

Camp Romeo, Ghazni Province, Afghanistan

April 2009

“Captain Ward-Bocelli, I need you to come with me.”

Abigail jumped at Major Ray Watson’s baritone voice that pierced the silence of the small room she called an office. She whipped around. “Sir?”

Their host at Camp Romeo had already turned away.

“What did I just see?” Bryson Bishop, her sergeant, stared after him. “I don’t get it. What is it?”

Her gaze flew to the e-mail message that had landed in her in-box seconds earlier. The subject line told her enough.

Extension of Assignment to Camp Romeo.

“Trouble.” She slapped shut the lid of her Panasonic Toughbook, grabbed her patrol cap, and stuffed it on her head as she bolted into the hall. She ran to catch up to the major. “Sir, you want to tell me what’s happening?”

“Bad stuff.” He pushed through the door.

Abigail grabbed it to keep it from hitting in her face. “As in?”

“An SF team got hit at a village fifty clicks from here.” He clipped his words as he strode toward the eastern end of the camp.

Even at her five-foot, ten-inch height, Abigail hustled to keep up. “Casualties?”

“Ten. Plus who knows how many locals. A real massacre.” The major swore. “And it sounds like you drew the short straw to figure out what went down.”

Jennifer Haynie

Her mind flashed to the orders she'd received but not had a chance to read. "Sir?"

"I got word from your CO. Looks like you'll be our guest for at least a few more days."

Oh, great. Just what she needed. Camp suspicion still hit high on the wariness scale after she and Bryson had investigated a soldier who'd gunned down an unsuspecting local. Being a part of the Army's Criminal Investigation Command, better known as CID, tended to engender distrust among the rest of the Army. She ground her teeth. "We'll do what we can, sir. Where was the SF team based?"

"Kandahar." He bit off that word. His pace kicked up dust on the dirt road.

Jonathan.

Her brother's name slid unbidden through her mind. As a Green Beret, he'd been in-country for almost a year, but he hadn't ever shared where. But he wasn't anywhere near here. Was he?

They slowed as they approached the eastern end of the camp with its airstrip for transporting supplies, personnel, and prisoners.

Next to the scarred concrete stood a series of tents. The combat support hospital. Crucial to any location near an active theater of operations.

Abigail almost laughed at that. Where in Afghanistan *wasn't* a field of operations?

She jumped as the doors to the nearest tent banged open. Two nurses sprinted down walkway to the edge of the strip with a gurney between them.

Even now, the deep thump of rotor blades throbbed a bass rhythm. She peered through the midday glare that her sunglasses barely shielded. To the east, four shapes materialized in the washed-out blue. They rapidly grew. Two Black Hawk Medevac helicopters and two Apache attack helicopters. The Apaches peeled off, most likely headed back to the scene of the attack. The two Black Hawks landed. Abigail winced as their rotor wash sent dust and sand whirling into the air.

The nurses darted forward and ducked under the still-spinning blades as the side door to the nearest Black Hawk slid open. The engine cut off. A

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crewman hopped onto the tarmac, holding an IV bag over his head. He bent low and shouted something to the nurses.

Someone else leapt from the bay.

He looked familiar.

Careful to avoid the blades, Abigail drew closer.

Dirt streaked the newcomer's face. So did something else. Blood? He wore his beard long, almost to the point of shaggy, most likely as a way to gain rapport with the locals. He held the hand of the man on the gurney and bent close over him as he said something.

Abigail gaped at the blood-soaked bandage wrapped around the victim's left leg. Another bandage encircled his neck. *God, please...*

The nurse said something to the injured soldier's buddy. Gently, she pried his hand away. She and her colleague hustled toward the CSH with the gurney rattling between them.

His friend hung his head and swept his hands through disheveled sandy blond hair.

That one gesture connected it for her.

Jonathan.

Her brother stood before her.

She opened her mouth to shout to him, but it remained locked in her throat.

Jonathan! Her cry echoed in her soul. Heart racing, she tried again. "Jonathan!"

She rushed toward him.

His head snapped up. His eyes, a clear green now reddened by dust and emotion, widened. "Abigail?"

She ran to him and threw her arms around him. He clung to her as he shook from head to toe.

"What...what are you doing here?" he finally gasped.

"An investigation. Your friend." She stared in the direction of the CSH.

"David."

She whipped around. "David Shepherd?"

He looked away.

Jennifer Haynie

Now that the helicopter blades had stilled, the sound of quiet weeping reached her.

