universally ignored by these people. She had to act like all the rest of the men.

There were several women beginning to cook breakfast. Kelly recognized the two who had been in the tent with Ahmed the night before and there were several others. They were whispering among themselves. One of them smiled at Kelly. She wondered what they were saying about her.

She went over to see what they were cooking. Breakfast seemed to be some unidentifiable chunk of meat, dripping fat into the fire off a spit that was turned constantly by one of the women. It smelled good at least. Between the smell of the smoke and the roasting meat, Kelly was getting hungry.

She watched as several men, one at a time, went into a small grove of trees outside the camp. She figured that was where they went to pee, and she needed to go herself. When she determined that no one was there, she strode purposely across the camp and into the bushes. She looked around, then dropped her pants, squatted, and relieved herself quickly before anybody else came. She went back into camp and headed back to her tent.

Abdul approached her. He bowed slightly.

"Sir, the Khan has invited you to breakfast, if you want to join him."

"Thank you, Abdul," said Kelly, remembering to rasp her voice so she didn't sound like a woman. She

imagined she sounded a little like George C. Scott as Patton. "I'll join him presently."

He lingered.

"Are you OK?" asked Kelly, "Did you get in any trouble?"

"I'm in a heap of trouble."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

Abdul hemmed and hawed, hanging his head.

"If he says anything, could you tell him I was on guard, that I wasn't asleep, and that I fought mightily?" said Abdul. "He might believe you. After all, you did the same to him, but I was supposed to protect him, and he is the Khan."

Kelly couldn't help but laugh a little, but she tried to act stern.

"I'll do what I can," rasped Kelly, "but I won't lie to him. I'm sure it will blow over. Maybe Ahmed won't hold it against you very long."

"He has a long memory," said Abdul. "He has ways of punishing men."

"OK, Abdul, if the opportunity arises, I'll tell him exactly what happened. That's the best I can do, but I will try not to get you in any more trouble. OK?"

"Thank you, sir," said Abdul. "I am grateful."

He bowed slightly and turned away. Kelly entered her tent. She sat there for a moment, savoring the rich smells of breakfast cooking. Her stomach rumbled.

She thought about giving Ahmed two more coins right then, but decided to wait until the caravan got moving again before paying him. She rolled up her gear, retrieving the pistol from her pillow and returning it to its holster. She rolled it up in the

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cartridge belt. She got up, exited the tent, and strolled over to Ahmed's tent, making sure to keep her hood in place. The tent looked smaller in the light of the early morning. She pulled back the flap and ducked inside.

"Good morning," said Ahmed. He was dressed and shaved, and sitting cross-legged on the floor at his little table. The women had cleared the mess from the night before and were bustling around, bringing bowls of meat and gravy. A jug of water sat in the middle of the table and a jug of wine was on the floor next to Ahmed. Ahmed sounded much more clearheaded than the night before, but he still smelled awful. They all did. Fortunately, everyone had clothes on and the debauchery of the night before was only a memory.

Kelly sat down and crossed her legs too. The meat tasted like greasy mutton. It was tough and chewy but it was hot. She washed it down with plenty of water. She couldn't stomach any wine for breakfast. The way they ate, with their fingers, using only a knife to cut the meat, spear it and raise it to the mouth, was messy. But it was effective.

Ahmed tried to talk Kelly into removing her hood, but she declined. She was so untalkative that he finally stopped trying to chat, starting to regret inviting her to his table. They finished the meal in silence, then Kelly thanked him and left with no pleasantries. She returned to her tent and stayed there in the musty stuffy dark. She opened the flap a little to let in some air and a little light. She was bored, but she didn't want to call any attention to herself. She

just wished they would get moving.

Some time during the day, a group of Prester John's men made a half-hearted search for her. They said they were looking for a dangerous man and that John wanted him returned to the castle for personal reasons. Ahmed Khan told them he hadn't seen anyone, but he would be glad to let them know if anybody showed up. He asked if there was a reward for the man's return. The men said that they didn't give rewards to people for just doing the right thing.

Kelly stayed in her tent. Ahmed came by personally after the patrol left to let her know that they were looking for her. The search verified Kelly's story, and her reputation as both a man and a dangerous person.

"When are we going to leave?" she asked.

"Tomorrow," said Ahmed. "It should be a fair day to travel and we have a long way to go."

"How about my camel?"

"I'll have Abdul show you the beast I've selected for you," he said. "Since you've never ridden one before, I thought you might be more comfortable on an older animal who's been in our caravan for a long time. He used to be mean, but he has mellowed over the years. Abdul can show you how to ride him and how to secure your possessions on his back."

"OK," said Kelly.

Later in the day, when the wind was whipping up the dust in the camp and the heat of the sun was warming everything to a swelter, Abdul came for Kelly. He was quite cheerful when he lifted the flap and poked his head into her tent.

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"Traveler," he said, "the Khan has sent me to introduce you to the camel you have purchased. He seems to have forgiven me for the problems of last night."

"Well, I didn't say anything to him," she rasped. "He must have come around on his own."

"I know," said Abdul. "That's even better."

Kelly got up and crawled out of the tent. They went to the roped-off corral where the animals were kept. Abdul let himself in and returned with the largest camel in the lot.

"This is Mamoud the camel," said Abdul. "He was the Khan's favorite until he got so old and cranky, but he is still strong and he will carry you well."

Kelly walked over to the great beast as he stood over her. She slowly stroked his thick neck and flank. She spoke softly to him, the way she might to a horse. It appeared to be working.

"This saddle is included," Abdul said. "The Khan told me to instruct you in the art of riding and taking care of your camel."

Abdul showed her how to coax the great beast to bow to the ground so she could saddle and mount him. The beast sputtered and yawned and made funny noises, but he didn't spit at her or try to bite her. Abdul showed her how to secure her belongings to the back and sides of the contraption they called a saddle.

With Abdul's help, she mounted the beast and rode him around in a circle.

"Camels are independent cusses," said Abdul. "Sometimes they do what they want to do, not what

you want them to do. And they can be awfully stubborn. But you seem to be getting along fine with Mamoud there."

Kelly stroked the camel's side and neck. It was difficult to reach from high atop the hump, but Mamoud seemed to be at least willing to put up with Kelly. Maybe he appreciated that she didn't weigh as much as a man and was easier to carry.

Kelly had Abdul show her how to take care of him, as well as how and what to feed him.

"Camels don't need much from us," said Abdul, "but they do take good care of us."

Abdul left her with her camel. Kelly took off the saddle and rubbed him down. He seemed to like her attention. Kelly hoped the good relations would last.

She returned Mamoud to the corral and went back to her tent. She was tired from the exertions of the night before, so she took a nap. She awoke when Abdul came again to tell her that she was expected to join the Khan for dinner. She rose and left the tent, striding with as much swagger as she could muster across the camp to the big tent.

Ahmed was waiting for her. The tent was lit by a lot of lanterns on and over the table. There were a couple of other men there too, all just as scraggly-looking as Ahmed. Kelly sat down and crossed her legs. She kept the hood over her head, even though it was beginning to really irritate her to have to do so. It was hot and stuffy, but she was afraid they would recognize her as a woman if they got a look at her face.

"This is my little brother, Saleem," said Ahmed,

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indicating one of the men.

The man smiled at her and said, "Hello, Mr. Traveler."

"And this is my cousin, Ali," he said.

The men smiled at Kelly and nodded.

Kelly looked at each of them, but didn't respond. She wanted to stay aloof and mysterious as long as she could.

"Here," said Ahmed, passing her the jug, "Have some wine."

One of the women who were waiting in the shadows brought Kelly a cup. Kelly took it and held it out for Ahmed to pour some wine into it. She tasted it. It wasn't too bad. It had a tart taste and it was a little sweet, but it didn't taste bad at all. She could tell that it was high in alcohol content. She sure didn't want to get drunk with these guys and lose control. She just sipped a little. She drank more water than anything.

"We're leaving tomorrow," said Ahmed, "so tonight, we have a feast. And we have some entertainment too."

The two women who had been with Ahmed the first night she had entered the tent came forward, out of the shadows. They were both dressed elaborately in flimsy, gauzy, see-through outfits, with bare midriffs, embellished with lots of gaudy, jingly-jangly, jewelry. They each smiled and shook their bodies and then put on a transparent veil that still didn't really hide their faces.

"I told you that they were both accomplished belly dancers," said Ahmed, "didn't I?"

"You did," rasped Kelly.

"Their names are Delilah and Jezebel."

Kelly was tempted to ask him if he was kidding, but thought better of it.

A few more men entered the tent, Abdul among them, carrying musical instruments and drums. They sat down and started to play a slow little tune that Kelly had never heard before. The women gyrated slowly to the music, which was performed surprisingly well. The other women in the shadows brought food to the table in bowls for everyone to share.

The music got faster. Delilah and Jezebel kept up, their gyrations getting more and more wild. They actually were quite good, and they were assuredly sexy, but they weren't strippers, just jiggly dancers. Kelly couldn't believe they could shake that much. Breasts, buttocks, and especially bellies all shook and jiggled at a furious rate. She couldn't help thinking that this was what the Warden in her first prisoner of war camp had wanted her to do the night that Billy Zagoras had gotten himself in so much trouble and had his balls crushed.

The food was good and plentiful, the wine was heady, the music was loud and the women were determined to please.

Ahmed leaned over next to Kelly.

"We're all going to get laid later. Stick around and get yourself a piece of ass. The girls are all curious about you."

Oh, for crying out loud, thought Kelly. How the hell was she going to deal with this? She wondered if

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she should let Ahmed know that she was a woman. She was afraid that if she did, he would expect to be able to take advantage of her, but if she didn't, it seemed he would be expecting her to join him in his debauchery every night.

"This is your last chance for a while," he said. "We leave tomorrow, and there won't be much chance for enjoyment while we are moving. What do you say, Traveler?"

"Not tonight," rasped Kelly from under her hood, "at least not here. I'm not used to public displays and orgies like this. I keep to myself and if I engage in sexual relations, I do it in the privacy of my own tent. Understood?"

"Oh," said Ahmed with a surprised look on his face, "OK."

Kelly was willing to bet that Ahmed had never met a man who wouldn't jump at the chance to get laid, any time, anywhere, in public or private. He was clearly surprised by her reaction to his offer, which he surely believed was magnanimous.

"Are you married to any of these women, Ahmed?" she asked.

He looked at her quizzically.

"Married?" he said, "That's for civilized men. We're nomads, in case you hadn't noticed. We share our women, as well as everything else. But we don't marry, at least not in the way you probably mean. If you want to get laid, it's yours for the asking."

"What do you do with the children if one of the women gets pregnant?"

"Oh, the women raise them and take care of them.

When the boys are old enough, we teach them how to ride and shoot and trade. The girls are taught how to cook and how to please the boys."

How nice, thought Kelly.

"If you want," he said, "I could send one of the women to your tent later."

Kelly looked back at the whirling, gyrating women, shaking their bodies in time with the music. She couldn't believe they could jiggle that much. The men were fascinated by them, watching every jiggle. They were barely covered by the flimsy, transparent garments they were wearing. *At least it looks like great exercise*, thought Kelly.

She wondered if she could confide in one of the women. *Nah*, she thought. *They're all too gossipy*. She had seen them discussing the events of the night before and looking at her as they tried to figure out who she was.

"No, I don't think so," said Kelly, "not tonight, at least."

"OK," said Ahmed with a sigh. He couldn't figure out why a tough character like Kelly wasn't interested in sex. He sat back and enjoyed the dancers. They all clapped in time with the music. They ate, they drank, and they anticipated the orgy to come. When the dancers started to swirl closer to the men and remove some of their clothing, Kelly got up to leave.

"Good night, Ahmed Khan."

"Good night Traveler," he said, not taking his eyes off the women. He dismissed her with a half-hearted wave. He wasn't interested in her or her suspected hang-ups. He was interested in getting drunk and

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getting laid.

Kelly left and returned to her tent, certain that it wouldn't be long before Ahmed and his brother and his cousin were sating their desires. The rest of the men and women in the camp seemed to be having a party of their own. All the women were carousing with the rest of the men. Kelly was willing to bet that there wouldn't be a very effective guard tonight, if there was one at all.

It was noisy in the camp, but it finally quieted down. She removed her boots and rubbed her feet, but kept on all the rest of her clothing.

She slept well.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

There was a dense mist in the camp when Kelly poked her nose out through the tent flap in the morning. There was an orange glow in the east. It was going to be a humid day.

As she pulled on her boots, the old Navy rule of thumb drifted into Kelly's mind:

*Red sun at night,
Sailor's delight,
Red sun in the morning,
Sailors take warning.*

They could be looking at some bad weather today. At least they weren't at sea or in the air. But the weather on land in the mountains and the desert could be pretty nasty too.

Kelly visited the bushes. She was almost surprised by one of the men coming to relieve himself but she stood up quickly, pulling up her pants, and strode past him before he could see that she was a woman. They smiled at each other as they passed.

Kelly approached Ahmed's tent. There was a lot of

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hustle and bustle going on. They were getting ready to break camp and the women were serving breakfast. The women smiled at her, and one of them held open the tent flap for her to enter.

Ahmed was dressed and already seated at his low table eating breakfast.

"Good morning," said Kelly.

"Hi," he said. "Did you sleep well?"

"Very well, how about you?"

"Oh, we partied into the wee hours, but Delilah finally put me to sleep. We'll all be all right. It's good to have a little fun when you can, though. You don't have much fun, do you?"

"I'm not a fun kind of guy," rasped Kelly in as menacing a voice as she could manage. "I'll keep to myself if you'll leave me alone. You can have all the fun you can stand as far as I'm concerned, just don't expect me to participate in any of your orgies."

"OK," said Ahmed, "but if you ever want to relax your guard a little, you'll be welcome."

"OK."

The women brought breakfast and they ate in silence. Ahmed washed it down with wine. Kelly drank water.

"When are we leaving?" asked Kelly.

"We'll be leaving as soon as we break camp," said Ahmed. "We should be on the road in a couple of hours. We have a long way to go today."

"Where are we going?"

"We want to get out of the mountains by tonight," he said. "There is a place at the end of the last pass where we usually camp. It's all down hill from here,

but there are a lot of rocks along the road. We follow the valleys. Usually, nobody bothers us, but there are reports of bandits about, so keep an eye out."

"Hmmm. Bandits, huh? I'll be ready."

That's just what she needed. Bandits! Oh, well, nothing comes easy.

She finished her breakfast quickly and got up to leave.

"Break down your tent and load up your camel," said Ahmed. "Be ready to leave. We don't want to waste any time."

"OK," said Kelly, "I'll be ready."

She returned to her tent and dismantled it. She rolled up the canvas inside the skins and reassembled her pack. She slung her carbine over her shoulder and strapped on her pistol. She picked up her pack and slung it over her shoulder. She headed over to the corral using her staff to help support the weight of her burdens.

When she got to the corral, she dropped her staff and pack on the ground. She entered the rope compound and found Mamoud. She stroked his neck and led him out, away from the other animals. Other men were doing the same with their rides and transports. Abdul was there. He seemed to have taken a liking to Kelly and asked if she needed any help.

"I sure could use some," she said. Mamoud was acting a little recalcitrant. He was intent on making it difficult for Kelly to get the saddle on him. Abdul helped her and it didn't take long. He helped her load her gear, including her staff, onto the camel. He showed her a large pocket attached to the saddle,

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which he said could be used as a scabbard for her carbine.

"You may need to use it," he said, "we've run into bandits on the road, south of here. A couple of years ago they ambushed us. We tried to fight them off, but they got away with some of our animals and a lot of us had to walk out of the mountains. At least they didn't get any of the women. That's what they were really after."

Oh, great, thought Kelly.

"Don't worry, Abdul. I'll be ready, and they'd better not get too close to me."

"I guess not," said Abdul. He still remembered the fear he felt when Kelly had her knife to his throat. "I'd much rather have you as a friend than an enemy, Mr. Traveler. Keep your eyes open."

Kelly just grinned. Abdul couldn't see her face under the ever-present hood, but he sensed her assent. Kelly led her mount away and went back to the place where she had pitched her tent. She coaxed Mamoud to kneel and settle on the ground. They didn't have to wait long. The Mongols broke camp in a remarkably short time, loading up the camels with everything.

Soon, they were forming up in single file. Kelly mounted her camel and coaxed him to his feet. She took her place far back in the line as they started to move off. The sun was over the horizon and the mist was burning off. Kelly twisted around to look back towards the castle. She couldn't see it behind the mountains and hills, but she knew she would miss the place and Prester John. She would have to remember

to keep it a secret.

They followed a well-worn, dusty trail through winding valleys, around the bases of the mountains. Every curve seemed to present a perfect place for an ambush. Kelly watched the high cliffs nervously.

The sun beat down on them and Kelly sweltered in her heavy clothing. She drank plenty of water. She kept the hood over her face. She fingered the butt of the carbine.

Several hours passed. The mountains got smaller as the miles went by. Clouds began to gather in the sky and the wind started blowing the dust through the valley along the pass from behind them. They had gone about fifteen miles when they stopped for a midday meal and a short rest. They were back on the trail in a half an hour.

They had gone a couple of miles more when they rounded a curve and found a large tree down, and blocking their path. Kelly had a bad feeling. The wind was kicking up even more, but she didn't think the tree had fallen naturally. Ahmed and his men were trying to move it by tying ropes to it and dragging it out of the way with their camels. Kelly drew the carbine out of its scabbard, slapped in a magazine, and chambered a round.

She looked up nervously at the high ground on both sides of the trail. She thought she caught movement along a ridge to the right. She coaxed Mamoud to the ground and dismounted, pulling the reins over his head.

"Stay put, Mamoud." She didn't know if he understood or not, but he seemed to settle in for a

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rest. Kelly ran over to a boulder at the foot of the hills on the right. She turned and looked back up at the hills on the right, but she couldn't see anything. The wind was whipping up the dust. Mamoud seemed to be happy to crouch down with his head pointed away from the wind.

Kelly peeked over the rock. She just saw a figure moving behind a bush on the cliff over head. She looked at the wall in front of her. There was a crevasse back up the canyon that looked like it led up to the heights. Ahmed and his men were mostly occupied with the tree, but a couple of them were nervously scanning the hills like Kelly, pointing their old, muzzle loading rifles at the heights.

Kelly crept around the boulder, keeping her eyes on the place where she had seen movement. She ducked her head, bent double at the waist and ran back up the pass a couple of hundred meters, to where she had seen the crevasse. It was a regular path up to the top of the ridge. But it didn't stop where she thought she had seen the bandits, it kept going up to the next ridge. Kelly kept climbing. She thought, maybe she could get behind the bandits, so if they tried anything, she could surprise them and ambush them the way they seemed to be ambushing the caravan.

It wasn't an easy climb. She slung the carbine across her shoulders as she climbed. It took about fifteen minutes to get up to the top of the second ridge. She hoped that no one had noticed her. She finally crawled along the ridge and peeked over the edge at the bandits. Sure enough, there they were. She

counted seven of them, all armed the same way as Ahmed's men, with single shot rifles.

They were watching Ahmed move the tree. Kelly wondered what they were waiting for. She looked over at the cliffs on the other side of the pass. She spotted two men over there, too. She looked back down. The bandits had sprung their trap. Ahmed and his men were standing there with their hands in the air, surrounded by mounted bandits leveling guns at them. No one seemed to have seen her. Then she heard a sound behind her. She rolled over and as she did, she noticed a man off to her left creeping toward her along the ridge and looking down on the scene below. He was unaware of Kelly. She quietly crawled backward behind a pile of rocks so when he got close to her, she would be behind him. She quietly put down the carbine. She drew her knife. He crept along at an agonizingly slow pace. Kelly quietly stripped off the hood and the heavy shirt it was attached to. She could move much more easily in just a T-shirt.

The man, finally, was right in front of her. She took a deep breath. She grasped the long dagger. She jumped out of her hiding place onto his back and knocked him down. It was a silent combat. He was part of the ambush and didn't want to alert Ahmed. Kelly didn't want to alarm the other bandits. His turban fell off as they fell. Kelly grabbed his hair and pulled his head back, exposing his throat. She brought the knife to bear and drew blood.

The man twisted and turned, but Kelly held on and put her knee in the small of his back, pulling up on his hair and drawing the knife across his throat.

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"I will kill you if you don't quit squirming," she whispered into his ear.

He twisted a little more and Kelly sliced down the front of his chest, cutting through his garment and drawing blood again. He finally stopped struggling.

"That's better," she said in her best attempt at a masculine rasp. "Now, I'm going to get off you and tie you up, so no tricks, or I'll slit your throat from ear to ear."

The man remained passive. Kelly got to her knees. She stuck the dagger in the ground so it would be easy to retrieve if she needed it. She brought out the twine Mustafa had given her to use as a garrote and reached out to pull one of the man's arms behind him. But the man was ready this time. He was incredibly strong. He spun around to face Kelly. He produced a knife of his own. He lurched at Kelly.

Kelly grabbed the dagger and just had time to bring it up between their bodies before the man landed on her, stabbing down at her face. He almost missed, but the sharp curved knife sliced across her left cheek in a shallow wound. The man went limp and he dropped his knife. He coughed and blood dribbled from his mouth. Kelly felt the man's heavy body collapse on top of her. She suddenly realized that his blood was pouring out all over her. He had been stabbed by his own momentum when he jumped on Kelly. His body twitched a couple of times. His eyes bulged out as if they might pop out of his head. Then he stopped breathing and all movement stopped.

Kelly squirmed underneath the heavy man. She

finally managed to roll him off of her. She was an awful mess. He must have bled a gallon of blood onto her chest from the wound in his chest. Kelly pulled on the knife. It was stuck between the man's ribs. It had apparently pierced his heart and lung. She wiped her hands on the man's clothes to get the slimy blood off of them. She had to stand up, lean over, put her foot on the man's chest, and pull on it to get it out of his dead body, but it finally came loose.

She wiped herself off as well as she could and then she peered over the edge to see what was going on down below. Ahmed was standing there in the middle of the pass with his hands in the air. His rifle was on the ground next to him. A group of five men had ridden horses into the valley and were talking down at him. The men on the ridge below Kelly had their rifles trained on the caravan. Kelly looked across at the other ridge on the other side of the pass. Those men also had their rifles trained down on the caravan.

Two across the way, seven below her, and five in the pass, all armed with muzzleloaders. Ahmed had about twenty-five men and women. All the men, at least, were armed and presumably would defend themselves. Kelly had had enough of being pushed around. She had been told again and again that she should be willing to shoot to kill if the situation called for it. She determined that this situation definitely called for it.

She figured she should try to get the two across the way first. Then she could draw down on the ones below her. She crawled back and got her carbine. She had always been a good shot, and the targets were

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only about a hundred meters away across the narrow pass. She aimed carefully at the one on the left. She squeezed off a round and quickly drew a bead on the other one. He was looking across at her. Just as he spotted Kelly, she squeezed off a second round. Both rounds had found their mark.

She leaned over the edge and looked down at the men below her. They had no place to hide. She loosed several rounds quickly, without even aiming, at both the men in the pass and the men directly below her.

"Don't move!" she yelled at the men on the ledge below her. "Don't move or I'll kill every damn one of you." They crouched down and put their arms in the air.

What cowards, Kelly thought, cowards and bullies. She looked down in the valley. The bandits were fleeing back down the pass, away from Ahmed and the caravan. Ahmed and his men had picked up their rifles and were firing at their retreating backs. The old muzzleloaders seemed to be more frightening than effective. Either that, or Ahmed's men weren't very good shots. They all fired their one shot and then it got quiet.

"Ahmed Khan! I've got them covered up here. There are seven of them. Send some men up here to disarm them."

Ahmed squinted up at her, shielding his eyes. It was overcast, but the light was still too bright if you looked up into it.

"Is that you, Traveler?"

"Yeah. Get some of your men up here to disarm these men. I don't want to have to kill them, but I will

if they don't behave, so hurry up and get your ass up here."

The bandits below Kelly were huddled together, looking up at her in fear. She had the carbine trained on them. Now that the battle was over and the adrenaline was subsiding, she realized that she was exhausted from her climb and from the fight with the bandit. He had been very strong and she figured she was lucky to have gotten out of that fight alive.

She hoped that the bandits who ran away down in the valley wouldn't climb up and sneak on her. Ahmed's men were making their way up to the seven on the ridge below her. Ahmed himself was climbing up to her.

When the seven bandits below were under the control of Ahmed's men, Kelly crawled back and got into her heavy shirt. It wouldn't do for Ahmed to see her in a blood-soaked T-shirt. She had the hood over her face by the time he climbed over the crest. He saw the dead bandit covered with blood.

