

By Wayne Halm

*with special thanks to Sheila Kent*

## Introduction

Sweat sat on the dusty bumper of the Duce-n-half and watched the ancient man herd the goats away from the road. He would not start the engine again until they were well away, the noise would scatter the goats. The old man wore more rags than clothes and carefully walked a zigzag course behind the goats. His worn boots sent up a little puff of dust with each step and he pounded on the boulders with his walking staff to keep the goats moving. The old man moved slowly but his hunched gait was awkward and unnatural, he was hurrying.

An old man doing a boys job, never a good sign, Sweat thought. He let his gaze drift over the broad dusty desert valley. There were brown mountains on the other side but the equally brown afternoon haze blotted them out. In the valley the sun bleached rocks far outnumbered the dusty bushes, and clumps of brown grass were rare. The dirt was depleted, a brown powder so dry as to be nearly weightless. The dirt was dead. The valley itself was dying. A few tough, weathered, and worn creatures still fought for a living in the valley, but it was plain that here life was losing.

The old man turned his lined leathery face and stole a glance at Sweat through clouded brown eyes. He thought the small man who patiently sat on the truck and gazed over the valley odd for an American. He was a soldier for sure, his weapon lay close at hand, but he wasn't one of the black soldiers, nor a red faced one, he was brown, a bit smaller, and much older. He wore the same uniform, but wore it as clothing, not as a symbol. This man was confident enough to travel alone. This odd soldier seemed to fear little, yet he looked at the land as if he understood, and he stopped for goats. This had to be the one called Sweat that Khan told him about.

Sweat was confident, 19 years of soldiering had taught him where danger lay and what to do about it. Once he had been a Green Beret First Sergeant, a soldier's soldier, now he was a supply Corporal and his own soldier. It was being his own soldier that had made him a Corporal again, but Sweat didn't care.

The old man waved, Sweat waved back, got in the truck and started the engine. There was still plenty of daylight, but he did need to get back to the base and load the truck for the next trip.

## Chapter 1

From the General's office came a yell, "God damned it Corporal, I said no, they are already scheduled. You are dismissed, now get the hell out of here."

The Sergeant Major cringed at the yelling and turned to watch Sweat come out. He liked Sweat, they had served together three times in the past. He knew the tough dark little Cajun to be a damned fine combat soldier and an excellent teacher of young troops. Sweat just cared too much about people to keep any rank.

"Well Sweat, I'll tell them that you tried. This is your new assistant, PFC Rufus Green Jr.," the Sergeant Major said and pointed to the Private.

Sweat nodded to the Private and said "Okay, you got everything you need Sergeant Major?" The Sergeant Major nodded. "Then come on boy we've got to be on the road by 6:30," Sweat said to the Private.

Sweat and the Private were but a few steps out the door and into the twilight when the Sergeant Major came out and called, "Sweat, there is a doctor looking for a ride to Jabar. The General said that we don't give rides to civilians. Do you know anybody going that way?"

"Tell him to be at the truck by 6:30," Sweat replied. Sweat looked back toward the General's office and added, "But tell him quietly."

"Yeah, I'll tell him," the Sergeant Major said. The deepening darkness hid the grin on his face.

## Chapter 2

The sun was up, but still a red ball, when Dr. Claire Barker approached the truck. She sat her bag on the ground and looked at the truck. It was big, two sets of rough tires on the back and similar tires on the front, a canvas cover stretched over the cargo area, a layer of brown dust covered everything.

"Hello," she called, "Is anybody here?"

"Yeah, I'll be out in a minute, keep your shirt on," came a reply from inside the cargo area. There were a few clanks and clunks of things being moved before a man climbed out of the truck.

Once on the ground Sweat looked at Claire. She wore sensible brown work boots, already dusty. Loose fitting khaki pants gathered at the waist with a canvas belt. A green cotton tee shirt that pulled tight across her breasts, and an unbuttoned khaki safari type jacket covered her arms and shoulders. Her pale unadorned and unblemished face was surrounded by a flaming mass of red hair.

"What can I do for you miss?" Sweat asked.

"I'm looking for someone called Sweat," Claire replied.

"That's me," Sweat said.

"I was told that you could arrange a ride to Jabar for me," Claire said.

"Jabar? You? You're the doctor?" Sweat asked, then chuckled.

"Dr. Claire Barker," Claire said, "What's so funny?"

"Not you miss, the Sergeant Major is just messing with me. Here put your bag in here. Want some coffee? It's Cajun," Sweat offered.

"Love some," Claire replied and Sweat poured from a large thermos bottle.