A young woman crouched in the open doorway. She wore a torn uniform of some sort that was streaked in gray and mottled brown. Her headscarf had slipped down enough to reveal a streak of raven black. She hugged herself and rocked back and forth as if catatonic.

Jonathan extended his hands and said something in Pashto. Whatever platitudes he murmured seemed to work because she finally uncoiled from her crouch and allowed him to help her from the chopper. The mewling continued.

Abigail's heart pounded. "What's going on?"

"This is Nabeelah," her brother said. He refused to relinquish his grip on the girl. "She needs to get checked out."

"So do you."

Someone nudged Abigail aside. "I'm Major Ray Watson." The major forced himself into their small group. "If you'll come with me, I'll get you to the hospital. Captain Ward-Bocelli, it seems as if you two know each other."

"He's my brother, Sergeant First Class Jonathan Ward." A lump in her throat overtook her.

"Then I suggest you join us." Without another word, the major turned on his heel and gestured for Jonathan and Nabeelah to head toward the CSH.

Abigail remained rooted to her little spot of tarmac, gaping at them as they walked away.

"Abigail?" Bryson's voice reached her as if from a distance. "Wait, is that why we got orders extending our stay here?"

"Yep." She took a deep breath to steady herself. "Sounds like the boys at the Pentagon want to know exactly what happened."



Camp Romeo, Gbazi Province, Afghanistan

Abigail hunched over the desk in the closet-sized office that was now her home away from home for another few days. Nothing broke the stillness. No

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chatter. No laughter. No nothing. She flipped the pages of her tablet as she reviewed the notes she'd made while debriefing Nabeelah Khan. In the silence, the noise sounded like she wadded up a ton of newspaper.

The young woman had crossed the fine line between deeply grieving and inconsolable. Throughout their two hours together, she'd barely been able to string together a sentence of somewhat comprehensible English before lapsing into weeping again. Well, who wouldn't be that way after losing all of her family, including her beloved father? Not to mention friends and comrades. And seeing David Shepherd injured so badly? He remained in surgery as the doctors struggled not only to save his leg but also his life.

She closed the notepad with a snap. Abigail rested her elbows on the desk and scrubbed her face with her hands. Her stomach rumbled. She hadn't eaten anything in close to eight hours.

"I heard that." Bryson's voice reached her.

She cocked an eyebrow as he settled at the desk across from her. He set a candy bar and a can of Coke on the blotter in front of her. "I know this isn't good for you, but it's the best I could come up with."

"Are you finished with Jonathan?"

"Yeah." His chair squeaked as he leaned back. He swung his feet onto his desk and popped a can of Dr. Pepper. "I'm surprised they're letting you on the case since you're his sister."

"That's why you debriefed him. I just happened to be in the neighborhood."

He shook his head. "I've never seen anything like this."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"It's almost like, at least from what Jonathan said, the hit was well planned. Maybe someone supplied them with insider information."

"How could they?"

He shrugged. "It's just a theory of mine. I think we should run it down."

"We might get our chance."

"I'm not following."

She opened her laptop, typed in her password, and turned it around. "We've been ordered to head to the village to check it out. Under heavy escort, of course."

Jennifer Haynie

“They’d better,” Bryson muttered. He took off his glasses and cleaned them with a rag he pulled from his pocket.

“Then at first light day after tomorrow, we’re to head back to Germany.” She rubbed her eyes.

“Go and see your brother.” Bryson’s soft advice reached her. “And tell him his buddy’s through surgery and stabilized.”

She opened her eyes a crack. “You went by the CSH?”

“Yep. They’d just wheeled him into recovery. The doc said they’ll fly him via medevac chopper to Bagram, where they’ll transfer him to a flight to Ramstein.”

“What were his injuries?”

“A nick to the neck which was nothing. The bullet that got him in the left leg broke his femur.”

She flinched.

“But they’re optimistic that they were able to do enough of a repair here to save it. So how about you run along and pass that to your brother? He’s in the guest quarters next to my room. I’ll bring us all some food later.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks, Bryson.” She jumped up and pushed through the door into the night. The cold bit through her ACUs, but she didn’t care. It wasn’t too far of a walk to the heavy canvas tent that made up the guest quarters of the small camp. She stepped through the main door. A central hall ran down the middle, dividing the eight rooms and two bathrooms neatly in half. Cheap wood formed the walls. She shivered in the chill.