"Damn, you killed him? I guess you do know how to use that knife. And it appears you don't mind killing a man when you have to. I'm glad I didn't mess with you. I'm glad Abdul didn't either. Damn! Hand to hand, a knife between the ribs."

"I'm afraid so. There are a couple of others across the way," she pointed, "I think I killed them too. I might have only wounded them but I had to put them out of action."

"Damn, Traveler," he said, "I figured you were a little dangerous, but I didn't expect this. I'm just glad you're on our side, not theirs."

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He looked around at the mess. The bandit lay in a huge pool of blood, his knife still in his fist. It had obviously been a violent fight, and a fair one. The man had been stabbed in the chest, not in the back. Kelly was bleeding from the wound across her cheek. Ahmed noticed.

"Here," he said, "let me look at that."

Before she could stop him, he pushed the hood back to look at Kelly's cheek. The cut wasn't deep or serious, but it was bleeding profusely.

Ahmed pulled a piece of cloth from within his robes and placed it against the wound. He held it tight. Then he got a good look at Kelly. He shook his head.

"That will leave a scar." He looked closely at her face. "Damn," he said, "you're just a boy. How old are you, Traveler?"

Kelly was unmasked. She wasn't sure how to answer. She had to come to a quick decision. She decided on the truth.

"Ahmed," she said. "I'm not a boy."

Ahmed stared at her. Realization suddenly blossomed across his face.

"You're a woman?" he said with an incredulous expression on his face.

"That's right, Ahmed, but if you tell anyone, I'll cut your balls off and stuff them down your throat."

Ahmed sputtered. He staggered backward, almost dropping the bandage. He handed it to Kelly and she applied it to her cheek again. He had no doubt that she was entirely capable of it. She frightened him. He had been a little afraid of her after the first night's

events, but here in the midst of all this slaughter, he realized just how dangerous she could be.

"Ahmed, I am an officer in the United States Navy. I was flying a fighter over hostile territory when I was shot down and captured. I've been in a couple of prisoner of war camps, but Prester John helped me and nursed me back to health. I'm trying to get back home."

"Damn," was all Ahmed could say as he stared at her.

"Have you ever heard of a place known as the 'End Of The Line'?"

That startled him. "Heard of it? I've been there. Way up north, right?"

"That's the place."

"I've got a cousin named Tamar who was taken there. He's been there for years. I went all the way up there to try to see him but they wouldn't let me in. It's a long way from here. They threatened to put me in there too if I wouldn't go away. I didn't know what to do. I came back here and went back to trading along the caravan route. I guess you've figured out that we are not quite as fierce as we would like people to think we are. We're really only simple traders. We hardly ever bother anyone except in self-defense. We're pretty honest, most of the time."

"Hmmm," said Kelly. She was getting an idea.

"Ahmed, how would you like to take a crack at getting your cousin out of that place?"

"Oh...jeez, I don't know about that. I don't think it's possible."

"Shit," said Kelly, "that's what everybody says, but

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I'm not so sure. I know how to get through a minefield like that. It's sewn with old contact mines, not the magnetic kind. It takes time, but someone who knows what he's doing can crawl across, probing for mines with a knife, and if he's careful, he won't be detected. Once inside the minefield, we would have the element of surprise and could catch them with their pants down."

"You're crazy," said Ahmed. "Even if we got inside the minefield, that place is impossible to get into. Have you ever seen the walls? They're twenty feet tall."

"I was a prisoner inside them. Listen, they open those doors sometimes, but I think I could climb over the wall and surprise them. They are so convinced that no one would ever try to get in, that all their efforts are concentrated on the prisoners. A stealth attack at night might be successful."

"You are out of your mind. We are Mongols, but I'm Ahmed Khan, not Genghis Khan, and my small band is not the Golden Hoard. They've got machine guns and all kinds of other stuff. You see what kinds of weapons we carry: knives, swords, and muzzle loading muskets and rifles. Hell, most of us can't even shoot straight. We don't even have sights on most of our weapons."

"Yeah, but they haven't dealt with me, a well-armed, well trained, pissed off U.S. Navy Officer," she said. "I've got a score to settle with them, and there are a couple of prisoners that I want to rescue. Maybe we could rescue your cousin, too."

* * * *

Ahmed looked at her in disbelief. But, damn, she sure was tough. She'd been able to sneak up on one of his best men and overpower him. Then she had scared the hell out of Ahmed himself after sneaking into his tent. She had killed this man lying on the ground in front of her during hand-to-hand combat. And there were two more men across the valley who might be wounded or dead. She sure was dangerous. She sure did know how to sneak into places and surprise men. And she didn't appear to be afraid of anything.

"Well," said Ahmed, "I sure wouldn't want to try it."

They stared at each other.

"Do you seriously think you could do it?" he asked.

She chuckled. "What do you think?" For the first time, he saw her brilliant smile and was captivated.

"Damn," he said, "I guess if anyone I've ever known could do it, you could."

* * * *

Kelly sensed she was winning him over. She knew how to get his attention.

"Damn, it's hot," she said. She pulled her hooded woolen shirt off over her head. Ahmed stared at the nipples poking at the blood-soaked T-shirt on either side of her sheathed dagger where it was strapped to her chest. He licked his lips. She couldn't help thinking that he looked like a Mongolian Al Bundy.

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Men are so predictable.

He lusted for her and was frightened of her at the same time.

"Ola!" came a shout from across the valley, "Ahmed Khan!"

Ahmed shook his head as if coming out of a trance. He turned and looked across at the men who had climbed up the other cliffside.

"Yes?" he yelled back to them.

"These two men are dead over here," came the response.

"OK," he yelled back. "Damn," he said looking back at Kelly with respect and fear, "Maybe someone like you could pull it off." His eyes drifted back down to her nipples.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. "Don't even think about it. I've had enough of that. They raped me in one of those damn prisons. I'm not one of your whores."

Ahmed stammered, "Oh, I didn't mean anything," he said, dragging his eyes away from her nipples. "At least now I know why you didn't want to stay around after dinner. Why didn't you just tell me you were a woman?"

Kelly laughed out loud.

"Are you kidding? Would you have respected me? Or would you have just looked at me as another plaything or somebody who could cook for you?"

"I see. You're right, of course. I wish I could get you in the sack right now."

"I know, Ahmed, but you can forget about that. I doubt I'll be interested in sex for a long time. But I

would like to head north and try to break our friends out of that place. What do you say?"

"Damn, I don't know. Let me think about it."

Kelly was shrugging back into her shirt. "I expect you to keep my secret."

"Wouldn't you be more comfortable if you just let everyone know?"

"Hmmm," she said, "I would, at that. But what do you think the reaction of the rest of your people would be?"

"Listen, they're already scared to death of you. I don't think it would make any difference."

"If one of them gets drunk and makes a pass at me, I'll castrate him, or worse."

"Understood. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

"OK, my name is Kelly Winchester. I'm a Lieutenant."

"OK," said Ahmed. He bowed slightly. "Welcome to our family, Lieutenant Kelly Winchester of the United States Navy. You have saved our goods and perhaps our lives. We are in your debt. I will consider your proposal, but I doubt if many of my men would join us in such a crazy adventure. Let's get back down to the road and get out of the mountains. We need to get to our campsite and we have lost a great deal of time. Let's get going."

They climbed down the rocks. Kelly drew some strange looks when the men saw her. There was a lot of whispering. The women noticed, too. Kelly just stared straight ahead from astride the camel as they started off again. She carried the carbine across her

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lap. Everyone noticed how she kept her eyes moving along the heights. It was comforting and frightening at the same time.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They hastened along the dusty road, but camels, especially when loaded down, are not inclined to hurry. As darkness started to overtake them, they pushed even harder. The mountains turned to hills and the cliffs on each side of the pass widened out. It was getting really dark by the time they rounded the last hill and saw the campfires of another caravan in the distance.

They were finally through the pass and out of the mountains. Bandits rarely left the high country. The campground was like a desert oasis. There was a well and trees and several traders lived there.

The other caravan was headed north, through the pass. They welcomed Ahmed. They were Siberians from Kamchatka and they knew Ahmed. They were still dining and they asked Ahmed and his little group to join them in the evening meal. As soon as the tents were erected and a central fire started, Ahmed headed to their leader's tent. He insisted that Kelly join him.

"We've got to tell them that we were attacked," said Ahmed, "and that we fought them off. The

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bandits will be pissed off, so we have to warn these folks."

"Should I wear my hood and go back to posing as a man for dinner?" she asked.

"I wouldn't bother, if I were you," said Ahmed. He chuckled. "They're just like us, but they can damn well recognize a dangerous woman when they see one. Your exploits will make a great story, and they'll tell it to others. You might even become a legend."

"Great," she said, "and all I want is to keep a low profile and get out of here without being re-captured. Please don't tell anyone that I'm a U.S. Naval officer."

"OK," said Ahmed.

Kelly left her heavy shirt behind and changed into a clean T-shirt. She knocked off most of the dried blood and used a little water to wash up. The wicked dagger was in place across her front. She removed the crude bandage from her cheek. The wound was scabbing up and had quit bleeding. She left it unbandaged.

They entered the tent. The smells of food were heavy in the dense warm air inside. There, at a low table similar to the one Ahmed had, sat a large, rotund man with a poorly shaven face, wearing furs and chewing on a bone. He looked up at them.

"Nicholas," said Ahmed in greeting. Nicholas rose and they embraced, slapping each other's backs.

"Ahmed Khan," said Nicholas, "how are you, old friend? We haven't crossed paths for almost a year." Ahmed looked like a pygmy next to the giant Nicholas.

"That's right," said Ahmed. They exchanged little

pleasantries for a moment, then Nicholas noticed Kelly and looked at her nervously. "What's this, you bring a woman into my tent, to my table?"

Ahmed turned to her.

"Nicholas," he said, "I want you to meet the most dangerous warrior I've ever met. I venture she's even more dangerous than you."

Nicholas looked her up and down. He snorted; he was obviously not convinced.

"Careful," said Ahmed. "She fought a man hand to hand less than eight hours ago. He was about your size. He's dead now. She stabbed him in the heart with that little dagger of hers. As far as I'm concerned, she's one of my most reliable men, even though she's not a man. But she's tougher than any of them. Smarter, too."

"Oh, really," said Nicholas. "I guess I need to hear about this." He smiled grimly. He looked her over again. Then he sat down, gesturing to Ahmed and Kelly to join him. He clapped his hands twice and a boy brought two more bowls of the steaming hot soup he had before him.

Nicholas slurped the soup using a large wooden spoon.

"I've missed your soup," said Ahmed. "Taste it Kelly, it's good, but be careful, it's very hot. It's full of hot peppers and spices."

Kelly looked around for some water.

"Here," said Nicholas, "Have a cup of wine."

He handed a cup to Ahmed and poured another one for Kelly.

Kelly tried the soup. It was hot, but it didn't really

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get to her until she swallowed, then it burned her throat all the way down to her stomach.

"Ayah." She grabbed the wine and sloshed some down her throat.

Nicholas and Ahmed were watching, and laughing at her antics.

Nicholas reached out with a plate of greens.

"Here," he said kindly, "munch on some of this. It will help."

Kelly grabbed a handful of the leafy stuff and crammed it into her mouth. It cooled the hot pepper pain going down her chest.

"Thank you. That was unexpected."

"Yeah," said Nicholas, "I know. It kinda sneaks up on you. But it is tasty."

Kelly was sipping just a little bit more. It really was good, once she figured out how to sip it a little at a time.

"Mmmm, it is good."

They all laughed and slurped some soup.

"Ahhh," said Nicholas with a sigh. "Now tell me how you came to kill a great big man like myself with that little knife of yours."

"It's not that little," said Kelly, bristling. He apparently didn't believe she could hurt someone as big and tough as he was.

Kelly and Ahmed looked at each other.

"Nicholas," said Ahmed, "Kelly is a quiet person. Let me tell this story."

"OK," said Nicholas.

He shifted his bulk to listen to Ahmed. He smiled good-naturedly.

"First, she is a warrior," said Ahmed. "She is always well-armed, and she knows how to take care of herself. I know from personal experience." He paused, with a sidelong look at Kelly, collecting his thoughts. He wasn't sure how much he wanted to tell Nicholas. "We were coming through the pass at the cliffs, you know the place?"

"I know it," said Nicholas. "It's a place where bushwhackers like to ambush honest traders like you and me."

"Right," said Ahmed. "Well, someone had cut down a tree and let it fall across the road. As we tried to move it, Kelly saw men on the heights overlooking us. She went back along the pass and found a path leading up to the heights. She climbed up and got up high behind the bandits. Then this great big old bastard came sneaking along, making sure that no one would do what Kelly had just done. They fought, hand to hand, knife to knife. Kelly killed him. I found him in a pool of his own blood with a stab wound in his chest. He wounded her, here, during the struggle."

Ahmed reached over and stroked Kelly's left cheek where the man's knife had sliced through her skin.

"A pity," said Nicholas, looking at her wound. "Such a pretty face. That will leave a scar."

"But wait," said Ahmed, "I'm not finished."

"There's more?" said Nicholas.

"Oh, yeah," said Ahmed. "A lot more." He was really getting into telling the story. "After she killed that guy, real quietly mind you, so no one could hear what was going on, she looked down and saw that

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the bandits had us at gunpoint and were about to rob us. She looked across to the other cliff and saw two more over there. Finally, there were seven bandits below her with their rifles trained on us from the ledge."

"Damn," said Nicholas. He looked over at Kelly. "What did you do?"

"Ahem," said Ahmed. "She shot the two across the way, then she sprayed bullets all over the place, scaring away the bandits in the pass and capturing the ones on the cliff. When we checked the two on the other cliff, they were dead-shot in the face, both of them. We disarmed the others. We took their rifles, knives and swords, then we tied them up and left them there. Their buddies will find them, I guess, and untie them. But I'll bet that bunch never messes with my caravan ever again."

Ahmed was breathless as he rushed to finish the story.

Nicholas looked back and forth between them. "You're kidding, of course." He laughed tentatively. "It's a good story, though."

"You want to buy some slightly used rifles, swords, and knives?" asked Kelly with a deadpan look on her face.

"You're headed into the pass," said Ahmed. "Be careful. But when you get to the cliffs, you'll see the tree that we had to move. I'm pretty sure the bandits came back after we left and removed the bodies, but if they didn't, they'll still be there, right where we left them."

"You're not kidding, are you?" said Nicholas.

"We're not kidding," said Kelly. She stared him down.

"I'm just glad she's on my side," said Ahmed.

"Well, damn," said Nicholas, "I guess so."

Nobody said anything for a moment.

"Well," said Nicholas, "I guess it's about time somebody paid back those miserable bandits. They've been preying on our caravans for years. I wish you could have killed them all. We're out here where there is no law. We have to take care of ourselves, but nobody has ever been able to fight those bastards off. You say you killed three of them. And it sounds like you humiliated them, too. Good! That's good. Very good." He really laughed this time.

He poured more wine.

"I salute you, young lady," said Nicholas. "I salute you and I thank you."

He took a long drink from his cup. Then he roused himself and struggled to his feet. "I have something to show you."

He went over to a pile of blankets and other gear. He rummaged around in it for a moment, then he picked up something and stood up. When he turned around, he was holding an AK-47 rifle.

"What do you think of this?" he said, presenting it proudly to Ahmed.

"Wow," said Ahmed, "where did you get this?"

"I got it in the south," said Nicholas. He lowered his voice. "I got it from the Dragon Lady."

Nicholas and Ahmed looked meaningfully at each other. Kelly was startled.

"The Dragon Lady?" she asked. "I was told to

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contact someone named the Dragon Lady. Is this the Dragon Lady who lives in the river city of Kwaize?"

The two men turned to look at her.

"Talk about dangerous women," said Nicholas.

"What do you know about the Dragon Lady?" asked Ahmed.

"Ah," said Kelly, hedging, "I was told to contact her. She owes a friend of mine a favor. I was told she could help me in certain ways."

"Watch yourself," said Nicholas, "she is one of the biggest, most powerful and dangerous criminals I know. If it's illegal, she runs it. And she doesn't care who gets hurt."

"She's really quite a nasty person," said Ahmed.

"But," said Nicholas, "she has almost anything you might want, for a price."

"May I?" said Kelly, reaching out for the weapon.

"Be my guest," said Nicholas, handing it to her.

She looked it over. She retracted the slide, removing the magazine and ejecting a round, which she picked up and replaced in the clip. She placed her thumb in the chamber and looked down the rifling, using her fingernail as a mirror to send light up the bore. She closed the action and replaced the magazine.

"It looks pretty good," she said, "Russian made, not Chinese. Semi-automatic. That's good. You won't waste ammunition, and you can actually shoot at something and hit it, without spraying bullets all over the place. It hasn't been used very much. The bore's clean and the action works smoothly."

She handed the weapon back to Nicholas. The two

men were staring at her in amazement. She had just told them more about the AK-47 than they ever would have guessed on their own. To them, it was just a dangerous-looking weapon that would produce more firepower than a muzzleloader. Kelly impressed them as being a weapons expert.

"Very nice," she said.

Nicholas put the weapon down and patted it.

"Nicholas," said Ahmed, "you might need it. We fought off those bandits, but they're probably pissed off, and they might be hungry. They depend on stealing from us for food, and they didn't get anything from us."

"Hmmm," said Nicholas, "thanks for the warning. We'll have to keep an eye on the heights. Maybe I can scare them off with my new rifle."

"You might just be able to do that," said Kelly. "All the ones I saw were armed only with muzzleloaders, plus a motley assortment of knives and swords, and we disarmed most of them. With that AK-47 you will be much better armed than they are. I'll bet they're rattled by what we did to them when they tried to ambush us. When you haul that thing out and start blasting away, it should scare the shit out of them."

Ahmed and Nicholas laughed nervously. They were not used to hearing a woman talk like that--like a man.

They didn't talk much while they were eating. Kelly ate her food quickly, then she got up to leave.

"Thank you, Nicholas," she said, "I'm tired. I've had a long day, and I'm sure you two old friends have a lot you want to talk about, so I'll bid you good

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night.”

“Good night, Kelly,” said Nicholas.

“Good night,” said Ahmed.

Kelly left the tent. The wind was whipping through the camps. She made her way through the dark night back to her little tent and entered it. She took off the harness that held the stiletto and its sheath in place across her chest. She removed her boots and her heavy pants and curled up under her blankets. She slid the dagger into the fold of her pillow and wrapped her fingers around the hilt. She fell asleep quickly.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kelly had been asleep for a couple of hours when she was awakened by Ahmed as he stumbled through the flap of her tent. Startled, she whipped around, grabbing him by the front of his shirt and bringing the point of her knife up to contact his chest.

"Ahmed!" she said. "Don't ever sneak up on me like that! I might have killed you."

"Hello, Kelly," he mumbled wobbly, "oh, well." He grinned unsteadily.

"You're drunk," said Kelly.

Ahmed grinned. "Yeah," he said, slurring his words, "I guess I am a little drunk."

"Well," said Kelly, fully awake by this time and removing the knife from his chest, "what the hell do you want?"

"Mmmm," he mumbled, "you're so beautiful." He reached out and caressed her breast with his hand.

"Ahmed," she said, slapping his hand away, "don't do that. Go back to your tent and fool around with your other women. I'm not interested."

"Oh, Kelly," he whined, "come on. You're one hell of a woman. Come on, Kelly."

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"Ahmed," she said, pushing him away, "Ahmed." He continued to try to paw her. "Damn," she said.

She stood up. Ahmed looked up at her, clad in only her panties and T-shirt. He reached out to stroke her leg and ran his hand up to her crotch, rubbing her sex inside her panties. She slapped his hand away again. He was drooling. *Damn*, thought Kelly. She pulled on her heavy pants. She shrugged into her heavy shirt. She sat down again and pulled on her boots.

Ahmed continued to leer at her and try to cop a feel. He reached down and played with himself.

"If you don't quit it, I'll kick you in the balls so hard you won't be able to have sex for a month," she said.

"Aw, Kelly, come on. Give me a little lovin'." He leaned over and tried to kiss her, slobbering all over himself.

"Come on." She pushed him out of the tent and followed him. "Let's get you home."

She pulled him up to his feet and put her arm around him to help him as he staggered along beside her.

"Kelly, my love."

"What?" she said in exasperation.

"I've decided to go with you," he said.

"That's nice." She hadn't a clue what he was talking about. "Come on."

"Thank you, Kelly. Jeez, you're pretty."

"Ohhh K," she said. They were approaching his tent. She was almost having to drag him along. He was so drunk, he would have fallen down if she didn't continue to hold him up. They entered the tent.

She dragged him over to the pile of blankets and pillows on which he slept.

"Delilah," she said, "Jezebel. Come here and help me with this damned fool."

The women roused themselves. They came over to help Kelly with Ahmed. They were dressed in flimsy knee length nightgowns, loosely tied together in the front with nothing underneath.

"Oh, you poor baby," said Delilah, cooing over Ahmed.

"Poor baby, my ass," said Kelly. "He just came staggering into my tent, slobbering all over the place. I almost killed him before I figured out who he was."

"Don't worry," said Jezebel, removing her gown, "we know what he needs."

Delilah had slipped her gown off her shoulders and was cradling Ahmed's head between her ample breasts. "We can take care of him, now," she said. "Just leave him to us."

"Mmmm," Ahmed was mumbling and nuzzling Delilah. Jezebel joined them. They started to remove Ahmed's clothing. His erection escaped his pants and reared up, wobbling around. Jezebel leaned over and placed her lips over the end of it, sliding down over it and taking him down her throat.

"Ahhhh," said Ahmed as he leaned back with his eyes closed, his head nuzzling and licking Delilah's large, erect nipples.

"I'm out of here, girls," said Kelly. She had had enough of Ahmed for one night.

She returned to her tent, got undressed, and curled back up, falling asleep quickly.

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As she fell asleep, she wondered what he meant about going with her.

Chapter Thirty

When Kelly awoke in the morning, the wind was whipping through the camp and it was raining. She dressed quickly and strapped on her pistol. She headed towards Ahmed's tent.

She entered. Ahmed sat there in the middle of the tent at his little table. Jezebel and Delilah bustled around. There was coffee and meat on the table and Ahmed was gnawing on a joint of the meat.

"We'll have some sliced potato with onions and peppers in a minute, Kelly," said Jezebel.

"He's not feeling too well," said Delilah.

"I guess not," said Kelly. Nevertheless, she sat down across from him and said, "How're you feeling?"

"Ohhhh," was all he said. He held his head and closed his eyes.

"How much did you drink last night?" she asked.

"Ohhhh," he moaned, "too much."

"You've got that right. Do you remember what happened?"

He looked up at her. "What did I do?"

"You stumbled into my tent and tried to seduce

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me, you damned fool. I almost killed you before I figured out who the fuck you were."

"Ohhhh," he groaned, shaking his head, "Kelly, I'm sorry. I guess you were asleep. I guess you weren't interested." Then his eyes cleared a little and he looked up at her, "How'd I do?" He grinned.

Kelly looked at him in exasperation.

"You didn't do anything," she said curtly, "but you tried. I brought you back here and these two dear souls took care of you."

She reached across the table, grabbing his chin and holding his face so he had to look at her. "Look at me," she said, "if you ever try anything like that again, I will make you wish you had never been born. Do you understand?"

He looked back at her miserably. He nodded his head. "Uh huh," he said, "I understand, Kelly."

Delilah brought a plate of sautéed potatoes with onions and peppers. It smelled marvelous.

"It's just that you're so damned good-looking," said Delilah as she placed the plate on the table, "and he's used to getting what he wants. I seriously doubt if any woman has ever told him no. After all, he is the Khan. Don't you understand, Kelly?"

"Hmmm." She had never thought of it that way. "Hmmm. Where I come from, men don't just get whatever they want, no matter who they are."

"He was so horny last night," said Jezebel, "he took on both of us before we could get him to sleep."

The three of them grinned at each other lasciviously.

Damn, thought Kelly. "Well, maybe you had better

just go back to thinking of me as a man again. I'm not interested in having sex with anyone, right now."

"OK, Kelly," Ahmed croaked. "I understand. You're off-limits. I'll leave you alone."

"OK," said Kelly. "Now let's have breakfast."

She helped herself to everything. They ate in silence.

"You said something last night," said Kelly.

"Hmmm, what's that?"

"You said you were going to go with me. What the hell did you mean by that?"

"Oh, that," said Ahmed, "I decided, after a long and serious discussion with my friend Nicholas, to accompany you on your quest to release prisoners from the End Of The Line. I intend to find my cousin, if I can."

Ahmed perked up a little.

"I learned something useful too. Nicholas knows something about that place. I don't know how he knows it, but he said that all the mines are wired to a central control console in the fortress. They had to do it because of the snow and ice. Apparently, the weight of the snow, which gets quite high in some drifts, would trigger the mines, so they have to disarm them in the dead of winter."