"Has this coffee killed anybody lately?" Claire asked.

"Not in the past month or so. But it will put hair on your chest," Sweat said and handed her the cup.

"Is this truck what the Sergeant Major meant by Duce-n-half?" Claire asked as she accepted the cup.

"Yeah, a two and one half ton diesel truck, it will go just about anywhere," Sweat answered.

"Has it gone to Jabar?" Claire asked.

"Yeah miss, I was there just last week. A big guy named Tom is setting up a clinic there. Got two kids with him, a boy and a girl. The boy is a fair engineer, and the girl is pushing vitamins, antibiotics and pain killers. I brought her a kid with a broken arm, a kind of bad one, it scared the crap out of her, but she did a good job," Sweat replied.

"Julie, yeah she's going to be good. But call me Claire," Claire said and sipped the coffee. She grimaced and said, "You weren't shitting me, this is strong."

Sweat smiled, "Okay, Claire. Just call me Sweat, everybody does. We'll get going as soon as the boy gets back. It'll be a long day, we're going to C Company today, we'll overnight there, and get you to Jabar by noon tomorrow. Still want to go along?" Sweat asked.

"Yeah, you're the only ride around," Claire answered.

"Then it's done. There is a latrine over there. You might want to use it, the ride will be kind of bumpy," Sweat advised. Claire took the advice.

As Claire walked away a battered old car pulled up and Rufus got out the passenger side door.

"You get the flares?" Sweat asked.

"Yeah, give me a hand, they're heavy," Rufus replied. The two of them lugged a crate out of the car and heaved it into the back of the truck.

"Crank up and warm the engine. You're driving," Sweat said.

"I don't know where we're going," Rufus protested.

"Well, as soon as our passenger gets back you're going to start learning," Sweat replied.

### Chapter 3

They bounced along for three hours, not in complete silence, but it really wasn't conversation either. Mostly Sweat gave driving instructions to Rufus and pointed out landmarks to both of them. Claire asked a few questions about the landmarks and got surprisingly detailed answers. Rufus drove, Claire held on, and Sweat watched the countryside intently. Claire sat in the middle, an M-16 rifle separated her from Rufus, another M-16 separated her from Sweat.

"You worked at that hospital in Marrero didn't you?" Rufus asked Claire.

"Yes. How did you know?" Claire answered with surprise.

"I saw you there. Last year when that fool drove his car into the building and killed himself. I helped pull him out," Rufus said.

"Billy Brown," Claire said.

"I didn't know his name, but that redneck needed lots of help," Rufus said.

"Well he's getting it now," Claire replied then asked, "What are you doing over here Rufus?"

"It's my time Miss Claire," Rufus stated.

"Your time? What do you mean?" Claire asked.

"My time to serve," Rufus said, "All the men in my family go into the Army when they're 18. My Grandpa says that everybody's gotta earn their place in this world. There ain't no free ride."

"Boy, your Grandpa is exactly right, there aren't any free rides," Sweat said.

They rode in silence for a minute then Claire asked, "What's this ride going to cost me?"

"Depends on where it ends," Sweat said without looking at her.

### Chapter 4

"Sergeant, what kind of shape is C Company in this morning?" Captain Mcguire asked.

"Sir, C Company is ready for battle," Sergeant Jones replied, "96 men on duty. We're down to three days rations but Sweat is due in this afternoon. We're in good shape sir, except for the flares, we only have three left, all bent, I wouldn't use them. Supply says they are backordered, it may be a week before we get any more. I've split the night vision gear between the machine gunners, that's where it will be most effective, but the rest of us will have to fight the old fashioned way for a while."

"And the men?" the captain asked.

"Morale is good this morning sir. Sweat promised to see about getting some USO girls up here, but I hear that didn't work out, so we may have a bunch of disappointed boys by nightfall," the Sergeant replied.

"Why am I not surprised," the Captain said.

"Captain, what are we doing still sitting on top of this hill?" the Sergeant asked.

"Following orders," the Captain replied.

### Chapter 5

"What's that?" Claire asked and pointed.

Sweat looked at the black dots on the hillside. "Those are goats, they're sort of the major industry out here," he said.

"Are they wild?" Claire asked.

"No, they probably belong to somebody is Shelah, but they are a long way from home," Sweat answered.

"Nobody watches them?" Claire asked.

"Boys normally would watch them, but there aren't any left. They've all been 'drafted' by one side or other in this little fight. You can't have a war without young boys," Sweat explained.

Claire watched the goats wander and nibble at the sparse grass and bushes.

"Up ahead boy, you'll see some tire tracks off on the right. Follow them east for about two miles, they'll lead you to C Company," Sweat said.