She paused at Nabeelah’s room and opened the door a crack. A closed-loop heater in the corner popped a little but had warmed the room so that Nabeelah wouldn’t wake up freezing. The young woman finally slept, her hair fanning onto the pillow in raven waves. Then Abigail heard her cries. The tragedy stalked her even in the depths of medicated unconsciousness.

Why her? Why David and Jonathan? Why did they have to lose so many close friends at once?

She let the door softly close and found her brother’s room. She tapped on the door. “Jonathan?”

No answer.

She pushed it open.

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A soft glow filled the room from the lamp that sat on a footlocker someone had pushed against the wall in a poor attempt at a dresser. Folded ACUs sat on top along with a toiletries kit. His heater had worked its magic, and she shucked her ACU jacket.

To her right, Jonathan hunched on the edge of his rack. His elbows rested on his knees, and he hung his head as he stared at the plywood floor. Fresh fatigue pants and a T-shirt probably offered him a modicum of comfort. He'd shaved, and a shower had removed the soot, dirt, and blood from earlier that day.

“Jonathan.”

This time, he turned his face toward her. The deep sadness emanating from his green eyes bludgeoned her soul.

He returned his gaze to the floor. His hands shook as if he'd downed too many energy drinks.

Abigail stepped all the way into the room and shut the door behind her to avoid releasing any more heat. Words held no currency during times like this, so she eased onto the bed beside him.

“Is David through surgery?” His voice rasped.

“Bryson said he's out and stable enough that they'll transfer him to Lundstahl in the morning. We can go see him later if you like.”

He nodded. “And Nabeelah?”

She sighed. “I finished debriefing her about an hour ago. She's beyond distraught.”

“We...we didn't stand a chance.” His hands clenched into fists.

She scooted closer to him so their shoulders touched.

“There were too many of them. They came so fast, and—”

“I'm here.” She rubbed his arm.

The trembling now emanated across his body. “They got Mackie first. A head shot. He was dead when he hit the ground.”

Her throat tightened.

“Then the grenade took down Captain and Oso. Oso, he was gone instantly. Captain took it in the stomach. I tried to save him, Abigail. I tried. But I...I couldn't.” A tear slipped down his cheek.

She gathered him in her arms and held on tightly.

Jennifer Haynie

With a low cry, he wept.



Camp Romeo, Ghazni Province

The sound of pounding reached Abigail where she lay on her rack. Her heater had switched off, and cold now pressed close to her face. She grunted and buried further under the rough wool blanket.

“Abigail!” The man’s voice grew in volume.

She stirred. “Huh?”

“Wake up!”

She bolted upright. “Jonathan?”

Had David died?

She yanked on her jacket and combat boots, then nearly ripped the flimsy door off its hinges. “What’s going on?”

Her brother stood there, his hair mussed, his eyes wide. “Nabeelah’s gone.”

She tried to make sense of what he’d told her. “What?”

“She’s gone.” He grabbed her hand and nearly dragged her across the hall where the young woman had stayed. He slammed open the door.

Abigail gasped. “She’s not in the latrine, is she?”

“No, I checked. There’s no way she could have left on her own, right?”

“No. There’s just one way in and out.” She glanced around the Spartan room. “Wait! Her things aren’t here.”

“What things?” Jonathan pushed past her and paced around the small space.

“Some of the nurses who were her size donated some clothing to her. And a headscarf. And toiletries. None of that’s here. This smells of something.” Abigail dashed down the hall, throwing her hair into a hasty ponytail as she ran. Forget the patrol cap. This wasn’t a formal visit to their host.

With Jonathan at her heels, she burst into predawn darkness dimly lit by a streetlight over the exercise yard. Only a few soldiers on night duty stirred.

She found Major Watson coming out of the mess hall with a steaming mug of something in his hand. “Sir, a word with you, if you would.”

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He stopped as if busted for being somewhere he shouldn't have been. Slowly, he turned. "Captain Ward-Bocelli, isn't it a bit early to be up?"

"Not when someone's missing." Jonathan didn't bother to salute as he glared at the major.

"I'm not following."

Abigail inserted herself between her brother and their host. "Nabeelah Khan is missing. You want to tell me what you know?"

"That would be nothing. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to brief the men who will be taking you to the village." He began walking toward the command center.

"Major Watson, I think you forgot one thing," Abigail called. "I'm in charge of investigating what happened in that village fifty clicks east of here. An eyewitness I interviewed has gone missing."

He stopped.

She squared her shoulders and narrowed her eyes. "From what I remember about Camp Romeo and what you showed me, there's only one way in and out of here. Meaning you can't say that she just happened to walk away because I'm not going to believe you on that. Someone in this camp took her away. Now I want to know where they took her."