"Hmmm," said Kelly, "makes sense. But why do they continue to use those helicopters to fly in and out? Why don't they just turn them off when they need to?"

"Nicholas says they don't want anyone to know that they ever turn them off, so they keep up the charade with the helicopter. Of course, the problem is,

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no one ever knows if they're armed or not. But if there's a lot of snow on the ground, or if it's snowing, it's a good bet that they are not turned on.

"That means that we would have to try our raid in the winter, and that gives me time to drive this caravan to the south and deliver my goods before we start. It will also give me a chance to see the Dragon Lady. I want to see if I can get a gun like the one Nicholas has."

"The Dragon Lady," said Kelly, "Damn. I want to meet her, too, and yeah, if you want to try anything like a raid on the End Of The Line, you need to be armed a lot better than you are now, that's for sure."

"So we are agreed. We drive to the south and then you and I travel north."

"What about your family? And your caravan?"

"Well," said Ahmed, "they're both the same thing. Almost all of these men are part of my family. I consider the women who have joined us as part of the family too. I suppose you could say we are sort of married, even though I told you we were not. It's just not official."

"Well, what about them? We can't take all of them with us, and maybe none of them will want to come. What will they do without you to drive the caravan?"

"Oh, I have other relatives they could stay with. The Great Khan in Mongolia will take care of them for me if need be, especially the women and children. Some of the men might come with us."

"Children? I've never seen any children."

"Oh, they stay with their mothers. Jezebel and Delilah aren't the only women who have attached

themselves to my family. When one of them gets pregnant, she stays in camp to give birth. Sometimes they stay there to raise the children, sometimes they rejoin the caravan and leave the children with the others. Most of them camp on the edge of the great eastern desert, the Gobi. Some of them even go to Ulan Bator on occasion. And then there are some who stayed in China with the children. The first woman I ever had was Chinese. She was very beautiful, very refined and cultured. She bore my first child, but she wouldn't travel with me across the continent in a caravan. I see her and the kids whenever I get close to the river. She lives in a village near Kwaize where the Dragon Lady is. She makes me clean up and bathe and shave."

"You said you think some of the men might come with us?"

"I think Abdul will, he's quite smitten with you, you know. But he's too shy to try anything. I guess he's smarter than me."

They finished breakfast. Then Ahmed went to see Nicholas as both caravans broke camp.

Chapter Thirty-One

The two caravans headed out in the rain, Nicholas to the north, Ahmed and Kelly to the south. It rained all day and the wind whipped around them. It was miserable, but it rarely rained that much, so everyone was grateful.

They made about thirty miles before they camped for the night on the flat plain. The grass seemed to grow before their eyes with all the moisture the rain had delivered. That night, Ahmed didn't dine in his tent. The rain quit as they were setting up camp. It was dark before everyone gathered for dinner.

Ahmed told everyone what he and Kelly intended to do. Abdul, as expected, said he wanted to go too. Some of the other men said they might want to come along, but would have to think about it.

They settled into the grinding routine of breaking camp each morning, driving south and stopping each night. They averaged about thirty miles per day. By the end of the week, they had traveled over two hundred miles and were out of the tall grass and skirting the eastern edge of the Himalayas. The trail became a path. They ran into more and more people.

By the end of the next week, they passed a part of the crumbling Great Wall and entered farm country.

"This is where we usually stop and trade," said Ahmed. They proceeded to set up their tents and to make camp.

They contacted a fat Chinese man named Chan Li who said he would take care of everything. Ahmed seemed to trust him. Then Kelly, Ahmed and Abdul set off towards the river. Ali and Saleem had decided to come with them.

When Chan Li heard that they were going to see the Dragon Lady, he offered to transport them in a truck.

"It's several days on foot, but you can be there tomorrow in my truck. Make sure to give her my warmest regards."

Ahmed told Kelly that Chan Li was scared to death of the Dragon Lady. They left most of their gear in the camp. Ahmed said that they dare not carry any firearms. They would be jailed or worse if the Chinese authorities caught them with any guns.

"And keep your knife hidden," said Abdul.

The truck ride started out rough but smoothed out when they hit the paved road. There were more and more people, walking and riding bicycles as well as riding in trucks and busses. They were stopped at a checkpoint once, but Chan Li was well known, as was the driver of the truck, so they were waved on through.

They came to the river and crossed over it on a bridge. From there on, the road ran right along the bank of the river. It was dusk, by the time they

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entered Kwaize. The driver knew just where to take them, but he would not join them. He said that he would be at the Inn across the street and they could contact him there when they were ready to return.

He dropped them off in front of a gaudy restaurant, bar and nightclub. Ahmed was the only one who had ever been there before. They entered. Kelly had her hood over her face. They crossed the room, found a table with five chairs and sat down. The restaurant was about half full, but every seat at the bar was occupied. There was a little walkway behind the bar with a full-length mirror behind it. A pretty young girl wearing short shorts and a halter-top was dancing on the ledge provocatively to Chinese rock and roll.

A waitress in a tight silk dress with a slit up the side came over to them.

"Nee how," she said.

"Nee how," they all said, smiling.

"Mao Tai?" asked the waitress.

Everyone nodded.

She left to get their drinks.

Kelly looked at Ahmed. "Do you know how to speak any Chinese?"

"I've just said about all the words I know," he said.

"Would you like me to order some food?"

"Don't tell me you speak Chinese."

"I speak a little Mandarin," she said, "enough to get us some food."

"Is there anything you can't do?"

"Not much," said Kelly.

When the waitress came back with glasses and a

pitcher of the liquor, Kelly crooked a finger at her.

"Ching lai cha shui, yi wan fan," she said, then she ordered, "sia lo mein, drew jow chow mein, mi fan, trow fan, sio pai quat, and wanton."

"Shay shay," said the waitress.

"Boo ka chi," said Kelly.

The Mongols sat there, watching the two of them speaking Mandarin Chinese and wondering what she was saying.

When the waitress left, Kelly said quietly, "I wanted to do that so they would know we understand them if they want to snooker us in any way. They won't speak to each other in Chinese to hide what they're saying."

"Good idea," said Ahmed.

"What did you order for us?" said Abdul.

"Oh, you'll like it," she said. "I got us some tea and some bowls of rice. Then I ordered shrimp lo mein, pork chow mein, some steamed rice, some fried rice, some barbequed spare ribs, and some wontons. I hope the wontons are in a soup, but I'm not sure how they serve them around here."

"Boy," said Saleem, "that sounds awfully good."

There were nods and smiles all around.

""Do you know how to drink this stuff, Ahmed?" asked Kelly.

"Mao tai? Sure," he said. He poured a little in his cup from the pitcher and sipped a little.

"Wow," he said, snuffling, "that's strong."

"Here," said Kelly, "let me show you how to drink mao tai the way the natives drink it."

She filled every cup to within a quarter inch of the

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rim.

"OK, now," she said, "raise your cups."

They all picked up their cups.

"Don't spill any, now," she said, "it's awfully good stuff. You drink it straight down, let it just pour down your throat, then turn your cup upside down to show you drank it all and yell 'gon bey'. Roughly translated, that means 'down the hatch'."

She drew the cup to her lips and demonstrated. "Gon bey!" she yelled, licking her lips.

The Mongols looked at her as if she was a madman. She smiled around at them.

"Don't tell me all you brave Mongols are afraid to drink like me," she said.

Abdul was first. "Gon bey!"

Then there was a chorus of "Gon bey's" from the rest of them.

"We can get pretty drunk on this stuff, if we're not careful," said Kelly. "It hits bottom and sort of explodes. It's one of China's greatest products. It's almost impossible to get it outside of this country."

"Gon bey," rang out from another group of men at a table across the room. When the Mongols looked over at them, the Chinese men held up their cups, upside down, and grinned at Ahmed and his little group.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" asked Ahmed.

Kelly winked at him. She waved at the waitress, who was watching them in amusement. She came over to Kelly.

"Please send a cup of mao tai to the Dragon Lady

with our compliments," she said, "and ask her to join us if it is convenient. Bring us an extra cup for her."

Kelly didn't give the waitress a chance to say anything, she poured another cup and looked around at the Mongols. Too embarrassed to let a woman appear to be out drinking them, they all held out their cups. She poured a little in each one. A chorus of "Gon bey" rang out, followed by laughter. But Ahmed looked worried. He was terrified of the Dragon Lady, and he was afraid they would all get drunk and not be able to take care of themselves if they needed to.

Then, a troupe of musicians came traipsing through the room. They mounted a little stage in the corner. To a clashing of cymbals, a costume dragon followed them. As their eyes focused on the dragon gyrating between the tables, they realized that it was being animated by a group of five naked women. The men's eyes stayed riveted on the dragon. The cymbals crashed. "Gon bey!" rang out again. Jeez, they were having fun. The women sashayed over close to the Mongols and brushed their nude thighs against the men, giggling at their attempts to touch them.

The Dragon snaked its way through the restaurant. Choruses of "Gon bey" rang out, over and over. Then, with a clashing of cymbals, the Dragon costume was dropped on the floor and the women climbed up onto the walkway behind the bar with the girl who was rapidly shedding her hot pants and halter-top. Soon, there were six naked women jiggling around on the ledge, and everyone in the place was sloshing down the Mao Tai. The nightclub was filling up.

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About that time, the waitress brought their food. It smelled terrific. It was steaming hot and it tasted as good as it smelled. They used fingers to eat the ribs, ceramic spoons for the soup, and had to try to figure out chopsticks for everything else. Kelly tried to show them how to hold and use them, but the Mongols were having trouble. Drinking all that booze hadn't helped their motor skills.

It was a wild dinner, and it was delicious. They were all slightly tipsy, but Kelly had tried not to let them get too drunk, yet. They were, however, having an awfully good time, even Ahmed, who should have known better but could never resist a good-looking nude woman gyrating in front of him.

Kelly had kept her wits, though, and suddenly, there was a striking woman surrounded by big, tough-looking goons, standing next to her. Kelly knew instantly that this had to be the Dragon Lady.

She was tall, as women in China go, and her long black hair flowed almost to her waist. She wore quite a lot of makeup, especially some dark blue eye shadow and brilliant red lipstick. She had a slender figure and was dressed in a tight, red, silk dress with a slit up the left side to expose her leg. Kelly noticed that her leg was extensively tattooed. And she was wearing Western stiletto-style high-heeled shoes that matched her red garment. She was no spring chicken, Kelly guessed she must be in her fifties, but she was a very beautiful woman and had obviously taken very good care of herself.

The men were drooling all over the dancing bares and slurping down more booze and food. They didn't

notice the woman or that Kelly had stood up. The noise of the band was deafening, especially when they crashed the cymbals. Just then, to the crashing of cymbals, the nude girls jumped down over the bar to the floor and donned the dragon costume again, slithering through the audience and allowing the men at the tables to see them up close and cop an occasional feel.

Kelly stood up and faced the Dragon Lady. She pushed the hood back off of her head. The Dragon Lady's eyes flickered as she realized that Kelly was also a woman. Kelly poured her a cup of mao tai and handed it to her. She quickly downed her own and held her cup upside down mouthing the words, 'gon bey' with a smile. The Dragon Lady downed hers too, turning her cup upside down.

"How was the food?" she asked over the din.

"Han how chi," said Kelly.

That drew a smile from the woman. "Come with me," she said to Kelly. Kelly couldn't really hear her over the din, but she read her lips, and her intent was obvious. They smiled at each other.

She turned and strode quickly away across the room. Kelly followed her. They entered a narrow hallway and passed through a door at the end of it. When the door closed, the noise quieted. All of the goons stayed outside except one. At a nod from the Dragon Lady, he attempted to frisk Kelly.

Kelly brought her fist up into the surprised man's groin and as he doubled over in pain, she twisted around behind him, grabbing him by the hair, and pulling his head back to expose his throat. Drawing

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her knife, she placed it just under his Adam's apple as she kicked him behind the knees and sat on him when he hit the floor. The man groaned.

"Very nice," said the Dragon Lady in a high, tiny voice. Kelly looked up into the muzzle of a Luger, trained on her by the other woman. "Now let him up and put away that toy."

Kelly hesitated just a minute, but then she put away the dagger and got up off of the man on the floor. She stood there, ready for another round if he wanted to try anything.

"Get out of here," said the Dragon Lady to the man.

He left the room sheepishly. The two women stared at each other, sizing each other up.

"OK," said the Dragon Lady, "sit down."

She sat down in an uncomfortable-looking, straight-backed chair and crossed her legs, exposing the tattoo on her leg. Kelly did the same, in another chair just like it. They faced each other. The pistol had disappeared as quickly as Kelly's knife.

"Who are you," asked the Dragon Lady, "and what do you want?"

Kelly smiled at her. She didn't say anything. She reached inside her bodice and removed the little purse with all its treasures. She opened it and retrieved the letter John had written, addressed to "The Dragon Lady". She handed it to the woman who turned it over and back again.

"John," she said. "I recognize the seal. It's his handwriting."

Kelly nodded.

"I haven't heard from him in a very long time," she said. "Were you his lover?"

"No," said Kelly, "but he was very kind to me. We became friends."

"Hmmm," said the Dragon Lady, "I loved him once. But he didn't love me back. I tried to seduce him, but he's just so damned virtuous. He saved my life once." Kelly watched as the woman's eyes misted a little and she seemed to be far away for a moment.

She opened the letter and read it aloud.

"My dear Zoe. I haven't been called that in a very long time. Please allow me to introduce Lieutenant Kelly Winchester. She is a pilot in the United States Navy and was shot down about two years ago. She has had a very tough time of it during that time. I was able to rescue her from a precarious situation and nurse her back to health. I ask that you help her in any way you can. Yours, in sincerest friendship. With love, John."

The Dragon Lady held the letter in her lap. There was another page in the envelope.

"He included the poem, too," she said.

Kelly looked at her quizzically.

"You've never seen the poem?" asked the Dragon.

"No," said Kelly.

The Dragon Lady handed her the sheet of paper.

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THE DRAGON LADY

She moved stealthily through the mist.

She warn't no Lady.

Her weathered face was deeply tanned like the rest of her body.

She carried the M-60 at the ready.

Several chains of 7.62 NATO rounds draped over her shoulders.

The mud sucked at her naked feet as she slipped silently forward.

Her rippling muscles moved smoothly beneath the skin of her tall frame.

Her straight black hair, slightly damp in the humid air, clung to her shoulders and her back.

Her green eyes peered through the dense fog, looking for the enemy.

The dragon tattoo started at her left ankle and rose up her calf, claws grasping around her knee and thigh. The torso slipped up her flank to disappear into her short, short, cut-off jeans, only to re-emerge from under her pistol belt.

More claws,

Wicked wings,

Gaping jaws,

Along her side,

And a crest which disappeared up

into her flimsy halter top, to

peek out again

over her shoulder.

One dragon on her left side.

It moved on her body as if it was itself alive - Sinister and Dangerous.

The Dragon Lady moved stealthily through the mist, searching for the enemy.

Was she the Hunter or the Prey, or both?

She was the Dragon.

But she warn't no Lady.

While Kelly was reading the poem, the Dragon Lady stood up and undid her dress, dropping it to the floor to reveal an elaborate dragon tattoo that covered the entire left side of her still-firm body from her ankle to her shoulder.

"John wrote that about me a very long time ago," she said. "He saw me one day when I was a young, idealistic guerrilla and that's exactly what I looked like. That poem is now engraved on a large granite cliff overlooking the river, a tribute to my earlier career." She bent over and picked up the dress, shrugging into it and re-attaching all the fasteners. "John didn't approve of me then, and he doesn't approve of me now, but we have remained friends over the years. He was always trying to reform me."

"He can't help it," said Kelly, "that's just the way he is."

"Yes," said the Dragon Lady, "You're right, of course. Well, what do you want? What can I do for you?"

Kelly looked at her.

"I need help for a crazy mission that I probably won't live through," she said. "John advised me against it and he doesn't know I'm going to try it. He thinks I should just ask you for help in getting down river to the coast. He said you would contact some people who could help me get out of the country, to a neutral place, or back to into U.S. hands."

"Oh," said the Dragon, with a chuckle, "that's all, is it? I can probably handle that. What else?"

"Well," said Kelly, "I was once a prisoner in a place

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known only as the End Of the Line. I have friends who I think are still there. And I want to try to get them out."

The Dragon Lady started laughing out loud before Kelly finished. "You are crazy!" she said. "Everyone's heard of that place. It's impossible to get in or out of there. And I suppose you want to take that horny bunch of drunken Mongols out there with you."

"They've got a relative in the place, too," said Kelly. They volunteered to come along and help me, if I would help them get their cousin out."

"Hmmm," said the Dragon. "Are they any good in a fight?"

"Well, I don't really know," said Kelly. "I had to rescue them from bandits that were intent on robbing their caravan. I had to kill a few of the bastards," she brought her hand up and touched the scar on her cheek, "and now Ahmed and the rest of them think I can do just about anything."

The Dragon Lady laughed again. "You had to rescue them," she said, "all those big, tough Mongols, and you had to rescue them? That's rich. But you did a passable job of disarming my man. That was impressive. He is not usually taken so easily. And you speak passable Mandarin. Where did you learn it, by the way?"

"Oh," said Kelly, "I studied it in college. And I worked my way through school as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant. They taught me more than my professors, and I became quite fluent."

"The Dragon Lady nodded and smiled. "I like you, Kelly Winchester," she said. "You remind me of

myself when I was young. I'll help you. I have no use for the bastards who run that place. The semi-official government affiliation they have is an irritant to me. They interfere in my affairs, and I don't like it one bit. Some of my men have ended up there, too. I'll help you, and if you pull it off, I'll help you get out of the country. I have lots of contacts. What do you need?"

"Hmmm," said Kelly. "Well, I'm pretty well armed. But those guys, they're carrying muzzleloaders and swords, for God's sake. I'd like to get them some decent weapons. I'll teach them how to shoot."

"OK," said the Dragon Lady, "I can get you just about anything you want, as far as small arms, side arms and rifles. Maybe some AK-47s and some nine-millimeter Berettas? Anything else?"

"Well," said Kelly, "I don't know how much you can handle. John seemed to think you could help me with transportation out of the country. Can you help me to get back up there first? The problem seems to be refueling. I wish I could get my hands on a plane. I just wish I could fly a helicopter."

"Hmmm," said the Dragon Lady, "let me think about it. Why don't you go back out and join your friends? Of course, they might be getting ready to visit my girls. I run the best whore house in town, you know." She smiled at Kelly. "I suppose you aren't interested in any of that, are you? I've got some impressive studs in my stable of prostitutes, real hunks for the ladies. I even jump them now and then."

"Not in the slightest. I've been raped enough times

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to put me off having sex for a while."

"Hmmm," said the Dragon, "that's too bad." She looked smokily at Kelly. She leaned forward. "Have you ever made love to another woman?" she asked in a husky voice.

"No," said Kelly. "Sorry, I'm completely heterosexual, I'm afraid."

"Pity," said the Dragon Lady, "I guess I enjoy it too much. Any kind of sex is enjoyable to me: men, women, both, I don't care. But maybe I haven't been through as much as you have. Why the heck are you Americans such prudes, anyway? You ought to just relax and enjoy yourselves a little. I have a dear Indian boy who could teach you the entire Kama Sutra in one night. Orgasms and satisfaction guaranteed. You must have an orgasm or it's free."

"No thanks," said Kelly with a chuckle.

"You aren't fucking any of those Mongols, are you?" asked the Dragon Lady. "They're so crude. And they're so damned ugly." She shivered.

"No," said Kelly, laughing again, "I'm not having sex with anybody right now, and I don't intend to any time soon."

"OK," said the Dragon Lady. "Go on back out there. Don't be shocked at what your friends are doing, they're just having a good time. I'll see what I can come up with. I'll see you tomorrow."

"OK," said Kelly. They rose from their chairs and shook hands.

"Thanks." She turned and opened the door. The noise assaulted her ears. She made her way back to the table where Ahmed and the rest of her

companions were.

One of the nude girls was squirming around on the table with her legs spread wide apart. They were eating grapes off her belly and licking mao tai off of the rest of her. The other girls were performing similar acts on other tables around the room for other groups of men.

Kelly strode over to them, her hood in place over her head, hiding her face.

She grabbed Ahmed. "OK," she yelled into his ear, "I've met with the Dragon Lady. We're all set. Now let's go."

"Aw, come on, Kelly," he said, "we're just getting to the good part."

Kelly looked down at the girl squirming on the table. Saleem was inserting grapes into her vagina and then eating them. He was handing them around to the rest of them. He looked at Kelly blearily and offered her a grape. "Dessert," he said with a lopsided grin on his face.

They were all in terrible shape, almost falling-down drunk. But they were obviously having such a good time... *Damn! Some men can be so revolting.*

Saleem was licking the inside of one of her thighs, Abdul was licking the other. Ali was sucking on her nipples. Ahmed had his dick out and she was licking up under his balls as he gyrated his hips, poking his erection at her face.

Kelly grabbed Ahmed by the front of his shirt and pulled him close so she could yell straight into his face. "I'm going over to the Inn to get some sleep. Have fun, but not too damned much fun. Get some

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sleep and wake up sober. Good night."

"Good night, Traveler," he yelled. He had a lopsided grin on his face.

The others heard him and chorused, "Good Night."

Then they went back to their debauchery. Kelly wondered if each of them would get a whore of his own, or if they would all screw the same one. She was sure they would all be screwing their fool heads off soon, but it couldn't last too long. They were already so drunk they could hardly stand up. She looked back at them one last time. They were removing their clothing and playing with their cocks in anticipation of getting laid.

Kelly turned and headed out the door. She crossed to the Inn. She entered and asked for a room.

"It's all ready for you," said the Desk Clerk. "Madam has called and reserved it for you, personally."

Chapter Thirty-Two

The Inn was far from posh, but the room Kelly got was clean. She sat on the bed and lay back. A real bed. How wonderful! The mattress was a little lumpy, but it was on real bed, with clean sheets and a soft pillow. The bathroom was at the end of the hall, but at least it had a shower with hot water. Kelly took her towel and went to clean up. She luxuriated in the shower for five minutes or more, just letting the hot water spray down over her body. Then she hurried back to her room wrapped in her towel and carrying her clothes. She locked the door. She dropped the towel on the floor and slipped between the clean sheets without any clothes. She stretched out and rolled over on her side. She was asleep in minutes.

She woke up when the sunlight coming through the window reached her eyes. She stretched and rolled over, away from the light and closed her eyes tightly, but she couldn't get back to sleep. She rolled back over and looked out the window. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day.

Kelly got out of bed. It was so nice to have some privacy. She did some stretching exercises, then she

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wrapped the towel around her body and headed down the hall to the bathroom. A man was just leaving. He ogled her. She went into the bathroom and then rinsed her mouth and washed her face. She rinsed off again in the shower, and then decided she had better get going and try to find her companions.

She went back to her room and dressed quickly. She almost hated to put the rough, smelly clothing on her nice clean body. Covering her head with the hood, she went down the stairs and was greeted with a cup of tea.

"Shay shay," she said.

She sat and ate a little breakfast of broth and rice, all piping hot, followed by some orange slices.

She asked how much she owed for the room, but was informed that it had already been paid for.

She left and crossed the street to the bar. The door was locked. She knocked, and then pounded as loudly as she could.

"Hey," she yelled, "let me in."

The door opened a crack.

"What do you want?" said a wizened little man.

"I left my companions here last night," said Kelly, "I'm looking for them."

"Oh," said the man, "are they the strangers? Nobody's here except some crazy Mongolians. I think the girls finally left them to themselves a few hours ago. They must have worn them out. The girls are pros, and usually they can take anything, but they were really dragging when they left out of here a few hours ago. Your friends must have had quite a night."

Great. "I'm sure they did. Well, let me in, I need to

get them rolling. Do you think we can get some food into them?"

"Oh, yeah," said the old man. "We're experts at getting men back on their feet after a night of it." He opened the door for Kelly to slip into the darkened restaurant. "Come on in and we'll see what we can do. I am Mr. Li. Are you their guardian?"

"You might say that," said Kelly.

The man led her across the room to a door. Inside the door was a staircase. They ascended and Kelly found herself in a long hallway at the top. There were doors on both sides. Most of the doors were open and the rooms were empty. Kelly peeked into one of them and saw only a bed and a small washstand.

"They're down here," said the man, trotting down the hall. He opened a door. Kelly looked in. There, in a heap on the floor was Ahmed and the rest of them. They were all naked and their clothes were in a pile in the corner.

"Gentlemen," said the man in a remarkably strong voice, "your friend is here to collect you."

Kelly walked into the room. She put her boot next to Ahmed's head and tapped him. He looked up at her blearily.

"Ohhh, my head." He rolled over and got to his knees. He put his hands to the sides of his head. "Ohhh."

"Come on, Ahmed Khan," she said in her raspy voice, "Get your ass up and get dressed. We have work to do. Get the rest of this riff raff up, too. I should have never introduced you to mao tai."

Mr. Li grinned at her. "They never had mao tai

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before?" he asked.

"Fraid not," said Kelly.

The Mongols were slowly dragging themselves over to their clothes. They were groaning pitifully. They smelled terrible, a combination of sweat, sex, and stale booze.

"Can we wash them off?" asked Kelly, "Do you have a shower?"

"Ahhh," said Mr. Li, "that's what we need. Bring them downstairs and we'll clean them up." He headed out the door and down the hall.

"OK, fellas," said Kelly in her most commanding voice, "come on with me. Let's get you cleaned up a little bit." She grabbed Saleem by the arm and half dragged him to his feet and out the door. She gave him a little push and headed him down the hall. "Follow Mr. Li there," she said. Then she returned to get the rest of them. One by one, she dragged them to their feet and headed them down the hall.

She brought up the rear with Ahmed.

"I spoke with the Dragon Lady," she said to him. "She has agreed to help us."

Ahmed looked at her through bloodshot eyes. He looked so pitiful.

"I hope you had a good time last night," she said. "It's the last time you'll be doing anything like this for a while."

She helped him down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs was an open door to the outside. Mr. Li had Ali, Saleem and Abdul lined up against the outside wall and was turning on a spigot with a garden hose attached to it. Kelly pushed Ahmed into line.

Mr. Li looked at Kelly. "Do you want to do the honors?" he said, with a little laugh.

"Please," said Kelly.

Mr. Li handed her the hose and turned it on full strength.

Kelly sprayed the cold water on the four men. The way they howled, you would think she was killing them.

"Turn around," she yelled at them. They turned around and around.

Mr. Li came around the side of the building with another hose and joined Kelly in washing down the Mongols. They were slowly sobering up, standing a little more steadily, hopping up and down, and rubbing their hands on their bodies to help clean up and get their circulation going again.

Then a woman who looked as old as Mr. Li came out the door with some towels.

"OK, that's enough," Kelly said. "Dry off and get back upstairs. Get into your clothes and when you're ready, get your butts back down here. We'll be in the dining room and we'll get some breakfast into you."

The old woman handed each one a towel as they skittered past her. She giggled at their nakedness.

Kelly washed the last of the mud off of their feet as they went through the door.

"Ugly, aren't they?" she said.

"This is my wife," said Mr. Li. "Everybody just calls her Mamasan."

"Hi," said Kelly. Every place Kelly had ever been, Mamasan was the name given to the madam who supplied the prostitutes to the soldiers, but she didn't

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say anything.

"Nee how," said the little woman.

While Ahmed and his band of Mongols were climbing the stairs, Mr. Li put away the hoses. Kelly and Mamasan went into the kitchen, where water for tea was already steaming. The two of them had a robust breakfast prepared by the time the four men had gotten dressed and came back down the stairs.

By the time they were through eating, they were coherent and seemed to be relatively sober. They were just finishing up when the Dragon Lady suddenly appeared out of nowhere, surrounded by her goons. It was almost as if she just appeared out of thin air. She was impeccably coifed as usual and had a brilliant smile on her face. She was dressed in a shimmering, transparent, silky, floor-length gown that showed off her taut body. Everyone could see the image of the full-length dragon tattoo on her left side.

"Good morning," she said softly to Kelly.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said in a louder and very cheerful voice. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," they all said. They didn't go into any details. She just beamed at them. Kelly was sure she knew every detail of their drunken orgy and approved of all of it. It was her business.

"Are you ready to head north?" she asked.

They glanced back and forth at each other, over at Kelly, and back at the Dragon Lady. They didn't look too sure about the trip at that moment.

"Oh come now," said the Dragon Lady, "if you're going to sneak up and attempt a raid on the most

notorious prison / fortress on the continent, you've got to be more sure of yourselves than that."

"We're ready," said Ahmed, "aren't we boys?"

"Yes sir," they said. They all nodded in assent, "when do we start?"

The Dragon Lady looked around at the group. She shook her head. Then she addressed Kelly.

"I think you'll be pleased," she said. "I have arranged for you a large but nondescript common cargo carrying truck with a removable canvas covering in the back. They are built here in China. It has all the documentation you will need. There is documentation for Russian territory as well. It has a trailer attached that is full of gasoline so you won't have to stop in hostile territory to refuel."

"In the truck you will find four M-14s. I could have gotten you some beat-up Chinese AK-47s, but there weren't any Russian models available. I've had these old American rifles for a long time. Nobody wants them, but they're pretty good weapons, and they're in really good condition. They were picked up by the Viet Cong, long ago in Viet Nam. I managed to get you four .45 caliber Browning Model 1911s for side arms. In addition, in the back of the truck, you will find a Fabrique-Nationale M-60 machine gun, with five full boxes of belted 7.62 NATO ammunition. I thought you might be more comfortable with American weapons anyway."

"There is a case of hand grenades, a case of Dynamite, and several boxes of ammunition for your small arms. I even managed to come up with an old, hand held mine detector. I'm sure you will find uses

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for all of it. That should get you there and help you break in."

"Now for your return," she said. She smiled broadly. "I have a special surprise for you. You're a pilot, aren't you?"

Kelly nodded.

"Have you ever flown a DC-3 or a C-47?" she asked.

"You're kidding," said Kelly. "Don't tell me you managed to get us an airplane?"

The Dragon Lady just grinned at her.

"Hmmm," said Kelly. "I've never flown one of those antiques, but I don't think I would have any trouble, as long as I can figure out how to start the engines and take off. That's an old taildragger. They're a little tricky. I suppose if I can fly a mach two fighter, I can get an old flying truck like that into the air."

Kelly was thinking furiously. "How about charts?" she said, "I've got to know where I'm going. And what do I do if I run into the airborne authorities? I can't fight Migs in a plane like that."

"It's the best I could do," said the Dragon Lady. "The plane is sitting abandoned on the tundra, about fifty miles north of the End of The Line."

"North?" asked Kelly.

"North!" said the Dragon Lady. "After your raid, I'll bet they won't expect you to head north. The plane has been there for over sixty years. It dates back to World War Two. I know the man who found it. He has had both engines running, and I have arranged to have it topped off with eleven hundred gallons of

aviation gasoline. His name is Misha and he will meet you there. He's a Russian, but he's not a pilot. He needs to get out of the country, too, and I told him you would help him."

"He has charts and he can handle radio traffic for you in Russian territory. Stay low over the desert, below the Russian and Chinese radar, and you should be able to get at least far enough to drop off the great Khan here, and his men. Then get as close as you can to here. I will help you get down river, but there is plenty of time for us to plan for that."

She handed a folded map to Kelly. "This is a map of the local area around the End Of The Line, it will help you find the plane. I recommend that you find the plane before your assault, and then attack from the north. They won't expect it."

The Dragon Lady paused to let everything she had just said sink in.

"There are a couple of other things I want you to do for me," she said. A fierce look of hatred washed over her face. "There are two brothers there named Song. I want you to bring them to me. And I want you to torture the Warden before you kill him. After you kill him, I want you to cut off his head and bring it to me with his gonads stuffed in his mouth." She seethed. "I have a particular dislike for that man."

"Are the Song brothers your brothers?" asked Kelly.

The Dragon Lady didn't answer, but Kelly knew it was so. She didn't press the point, but she unobtrusively reached out and took the Dragon Lady's hand briefly. They exchanged looks and they

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both knew.

"I don't know if I can bring you that man's head," said Kelly.

"I'll do it," said Ahmed.

"Ahmed!" said Kelly.

"That's the sort of thing my ancestors would have done," he said. "I'll bring you his damned head. And I'll stuff his balls in his mouth so he chokes on them."

The Dragon Lady smiled at him and then over at Kelly. "Thank you, Ahmed Khan. I will honor you when you return. Now go outside with my men and they will show you the truck I told you about." She nodded to her men. "Leave us alone," she said, "show them the truck."

The Dragon Lady's men left with Ahmed and the other Mongols.

The Dragon Lady came over close to Kelly. She embraced her. "You and I are kindred spirits," she said. "I hope you are successful, I know you will be. Come back to me and I will get you home. I can do it."

Kelly disentangled herself from her embrace. She reached inside her bodice and removed the purse John had given her. She walked over to the table, opened the purse and poured the contents out. She picked up the letter to the Pope and the emerald.

"Take all you want," said Kelly. "I don't know if it's enough to pay you for a truck and an airplane or not, but it's all I have."

The Dragon Lady scooped the jewels and the gold coins into a small pile.

"This is all very valuable," she said. "John

provided you well. But you would have a hard time spending it. It would be like buying a glass of water when all you have is a certified check for a million dollars. Nobody could give you any change. I have supplied you with some yuan and some rubles for your trip. You will find it in the glove compartment of the truck. In addition to the weapons, there is some food in the truck and a first aid kit. You might need it if any of you are wounded. It's much more likely that you will all be killed in the assault, you know."

"I know," said Kelly, "but we do have the element of surprise, and I can be a formidable menace when I'm pissed off."

They laughed.

"I'm sure of that," said the Dragon Lady.

She embraced Kelly again. The way she did it was more than just a friendly good bye. She molded her body against Kelly's, then she kissed Kelly on the lips.

"Good luck," she said. Then she turned and walked back into the restaurant. Kelly went outside.

Chapter Thirty-Three

The truck was loaded and Ahmed was sitting in the front seat. Abdul, Ali and Saleem were in the back. The Dragon Lady's men were standing in a circle around it. Kelly sighed and got into the driver's seat.

She started the truck, stepped on the clutch, put it in gear, let off the brake, and gradually pulled away.

"Do you know how to drive a truck?" she asked Ahmed.

"I know how to drive camels," he said. "I know how to ride horses. Trucks? How hard can it be?"

Oh boy, thought Kelly. It looked like she would have to drive all the way.

"I think Abdul has driven a truck," said Ahmed.

Great. Oh well. Kelly drove slowly back along the road to where the caravan was camped. It was dusk by the time they got there.

The women ran out and hung all over the four men, welcoming them back.

"I suppose you will have to have another orgy to say good bye to them, now won't you?" asked Kelly.

Ahmed grinned. "Of course," he said. Dinner was

already cooking and it wasn't long before they were all sitting on the ground around the little table, eating bowls of hot soup and mounds of food.

"Lay off the booze tonight," said Kelly. "I want to travel at night, and I need you all sober."

"OK," said Ahmed. Abdul, Saleem and Ali all nodded.

"I'm going to get some sleep," said Kelly, getting up as soon as she had finished her dinner. "I suggest you do the same. I plan to head out at midnight. Be ready."

She turned and left them to their women. She knew they would have to say goodbye properly, and she was sure it would include almost constant sex for the next few hours. She just hoped they wouldn't get drunk.

She entered her tent and lay down fully clothed. She fell asleep quickly and slept soundly for the next few hours. She awoke around 11:30 and got up. She left her tent and went over to Ahmed's tent to see what kind of shape her companions were in. She was surprised to find a meal ready and everyone fully clothed.

"Come in," said Delilah, as she held the flap aside for Kelly to enter. "We have them ready to go. We helped them pack and we didn't give them any wine. We have already said our good byes."

Kelly was surprised and grateful. She entered and sat down. They ate pretty much in silence. Abdul acknowledged that he had driven a truck years ago, when he traveled with another group of traders who went off to the east into China. He assured Kelly that

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he could handle the truck if Ahmed would show him where to go. Kelly would have to rely on Ahmed's knowledge of where they were going as well.

She ate quickly and left to break down her tent. She packed up everything and put it in the back of the truck. Her companions had already loaded their gear. She noticed that they were bringing their muzzleloaders along. They were all ready and they loaded up. Kelly drove. They headed north. She drove slowly, but still, the truck went as far every hour, as the caravan could go in a day.

When it started to get light, Kelly started to look for a place to hide the truck. They were still to the east of the mountains. Ahmed came to her rescue. He had traveled this route over and over again, all his life. He knew a place where they could hide the truck behind some rocks, under some trees. They didn't set up any tents. They slept on the ground. Saleem and Ali took turns keeping watch.

Kelly, Ahmed and Abdul slept fitfully, and woke for good in the afternoon. They ate cold food, not wanting to light a fire. As dusk gave way to the dark, Kelly asked Ahmed to get in the back and let Abdul drive. They refueled the truck and then Abdul got in the driver's seat and started the engine. Kelly was next to him. She was pleasantly surprised to find that Abdul was in fact a careful and fairly accomplished driver. When they stopped to pee, Abdul got in the back and Ahmed got back up front. Ali and Saleem were sleeping in the back.

They drove all night and when dawn caught up to them, they were on the plain, driving through the tall

grass, along the caravan route.

"We could keep going until we get to the mountains," said Ahmed. "There are no authorities around here, and we rarely ever see an airplane. There's no place to hide a truck out here anyway. We could camp at the caravan campground, at the base of the mountains."

"Well, I'm tired," said Kelly. She brought the truck to a halt. "Let's get Abdul up. He can handle it."

Abdul enjoyed driving. Ahmed showed him the route and pointed out landmarks. Kelly slept in the back with Ali and Saleem watching over her. It was afternoon before they reached the mountains and stopped at the usual campsite. There were no other caravans there.

Kelly woke up when the truck ceased its gentle rocking as they drove along the ancient caravan route. She alighted as the rest of them were setting up a tent. It wasn't Ahmed's great big tent, but it was large enough for all of them to shelter inside. They had some lunch, and then Kelly stood up, exited the tent, and peered at the mountains, shading her eyes.

"Gentlemen," she said, "I think it's time I showed you how to shoot your brand new weapons."

They all grinned in anticipation.

"Come on," she said, "Go get them. Bring the M-60 too, the machine gun."

She walked over towards some large rocks. One of them sloped at about a forty-five-degree angle. *Perfect*, she thought. She wanted a target that wouldn't splash lead back at them but would leave a mark when a round hit it.

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She paced back a hundred and fifty paces. *That should be about one hundred meters*, she thought.

"OK, Ahmed," she said, "come over here. Put that M-60 down. Now who's first?"

Ahmed said, "Saleem, why don't you try it first?"

"OK," said Saleem.

"OK, Saleem," said Kelly, "stand right here. Now you hold it to your shoulder, just like you would your old musket. Here, let me show you how to lock in a magazine." She took the rifle, inspected it, noting that it didn't have a selector switch for full automatic fire. None of them did. She locked in a magazine, pulled the slide back and chambered a round. Then she raised it to her shoulder aimed at the rock, and fired a round. It felt good. The bullet struck the rock and ricocheted upwards away from them. She fired another round. Then she fired several rounds as quickly as she could squeeze the trigger.

She lowered the rifle. "To clear the weapon, you remove the magazine like this and pull back the slide to remove the round in the chamber." The round ejected and fell to the ground. Kelly bent over, picked it up and showed them how to put it back into the magazine.

"OK, Saleem," she said, throwing the rifle to him, followed by the magazine. He caught both. He grinned at her. "Lock and load," she said in a commanding voice."

Saleem locked in the magazine, drawing back the slide and loading a round.

"Ready?" said Kelly.

Saleem nodded. "Ready," he said.

"Fire one round," she said.

Saleem fired one round. It hit the rock and ricocheted up with a zing. Saleem grinned like a little boy with a new toy.

"OK, Saleem," said Kelly, "go ahead and fire some more rounds. Go ahead and empty your magazine."

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Kelly couldn't help but grin. He was having so much fun, and he appeared to be a pretty good shot. When he had finished firing all the rounds, Kelly showed him how to inspect the weapon and how to use his thumbnail to get light to shine up the barrel so he could check the rifling.

Ahmed was next.

"Lock and load!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Clear your weapon!"

After each of them had emptied one magazine, she had them each reload the magazines and stand in a line, two to her right, two to her left.

"Lock and load!" she commanded. "Ready on the left? Ready on the right? Ready on the firing line! Commence firing!"

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

She waited until all of them had emptied their magazines.

"Cease fire!" she commanded.

Kelly was having fun. She remembered range procedure and used all the commands those God-like sergeants had used when she was in Basic Training. She couldn't help grinning. All her companions were grinning, too. It was a lot of fun. But it was deadly

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serious as well. They would have to know how to use these weapons well if they were to have any chance at accomplishing their mission.

They seemed to be able to handle the M-14s fairly well, and even though they were pretty heavy, as far as modern military weapons go, they were still a lot lighter and easier to handle than their old muskets. She showed them how to handle the 45s and had them fire a few rounds.

Then the real fun started when she showed them how to set up the M-60 on its bi-pod and fire it. She showed them how to lay down and crew it, with one man feeding the belt ammunition in and the other firing the weapon. She showed them how to change barrels, but she didn't expect them to have to do it.

By the time they were finished, the rock was well scarred and pitted. Kelly could tell that they were fairly proficient with firearms in general and felt that they were familiar enough with their new weapons to use them efficiently. They camped there for the rest of the day and stayed the night.

In the morning, they ate a quick breakfast and loaded up the truck. They re-fueled it and then removed the canvas top so they could fire their weapons from the truck if they needed to. The pass was rough, so they couldn't go very fast, but they still made better time than they would have on camels. Kelly was driving. They saw some men on the heights, but they disappeared quickly and left the truck alone. After they got through the pass, Kelly drove right past Prester John's castle and headed north on the road that Mustafa had followed when he

had first brought her there.

"Are you sure you want to follow the roads, Kelly?" asked Ahmed. "I know the caravan route, but it goes cross-country."

"We'll make better time on the roads," said Kelly, "but we might run into trouble at check points. I don't know, what do you think?"

"Well," said Ahmed, "I guess the best way through the mountains is on the paved road. My route is pretty rough and it takes a long time. It would be rough on the truck and there are some places where we might not even be able to get through. But nobody would bother us, except the occasional bandit, and I think we have enough firepower to handle them now. News travels quickly, too. Your exploits are probably well known by now. I doubt that the average bandit would bother us since you killed those bastards. Those guys are just bullies. If they can't scare people and rob them without any resistance, they leave well enough alone. They're really a bunch of cowards."

"I don't know much about the road," he said. "I'm sure the authorities have check points here and there. Maybe it would be best to try to sneak through at night."

"Yeah," said Kelly, "I was thinking the same thing. I was brought here on these roads, but Prester John had a safe passage guarantee for us. I slept most of the way anyway. I was in pretty bad shape at the time, and my mind had been messed up. I can't remember much about that trip. They had two drivers and they switched off. We kept going, day and night. We never stopped until we got to the castle and we

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were on the road for several days. It must be a thousand miles or so, and the roads aren't that good."

"I don't know about the roads, but I'm sure it is every bit as far as that," said Ahmed. "I traveled up there once and it took me over a month, and I was going cross-country, driving hard."

Kelly finally came to a decision. "OK, Ahmed," she said, "we'll stay on the roads, unless we have to leave them. Get the map out and start figuring out the shortest route."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Kelly drove the rest of the day. They were climbing higher into the mountains. It was getting colder. They stopped at a small farm to eat and replaced the canvas top. They talked the farmer into selling them several crates packed with bags of rice. The boxes had Chinese characters stenciled on them. The farmer said the characters meant produce. At night they stopped to re-fuel and change drivers. Abdul drove on through the night. At sun up, they switched drivers again.

Kelly drove through a small village, but nobody noticed them. They stopped for lunch and to re-fuel and Abdul took over again. When Kelly took over the driving at midnight, they were descending from the mountains. Abdul and Ahmed told her that they thought they were being followed by someone.

About an hour after she took over the driving duties, Kelly was sure that she was being followed. It appeared to be a small truck or Jeep-like military vehicle. Ali and Saleem were ready with the machine gun in the back if they needed it.

Another hour went by and Kelly rounded a curve

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to be confronted by a checkpoint, with a guard waving her to a stop. She slowed and stopped. She reached over and woke Ahmed.

The policeman came up to the door and looked up at Kelly in the truck. She had her hood over her head.

"Papers, please," he said.

"OK," said Ahmed. "Let's see if any of these papers are any good." He handed them to Kelly. She unwrapped them and found a set labeled 'Mountains'. She handed it to the man.

He looked at it. "Wait here." He went into his little shack. Kelly could see that he was talking on the telephone.

He came back out.

"OK," he said, "everything seems to be in order. I need to look in the back."

He walked back to the rear of the truck. He peered in. Saleem and Ali grinned out at him. The guns were all neatly packed beneath the rice in the crates. It was late and the policeman was tired. He waved them on with a smile.

"Welcome to Siberia," he said.

Kelly slowly pulled away. It was only about half an hour later that Kelly saw headlights behind her and coming fast. The vehicle was catching up fast. It came up behind her and tailgated the truck. They were navigating a steep and curvy downhill grade, so he couldn't get past Kelly. He flashed his lights at her.

"I think this joker wants us to stop," said Kelly.

"What are you going to do?" asked Ahmed.

"Well I'm not going to stop, that's for sure," she said.

But when they got to the bottom of the grade, the road straightened out. Kelly sped up, once she wasn't going downhill. The small vehicle pulled out next to her. She looked over and a policeman was waving at her to pull over and stop. When she didn't do it, he pulled out a gun and waved it at her.

Kelly smiled at him and waved, as if she didn't know what he wanted.

"Ahmed, do you see any radio antennas on that Jeep?" asked Kelly.

Ahmed looked over at the vehicle.

"No," he said, "I don't. I'll bet no one knows he's out here chasing us. What do you think?"

"I'll bet you're right," said Kelly.

The Jeep was still next to them. Suddenly, the policemen jerked his wheel to the right and hit the truck, trying to drive it off the road. It caught Kelly by surprise, but she was able to keep control of the vehicle.

"He's going to run us off the road," said Ahmed. Kelly discerned a little hysteria in his voice. "What are we going to do now?"

The little Jeep swerved into the big truck again. Kelly was ready this time. She had both hands on the wheel and compensated when she saw him coming, by swerving into the Jeep.

She looked over at the policeman. He appeared to be laughing.

"OK, shithead," she growled. She jammed on her brakes and jerked the wheel to the left. The front bumper of the truck struck the back bumper of the Jeep, spinning it sideways in front of Kelly. She

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floored the gas pedal and pushed the Jeep along in front of the truck. It suddenly rolled over and Kelly slammed on the brakes again as the Jeep rolled over and over down the road. It rolled over about five times. Kelly stopped the truck. The Jeep stopped upside down. Gasoline was leaking out of it. The driver was not moving. Suddenly the gas caught fire and a moment later the Jeep exploded. Kelly and Ahmed shielded their eyes.

"Damn," said Ahmed.

"Serves the son of a bitch right," said Kelly.

Ahmed looked at her. He couldn't believe she was that calm about killing a man. Kelly could tell.

"Listen," she said, "I've taken all the shit I'm going to take from these assholes. I don't care how many of them I have to kill. If they get in my way, I'm going to push. If somebody dies, that's tough shit. You don't know what I've been through, Ahmed, but it hasn't been pretty. Besides, if that guy was from China and we're now in Russia, maybe they don't care if we kill him anyway."

She looked back at the burning Jeep. She drove the truck up to it and nudged it off the road so she could drive past it. She accelerated away down the road. Ahmed sat back. He was troubled. He wondered about this woman he had agreed to help. He was beginning to believe that she was about the most vicious, ruthless person he had ever run into, maybe even worse than the Dragon Lady. She didn't seem to care who she killed.

"Let's get as far away from here as we can, before they find him," she said. She put both hands on the

wheel, stared straight ahead, and sped up. By the time the sun was coming up, they were descending out of the mountains. It was getting colder. The farther north they went the colder it would get, and winter was right around the corner, now. Kelly continued to drive.

"I want to drive on up from here."

Ahmed shrugged his shoulders. He didn't say anything.

Finally, they left the hills behind and started across the plain.

"Do you think we should leave the road?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Ahmed. "I know the way. In fact, I think I can lead you to that old airplane. But I don't know how well the truck will go on the dirt. Do you want to try it?"

Kelly let off the gas and slowed down.

"Yeah, let's try it. The ground is probably frozen anyway. I don't think the ground ever gets defrosted this far north. It's like the Alaskan tundra."

"You may be right."

"Which way?" she asked him.

"Left," he said, "to the west."

Kelly pulled off the road. Ahmed had pulled out the Dragon Lady's maps. Kelly headed northwest across the tundra. They started to see patches of snow on the ground. They made a large loop around to the west, never actually seeing the prison. Ahmed claimed to know where it was. There were no landmarks and there was no place to hide.

Kelly went as fast as the truck would go. The snow

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completely covered the ground as they went further north. She didn't want to be caught out in the open. She scanned the skies for the helicopter. But the run around to the north was uneventful. She gradually turned back to the east. Ahmed kept nodding. He still claimed to know exactly where they were going.