He glowered at her. "I can't tell you."

"I think you're forgetting my occupation. CID, remember? You lie to me, you lose your career. Come clean with me now or at a court-martial later. Your choice."

Major Watson's gaze shifted from her to Jonathan. "Both of you, this way." He walked them toward the command tent and to his office. Once Jonathan had shut the door behind them, the major eased onto a chair that groaned in protest. "They showed up an hour ago."

"Who is 'they'?" Abigail remained standing.

"I don't know."

Jonathan folded his arms across his chest. "Bull."

"Seriously, I don't."

"Were they in uniform?"

"No. Civvies. They flashed paperwork stating that they were authorized to remove Ms. Khan from our custody."

Jennifer Haynie

“And you believed them?” she asked.

“Yes, because that authority came from way beyond my pay grade.”

“Like how far?”

“I can’t say.”

“What do you mean, you can’t say? I say you’re lying, and if you are, I’ll—” Jonathan clinched his fists and took a menacing step forward.

“Jonathan, no.” Abigail grabbed his arm. His biceps flexed under her grip as she pulled him away. “It’s not worth it.” She turned to the major. “And you have no idea of where they were taking her?”

“None.” Major Watson held up his hands. “None at all. Believe me that if I could have kept her here, I would have.”

Jonathan slammed out of the office.

Abigail studied the major for a moment. He maintained a steady gaze. Sweat had broken out on his brow despite the chill in the room. No matter how much she wanted to say he’d lied, she couldn’t. “Though I hate to say it, I think you’re telling the truth. But if I find out you’ve lied to me, you can kiss the rest of your time in the Army goodbye. Got it?”

The major pressed his lips into a grim line and gave her a slight nod.

“Thanks for your help. Either Bryson or I will be by to take an official statement after we get back.” She pulled open the door and headed out.

Where could Jonathan have gone? It wasn’t that Camp Romeo was small, but with a contingent of five hundred troops around, there weren’t a lot of hiding places. A scene from the day before flashed across her mind, and she turned her steps toward the air strip.

Cloaked in his jacket, her brother huddled on a crate next to the small hangar. To the east, beyond the concrete wall and barbed wire, the sun struggled over the jagged mountains in a sickly yellow haze.

Abigail approached and eased onto the rough wood beside him.

“She’s gone.” His head drooped. “What if they turned her out because they suspected her to be a traitor? She’d never survive in the village. Not by herself.”

“I’m headed there today. I’ll—”

“No!” He grabbed her arm with crushing force.

“Ow!” She pried his fingers loose.

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“It’s not safe, they’ll—”

“We’ll be escorted, okay? I’ll look.” She sighed. “I’ll try to find out who took her. Still, there’s only one thing we can do.”

“What?”

She faced the sunrise. “Pray.”

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Ghazni Province, Afghanistan

March 2016

Christine Parker cinched the four-point harness tighter around her. She focused on Jonathan Ward, her boyfriend and COO of SecureLink's Ghazni compound. He stood at the rear of the convoy's lead vehicle, a four-door Jeep Wrangler with a 50-cal machine gun mounted on the back. Chip Johnson, the protective detail supervisor, kept his helmet tucked under one arm as he chatted with him. Jonathan clapped him on the shoulder and strode toward the armored school bus that would ferry their clients, sixteen doctors and nurses, to a remote village high in the mountains.

Please look at me. Christine's stomach knotted on itself as she recalled the spat that had replaced what should have been a clandestine bit of romancing.

Curse the no-fraternization policy that prevented them from being open about their relationship.

He gave the driver and bus guard a mock salute and headed in her direction.

His clear green eyes met hers. The corners of his mouth quirked up in the slightest of smiles. Someone called something, and he turned.

Some of her worries eased.

But not all.

Once more, she tightened her harness.

"Any tighter, and you will not be able to breathe."

Jennifer Haynie

At the teasing statement in accented English, she glanced up. Ali al-Saad, an Iraqi gunner who qualified for the sunniest disposition of the group today, grinned. The straps of his helmet dangled along the sides of his face.

“And any looser for you, and your helmet will fall off.”

He laughed and secured the Kevlar. “Not anymore.” He patted her on the shoulder and climbed into his position behind the 50-cal machine gun. The bullet belt rattled as he made one final check of his weapon.

Eddie Horton climbed into the driver’s seat. “Looks like we’re ready to go. You locked and loaded, Parker?”