But when they got where he thought they should be, there was no plane there.

"OK," said Kelly, "now what do we do?"

"Oh, don't worry," said Ahmed, "It's around here somewhere."

Kelly decided to run a search grid. She drove five miles to the east, then a mile to the north, then ten miles to the west, then back north and east again. Nothing.

"Are you sure there's an airplane out here?" she asked.

"I know it's here," said Ahmed.

It was getting dark. Then it started to snow.

"We won't be able to find it at night," said Kelly. "Let's stop and make camp. We'll start looking again in the morning."

"Agreed," said Ahmed.

They parked the truck and got out. They all stretched. They pitched the big tent and brought their bedrolls inside. They ate cold food. Kelly even broke out some of the shortbread that Mustafa had given her. It was delicious, and it energized them. They didn't dare light any fires or lanterns. They huddled in the tent against the cold.

Ali, Saleem, and Abdul took turns keeping watch. Kelly asked Ahmed if they would really be able to

stay awake and keep watch. She remembered how easily it had been for her to enter the caravan's camp.

"They'll be fine," said Ahmed. "They're all scared to death. They know how dangerous a place this is."

Kelly was tired. She slept soundly. So did Ahmed. They awoke in the morning and ate cold food. It was still snowing. Kelly was pleased to see that the snow had covered their tire tracks. They were striking the tent and preparing to begin the search again when Abdul, who was on watch, noticed a man in the distance, walking toward them. He alerted the rest of them.

"Stay here," said Kelly, and she started walking out to meet him. She had her pistol on her hip and was carrying her carbine. Ahmed trotted out after her.

"I'm coming too," he said.

Kelly just nodded.

As they approached the man, they looked him over. He was a tall man, warmly dressed in furs. He had light blond hair and a full beard. He was carrying an AK-47.

When they got close enough to speak, Kelly said, "Misha?"

"Lieutenant Winchester? Ahmed Khan?"

They all smiled and clasped hands.

"I saw you driving around looking for me yesterday," said Misha. "I have the plane well hidden. You would not have been able to find it."

"How did you hide it out here?" asked Ahmed looking around at the flat, desolate landscape. "There's no place to hide anything."

Misha grinned down at Ahmed and Kelly. "You

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can hide anything, if you know how to do it."

They walked back to the truck.

"We'll need to hide this truck, too," said Misha. "The people at the prison are unaware of my presence and I don't think they know the plane exists. When I found it, it was almost covered with snow. From the air, it still looks like a snow drift."

Ahmed introduced the others. They loaded up and got in the truck. Misha was in the front with Kelly, who was driving.

"How do you know the Dragon Lady?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, "It's a long story. Let's just say we met a long time ago, and we once had an intimate relationship. When I told her I had found this old airplane, she doubted she could find anyone to fly it. Then, out of the blue, I got word that you were coming and a mutual friend of ours got me a few drums of aviation fuel. There's enough in the tanks now to get into the air and fly a short way, but about fifty miles west of here is a fuel truck full of the stuff at an old abandoned military runway. How about you? How did you meet her?"

"Oh," said Kelly, "that's a really long story. I'm a United States Navy pilot and I was shot down during a mission. I spent time in some prisoner of war camps, including this one, and I was rescued by a good Samaritan. I had a letter from him to her, and I think Ahmed had run into her before. Anyway, she agreed to help us."

Misha guided her as she drove across the snowy tundra. Finally, he told her to stop. Kelly looked at him quizzically.

"Come on," he said, climbing down out of the truck. He walked a short way with Kelly right behind him. Suddenly he stopped at the edge of a sunken dry riverbed. Kelly looked down over the bank and there, under a white tarpaulin, was the outline of a big twin-engine airplane. She scrambled down to the floor of the riverbed and ducked under the tarp.

Sure enough, it was a C-47 with faded WW II Army Air Corps markings. There was a small Jeep parked behind the plane.

"Well, I'll be damned!" she exclaimed.

Misha was behind her grinning. Kelly was rushing around like a kid with a new toy at Christmas, looking at everything, touching and caressing the cold metal with her hands.

"The Dragon Lady said you have had the engines running," said Kelly.

"They run like they did when they were new," he said "I don't know the whole story, but it appears that during the Second World War, somebody, probably in your army, flew it here and landed it just before it ran out of gas. I didn't even have to add any oil to the engines before I started them. I just turned them over about twenty times by hand. The inside is in just as good shape as the outside. I have no idea what happened to the aircrew or why they were here, but your country conducted a lot of unusual missions during World War Two. There are no bullet holes anywhere, at least."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've seen in years," said Kelly.

Misha just grinned. The rest of the men had

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descended into the little streambed and were watching Kelly as she looked the plane over. They could tell how enraptured she was, and they were all grinning too. Her excitement was contagious.

She reached up and opened the side cargo door. She jumped up and climbed into the plane. She got to her feet in the dark interior and made her way up to the cockpit. The door was open. She eased herself into the left seat and looked around. Her feet automatically reached out to the pedals. The instrument panel looked fairly simple. She identified the flight controls and instruments, the engine instruments and controls, and the avionics. She gently pulled back on the yoke to work the elevators and ailerons, and moved her feet on the pedals to work the rudder. It just felt so comfortable. She couldn't wait to fly it.

Misha came up behind her.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"Oh, gee," said Kelly, "I can't wait to get her in the air." Then she had a thought. "How do we get her out of here?"

"Oh," said Misha, "there's plenty of room to taxi down the streambed. There's an old ford about a mile away where you can turn up onto the tundra. Then you have the whole flat plain to use for a runway."

"Hmmm," said Kelly. "What about the snow? The tires will drag in loose snow. We'll never get off the ground."

"Oh," said Misha. "I hadn't thought of that. It might snow for a long time, too."

"Damn," said Kelly.

She got out of the seat and they both went back and dropped out of the plane.

Misha showed Ahmed how to hide the truck. Then he took them into his little living quarters. He had dug himself a little cave in the side of the riverbed. He said it took a long time, even in the summer, but it was worth it.

It was. It was warm. Misha had a little generator and a kerosene heater. He also had a little electric cook stove. They all ate well that night, and they slept warmly, huddled together in the little cave.

Chapter Thirty-Five

When Kelly woke up the next morning, Abdul was the only one awake. He was on watch. Kelly went outside to keep him company. It was still snowing. He smiled at her.

"Miss Winchester," he said, "I have an idea."

"Hmmm," mumbled Kelly, only half awake, "what's that, Abdul?"

"We were talking last night," he said. "Misha said that you don't think you can get the plane off the ground with all this snow."

"Yeah," said Kelly, "I'm worried. I don't know if we can even taxi. What's your idea?" Kelly's interest was bringing her to full wakefulness.

"Well," said Abdul, "why don't we take the truck and pack down the snow by running it back and forth over the snow?"

"Hey, Abdul," she said, "that's a good idea. You know, I think that might work." *Why didn't I think of that? I must be slipping.* "Boy, that's good, Abdul. Yeah, that'll work."

They walked out onto the plain and looked to the south. The ground was flat, and the snow was piling

up evenly in the still air. Without a lot of wind, there weren't a lot of snowdrifts. By the time the rest of the men started to get up, Abdul and Kelly had found the ford and pretty much figured out how and where to put the runway.

Misha and Ahmed were up and looking around for Kelly and Abdul by the time they started back. They were out on the tundra, walking back towards the camp, when the others spotted them.

It was a cheerful breakfast with the take-off problem solved. They took turns running the truck up and down the creek bed and across the plain for the rest of the day. It finally stopped snowing in mid-afternoon. There was at least a foot of snow on the ground, maybe more.

"I wonder if the mines are turned off yet," mused Kelly.

"What do you mean?" asked Misha.

"The prison is surrounded by a minefield," said Ahmed. "When the snow gets too high, it sets off the mines if they don't turn them off."

"Oh," said Misha, "they must be those old contact mines. You say they're wired up so they can be disarmed?"

"Yeah," said Kelly, "and we hope they're turned off so we can get through it without having to crawl all the way, poking ahead with a knife or using the mine detector."

"Yeah," said Misha with a chuckle, "I've done that. It's no fun, and it takes forever. But it sure surprises the enemy when you show up."

"Yeah," said Kelly. "But what do you think? Do

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you think the snow is heavy enough for them to have to turn off the mines?

"Hmmm, I don't know," said Misha. "I would guess so. I know I wouldn't take a chance on having a whole mine field blow up if it was me. What do you plan on doing, anyway? Are you just going to drive up in your truck and ask them to let you in?"

"Hmmm," said Kelly. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound like such a good idea, does it?"

Abdul looked around at all of them. "Why don't you all sneak up to the walls on foot? I'll drive the truck in after you're in and be ready to pick you up. But you'll have to make sure the minefield is disabled for good, so they can't turn it on. We wouldn't want mines exploding all over the place while we were trying to escape. They might turn it on and let all the mines explode all at once while we were in the middle of them."

"Not good," said Kelly. "I wish I could fly that helicopter. I'd fly it in and let Shepherd fly it out. I guess he's still there."

"They did ship some men out," said Misha. "I've been watching them for quite a while. I think they shot some, too. I didn't think they would do that, the slave trade being what it is, but I think they had a riot and had to resort to shooting the prisoners to get things back under control."

"Damn," said Kelly, "I hope the men I came here to rescue are still here and still alive."

"Well, I promised to bring the head of the Warden to the Dragon Lady," said Ahmed. "She gave me a bag to put it in, and I told her I would do it if we were

successful.”

“Well,” said Kelly, “here’s what I have in mind. Misha, you stay here with the plane. When you see us coming back, get the engines going and warmed up. Abdul will drive us all to the edge of the minefield. We’ll take the spare tire and roll it ahead of us across the mines, to make sure none of them go off. If the mines are inactive, it won’t make any difference. If they’re armed, the tire will either miss them all or set one off. In either case, if we follow the tire track we’ll be able to get inside without them knowing we are there. If a mine goes off, we’ll have to abort and we might not even be able to try again. Better yet, we could use the mine detector to find a mine. Then we could dig it up and see if it’s armed or not.”

“OK, Kelly,” said Ahmed, “what do we do when we get to the wall?”

“When we get to the wall,” said Kelly, “we need a diversion. The gate is on the east wall, so someone, Ali and Saleem, you go around to the west wall and start lobbing hand grenades over the wall. The rest of us will dynamite the main gate and go in that way. All the guards and the Warden should be over on the west side wondering what’s going on. As soon as you two hear the dynamite go off, get out of there. They’ve got machine guns mounted everywhere, but they will probably be startled by the second explosion and head back to where we are breaking in. Come around to the main gate where we are and help us release the prisoners. We’ll be ready for the guards with the M-60. I think I know where all the controls are. They’re probably in the Warden’s office.”

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"I'll come after you as soon as I hear the explosions," said Abdul. "Any surprise element will be gone by then."

"OK," said Kelly. "Makes sense."

"I hope none of you are squeamish. I intend to kill all of them. We don't have time to tie them up or lock them up in cells. As far as I'm concerned, the bastards have it coming to them. And Ahmed, if you want to cut off the Warden's head, go right ahead. Remember to castrate him and stuff his balls in his mouth. That's what the Dragon Lady requested, if I'm not mistaken."

Kelly was both calm and in a fury inside. She spoke in a low measured voice, but her eyes flashed. She was frightening the men, but she gave them confidence that they would succeed.

"I don't think there are many of them in there," she said, "and I don't think there are that many prisoners either, especially if some have been shipped out and some others might have been killed."

She looked around at them.

"Are we agreed? Have I missed anything?"

Abdul coughed.

"What is it, Abdul?" asked Kelly.

"What about the helicopter?" he asked.

"Oh," said Kelly, "Good point. We have to disable it or they'll be able to chase us down. Any suggestions?"

"Well I could take care of it while I'm waiting for you to start blowing things up," said Abdul. "I'll need some dynamite or a few hand grenades."

"Y'know," said Kelly, "you're one pretty smart

feller. You keep coming up with good ideas. Have I forgotten anything else?"

They all looked around at each other. Nobody could think of anything else.

"OK," said Kelly, "so we are agreed. Very good. Shall we go tonight?"

"Oh," said Ahmed, "you want to do all this at night?"

"Of course," said Kelly. "We want to hit them at about three or four o'clock in the morning. That's when all sentries fall asleep, isn't it Abdul?"

Abdul looked around sheepishly. "I wasn't asleep when you snuck up on me," he said.

"I know," said Kelly with a chuckle, "but the fellow you relieved was. I remember you kicked him to wake him up, didn't you?"

"That's right," said Abdul, "he was."

"Don't worry, Abdul," she said, patting him on the shoulder, "I was just kidding. None of you had ever run into anyone as mean and sneaky as me."

They all chuckled.

"OK," she said, "Let's get something to eat and then get some rest."

Chapter Thirty-Six

They woke up early and ate a cold meal. Abdul drove the truck and Kelly drove Misha's Jeep. Misha pointed them in the right direction and told them that the minefield wasn't really as large as everyone thought it was. He said to stop about a quarter mile from the walls and roll the tire.

First, Kelly used the mine detector to find a mine. They carefully dug it up. It had buried wires heading back toward the prison. The firing mechanism had an electronically-activated safety lock on it. The mine was not armed and the safety was engaged.

Abdul took several sticks of dynamite and a couple of grenades. Then he got in the Jeep and drove off to blow up the helicopter. Ahmed rolled the tire. It went a long way across the crusty surface of the snow before it fell over. They all followed in single file and Ahmed rolled the tire again. It took one more roll before it bounced up against the wall. They huddled there under the wall in the quiet night. It was clear and the stars twinkled brightly in the cold air, but the moon was only a small sliver of a crescent. It was nice and dark, perfect for a sneak attack.

Kelly took a couple of grenades and gave a couple to Ahmed, just in case. She tucked the grenades in her bodice. Saleem took the remaining grenades and headed to the right, towards the west wall. Kelly and Ahmed took the case of dynamite and headed to the left, around to the gate. They planted the sticks along the bottom of the massive doors and taped one on each hinge. They were wiring them all together when they heard the first grenades go off. Kelly hurried to finish as they heard more explosions. They moved around to the side of the wall. Kelly and Ahmed looked at each other. Ahmed had the M-60 machine gun in his arms. Kelly closed her eyes and twisted the detonator. The explosion knocked them off their feet and shook the walls. Kelly looked up through a big cloud of acrid smoke. They got up and cautiously approached the gateway. The gate was on the ground, all shattered wood and twisted metal. As they entered, they heard another explosion in the distance. That would be Abdul, blowing up the helicopter.

They climbed inside the prison. One of the guards was lying there on the floor in a pool of blood with a huge splinter of wood through his chest.

Ahmed set the machine gun up on its bipod and lay on the floor. Kelly loaded the belt into it.

"OK, Ahmed," she said, "I'm going to look for my friends. Anybody who comes down the hall without calling out your name, blow him away."

Just then, three guards came around a corner and started down the hall towards the gate. Ahmed cut loose and dropped all three of them in their tracks before they knew he was there. Kelly ran down the

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hall, stepping over the bodies. First, she went to the Warden's office. The door was locked. Kelly kicked at it. Then she shot the lock out with the carbine and it swung open. It was dark inside. She flipped the switch and the lights came on.

Sure enough, there were the controls to the video cameras and the minefield. The minefield was not armed. She smashed the console with the butt of the carbine. Then she looked at the video monitors. There was one for each hallway and each cell. A quick look showed the Warden and four guards running down the hall toward Kelly. She used the controls to open all the sliding steel doors. One of the guards was the woman Kelly remembered from her stay here.

The basement lab was dark. Only nine cells appeared to be occupied. There was Colonel Flemming and Shepherd, and several men Kelly didn't recognize. And there was one oriental-looking man. Kelly wondered if he was one of the Song brothers. In the last cell was a man that looked a lot like Ahmed, short and hairy with long arms and bowed legs.

But she had more immediate problems to worry about. The Warden and the guards were just around the corner from the hallway to the office. Kelly retrieved a grenade from her bodice, pulled the pin and held it tight as she crossed to the wall. She glanced back at the monitor. *Here they come*, she thought. She released the safety on the grenade and rolled it slowly down the hall. It exploded just as the guards rounded the corner. It knocked them all flat. Kelly sprang out of the office, blasting away down the

hall at them. The two men who had been in the lead were mangled and bleeding lumps of twisted flesh.

The woman behind them was trying to get up. Her left arm was missing and her face was streaked with blood. She looked up at Kelly with a surprised look on her face. Kelly fired several times and she fell backwards. Suddenly, the other guard jumped out from around the corner, firing wildly down the hall at Kelly. A bullet grazed her right arm. She returned fire and pumped several rounds into the man, who also fell backwards. Kelly pulled the trigger again. Damn, she was out of ammunition.

She reached down to her pistol belt for another magazine, but just then, the Warden himself jumped out at her. He had a pistol in his hand. He could see that he had Kelly at a disadvantage and he rushed at her. She dropped the carbine and drew her knife. He raised the pistol. She jumped at him. The pistol went off, just as she reached him. Her left hand struck his arm, making the shot go wild. She plunged the dagger deep in his chest. His wide eyes stared at her as he fell backwards under the momentum of her body when she ran into him.

As she pulled the knife out of his chest, Kelly couldn't help thinking that it seemed like every man she killed looked surprised. She was losing count of the men she had killed. The Warden wasn't dead yet, but he was dying. Blood spurted from his chest and dribbled from his mouth as he coughed in agony.

"Winchester?" he said weakly.

"The same," she said.

Then he went limp.

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Kelly went back to the office. She looked at all the monitors. No one was moving, except the prisoners who were wondering what was going on. She didn't see any more guards, none that were alive, at least. She went back to the gate.

"Ahmed," she called out, "It's me, Kelly. Don't shoot."

She rounded the corner and stepped over the mangled corpses on the floor. Ali and Saleem were there with Ahmed.

"I think they're all dead," she said. "The Warden might still be alive, though, if you want to mutilate him for the Dragon Lady."

"All right," said Ahmed. He got up and went past Kelly toward the office. Kelly was suddenly very tired. She sat down on the floor.

"Ali," she said wearily, "you and Saleem go around and open all the cell doors. Bring the prisoners out here to me. I need a rest."

"Yes ma'am," said Ali. They went past her and stepped over the bodies on the floor. Kelly looked over the slaughter around her. She began to cry. As the tears rolled down her cheeks, she sobbed. "They had it coming!" she shouted out loud. "The bastards all had it coming!"

She was still sitting there, wiping tears from her eyes as the first prisoners came down the hall. She didn't recognize the first three, then Shepherd came down the hall.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, "Lieutenant Winchester?"

He rushed over to her and was bending over to see her, when Colonel Flemming came around the corner.

Shepherd helped her to her feet. Flemming came over to her, looking around at all the mangled bodies.

"Kelly?" he said unsteadily.

"Oh, Mark," she said. She leaned against him, exhausted now that the adrenaline was leaving her bloodstream. He held her and she put her arms around him.

"I'm so glad you're all right," she said.

"Are you responsible for all this?" he asked.

"Yes, Sir, I'm afraid so."

She pulled away from him. The last two prisoners were coming down the hall. One was the oriental man.

"Nee how," said Kelly.

"Nee how," he said with a surprised look on his face.

"Mr. Song?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Your sister sent me to get you," she said, "where's your brother?"

"He's dead," he said. "There was a riot a few weeks ago and he was killed."

"Do you know this man?" asked Colonel Flemming.

"It's a long story," said Kelly.

Ali and Saleem were talking animatedly with the other man. *It must be their cousin, Tamar*, thought Kelly. He looked bewildered and confused.

Finally, Ahmed came trotting back along the hall, a grin on his face, carrying the little sack the Dragon Lady had given him.

"He wasn't quite dead, Kelly," he said gleefully.

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"You left him barely alive. He lived just long enough for me to do exactly what the Dragon Lady wanted. He choked on his own balls. I cut them off and stuffed them down his arrogant Russian throat."

Mr. Song looked at Ahmed. "The Dragon Lady?" he said, "My sister? What did she want you to do?"

Ahmed grinned. He opened the sack and let Mr. Song look inside. It was dripping blood. It held the Warden's head. The man's cock and balls were stuffed in his mouth. Mr. Song recoiled from the sight in the bag. Then he said, "It's about what I would expect of her. I'm sure she will be pleased."

Flemming looked at Kelly.

"Don't look," she said. "I have some rather violent companions, but that's what I needed to get you out of here."

Just then Ahmed let out a cry of joy and ran over to one of the prisoners.

"Tamar," he said. "Kelly, it's Tamar, my cousin."

The man looked like he didn't recognize Ahmed. He looked confused.

Kelly went over to him.

"Have you been down in the basement? Was the Doctor there?"

The man nodded. He had a bewildered expression on his face.

"Ahmed," said Kelly, "He's been brainwashed. This Doctor is a horrible man, but he is very good at what he does. It took me a long time to recover from his torture. I'm not sure I really have fully recovered. You will have to take care of him. He probably doesn't know who he is, never mind who you are. It

will take time, but he will probably recover after awhile."

Kelly stood up. "Let's get out of here. We have a plane to catch."

Flemming looked at her in genuine surprise. "An airplane?" he said, "you have an airplane?"

She looked at him wearily. "A C-47. Know how to fly one?"

"Well, I'll be damned," said Fleming. "I sure do know how to fly C-47s. I cut my teeth on them in Viet Nam." He took Kelly by the shoulders. "How the hell did you manage all this?"

"Ow," she howled.

"Oh," said Fleming, looking down at her right arm, "you're wounded."

"It's just a flesh wound." She looked around. "Is everybody here, Ahmed?"

He nodded.

"OK," she said "let's get the hell out of here."

She turned, hefting the carbine, and led the way out the shattered gate. Abdul was waiting there with the truck.

"What about the minefield?" asked Fleming.

"It's been deactivated," said Kelly. "OK everybody, load up."

She looked up at Colonel Fleming. "I'll explain everything later. Let's get out of here, now."

"OK," said the Colonel. "I can't wait to hear what you've been up to."

Kelly and Abdul got in the front and the rest of them all climbed in the back of the truck. Kelly opened the first aid kit and dressed the wound on her

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right arm as Abdul drove.

"You would have been proud of me," said Abdul with a smile, "I was very brave."

Kelly smiled at Abdul but didn't interrupt him.

"There were three of them," he said. "One was on guard and the others were sleeping. I snuck up on the guard as he sat in front of their little shack. I grabbed him from behind, just the way you attacked me, but I slit his throat before he could make any noise. He just gurgled a little, that was the only noise he made. Then when the explosions started, the other two rushed out the door. I was waiting for them, and I shot them both with my new rifle. I killed them both with one shot each, I think. Then I blew up the helicopter and drove the truck back here to pick you up."

"Well done, Abdul." She patted him on the shoulder. "Well done."

They stopped to pick up the Jeep. Kelly and Ahmed drove it, following Abdul in the truck. When Misha heard them coming and saw their headlights, he started the engines, first one, then the other. They were all warmed up by the time the truck and the jeep stopped and everyone got out.

Kelly took Colonel Flemming by the arm. "Come on. We've got a plane to fly."

"Hold on a minute, Winchester," yelled the Colonel over the roar of the engines, "I want to look her over first. I know you're in a hurry, but I won't operate a plane that hasn't been pre-flighted. Let me do a walk around first."

Kelly blushed in embarrassment. She knew he was right. They had no idea if the darn thing would

actually fly. It was old and the only people who had worked on it were not pilots. She helped him perform the pre-flight inspection. They found some water in the fuel tanks, so it was a good thing they checked, but they couldn't find anything else wrong with the plane.

"It's in remarkably good shape for an old, World War Two derelict," yelled Flemming. "Hell, it looks like new except for the faded paint."

They climbed up into the plane and entered the cockpit. Misha was sitting in the left seat with his feet on the pedals, holding the brakes against the idling engines.

Kelly looked at Flemming. "Will you take the left seat? I've never flown anything like this."

"OK," he said.

Kelly got in the right seat and got her feet on the pedals so she could hold the brakes. Misha got up and let the Colonel sit in the left seat.

Ahmed came up and stuck his head between them. "Everybody's aboard. The door's closed and we're ready to go."

"OK," said Kelly, "tell everybody to hang on, and tell them to spread out. Since there aren't any seats back there, it will be a little rough. Ask Misha to come back up here. We need him."

"OK, Kelly," said Ahmed. He turned and left. Then Misha came back up to the cockpit.

Colonel Flemming was taxiing along the creek bed. "Can I use my landing lights?" he asked.

"Yeah, turn them on. I think anybody who we would be afraid of is dead now," said Misha. "Keep

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up your speed. When you see the ford, turn left and you'll go up a slight grade onto our little runway."

"There," said Kelly, "there's the ford. Turn here."

Flemming depressed the left pedal and increased the throttle on the right engine. The plane climbed up the little bank out of the riverbed, onto the plain. As soon as he got up on the level ground, Kelly said, "OK, Colonel, the runway's right in front of you. We made it by packing down the snow with the truck."

"How long is it?" asked Flemming.

"About a half mile," said Kelly, "maybe three thousand feet.

"That's enough," he said.

They couldn't see over the nose of the old tail dragger, so Flemming took her word for it and pushed the throttles forward. The plane rolled forward easily. As their airspeed increased, he pushed the yoke forward a little to bring the tail up so he could see where he was going. He waited to rotate until he was almost at the end of the little runway. He waited until he had plenty of airspeed and altitude before he retracted the landing gear.

As soon as they were airborne, Kelly said, "You had better turn off the lights now. We have to stay low to stay below the Russian radar, but there's nothing out here to hit. It will be getting light and the sun will be up in a little bit. OK, Misha, now where do we go? We have to get that fuel you told me about."

Misha pointed out the way westward to Colonel Flemming. It was getting lighter by the minute. Then, all of a sudden, there was the runway stretching out straight in front of them. It was a bumpy landing, but

at least there was very little snow on the landing strip. Misha showed them where to taxi and they saw the truck. A man was waving at them. They taxied up to him and he waved them to a halt. Flemming pulled the throttles back and moved the mixture controls to lean, stopping the engines.

"Stay here, Winchester," said Flemming. "I'll show him how to fuel it." He got out of his seat and headed out of the cockpit. It took a while to pump in 1100 gallons of fuel, but soon the Colonel was climbing back into the cockpit. The sun was up by then and there was a clear sky. Kelly and Flemming started the engines and taxied out onto the runway, immediately going to full power and getting off the ground as soon as possible.

"That man on the ground joined our little group, you know," he said.

"He's my partner," said Misha. "He wouldn't last ten minutes here after the authorities find out what's happened."

"That makes about sixteen of us," said Flemming. "A C-47 should handle it. She feels pretty nimble for an old bird."

"OK," said Kelly, reaching behind the seats, "here are some charts." She unfolded the first one. "Here's where we are now. There don't appear to be many VORs or other navigational aids around here, but we'll be able to pick up some further south when we get closer to the mountains. We don't have a Loran or anything like that."

"I don't know if we can get over the mountains in this plane," said Flemming, "I don't suppose we have

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any oxygen, do we?"

"I'm afraid not," said Misha, "and we don't have cabin pressurization."

"It's OK," said Kelly, "we can fly around the worst of the mountains. We want to go to the east anyway, not due south. We're not going back where you and I came from, Colonel."

"OK," said Flemming. They flew along at about 200 feet, skimming the ground. Low enough to elude radar but high enough to avoid any hazards on the ground. At least there weren't any power transmission lines across the dessert. Misha monitored the radios while Kelly and the Colonel flew the plane. Kelly did most of the navigating. She answered questions and told him pretty much what had happened since she had been sold as a slave. She gave him the short version and didn't embellish the story very much. She glossed over the fact that she had had to kill so many men.

Kelly took a nap while he flew then he napped while she flew. It was a beautiful day to fly, and an uneventful flight.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

About ten o'clock, the mountains rose over the horizon.

"Head east, around them," said Kelly. "It's longer, skirting the mountains, but I don't know the way through. There is a way, though. I know some people who have a little Piper Cherokee 235 and they flew it to a place right in the middle of the range. I don't think we can get high enough to fly right over them, do you?"

"I don't think so," said Flemming. "The ceiling for these old birds is only a little over twenty thousand feet, but without a pressurized cockpit and cabin, we can't really go up there anyway. I don't suppose you have some oxygen stashed away anywhere aboard, do you?"

"Fraid not," said Kelly. She was looking at the charts. "Some of those mountains are higher than that anyway. There are ways through, but it's still a long way, and there's no place to turn around."

"That's what I figured," said Flemming. He edged the heading slightly to the east. "You know,

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Winchester, we could fly over the foothills, right up to the big mountains, as we fly around them. I'll have to be careful about updrafts and downdrafts, but if your charts are accurate, we can get up a little higher and navigate a short cut. The mountains will confuse any radar too, so they won't find us."

Colonel Flemming was a skillful pilot, and he was obviously very familiar with the C-47. He flew the plane in close to the hills, gradually gaining altitude and leveling off at about 15,000 feet. The air was thin up that high, but it didn't seem to bother him.

"Breathe slowly and deeply," he said. "I won't go any higher, but we will probably be all right at this altitude."

They started to encounter turbulence. The plane shook quite a bit. Colonel Flemming calmly flew the plane over the hills. As Kelly watched him, she noticed he was smiling. He was constantly scanning: manifold pressure, altitude, airspeed, heading, oil pressure, fuel levels, and outside the plane to the terrain and the horizon.

"Gee, I love these old planes," he said.

Kelly spelled him when he got tired. Misha monitored the radios. Nobody noticed them. They flew east and south for hours, but by the time they were heading west again, south of the mountains, the fuel levels were getting pretty low.

"OK, Winchester," said the Colonel, "how much farther do we have to go? I've got to put her down pretty soon. I don't want to run out of fuel and crash in the mountains."

To the southeast, it looked to Kelly like farmland—

rice paddies and row crops, but ahead it looked like it was leveling out into the plain that Ahmed called home.

"How much more time do you think we have in our tanks?" asked Kelly.

"Oh," he said, "maybe an hour or so. I don't suppose you have a friendly runway nearby, do you?"

"Hmmm," said Kelly, "I don't know. Misha, ask Ahmed to come up here. I want to ask him where we are."

"OK," said Misha. He took off his headphones and headed back into the body of the plane. After a couple of minutes, Ahmed came up into the cockpit.

"Hi," he said, "this is fun. I've never been in an airplane before, you know. None of us have. What do you want to know?"

"Ahmed," said Kelly, "look at this chart. Here's where we are. Now where is your caravan route?"

"Hmmm," said Ahmed. "This is a funny looking map. Here, let me see it."

Kelly handed it to him. He unfolded it and studied it for a while. He murmured to himself and smoothed it out to see it more clearly.

"Ah," he said, "here, Kelly, here. Look here. This is the pass. This is where Prester John's castle is, and here is where the caravan route leaves the mountains. We go south along this route. It goes off the map before the route gets to the river."

Kelly got out another chart. She unfolded it. She found the river, and then she found Kwaize.

"OK, Colonel," she said, "here's where we're

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going. It looks like another hundred miles or so, then the trail heads south and goes about another two hundred miles to the base of the Himalayas, here." She showed him the chart.

"Get us to any place along our caravan route and I can guide us back down to the river. From there, we can get to Kwaize. I'll bet the Dragon Lady would send a truck with some gas in it if I could get to Kwaize."

"She does want this airplane," said Misha.

"OK," said Colonel Flemming, "do some figuring, Kelly. Give me a vector that will get us close to that route and as far south as we can get. Use two hundred miles as a maximum range from here. I think I can stretch it that far."

Kelly ran a plotter from their current position across the map to where Ahmed said the caravan route was and rotated the hundred-knot mark south to meet it. She read the vector from the protractor.

"Come left to two-two-five. That will get us over the route with about another fifteen minutes of fuel left. If you are down around two hundred feet AGL or less, you can wait until we're just about out of fuel and then set her down on the plain. I've been there, sir, and it's nice and flat, but there is a lot of tall grass."

"Not this time of year, Kelly," said Ahmed. "The grass dies and shrivels during the dry season and it doesn't start growing real good for a while yet."

"OK," said Flemming, as he came to the new heading. He gradually reduced power and let the plane settle down over the plain as they left the

mountains and the farms behind.

Ahmed went back to caring for his cousin. Misha continued to listen for indications that they might have been identified. About forty-five minutes later, Kelly saw the caravan route. They were at about 150 feet AGL.

"OK, Colonel," she said, "see that little trail down there?" She pointed to it. "Follow that as far south as you think we have fuel for."

Flemming turned south to follow the dusty path across the plain.

"IFR," he said, "I follow roads."

Ahmed was looking out the window and he started recognizing landmarks. He went back up to the cockpit.

"Hey, Kelly," he said, as he tapped her on the shoulder.

"What is it, Ahmed?" she said.

"I think I know a good place to hide your airplane," he said. "Look over there." He pointed off to the right. "Do you see those trees over there? That's a good place to camp. There's a well there that's been used for thousands of years. And those trees are spread wide apart. You could put the plane under and between them so it couldn't be seen from the air. Nobody goes there except the caravans, but it's a good place to camp. I could go south to Kwaize and ask the Dragon Lady to send you some more fuel. Then you could fly down to the river or all the way to Kwaize. It would only take me a few days on foot to get to Chan Li."

"What do you think, Kelly?" said Flemming.

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"I brought the big tarpaulin to hide it, too," said Misha.

"I've come to trust Ahmed in matters like this," said Kelly, "I recommend we land over there and taxi up under the trees while we still have a little fuel left. Then we could stay here with the plane. Ahmed could take the rest of the men south and see if the Dragon Lady can help them get home." She turned to Ahmed, "I'll bet you can't wait to see Delilah and Jezebel again, can you?"

"You know me too well, Kelly Winchester," said Ahmed. "That sounds like a good plan, though."

"OK," said Flemming. He turned the plane to head toward the trees. "Put the gear down, Winchester. Flaps down."

"All green, gear down," said Kelly.

Flemming reduced power and the plane settled toward the plain, as he bled off airspeed with the flaps down. They were low anyway and soon they settled softly to a smooth landing and Colonel Flemming taxied straight ahead, under the trees.

"This is good," said Ahmed, as Kelly and Flemming shut down the engines.

Soon, they were out of the plane and covering it with the tarp. They had a cold supper and slept out under the stars. Early the next morning, Ahmed led everyone off to the south, except Kelly and Colonel Flemming. They stayed with the plane to fly it out whenever the fuel arrived. Kelly had enough emergency rations for the two of them to last for a couple of weeks.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Kelly and Colonel Flemming watched them go. They had their arms around each other's back. They turned and walked back under the trees.

"We have to be ready for anything, sir," said Kelly. "There are bandits, and then again, we might be discovered by soldiers. I don't know about you, but I don't intend to be taken alive again."

She sat down on the ground next to the M-60 and worked the action.

"This is very effective," she said.

The Colonel had been watching her, and just listening.

"Ahmed and Misha filled me in on some of your exploits," he said. "It appears you're quite a woman, Kelly."

"Yeah, well, you do what you've gotta do."

She looked up at him.

"I've killed a lot of men since the last time I saw you," she said. "It doesn't bother me, though, and that does bother me. I've got a lot of hate built up inside of me. I almost get a perverse pleasure when I kill one of those bastards. I guess I rationalize it. As

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much as they have hurt me, I want to kill them. I wish I could get my hands on those maniacs from that camp we were in at first—the one in the jungle. Those bastards who raped me.... the ones who killed Billy Zagoras.... It would give me a great deal of pleasure to kill every one of them, one at a time, face to face. I'd like to cut them up into little pieces. I'd like to do what the Dragon Lady asked Ahmed to do to the Warden of the End Of the Line. Do you know what he did?"

The Colonel shook his head.

"The Dragon Lady told him to get to him while he was still alive so he would know what was happening. Then he was to cut off his private parts and stuff them in his mouth to smother him, and then cut off his head. She even gave him a little bag to put the damned head in. I almost killed the son of a bitch, he would have died from the wound I inflicted, but he was still alive when Ahmed got to him, I think. The bastard came at me with a gun, but I jumped him. I killed him with a knife. This knife."

She pulled the stiletto from her bodice and held it up so Flemming could see it.

"Have you ever noticed how much people bleed when you cut them or stab them with a knife?" she asked. She was almost talking to herself. "There's a lot of blood on this knife." She was almost whispering.

"No," said the Colonel, "I'm afraid I haven't. I've never had to engage anybody in hand-to-hand combat. I've never had to try to kill a man up close."

"Colonel," she said, "I was a good pilot. I was really good at what I did. But blowing up buildings

and bridges, burning people in the jungle with napalm, killing tanks, even strafing enemy troops on the ground... I always felt sort of... detached. I never actually thought about the people I was killing as real people. But killing a man face to face is different. When you look into his eyes, when you smell his bad breath...everybody that you fight hand to hand seems to have bad breath. When you feel his body, and his muscles, and his fat and his bones moving against your own body, when his hands are on your throat or he slashes your own body with his knife or he shoots you, it's different. When his warm, slimy blood spurts out of his body all over you... it's different. It's different, Colonel. Dead people smell awful, too, and in no time, they're covered with ants, and flies and all kinds of bugs. It's different. It's revolting and it's different. I'm revolted at my own actions."

Kelly's eyes were damp and a tear rolled down her cheek. She looked down at the knife. She stuck it in the sand and then she wiped it off. She returned it to her bodice.

The Colonel knelt down next to her. "Come here, Kelly," he said.

She leaned against him. He put his arms around her. He kissed the top of her head.

"It's OK," he said, "I think I understand."

He rocked her back and forth as she wept.

"Go ahead and cry if you want," he said, "they tell me it's good for you."

"Oh, Mark." She squirmed around in his arms to face him. "I've thought about you all the time."

She raised her face towards his. She scrunched up

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towards him, closing her eyes, and tried to kiss him on the lips. He was caught off-guard and kissed her perfunctorily, but then he raised his head away from hers.

"No, Kelly," he said, "we can't do this. You know I'm attracted to you. You're a sexy desirable woman, and I love you in a way, like a daughter. But, you know I'm married, don't you?"

"I guess," she said huskily. "I should have known. Married and faithful, even after years away at war. Maybe that's why I want you so much. I wouldn't want you at all if you were a cad."

She sat up and pulled away from him, rubbing her eyes and wiping her nose on her sleeve, trying to ignore the ache between her legs. "I'm sorry, Colonel. I should not have acted like that. I don't know why I did. For the longest time, after being raped so many times, I couldn't even think about sex. I've had my body violated so much... but you are so kind and so strong. I guess you're the kind of man I've been looking for all my life. When I finally find you, you're twice my age and you're already taken."

"I'm sorry, Kelly," he said. "I almost wish I could just let go and let you seduce me. Lord knows, I would love to. I get just as horny as the next man, and you are quite a remarkable woman. You're lovely, too. Remember, I spent a long time next to you in that cage with no clothes on. I couldn't help noticing how lovely you are. You are sexy too, and if things were different..." his voice trailed off for a moment. "But I can't do it. I've been married a long time, and I've never cheated. I am deeply in love with my wife. If

we ever get home, I'll introduce you to her. Then you'll understand why I love her so much. You'll like her. You won't be able to help it."

Kelly straightened up.

"It won't happen again, Sir. Meanwhile, we had better be ready for anything. I'm going to clean our weapons. We have the machine gun, and I have an M-1 carbine. I also have my revolver and several knives. If we're attacked, I recommend that we use the M-60. I'll fire it if you'll feed the ammo."

"OK," said Flemming.

"Do you mind if I take off this heavy shirt?" she asked, "I have a T-shirt on underneath it. It's just that it's so hot in these heavy clothes."

"Go ahead," he said, "it won't bother me."

She stood up and stripped off the shirt, revealing the harness that held her dagger between her breasts.

"If we're attacked and they get close, you can have my pistol," she said. She unbuckled the pistol belt and handed it to him. "I want the carbine. And here," she said. She reached into her left boot and pulled out a knife. She handed it to him. "I hope you don't need it, but you never know."

"OK," he said, "you're right. Thanks."

She showed him how to put it in his boot without cutting up his leg.

They went over the operation of the machine gun. They cleaned the weapons.

Then they sat under the trees.

He told her about the End Of The Line and what had happened after she was sold as a slave. She told him about the Doctor, and Prestor John, and how she

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met Ahmed and how she saved his caravan. She told him about the Dragon Lady. He told her how he met his wife.

Then they told stories about airplanes – doing what pilots call hanger flying. They snuggled, and hugged, and giggled, and laughed. Kelly got more and more horny, but her Colonel gently resisted all of her advances. Each day they became closer friends.

They kept their eyes open and they scanned all around constantly for visitors. They took turns keeping watch at night. Several days went by and they were left alone by the world. Then one afternoon, they sighted a caravan coming towards them from the north.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

They approached at dusk. The people in the caravan looked a lot like Ahmed's or Nicholas's, riding their camels and leading lots of other camels loaded down with trade goods. The men carried the same old muzzle loading rifles Kelly had seen in the hands of most of these men.

Kelly went out to meet them while Colonel Flemming covered her with the machine gun from the shadow of the plane under the trees. She kept her hood over her head.

The man in the lead stopped when he saw Kelly standing there. He passed the word to the leader of the caravan who came swiftly to the front.

"Ola," he said holding up his right hand while cradling his rifle in the crook of his left arm. He was well dressed in white robes with a very neat, tightly wrapped turban. He had a well-trimmed beard. He smiled. "*Pax vobiscum.*"

My goodness, he's speaking Latin. She raised her right hand. "*Pax vobiscum,*" she said. "Welcome. We are just resting and waiting for our friends to return."

"Ah," said the man. "English. I speak English. We

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are from India, from the Punjab. We are Sikhs."

"We are members of the caravan of Ahmed Khan, the Mongol," said Kelly.

"Ah," said the Sikh, "I know Ahmed Khan. We all owe him a debt of gratitude. He has rid the mountain pass of the bandits. They have not bothered any caravans since he last passed that way. He killed many of them and scared the rest enough that they have left the area and no longer bother honest gentlemen. I am Raj Anand, the Sikh." He looked intently at Kelly. "You don't look like a Mongol."

Kelly looked up at the men. "I am just known as the Traveler," she said. "I was with Ahmed Khan when we were ambushed by the bandits."

The eyes of both men widened in recognition. "You are the Traveler?" asked Raj. "You are the one the stories are about? You are the woman who killed all the bad men?"

Kelly shrugged. She pushed the hood back off her head. "The same. I didn't know the stories had spread that fast."

"Oh, yes," said Raj. "We are honored to be in your presence. Your fame has traveled far and wide. The story about your exploits is being told in every camp. I heard about you only about a week ago, before we went through the pass. It was a peaceful passage, thanks to you. I honestly didn't believe you existed. I thought it was only a story and that Ahmed had done the fighting. But the story is about a furious woman, who kills men at will and shows no mercy. I am honored to meet you. Honored, and a little bit frightened."

Kelly smiled and then she laughed, blushing. "Don't worry, Raj Anand," she said, "I only kill bad men, not honest, hard-working men who drive caravans across the desert. I'm on your side, and I'll fight by your side if I need to. I am honored to meet you, but I have no hospitality to offer you. We only have emergency rations."

"I see that you have a big airplane," he said. "And I see that you have a companion hunched down behind a particularly nasty-looking machine gun."

Kelly smiled again. She turned her head. "Colonel," she yelled, "please secure your weapon and join us."

"OK," said Flemming. He cleared the action of the M-60 and flipped on the safety. He got to his feet, picking up the weapon and balancing it over his shoulder. He marched down to where Kelly was standing in front of the clan of Sikhs, gathered together on their camels.

"This is my traveling companion," said Kelly. "Ahmed Khan was with me when we raided the End Of The Line to free him. We freed all the prisoners there and escaped in this airplane. You have heard of that place?"

"Indeed I have," said Raj. "It is the slave market in the far north, is it not?"

"It is," said Kelly. "I myself was a prisoner there at one time. I was sold as a slave, to Prester John, and he allowed me to leave his castle. We raided the prison and rescued our friends with the help of the Dragon Lady. You've heard of her?"

"The Dragon Lady of Kwaize?" he asked. "Another

very dangerous woman. I'm not surprised that you know her, but she cannot be trusted. Can you?"

"Raj Anand," she said, "I promise to be as honest and trustworthy with you, as you are with me." She bowed slightly and dropped her eyes to the ground briefly before raising them to look back up at Raj.

"Well said," said Raj. "Let us camp. Then, perhaps you will join us for the evening meal. Of course, you know you will be expected to tell us all your stories."

"Now I am honored, Raj Anand. We will be pleased to join you. I'm sure you will guarantee our security and that of our possessions."

"Of course," said Raj. He smiled broadly and nodded a little bow to Kelly from atop his camel.

She and Colonel Flemming stood aside as the caravan moved past them with a creaking of leather harnesses. They returned to their little camp and put most of their gear inside the plane while the Sikhs set up their camp. It didn't take long.

"Can we trust these men to leave our gear alone?" asked the Colonel.

"I think so," said Kelly. "Most of these caravan people pride themselves on keeping their word. I'm sure they would like to cheat us out of something, but we don't have anything they want besides our weapons, and that's one thing that's off-limits. They never steal another's weapons. Weapons must be a gift, a purchase, or taken from a dead friend or enemy. Another thing, they don't usually steal, but they will go to elaborate lengths to swindle someone. An elaborate swindle is something to be admired, and the victim usually even admires the swindler. It's

complicated, but honor, ethics, various religions and morality systems, and business sense, all of these are highly valued. In addition, strength is what enforces the law. There is no governmental authority in most of the places these men traverse, and there are unscrupulous bandits and outlaws who must be guarded against. That's why everyone carries a gun. "

"Hmmm," said Flemming, "OK."

"Oh," said Kelly, "and another thing. I don't know about these men, but be ready for anything at diner. Ahmed has women hanging all over him, and he expects his guests to participate in his nightly orgies, so don't be shocked. Nicholas, the Russian didn't seem to like women at all. I think these Sikhs are pretty straightlaced, but don't be surprised at anything."

"OK," said Flemming, with a little laugh. "I intend to just keep my mouth shut, except to put food into it. You seem to be able to talk to them in ways they understand. I'll let you continue to do so. You seem to be a hero of sorts to them."

Kelly just grinned at him. "Yeah, I guess so."

Soon after the Sikhs had erected their tents, a man came to collect Kelly and Colonel Flemming.

"Raj Anand awaits," he said with a smile.

He guided them to the main tent. They were served a spicy, curried, lamb dish, rich with raisins and apples by two lovely women, who were introduced as the wife and daughter of Raj Anand. There was a prayer of thanks before dinner. After dinner, Kelly was asked to relate the firsthand account of the ambush of Ahmed Khan by the bandits

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in the pass. She told the story in as factual a manner as she could, ending with, "I really don't like killing people, but sometimes there is no choice." Everyone nodded in agreement.

Then Raj Anand told a story about his exploits as an astute businessman and how he first met Ahmed Khan. They both tried to cheat each other over a trade of goods from one to the other. Apparently, they ended up about even, but they renewed the bargaining each time they met. They were friends who respected each other as cunning swindlers and hard-driving businessmen.

After the stories were told, Kelly and Colonel Flemming returned to the plane. A Sikh was there on guard. He smiled at them and told them that he was there to make sure nobody bothered any of their possessions. They thanked him and got out their bedding from the plane. The Sikh told them to call for help if anyone bothered them, and he left, saying that Raj Anand would watch over the whole camp.

Kelly and Flemming slept well that night, not having to keep watch, but they kept their weapons close. The Sikhs noticed, and left them alone. These well armed warriors with a bloody reputation were to be respected, feared and left alone.

The next morning, the caravan was on the move again. The tents were struck and loaded up, and they were moving out shortly after the sun broke over the horizon. Raj Anand waved to them with a smile. Kelly and Flemming waved back.

Later that day, Ahmed Khan's caravan approached from the south.

Chapter Forty

They met in Ahmed's tent for the evening meal. Delilah and Jezebel served a hot soup filled with leafy greens and mushrooms followed by a tough, overcooked chunk of mutton. Everything was accompanied with wine in large jugs. The women were both fully dressed, Kelly was glad to note.

Two Chinese men were in attendance. They were both pilots who worked for the Dragon Lady and they told her that they were to take possession of the C-47.

"Nee how," said Kelly.

"Nee how," they said. They were relatively uncommunicative, and they only spoke Mandarin and Cantonese.

After the usual greetings and niceties, Ahmed said, "I have some bad news, Kelly."

Oh, no. She looked expectantly at Ahmed.

"Well," he said, "in a way, it's good for you, since you weren't there."

Kelly waited for the news.

"All those other men we rescued," he said, wringing his hands and looking down, avoiding

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Kelly's eyes, "they've been re-captured. All of them except my cousin, Tamar. He was with me and they missed him."

"Oh no," said Kelly, "what the hell happened?"

"I don't know, for sure," he said, "but I have figured most of it out. The Dragon Lady has a lot of enemies, and the government watches her closely. Somebody tipped off the Provincial authorities that she was harboring fugitives and helping them to escape the country. They surrounded and raided her nightclub. The men were hiding in the whorehouse upstairs with the girls. They arrested them all. I don't know where they were taken. We were already on our way back here. Nobody has bothered us, so I don't think we are under suspicion."