Ahead of them, the big engine of the school bus groaned to life.

Jonathan approached. “You guys set?”

“As much as we’ll ever be.” At least her voice didn’t shake.

“Head on a swivel, y’all. Godspeed.” His focused on Christine. “I’ll see you tonight.” He mouthed “I love you.”

She released her breath. “See you soon.” She shoved her wraparound sunglasses onto her face before he noticed the tears filling her eyes.

He slapped the front fender of the four-door Jeep Wrangler. “Move out. Chip’ll call us when y’all get there.”

The lead Wrangler—which held Chip, a driver, and a gunner—led the way through the massive iron gate. The school bus followed, then their Wrangler. Christine gripped her rifle to keep it from bouncing around.

Once they cleared the gate, they picked up speed as they rolled along the asphalt road toward the Kabul-to-Kandahar highway. Eddie handled the vehicle as if they headed to the grocery store rather than the heart of Taliban country.

A stream of cars and trucks became visible as they neared the highway. They pulled up parallel to one another. Christine glanced at the school bus. Gregory Jordan, the guard, stood on the steps. He flashed her a thumbs-up sign.

When Eddie caught a break in traffic, he pulled onto the road first to allow the other vehicles safe entry. Once everyone had come up to speed, Christine’s thoughts turned inward and spun as fast as the wheels of their Jeep. Automatically, her mind ticked to a little over twelve hours before when Chip had sent her to Jonathan’s office to summon him for the security

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team's final briefing. He hadn't wasted words or even a kiss before he'd asked his question.

"What's going on?" he'd demanded.

And what had she done? Ducked the question. Sidestepped his followup. Tried to pick a fight. And all because she couldn't figure out why she couldn't tell him about the secret that now burdened her.

I'm scared, she mentally told him now, as a truck piled high with tires blew past them. *I'm scared of what I found. I couldn't tell you last night because I hadn't found all of the evidence until after everyone went to bed.*

"You're mighty quiet." Eddie raised his voice to be heard over the wind rushing through their open-air Jeep.

"A lot on my mind." Christine rubbed the forestock of her rifle.

"Try me."

She studied him. "The doctor is in?"

The black man laughed. "Something like that. Try me."

Christine sighed. *You've talked to Eddie before about past relationship stuff. He's talked to you about stuff in his marriage. You two have a friendship. So trust him, why don't you?* "Have you ever been in a situation that you know you have to share something with someone, but you're too scared to?"

"Why would I be scared?"

"Because you thought you weren't ready at the time. And now, you realize you should have."

"Girl, you are so not making sense. Try again."

"Last night, I was pretty sure something was going on, but I wasn't one hundred percent sure. Then the person who has the authority to do something about it—who is also someone I really care about—started demanding answers. I couldn't tell him because I wasn't certain."

"Let me guess. Ward's the guy you really care about."

The flush heated her cheeks faster than the sun as it rose past the mountains. "Uh, yeah. How did you know?"

"You and I work together. Now the wife would say I'm not the most clued-in guy, but I can tell you're troubled."

That got a wry laugh out of her.

Jennifer Haynie

He sobered. “That being said, if it’s serious and involves something at the compound, you need to tell Ward regardless of any reservations you have. That good enough for you?”

A smile finally broke through her tension. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“That’s why I’m your driver today. Yes, ma’am. That’s why.” Eddie chuckled.

The hum of the tires dropped as the convoy slowed. They turned from the smooth asphalt onto a rutted macadam surface.

“Okay, guys, look sharp.” Chip’s voice crackled over their comms units. “We’re half an hour out. Eyes out for tangos.”

Christine’s grip tightened on her rifle. Her free hand crept to the emergency release button for her four-point harness. Like she had each mission, she rehearsed the sequence Chip had pounded in their heads. *Release, rifle, roll.* She scanned the mountainside of scrub, rocks, and other features rushing past as they wound their way higher and farther from the supposed safety of the highway. She glanced at the digital clock on the dash. Ten minutes in. Twenty to go until they reached the village.

An explosion kicked a dust cloud from the sides of the mountain.

Christine jumped.

The bus screeched to a halt, and Eddie barely avoided rear-ending it.

“Chip, what’s going on?” Eddie shouted into the comm.

“IED! Red alert.” Chip’s voice remained even and steady, despite the impending ambush. “Base, this is Convoy Two. Ambush. We caught an IED in the—” His calm words shattered on a scream. A loud rifle report rocketed through the narrow valley.