"Damn," said Kelly. "What about her?"

"She's in the local jail," said Ahmed. "She'll probably be out in a couple of days. She pays off the police with free visits to the whores and she gives them dope sometimes. Her methods are hard to resist. But I don't know if she will be able to help you now. Chan Li told me to tell you not to try to contact her. They may still be watching. Her criminal activities are one thing, you and your fellow prisoners of war are something else altogether. The local cops like having her around. They use her networks to their own advantage sometimes, but they will not stop looking until they find all of you."

"Well, Damn," said Kelly again. "Well, what the hell are we going to do now? Do we have to turn around and go back to Prester John? Or must we join the caravan of Ahmed Khan?"

"You are welcome to do either one, you know," said Ahmed. "If both of you want to come with me, I would be glad to take you in. But there is an alternative. Remember Chan Li?"

"Sure," said Kelly.

"Well," said Ahmed, "Chan Li is not really involved with the Dragon Lady. He's sort of an independent operator. He's not under any more suspicion than normal. He might be able to help you. Do you have any money?"

Kelly reached inside her bodice and pulled out her purse. She reached in and removed the yuan and rubles the Dragon Lady had given her.

"Ah," said Ahmed. "That might be enough. And he might make you a deal for that fancy machine gun. What he can do is get you in a boat going downstream to the coast. When you get there, you would be on your own, but at least you would be closer to home than here."

"Chan Li, huh?" said Kelly, "The fat man who took us to Kwaize in the truck?"

"That's him," said Ahmed.

"How far is it from here?" asked Kelly.

"On foot," said Ahmed, "three days. But you had better not carry that big machine gun, Colonel. You'll be spotted in a minute. You're already too tall. At least you," he looked at Kelly, "you're dressed in a manner that won't invite suspicion, but you, sir," he looked at Flemming, "you're much too tall, and you need some nondescript clothes. I can help you there, but you really need to learn how to slouch. Bend your back as if you had been working in a rice paddy all

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your life instead of flying airplanes."

Flemming laughed softly. "OK."

"I'm not kidding," said Ahmed, "I'm dead serious. It could save your life. Bend over when you walk and act humble. Keep a hood over your face like Kelly does and slouch."

"OK," said Flemming, getting serious, "I'll try. Kelly, you remind me if I stand up straight."

"Yes, Sir," she said.

They finished eating and Ahmed continued to slosh wine down his throat, as did the two Chinese pilots, who were loosening up and giggling. They were leering at Delilah and Jezebel.

"Colonel," said Ahmed, "are you up for a piece of ass?"

Colonel Flemming looked sternly at Ahmed. "No, Ahmed," he said. "I'm married and I don't have sex with anyone except my wife."

"Oh," said Ahmed, "too bad. "Both Delilah and Jezebel were hoping to get their hands on you—and their legs wrapped around you. They are both very accomplished lovers, you know."

"So I've heard, but no thanks," said Flemming. "I'm flattered, but I think I'll pass."

"OK," said Ahmed. "Kelly?"

"You know my answer, Ahmed," she said.

"Yeah," said Ahmed, "I'm sorry you Americans are such prudes. You ought to loosen up and drop your pants now and then. These Chinese guys are going to get laid tonight. I've been keeping them happy, but they will be flying out tomorrow. They have some fuel in some big drums, and the Dragon

Lady has a place for it at an old airport somewhere. I think she's going to use it for smuggling somehow. Frankly, they've been fun to have along, but I'll be glad to see them go their own way. They ride my camels, screw my women, drink my wine and eat my food. And I don't get anything out of it at all."

"Except the good will of the Dragon Lady," said Kelly.

"Ah yes," said Ahmed, "and that's surely worth an awful lot, isn't it? I just hope she gets out of jail. I understand they have her hung on a wall some place, in the old jail in Kwaize. The local authorities are not happy about it, but it's some Maoists from Beijing that are behind the whole thing."

"Oh," said Kelly. "Great."

Delilah and Jezebel were clearing the table. They had already removed some of their clothes. Kelly decided it was time to go.

"Good night, Ahmed," she said. "Tzee jian," she said to the pilots.

"Good night," said the Colonel.

Then, Kelly went over and took Ahmed by the shoulders.

"Ahmed," she said, "I'll never forget you." She embraced him, bad breath, body odor and all, and she planted a big long kiss directly on his lips. Ahmed was so surprised that he didn't even try to feel her up or pat her ass. He just put his arms around her and kissed her back.

"Something to remember me by," she said. Then she rose to her feet and followed the Colonel out of the tent. She slept with her head on the Colonel's

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chest and his arm around her protectively. She dreamed again about the Tailhook Bar in Pensacola, eating cheeseburgers and watching the other pilots as they ogled the dancing bares.

They woke early and were gone before the Mongols began to stir. They left the machine gun and all the belt ammunition in front of Ahmed's tent.

The Colonel did his best to slouch and bend over like an old Chinese man, but Kelly had to remind him several times. They resisted the temptation to march at a respectable four miles per hour and took their time. Marching along at a military clip would have invited suspicion. They camped in bushes, away from the road. By the afternoon of the third day, they reached the river. The next morning, Kelly set out to find Chan Li. She found him eating breakfast with some travelers who were negotiating for his services. He was astute enough to avoid using her name. He just addressed her as the Traveler.

He excused himself and rose from the table, moving away from his hosts so they could speak privately.

"You must be careful," he said. "The Maoists think they got all of you, so they are not looking for you yet, but if anyone leaks the news that you are back, they will come after you."

"OK, Mr. Li," said Kelly. "What about the Dragon Lady? I understand she's in jail."

"She is. It's disgraceful what they are doing to her. They've been trying to get the goods on her for years, and now that they've got her locked up, I'm afraid they are torturing her. Her men are all well-known

and many of them have been killed. The local authorities are afraid to do anything for fear of being branded as traitors. Everybody's really pissed off because the bar, the restaurant and especially the whorehouse are all closed, not to mention the gambling and dope smuggling."

He looked at her searchingly.

"They all..." he didn't finish his sentence.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I think they are sort of hoping that you will break her out of jail and kill all the Maoists. Don't tell anybody I told you, though."

"What?" said Kelly. "Why me?"

"Don't you know? You are a notorious killer with a reputation for success. Your deeds have become legendary in the last few months. Everybody knows about you, but nobody really knows who you are. Some even think you are a spirit and not a real flesh and blood person. In the stories, sometimes you are a man, sometimes you are a woman, but you always beat up and kill the bad guys and get away clean. There are stories being told about you that are not even true, but the dispatching of the bandits in the pass and the raid on the End Of The Line are stories that are being told in hushed voices all over."

"It seems you are a celebrity, Kelly," said Flemming.

"Damn," said Kelly, "I guess so."

She stood there in thought for a moment.

"Who wants me to rescue her? Would I have any help?"

"Will you do it?" said Chan Li.

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"I don't know. It depends on who I'm dealing with, and whether I can trust them."

"OK, look," said Chan Li, "the local cops would leave the gates and all the doors open at night when all the Maoists would be asleep. All you would have to do is kill them all and release the Dragon Lady."

"Oh," she said, "that's all, is it? I don't enjoy killing people, no matter what my reputation says."

"I know," said Chan Li, "but these are terrible men. Very bad. Boo how. Very bad. They would try to kill you if they could, and they will be looking for you eventually. All the local authorities will help you escape if you help them. But you must not leave any of the bad men alive. They must not be around to report back to their superiors."

"Hmmm," said Kelly. "What do you think, Colonel?"

"I'm afraid it's your call, Kelly," he said. "I'm out of my depth here. My inclination would be to cut and run, but I don't think we would get very far. And if we cross the local cops, they'll turn us over to the same bunch that has your Dragon Lady in jail. I'm afraid we might end up back in a prisoner of war camp."

"Yeah, I think you're right. But this time, if they try to take me, I'm going down fighting. Hmmm..."

Chan Li and the Colonel watched Kelly as she mulled over her decision.

"OK," she finally said. "I'll do it. But I won't just go in there and kill everybody. I'll only do that if I have to. The local guys can kill them all if they want to. They just need me as an excuse, anyway, don't they?"

"You're right, of course," said Chan Li. He looked at the Colonel. "Will you be helping her?"

"I don't know," he said. "Do you want my help, Kelly?"

Kelly looked directly into his eyes.

"Are you up to it? We might have to kill a lot of people. I hate to say it, but I'm awfully good at it. Are you?"

"I don't know," he said, "but I'm game if you are. I am a soldier, after all. I have been for a long time. Soldiers break things and kill people. That's what we do. And I'm still in pretty fair shape for an old man."

Kelly thought for a minute more.

"OK, Mr. Li. I take it you trust these local police?"

"Oh yes," he said. "They have no use for the Maoists. Of course, once they are out of the way, it will be back to normal, with them trying to catch me at something illegal." He chuckled to himself. "But we are all in agreement until the Provincial cops are gone. We have an alliance against them until then, and they wanted me to ask you for your help. They're not really cowards, but they have heard the stories about you too, and they think you are invincible. They fear you. They expect you to leave, and when you're gone they will be much relieved."

"OK," said Kelly. "What's the next step?"

"I will arrange everything. They don't want to have any dealings with you. They just want you to do your thing and they will stay out of the way. I will talk to them and let you know."

"OK," said Kelly. She looked askance at the Colonel. He nodded surreptitiously. "Is there a place

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where we could clean up, get something to eat, and get some sleep? A nice secure place?"

"Of course," said Chan Li. "Wait here. Let me finish up with these people and I will take care of everything."

He went back to the other men with whom he had been eating and talking. He finished quickly and rejoined Kelly and Flemming. He took them to a garage and they got into a small car. He drove them for hours, stopping occasionally for gas and to pee. They finally got to Kwaize and he stopped at a small cottage with an extra little room on the side. He explained to the old couple there that his companions needed to wash, eat, and sleep and be hidden. They smiled and said "Nee how."

They showed Kelly and Flemming the outside latrine. They had a shower made out of a fifty-five gallon drum on top of a scaffold, with a shower head screwed into the bottom and a chain to activate it.

"They ask that you use the shower together," said Chan Li, "because it takes so much effort to fill it back up."

"OK," said Kelly.

The Colonel rolled his eyes. "I'll help them fill it up," he said.

"Good," said Chan Li, "I hoped you would, but they still ask that you shower together and not use too much water."

"Oh, OK," said Flemming.

The old couple showed them the little room. It had one small bed. It was just big enough for the two of them to lie down on side by side. They each used the

latrine first then they stripped down and got in the shower. The only thing Kelly refused to take off was her dagger. They took advantage of their forced intimacy to help scrub the grime off of each other with a scrub brush they found on a shelf. They had no soap, but the rinse was refreshing. Neither of them was particularly embarrassed, except when Flemming ended up with a hardon. After all, they had been naked in cages right next to each other for a long time and were used to looking at each other. They laughed about his erection, but didn't do anything about it, although Kelly was willing. She wanted to touch and caress it, but she didn't.

When they dried off and got dressed again, they sat down to a nice homely meal of soup and stir-fried vegetables with a little chicken in each, accompanied with a bowl of rice and the ever present cup of tea.

They were tired and went to sleep immediately, snuggled up against each other in their underwear. Kelly still had on her harness, holding the dagger between her breasts.

They woke in the morning to a chattering of people outside. They peeked out through the curtains. The old woman was bargaining with a peddler for a chicken. After dressing, the two companions went into the cottage and had a good hot breakfast. While they were finishing up, Chan Li showed up.

"Everything's settled," he said. "I'll take you to the jail tonight."

"I want to hit them at three or four in the morning," said Kelly.

"Oh," said Chan Li. "They were expecting you to

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do it around midnight."

"Good," said Kelly. "I don't want to show up when they expect me. Just let them go ahead and unlock everything when they want to. I'll take care of everything else."

"The jail is small," said Chan Li. "They only have a few cells, and the Dragon Lady is the only prisoner they currently have inside. There is a small office, and an attached barracks where the Maoists are sleeping. There are seven of them, all young men. You'll recognize them by the red bandannas they wear tied around their heads, even when sleeping. No one else will be anywhere near the place until morning, so anyone inside should be a bad guy, except for the Dragon Lady."

"OK," said Kelly. "Meet us here at two. We'll be ready."

The rest of the day, they spent cleaning their weapons and sharpening their knives. Kelly had the M-1 Carbine, her stiletto, and one boot knife, plus her garrote. Flemming had the Colt revolver and one of Kelly's boot knives.

They went to sleep early, fully dressed this time. Comfort be damned.

Chan Li showed up right on time. He had a boltcutter with him.

"You will need this if she is actually chained to the wall as reported," he said.

He guided them to the jail. They stopped at the end of a narrow alleyway and looked out across a broad cobblestone square at the old structure. It was dim inside the high-barred windows of the jail. The walls

were made of rocks and looked sturdy and old. The wooden door was closed.

"The local police have assured me that the door is not locked," whispered Chan Li, "but the Maoists think it is."

The three of them crouched down and watched the little building. Chan Li fidgeted.

"What are you waiting for?" he whispered.

"I go when I'm ready," whispered Kelly, "not before."

"OK, OK," whispered Chan Li.

Kelly waited some more, watching intently for any movement.

"I have a boat waiting for you, when you're through here," said Chan Li. "It has a false bottom. It is used for smuggling, and sometimes, for smuggling people like you. It will take you downriver to the seaport on the coast. I don't know what you will do when you get there. I don't know anybody there, so you're on your own at that point."

"Thanks, Chan Li," said Kelly, "but let me concentrate on one thing at a time."

Kelly and Flemming watched the building. Nothing happened for a long time, an hour or so. Suddenly, Kelly made up her mind.

"OK," she whispered, "it must be about three o'clock or later."

She looked over at the Colonel.

"Ready?" she whispered.

He nodded.

She stood up and stripped off her heavy shirt. She stealthily crept across the square. Quietly, she

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chambered a round in the carbine. Flemming followed her with the pistol in one hand and the boltcutters in the other.

They stopped outside the door. She slung the carbine over her shoulder. She pulled the garrote out of her bodice.

"I'm going to try to do this quietly," she whispered. "I'm going to kill the guard, then, if we're lucky, we can release the Dragon Lady and get out of there without killing anyone else. Watch my back."

She tried the door. It swung open a few inches. It creaked a little bit.

Damn, she thought. Why the hell couldn't they have oiled the darn hinges?

She opened it some more and peeked inside. There behind the desk, was a guard with his feet propped up on the desk and the chair leaning back against the wall. He had a girlie magazine in his lap and his head nodded down in sleep—his chin was on his chest.

Damn. She wouldn't be able to get to his throat to strangle the man. She put the garrote back inside her shirt and drew out her dagger. She looked back once more at Flemming. He nodded seriously at her. She crept quietly across the floor to the desk. She crawled around it and stood up next to the guard. She reached out to grab the man's hair, and just as the shadow of her hand crossed his eyes, he blinked and looked up at Kelly. She quickly grabbed his hair and yanked it back to expose his throat. She plunged the dagger, point first in a stabbing motion through his larynx, all the way to the back of his neck to the bone. He had a startled and frightened look on his face. She twisted

the dagger sideways to cut more of the man's throat. He gurgled, but couldn't make any other sound. Blood spurted from his carotid artery in pulses. It squirted all over the desk in front of him.

Kelly pulled the knife out and put him out of his misery by stabbing the knife through his temple into his brain, killing him instantly.

She had made very little noise. She turned to look at Colonel Flemming, standing there, horrified, with the bolt cutters over his left shoulder and the pistol in his right hand.

"Look out," she said in alarm. Another guard was behind him. He turned, but wasn't fast enough. The guard grabbed him by the right arm and kicked him behind the knees, knocking him off his feet. As he fell, the pistol went off wildly. Flemming twisted and tried to swing the boltcutters at the man, but the guard grabbed them and yanked them out of his hand. He brought the heavy bolt cutters down across Flemming's face, crushing his nose and skull. He collapsed.

"No!" Kelly yelled. The second blow smashed in the side of Flemming's head. Kelly launched herself at the man as he stood back up for another swing. She plunged the dagger deep into his chest. The man yelled. They fell to the floor, Kelly on top of him. She stabbed him again and again. Blood spurted out of his many wounds. He coughed and blood came out of his mouth and nose.

The door to the barracks opened and another man staggered out sleepily, with an AK-47 in his hands. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

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"You sons of bitches," she yelled. She rolled off of the second guard onto the floor. As she rolled, she kicked up at the man, finding his testicles. As he doubled over and dropped his gun, she got to her feet and came up blasting away with the carbine. She fired three shots at point blank range into the man. As he fell, she jumped over him and kicked open the barracks door and strode in. The other four Maoists were struggling to wake up and get out of their cots. She fired a round at each of them and then went back and shot each one again and again, yelling "You bastards! You sons of bitches! I'll kill every fucking one of you, you damned bastards!"

Tears were streaming down her cheeks. She inserted a new magazine into the carbine. She checked each of the men. They were all dead. There was blood everywhere.

"Well," she said to herself, "you wanted me to kill all of them. I guess you got your damned wish."

She exited the little room and went back into the office.

She knelt down on the floor next to Colonel Flemming. She lifted his crushed head to her breast and held him. He was dead, too. There was no question. The blows from the heavy boltcutters had crushed his skull and splinters of bone had been forced into his brain. His head was a bloody mess and the gray matter of his brain was oozing out of his wounds.

"Why, God, why?" She rocked back and forth, holding him to her. His shirt fell open and she saw the little dog tag chain with all the dead soldier's

identification on it. She pulled it over his head and added his tag to it, hanging it around her own neck.

"Hey!" shouted a weak voice from the jail. "Hey! What's going on out there."

Kelly gently let Colonel Flemming's body down to the floor. Thinking quickly, she unbuckled the pistol belt from around his waist and strapped it around her own. She picked up the revolver and holstered it. She picked up the bloody boltcutters and made her way quickly into the jail.

"Oh no!" she said when she saw the Dragon Lady. She was chained by her wrists to the wall and her body sagged in weakness. She was stripped to the waist and had on only a flimsy pair of black pajama bottoms, like the Viet Cong used to wear. Her shrunken, starving body was barely enough to hold the pants up on her hips. Her torso was criss-crossed with stripes where she had been whipped. Her nose was bloodied and both of her eyes were black and blue. The left one was swollen shut. Her feet barely touched the ground. They must have had her there for quite a while. Her clothes were soiled with diarrhea, urine and blood from her many wounds.

She looked at Kelly with her one good eye.

"Winchester?" she croaked.

"The same," said Kelly crossing to the woman. She hefted the boltcutters and braced them against the wall to cut the chain holding the woman's left arm by the wrist.

She grunted and squeezed the handles. After a couple of tries, she got the chain cut. The Dragon Lady hung from the right wrist. She couldn't stand.

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"Have they fed you at all?" asked Kelly.

"Only a little water," she croaked.

Kelly worked on the other chain, finally cutting through the heavy links. The Dragon Lady dropped to the floor. Her back was striped with welts from a whipping that looked worse than her front. Kelly knelt down and cradled the woman's head in her arms.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" asked the Dragon Lady in a weak voice.

"Can't you tell?" Kelly said, "I'm rescuing you. Saving your life, by the looks of it. I don't think anyone outside knew they were treating you this badly."

"I'll live," said the Dragon Lady. "Just help me get out of here. Call me Zoe, by the way. I like to be on a first name basis with people who save my life."

She tried to laugh, but ended up coughing instead. There was blood in her spittle.

"You've got some internal injuries," said Kelly.

"Yeah," said Zoe, "what's new? Haven't you ever been beaten up before?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," said Kelly, "but I made this bunch pay for what they did to you."

"Thanks," said Zoe.

Kelly helped her to her feet, but she couldn't stand or walk. She dragged her across the room and out the door into the office. Zoe looked around. There was blood everywhere, and dead bodies littered the floor.

"Damn," she said, "how many of the bastards did you kill?"

"All of them," she said.

"Heh, heh," she chuckled. "Good answer."

"There are more in the barracks," said Kelly.

"Oh, no," said Zoe, "is that your precious Colonel? I don't recognize him, but he looks like a Colonel. I know you two were the only ones who stayed behind with the plane. It must be him, and I know you were close. Is he dead?"

"Yeah," said Kelly, "He's dead. I asked him to watch my back, but he was watching me instead. One of those sons of bitches snuck up behind him and smashed his head in with his own damned boltcutters. I'm afraid I went a little berserk. I killed every son of a bitch I could find. Now, after seeing what they've done to you, I'd like to kill them all again."

"Not necessary," said Zoe, "be a waste of ammunition."

Kelly dragged Zoe out of the jail and across the square to where Chan Li was waiting in the shadows.

"She needs a doctor, Chan Li," said Kelly.

"Where's the Colonel?" asked Chan Li.

"He's dead," said Kelly. "Don't worry about him. Help me get her out of here."

"OK," he said. "I'll send someone back for your gear."

They half-dragged, half-carried Zoe back to her bar. They took her upstairs to a room. They quickly sent for a doctor. Kelly held her head.

"Kelly," she said, "I'll be all right. I've been through stuff like this before. But you've got to get out of here. They'll be all over this place in no time looking for you. Have you got an escape planned?"

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Chan Li was standing there.

"I have made an arrangement with the Siu family to transport her down river in their false-bottomed boat," he said.

"Ah, good," said Zoe. "You had better get going. We can't help you any more from here. Get to the port and look for a boat going offshore. If you look in the waterfront bars, be careful. They're dangerous. They'll try to dope you up and you'll end up a slave again if you're not careful."

They said their goodbyes and then Chan Li escorted Kelly out, hustling her toward the river.

Chapter Forty-One

Kelly soon found herself in a small boat, propelled by oars and poles, drifting down the river. Mr. and Mrs. Siu and their three sons worked the boat as rice traders and part time smugglers. Usually they just carried rice downriver and returned with fabrics and clothing from the seaport, but occasionally they hid dope or guns in the false bottom of the little craft.

Mr. Siu said that they would be stopped several times at official checkpoints along the river and Kelly would have to be well hidden each time. This time, they had a light load of rice so they could move it out of the way and remove the planking to let Kelly lie down in the bilge to hide, and get back out again. They had to replace the planks and cover it all up again with the bags of rice each time she hid.

The boat drifted slowly down the river with the current, steered and propelled by the oars and poles. Mrs. Siu had a transistor radio that she kept tuned to stations that played traditional Chinese music. They kept a small fire going in a little grill in the bow of the boat to cook on. They had a little cabin, lit by an oil lantern, where the family slept in shifts. They stopped

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each night, but somebody always stayed on watch. Kelly always had to be concealed at night, sleeping in the bilge.

It was hot and damp and hard to breathe in the bilge. The deck planking was just inches over her body. She lay on her back with the keel parallel to her spine. The boat leaked, and Kelly had to lay on her back in the brackish, putrid water that collected in the bilge. She would have drowned if they hadn't constantly kept the hand pump going. To say it was uncomfortable and scary would be an understatement. At least they did have a hollow bamboo air tube for Kelly to breathe through, in case the water rose too high. The worst part was that it was completely dark. It was almost like having the Doctor's little box over her head. She felt so alone, trapped and vulnerable, without knowing what was going on up above on deck. She kept her hand wrapped around the pommel of the dagger strapped between her breasts for comfort.

The family fished to supplement their basic diet of rice cooked up with a few hoarded vegetables, mostly onions and various kinds of peppers. They had plenty of rice wine to drink, and they dipped water straight out of the river. They boiled the water and made tea with it. Kelly got diarrhea anyway, and stomach cramps. Wouldn't you know her body picked a time like this to menstruate?

She was thoroughly miserable the whole time she was on the little boat. It took over a week to get to the port. She had to hide in the bilge at least once every day, and she had to sleep there at night, because the

Siu's never knew when they might have a visitor. When they got to the seaport, they rafted up side by side with several other riverboats. Mr. Siu told Kelly that he might know someone who could help her get out of the port. He knew some fishermen who went off shore and sometimes they said that they would see an occasional warship. Mostly, though, they only saw the coastal patrol boats looking for smugglers and pirates.

"Pirates?" she asked. "I've heard other people say there are pirates, but I thought they were kidding. I thought all the pirates went out of business hundreds of years ago."

"Oh no," said Mr. Siu, "not around here. They are real enough in these waters. They prey on honest merchants and even fishermen. The worst ones are from Viet Nam. They are the meanest, and they don't care who they hurt. We're lucky we didn't run into any of the river pirates on our trip down river."

Great, thought Kelly. *Well, what else could happen?* She was sure she would find out. At least her period had quit and she was over the diarrhea. That night, after they ate, Mr. Siu told her to gather up her gear and follow him. He led her across several boats to a dock. They went ashore.

"Be very alert," he said, "this is a very dangerous place at night."

Kelly nodded. He led her on a circuitous trek along the waterfront, past bars and whorehouses, between warehouses, cautiously peeking around each corner before proceeding. Eventually, they came to another large pier with some large sailing junks tied up and

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some more rafted alongside.

He scooted across the street to the dock with Kelly right behind him. They went all the way out to the end of the dock and then crossed several of the boats to board a large, old, fishing boat. It was a traditional junk with the slatted gaff rigged sails, like a schooner with a large mainmast and a smaller foremast. They were met ondeck by a rotund, weathered man wearing Western- style jeans and sea boots, but no shirt.

"Captain Wang, this is the Traveler you have heard about," said Mr. Siu.

"Nee How," said Kelly.

"Nee how," said Captain Wang.

They looked each other over. Kelly pushed the hood back off her head.

"I can help you sail," she said. "I've been sailing since I was a little girl, and I'm an officer in the U. S. Navy. I won't be just so much dead weight."

The Captain raised an eyebrow. He looked like he didn't believe her.

"What's in it for me?" he said.

Kelly pulled out her purse. "I have money to pay you, yuan and rubles. I will also let you keep my guns and all the rest of my gear, once I am delivered to a U. S. Navy warship. I have only a few possessions I intend to keep—this letter, some dog tags, and my knife. Everything else, you can have."

"Hmmm," said the Captain. "Very well. I'll show you to your quarters. We leave with the tide just before dawn. Everyone will be moving at about four o'clock. Rise with them if you really want to act as a

member of the crew. Thank you, Mr. Siu."

"Thank you," said Kelly.

"Boo ka chi," said Mr. Siu. "Tzee jian." Dismissed, he slipped over the side to the next boat and headed back to his family.

"Tzee jian," said Kelly to his receding back. She followed Captain Wang below to the foc'sl and he showed her a berth between two others. There were five sailors who greeted her with grins and a chorus of "nee how."

He introduced her only as the Traveler.

"Put your gear over here," he said, indicating a small area on the floor between two small sea chests.

She unloaded her firearms and put them down with her other gear.

"Gentlemen," said the Captain, "I wouldn't mess with this Traveler. You may have heard stories..." he looked at her.

"They're all true," said Kelly, looking around, fiercely.

"'Nuff said," said the Captain. "She will be a member of the crew until we can deliver her to a destination of her choice. Is that understood?"

The sailors all nodded.

"Very good," said the Captain. "We leave with the morning tide."

He turned on his heel and climbed up the companionway to the deck.

Kelly looked around at the men. They looked friendly, but they obviously didn't know what to make of her. She slipped into her hammock, fully clothed and closed her eyes. She went to sleep

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quickly. It was a luxurious berth compared to the bilge of the small riverboat. Even the smell of decaying fish parts mixed with sweat was better than the putrid water had been in the bilge of the little riverboat. The men were gambling with dice. They talked softly, not enough to keep Kelly awake. Eventually, they turned down the lantern flame and they all slipped into their hammocks to get some sleep.

In the morning, they all rose together and Kelly followed them to the main cabin where they ate a breakfast of tea, hot soup, and smoked fish in a salty sauce. By five o'clock they were letting go the lines and pushing off from the other boats, who were also preparing to get under way. Kelly helped the men raise the slatted sails. The captain was at the helm, a large tiller instead of a wheel.

The tide floated them toward the channel and soon the breeze caught them and propelled the little sixty-foot craft out towards the open sea. Kelly didn't know whether to think of it as a large boat or a small ship. The craft had no motor. They passed a lot of moored boats and ships on their way to the mouth of the harbor. They ran out close to a jetty on their starboard beam, and when they rounded the end of it, the boat began to pitch over the rollers coming in from the sea.

Kelly breathed deeply. The clean sea air was so refreshing. She grinned and stretched. It was so invigorating. She quickly got her sea legs under her. She had never been afflicted with seasickness. She had experienced more turbulence and gut-wrenching motion while flying combat missions than she ever

expected to encounter on the water.

She took charge of the fore sail sheet. She kept her eye on the wind, trimming the sail to catch the wind at the best angle. The men soon figured out that she knew what she was doing and left her alone. They even grinned at her a few times. It wasn't total acceptance, but it was a start.

The little ship rode smoothly over the four-foot rollers as the Captain expertly guided her out to sea. He motioned to Kelly to join him.

"I see you can trim a sheet," he said, "can you steer?"

"Sure," she said.

He motioned for her to take the tiller.

"Just keep her on this heading," he said. There was a small binnacle on a pedestal in front of her. They were heading south.

"We'll round Hainan Island to the west," he said, "and go on south, across the Gulf of Tonkin. The fishing is good there this time of year. Also, there's a good chance we will run into one of your warships. But we also might run into patrol boats, and there are some nasty pirates in those waters. We've run into them before. They're too lazy to fish for their own food, so they have to steal it from honest men like us."

"I don't like bullies," said Kelly. "Do you usually fight them off?"

"No," said the Captain, "It's not worth it. They might kill someone, and they might shoot up our boat."

"Yeah, but they will keep doing it until someone

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stops them," said Kelly.

"I know your reputation, Traveler," said the Captain, "you have left a trail of dead bodies wherever you go. I don't want blood on my decks."

"Oh," said Kelly, chastened. "I understand." She steered the craft as expertly as she had trimmed the sheet. The Captain was satisfied she could handle it.

"We need to prepare our nets," he said, "just keep her on this heading."

"Aye aye, Sir," said Kelly. It felt good to say those words again. The Captain grinned at her. The craft heeled slightly in the brisk breeze. Seagulls followed them, screeching and gliding along, waiting for the fishermen to supply a meal for them.

The men who weren't tending the sheets all gathered in the waist to mend and spread and fold the nets. They attached cork floats where the old ones had broken or become waterlogged, and they replaced parts of the netting that had begun to rot.

Kelly watched her sails, the horizon and the binnacle as she guided the junk effortlessly over the long gentle swells. She hadn't felt this good in a long time. She was almost happy. She couldn't help but think that she was almost home. She kept hoping a carrier task force would suddenly appear directly ahead.

Most of the seventh fleet was far to the east of here, but there were destroyers and frigates patrolling these waters, and there was always hope that a submarine would surface alongside.

They cruised all day. One of the men took the helm after the evening meal and Kelly relaxed in her

hammock. The men weren't very talkative with her. They kept to themselves. Kelly wasn't sure she wanted to get too friendly with them, anyway.

The next day, they spotted the western coast of Hainan Island. They were making good time. They continued on a southerly course during the next two days and then headed southwest towards the coast of Viet Nam. By the end of the week, they were off Da Nang and the nets were ready. The weather had been beautiful, but as they approached the coast, the wind died down and they were enshrouded in fog.

"This is not good," said the Captain. "There is too much traffic in and out of Da Nang. We're right in the path of all the big ships that visit the port."

Sure enough, after sitting becalmed in the fog, they heard a ship approaching. A large freighter loomed up out of the mist and bore down on them. Nobody on the big ship ever even noticed the little junk in their path, and she passed within fifty feet of Captain Wang's boat. The wake rocked the fishermen violently, almost capsizing their craft.

Another ship followed the first one about a half an hour later, but at least someone on the deck of the freighter saw them and waved at them. They hoped that the crew of the second ship would radio any other ships in the area that a becalmed fisherman was out here.

Eventually, the fog began to lift and the wind picked up around mid-afternoon. It started raining gently and the fog cleared some more. They headed south again. The wind picked up and the seas began to pound the little craft. A storm was coming and it

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was coming fast.

"Why don't you put in at Da Nang?" asked Kelly.

"I hate to have to deal with the damned Vietnamese," he said. "They all want bribes, and they're all so suspicious. They don't trust anybody, and they would surely take you into custody. Then they would want to know what you were doing aboard my ship."

The little ship was struggling in the increasingly bigger seas. As the wind increased, the Captain had them reduce sail. They lowered the foresail and furled it completely, then they reefed the mainsail. Later, they took another reef in the main. Kelly guessed they had at least a fifty or sixty knot gale blowing. The junk was laboring in the increasingly heavy seas as they drove south along the coast. Kelly stayed at the helm with the captain, steering into the wind. She didn't want to be driven onto the rocks of a lee shore, especially a hostile place like Viet Nam.

They fought the storm all night. Waves crashed over the bow and washed over the deck, but the little ship was sturdier than Kelly had thought. Built like an oblong box, she was almost a hundred years old. There wasn't a nail in the hull. She had been built with only wooden pegs and pitch to hold the planking to the massive frames. She certainly had been built to last, and to weather storms like the one raging against her as Kelly fought the tiller in the driving rain. Everything groaned and creaked as the ship struggled over each massive wave, but nothing broke.

The storm abated somewhere in the early morning

and by the time the sun rose over the horizon, the rain had stopped and the wind had dropped to a steady twenty knot breeze.

The sun came up blood red in a clear sky off to port.

"Red sun in the morning, sailors take warning," said Kelly to herself. The captain heard her. He grinned and nodded at her. He was puffing on a pipe. The smoke wafted past Kelly's nose. It was tobacco, not dope at least. Nowadays, you could never tell.

"Want some?" he asked, offering her a pipe and a pouch of tobacco.

"No thanks," said Kelly, "that's one bad habit I never picked up, thank God."

He grinned at her, stroking the taff rail lovingly. "She's a good little ship, isn't she?"

"That she is," said Kelly. "I didn't know these little junks could handle storms like that."

"We've weathered worse than that," he said. "She's been in my family over a hundred years. I was born below in the cabin."

"Hi, Skipper," came a call from foreward, "there's a boat off to starboard in trouble."

Kelly and the Captain looked off to starboard. There, low in the water and listing badly, was a small motor boat. She looked to be a sleek and fast craft, about forty feet LOA or so. Several men were waving from her deck.

"Looks like they're sinking," said Kelly.

"Hmph," said the Captain. "Vietnamese."

He looked at them some more, raising his binoculars to get a better look.

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"You're right," he said. "I guess we had better help them. I just don't trust the men around here. Most of them are smugglers and pirates."

From the looks of the boat, a racy speedster, she understood his concern. What the hell would a boat like that be doing out in a storm like the one they had just come through. There were an awful lot of men on board for just a pleasure craft.

Captain Wang put his helm over.

"Let out those reefs," he yelled. "Get the foresail back up."

He came around and let out the mainsheet, jibing the foresail and running downwind to them. He went past them as they yelled and waved to the men on the fishing junk. He came about and brought her into the wind and held position as the speedboat, for it was apparent that was what it was, drifted down towards the junk. The Captain maneuvered the junk alongside to starboard and lines were thrown back and forth.

The Chinese fishermen helped the Vietnamese men up onto the junk. They came aboard, eleven of them, and their leader, a skinny man with greasy black hair and a long droopy mustache, said, "Nee how." He spoke Mandarin.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," he said. "We were sinking."

"Well you are safe, now," said Wang.

"I am Ngoyen," said the man. "I need you to help us tow our boat back to Da Nang."

"Oh," said Wang, "I wish I could. But we have no power. This is a sailing vessel. We couldn't tow a boat that big."

"Oh, sure you can," said Ngoyen. "Just tow us back to Da Nang and we'll pay you for it."

Kelly was getting nervous. These men didn't look like seamen. They were dressed too nicely and they had on shiny black shoes instead of sensible boots. Captain Wang didn't like the looks of them either.

"I'm sorry," he said, "there's nothing I can do about your boat. The best I can do is set you ashore somewhere. I don't go to Da Nang. It's too much trouble."

Ngoyen got a mean look on his face. "You will tow us to Da Nang." He pulled a gun out from under his arm and leveled it at the Captain. The other Vietnamese men all pulled guns out too.

Kelly decided it was time to act. This was getting out of control. She started to walk forward towards the bow, through the waist, where the Vietnamese men were. Captain Wang's men were all gathered aft with him.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked Ngoyen.

"I'm going below to take a shit. You want to join me?" She smirked at him impishly. They didn't have to know that the junk didn't have a proper head. She pushed her hood back and stripped off her shirt, concealing the dagger harness inside it, and said, "Hell, I'm just a whore, along for the ride to keep them company. Let me know if you want a little action. *Voulez vous e'couche, avec moi? N'est pas?*"

She raised her T-shirt to flash her tits at Ngoyen and his men.

"Beaucoup pussy," she said, "you like?"

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All Vietnamese spoke French and they liked what they saw and heard.

They all grinned and believed her, anticipating a great piece of ass, with French round eyes, at that. They let her go and returned their attention to Captain Wang and his shaken crewmembers. She wiggled her ass and let them feel her up as she walked past and through the pirates or smugglers or whatever they were. Honest men probably wouldn't be out at sea in a speedboat at night, armed to the teeth with handguns. She would enjoy killing these bastards.

She slid down the companionway without touching a stair. She quickly crossed to her gear and retrieved the pistol belt and strapped it on, loading the revolver and holstering it. She dropped the shirt and donned the harness holding her stiletto. Finally, she picked up the carbine and inserted a twenty round magazine. She filled her pockets with bullets for the revolver and the two spare carbine magazines.

She took a deep breath. She faced the stairs, putting her foot on the highest stair she could reach.

"OK," she said under her breath, "here goes."

She launched herself upwards, out of the companionway and onto the deck in a prone position. She brought the carbine to her shoulder and drew a bead on the closest man, only a couple of feet away. She wanted them to turn around so they wouldn't shoot Captain Wang or any of her crewmates.

"Hey!" she yelled. As they turned she saw the closest man aim his pistol at her. She pulled her own trigger. At this range there was no need to worry

about gently squeezing off a round. In the prone position she had a steady firing position, even in the rough seas. She also presented a very small target. And the men standing before her were surprised and unsteady, unable to aim at her with handguns on the pitching deck.

She fired five shots before anyone returned fire. Every round found its mark. Five pirates lay on the deck. Several rounds came her way, thudding into the wood and sending splinters flying. Suddenly, she felt a burning pain in her left buttock. *Damn, what a place to get shot.*

She fired again. Another one down, then another.

Oh shit! Ngoyen had turned and was shooting the Chinese fishermen. Kelly couldn't get a clear shot at him, his men were in the way. Kelly emptied the magazine and all the Vietnamese men lay on the deck, but another pistol bullet had clipped her left arm up high, near her shoulder. All the Chinamen seemed to be down too, except the Captain. Ngoyen was behind Wang. He had his arm around the Captain and had a gun pointed at his head.

"I'll kill him, whore," he shouted. "Put down your weapon or I'll kill him, I swear."

Kelly got slowly to her feet. Her butt didn't hurt as bad as she thought it would, but it was difficult to walk. Blood was streaming down her left arm, but the bullet had gone right through and it hadn't hit a bone or anything serious. It just hurt like hell. She gave thanks for a large female fanny.

She limped aft towards the two men.

"Stop right there or I'll kill him," said Ngoyen.

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He won't do it, thought Kelly. If he shoots Wang, he won't have a shield and he won't have a hostage. She looked into Ngoyen's eyes. The man was scared. He should be, she thought.

She drew the colt from her holster and dropped the carbine to the deck.

"Let him go and I might let you live," she said in a menacing voice. She continued to limp towards them. Captain Wang looked terrified.

"Don't come any closer," said Ngoyen.

Kelly kept going. She was only a few feet from the two men. She didn't hesitate. She raised the revolver and pointed it directly into Ngoyen's left eye from only a few inches away. She cocked the hammer.

"Let him go!" she said. "Now!"

Ngoyen looked as terrified as the Captain.

"I'll kill him," he said.

Kelly squeezed the trigger. Ngoyen's head exploded as his brains were blown out the back of his head. His lifeless body dropped to the deck.

"Look out," screamed the Captain.

Kelly was tackled from behind by one of the other Vietnamese men. She must have missed one. She suddenly realized that there had been eleven of them, but she thought she had only seen ten of them drop.

The pistol went flying as she fell beneath the man. He wasn't very heavy. Even with her wounds, Kelly was pumped up with adrenaline. She twisted around from underneath him with a blazing speed that he didn't expect. The dagger was in her hand in a flash. They rolled across the deck, and the man struggled to disengage himself from Kelly's grasp. He stood up.

He saw a gun on the deck. He dove for it. Kelly made a lunge for him. She crashed into him and her momentum drove them to the railing on the port side. They struggled, Kelly trying to bring the knife into play and the man trying to point the gun at her. He pushed her and she lost her balance against the railing. She fell backwards over it, but she grabbed the man and dragged him with her.

They fell over the side into the heaving sea. The man lost his grip on the gun and tried to reach out for it. That gave Kelly the opening she was waiting for. She stabbed him in the chest. She pulled the knife out and stabbed again and again. The man went limp, his blood mixing with the blood from Kelly's wounds in the rough water. Kelly saw the fear in the man's eyes as he died.

"Look out, Traveler," yelled the Captain. "There's too much blood in the water. Shark! Shark! Look out!"

He sounded hysterical. Kelly saw the dorsal fin approaching. She turned and placed the dead Vietnamese pirate between herself and the shark. Just as the monster was about to get to them, she pushed the body at the shark. An enormous mouth opened up as the shark attacked. It bit down, slicing the man in half. The monster glided by with the whole midsection of the man in his huge jaws.

The Captain was reaching down over the side. A wave lifted Kelly and she reached up to grab his hand. He pulled her up and out of the water with a mighty heave, just as the shark came back for another bite of the pirate. Kelly and the Captain fell in a heap on the deck.

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"Are you OK?" he asked, breathing heavily from the effort of yanking her from death's jaws.

"I guess," said Kelly. She looked down at the wound on her arm. She reached around behind to her buttocks and felt of her hip. She hurt everywhere. "Do you think you could dress my wounds?"

"Of course," he said.

They heard a moaning from aft.

The Captain got up and went to see what it was. Kelly followed him. Three of the sailors were still alive. Two of them weren't hurt too bad, but the other one had a bullet in the gut and was bleeding badly. Two of the men were dead.

While the Captain ministered to his people, Kelly picked up the carbine and slapped in a fresh magazine, chambering a round. She proceeded to check Ngoyen's men. All of them were either dead or had serious wounds. Four of them were still alive. Kelly was tempted to just shoot them in the head, but the Captain tried to talk her into just letting him tie them up. Then one of them tried to pick up a pistol and aim it at Kelly. She saw him moving and shot him in the head.

"Die, you son of a bitch!" yelled Kelly. "Are you sure you want to let the bastards live?" She summarily shot the other three in the head. "Kiss my ass!"

"Oh, Kelly," said the Captain. "Why? Have you no mercy?"

"Throw the fucking bastards over the side!" she yelled. She kicked at the bodies as she limped around them, bleeding from her own wounds.

The Captain returned to helping his sailors. Kelly limped aft to help him. She collapsed on the deck next to him.

"I have to get back to my port," he said. "I can't go into a Vietnamese port. They would accuse me of attacking them instead of the other way around."

"I don't want to go back there," said Kelly. But she knew he was right. Wang was the only person aboard who was not wounded. He had only two men who could realistically help him sail the junk, plus Kelly. They all needed medical attention, but Kelly didn't want to get it in China. That would mean re-capture.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Captain Wang, "I'll let you take the dingy and try your chances alone. That's the best I can do. I'm heading back to port as soon as I can."

Kelly thought about that. Alone, in a twelve foot dingy on the high seas, with nothing but a small sail and a pair of oars. Captain Bligh of H.M.S. Bounty had done it. He had sailed over a thousand miles in a longboat with a few men after Fletcher Christian had set them adrift.

"I can give you some water, some food, and a fishing line," he said. He looked at her expectantly. He knew she wouldn't willingly return with him.

"OK," said Kelly, she was over her rage. She was tired and weak. "You're sure you'll be all right. It's a long way back."

"Oh," he said, "we'll make it. I just hope you do. I understand why you might want to take the chance instead of coming back with us, but I wouldn't rate your chance of survival very high."

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"I've got to try," said Kelly. "I've gotten this far...I'm not going back."

"I know," said Wang.

They cleaned and dressed the wounds of the survivors of the gun battle. Kelly's wounds were only flesh wounds. None of the bullets had lodged in her body but had gone right through. Neither were they very deep. She had to drop her pants to let Wang work on her ass, but he patched her up as well as he could. Years at sea and a well-stocked first aid kit had made him a fairly accomplished amateur doctor. Two of the crewmen were able to get up and move around too.

They loaded the dingy with food and water before they dropped it over the side.

"I know you promised to let me have your guns and all your gear," said Wang, "but I think you might need it."

"Thanks," said Kelly. She was indeed reluctant to give up her weapons.

She climbed over the side and dropped into the little boat. She pushed off and they all waved to each other. The junk's sails caught the wind as Wang put the helm over and she slowly pulled away to the north.

Kelly leaned over the transom to slide the rudder onto the pintles. She inserted the tiller into the post. Then she raised the mast and hoisted the little sail. The wind caught and she steered eastward, away from the Vietnamese coast and, hopefully toward the U.S. Navy. She watched as the junk sailed farther and farther away. She was alone, now. Boy, was she alone.

Chapter Forty-Two

Kelly sat in the Tailhook Bar in Pensacola wearing her whites. A cheeseburger and a frosty beer sat on the table in front of her. She had just come from the awards ceremony. POPEYE sat across from her. For once, he was more interested in Kelly than he was in watching the dancing bares.

Her little boat had been spotted by a helicopter patrolling the Gulf almost two weeks after Wang had set her adrift. She was unconscious, dehydrated, out of water and food. Her wounds had scabbed over and were healing, but her skin was burned to a crisp.

She was picked up by a destroyer and transferred to a hospital ship. They said she had almost died and could not have lasted much longer. After regaining consciousness, when she was out of danger, they flew her to Guam, and then back to the States. She ended up back in Pensacola for recuperation. The Navy assigned her a press agent to handle public statements and appearances. They were keeping an eye on her, ever since she had thrown a punch at a snot-nosed little twerp with a microphone who had accused her of murdering innocent people during her

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time in enemy territory.

"Hell," said Kelly to her old wingman, "I was only trying to escape, and they were all bad men. Everyone I killed deserved it. Shit. I felt like killing that little twerp, too."

POPEYE stared at Kelly. "VIXEN," he said, "You scare me."

She chuckled. "POPEYE, you don't know how many men have told me that over the last couple of years."

She leaned back and picked up her beer.

"Go ahead and watch your naked women, POPEYE," she said, "I'll watch you." She grinned at him. "I dreamed about this place, you know. All I wanted, all the time I was in captivity, was a cheeseburger and a cold beer at the Tailhook Bar."

She took a bite of the burger. A little ketchup squeezed out on her left cheek. She winced as she wiped it off and the napkin drifted across the scar from her fight with the bandit.

She opened the little navy blue box and looked at the award inside. The Navy Cross. It had come down to either that or a Court Martial for committing war crimes. The Navy decided it was better to make her a hero instead of a villain. The CIA knew about all the men she had killed. And they knew about all the men who had died around her while she was barely surviving. The Navy doctors had found the dog tags from all those dead prisoners hanging around her neck. She explained that Colonel Flemming, of the U.S. Marine Corps had collected most of them before he died. Then she cried, thinking about him. She

intended to go see his wife.

They were thinking of assigning her to the Sixth Fleet. That way she could visit the Pope in Rome. His Holiness was expecting to see her and he knew she had a letter from Prester John for him. She also had saved the one large emerald that Prester John had given her. She wanted to present it to His Holiness, along with the letter. He insisted on seeing her personally, and didn't want anyone else to deliver the letter.

Kelly Winchester—Hero. She couldn't wait to get in an airplane and get current again so she could fly. They wanted her to give speeches. Her wounds had pretty much healed, but her body carried some really nasty scars, especially the one on her ass and the slash across her cheek from her fight with the bandit. She wanted to land on a carrier again.

Some civilian interviewer had asked her if she would worry about being captured again if she returned to her squadron and got back to flying missions.

"I don't think they would want to capture me again," she said, "I'm too damn tough for them, and I've developed quite a mean streak, if you know what I mean."

The C.I.A. guys and Naval Intelligence knew what she was talking about, but most people didn't know how dangerous she had become, or how many men she had killed. She even scared the feminists, who idolized her at first for her exploits, 'til she punched one of them for making a pass at her.

She still slept with her dagger under her pillow. It

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was comforting.

Nobody dared wake her up.

THE END

About the Author

Mr. Alex is a retired manufacturing executive. Originally from New Jersey, he has lived all over the East Coast of the United States from Maine to Alabama. His education includes a B.S. from Clemson University and an M.B.A. from Jacksonville State University. A Vietnam veteran and a private pilot, he has a number of other interests, including: music (he plays the drums), sailing, mathematics (he is an A.S.Q. Certified Quality Engineer), handgun competition, chess, drag racing, and bridge.