Christine slammed her hand onto the emergency release. The straps popped free, and she rolled from the Jeep with her rifle in hand. As she hit the ground, Gregory tumbled to the road. He didn’t try to stop his fall.

He was dead.

Sniper.

Another bullet slammed Ali in the chest. He collapsed backward.

She rolled underneath the Wrangler and stayed on her stomach.

A woman screamed.

The Athena File

“Don’t!” Christine shouted, but the dust choked her words so they came out as a whisper.

One of their clients fell to the ground. Then another. The sniper went to work in earnest.

Christine shifted her gaze toward the left-hand side.

Taliban poured over the lip of the road.

She shuddered as their war cries filled the air along with the popping of small arms fire. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. Her hands felt clammy as they clasped her rifle.

A pair of booted feet crunched dirt mere inches away. A pistol shot echoed above her.

Eddie crashed to the ground. His sightless eyes stared at her. Blood oozed from the hole in his forehead.

“No!” She scrambled forward and drew a bead on the killer. One shot finished him just as surely as he’d taken the life of her friend.

Her cry drew the attention of the others.

She couldn’t even count their number. She rolled to her feet and fired blindly as she dashed across the road. Two more dropped.

Her gun jammed.

She tossed it aside as the slope steepened. She began sliding on the loose gravel and rock surface.

An explosion rocketed through the air.

She skidded as she turned. Her hands touched earth.

Black smoke billowed into the air, carrying with it the screams of their clients. People she was commissioned to protect. She clutched at the rocks around her. “Oh, God! No!”

Robed jihadis jerked toward her voice. With high-pitched war cries they charged her location, the ends of their turbans fluttering behind them.

Her heart lodged in her throat. She couldn’t outrun them.

Not now.

She yanked her pistol from its holster and fired three shots, dropping three.

She turned and ran as fast as she could.

Jennifer Haynie

Her quads burned. Her sides heaved. She scrambled against gravity as it tugged her closer to the stream bed at the bottom of the slope.

If she could reach just the stream bed, she could outrun them.

But why weren't they firing at her?

Her ankle twisted, shooting hot pain up her leg.

She pitched forward, losing her pistol, and skidded down the uneven slope on her belly. Her momentum drove her straight toward a massive rock. She thrust out her hands but still smashed her head against the unforgiving boulder. Blackness oozed through her senses. She tried to shake it away and raise herself from the gravel.

A knee slammed into her back.

Her breath whooshed from her lungs. She sucked in another.

Rough hands pawed at her, and her attacker yanked her knife from its sheath. It clinked onto the ground, oh, so close, yet too far away to do her any good.

He flipped her.

She pushed herself to her elbows. Five gathered around. She could still get away. She could fight them.

Then the small crowd of Taliban parted to reveal an older man. Henna streaked his long beard. His eyes had that flat, dull look she'd come to associate with evil.

Chills wracked her.

He dropped onto her, pinning her hips to the ground.

He slapped her, and she yelped. His hands fumbled with her helmet strap. It rolled off her head, and he reached behind her.

"Stop!" She flailed beneath him and struck out with her fists, her only weapons at that point.

Two of his men pinned her wrists to the ground. The man grabbed her hair and yanked it from its bun. He jabbered in Pashto too quick for her unseasoned ear to understand.

He fingered her hair as he smoothed it out. A smirk curled his lips, and he directed a question toward a comrade. He cackled when he received an affirmative answer.

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She strained against the hands constraining her. “Get your filthy paws off me.”

The leader spat in her face.

“Let me go! Help!” she shouted uselessly.

He hit her again, this time so hard that she saw stars. His image split into two before merging.

Then he spoke in slow, clear Pashto.

Thanks to Jonathan’s careful tutoring over the past eighteen months, she knew exactly what he said.

“She’s the one.”

She thrashed as he reached into the folds of his robe and drew a knife with a blade as long as her forearm. He raised it.

“No, please, don’t.” She yanked at her wrists. Nothing.

The leader closed his eyes. He began chanting in Pashto like he was in a trance. His grip tightened around the handle.

In a flash, he brought it down, straight into her throat just above her armored vest.

Pain arced through her, and the scream that escaped her wasn’t her own.

She couldn’t breathe. Blood filled her mouth. She tried to cough. *I’m dying.* The thought raced through her mind. *God, no. I’m dying. Please. Please! I...*

“Jon...Jonathan.” Her back spasmed in agony. Hot tears filled her eyes as blood spilled from her mouth. Her heart thudded in her ears, slowing with each weakened pump. Blue sky turned to gray, then nothing.