### Chapter 6

Rufus pulled the Duce-n-half into the C Company area at 3:30. Area was probably the right word for it, base or even camp would have been an exaggeration. The area covered the top of a low gentle hill, it was centered around the mud brick walls of an old building. If the building ever had a roof there was no sign of it, a tent was set up inside the walls. The tent served as mess hall, headquarters, chapel, hospital, and warehouse, depending on time and need. The area was basically a circle about a hundred yards across. Visually it was defined by a ring of brush collected from a killing field cleared for fifty yards all around. Functionally it was defined by a circle of fighting positions dug into the ring of brush and by four M-60 machine gun positions that quartered the perimeter.

"Ain't much," Rufus said as he stopped the truck near the walls.

"Well, they were only supposed to be here a few days," Sweat said.

"Were?" Rufus asked.

"Yeah, that was 12 weeks ago. Welcome to Afghanistan," Sweat chuckled.

"You staying for dinner Sweat?" Sergeant Jones yelled.

"Maybe, what's on the menu Jonesy?" Sweat yelled back.

"Well, let's see, tonight we got ..." Sergeant Jones started then spied Claire, "Sweat, what's this?"

"You have been out here too long Jonesy, this is a woman," Sweat explained, "Claire Barker, and

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if she can find a seat upwind of you guys, maybe she'll chat a while and remind you of what the world is like."

A dozen men had gathered round and the sight of Claire's red hair was rapidly drawing more.

Sweat said loudly enough for everyone to hear, "Sergeant Jones, if we could go inside maybe Miss Barker ..."

A yell from the crowd cut him off, "Sweat, you promised us young dancing girls."

Sergeant Jones spun around with murder in his eyes, but before he could say anything Sweat continued, "Excuse me Claire". Then he started yelling, "Jefferies what's the hell is wrong with you? Look at my collar, look at it! Do you see any god damned stars on my collar? Face it, stars stick together, movie stars entertain men with stars. And neither one of them give a shit about you or me. Now this lady on the other hand, well her shapely butt is probably black and blue from bouncing all day just to get out here to talk with you assholes. And you owe her an apology."

A miserable sounding Jefferies said, "Yeah, you're right. I'm sorry miss."

"Screw it, don't worry about it, I'm just glad to meet somebody else who thinks that Sweat is an asshole," Claire said to everyone.

The crowd agreed, shyly at first but with growing enthusiasm.

She held out her leg, pulled up her pants leg to expose a work boot and pale calf. This got vigorous catcalls and cheers from the crowd.

"As you can see my feet are too big for dancing, but come on, I know some damned fine dirty jokes," Claire announced.

She looked at Sergeant Jones and he led them into the tent. Sweat stayed behind.

"Quite an arrival Sweat," Captain Mcguire chuckled as he walked up.

"Aren't you going in to listen Captain?" Sweat asked.

A roar of laughter rolled out of the tent.

"No, the guys will enjoy it more if I'm not there. Besides not everyone can go, somebody still has to guard the place," he waved toward the perimeter, "And somebody has to help you unload the truck."

"I appreciate that Captain. I got something special for you anyway," Sweat said. He pulled out a plywood crate and both men lowered it to the ground.

The Captain opened it and looked at the flares. "These are Russian. But I'll take them. How did you know?" he asked.

"I try to keep track of what's going on," Sweat answered.

"So what's going on with the red headed lady?" Captain Mcguire asked.

"Captain, I asked about the dancing girls, the General told me to shove it up my butt. Then Claire came along looking for a ride to Jabar, and you don't have a dance floor anyway," Sweat explained.

"Jabar? Why Jabar?" the Captain asked.

"She's a doctor. Going to work in the clinic there," Sweat answered.

"Jabar is pretty exposed," the Captain warned.

"I know," Sweat responded.

### Chapter 7

There was no moon, only the stars filled the dead black sky. Still the sky was brighter than the pitch black that Sweat and Claire walked through on their way to the machine gun bunker. As he walked Sweat frequently kicked stones and his rifle thumped against his belt.

"Thanks for talking with the guys Claire," Sweat said.

"Was that little surprise the price of my ride out here?" Claire asked.

"No, that was just singing for your supper," Sweat answered.

"Then I may as well sing to all of the guys," Claire said.

"Claire, this isn't a good ...", Sweat saw the spark trails of several Rocket Propelled Grenades arching toward them, stopped mid sentence and threw Claire to the ground.

He was too late. The seven RPGs exploded in a line along the perimeter before Sweat and Claire reached the ground, Sweat felt a sting in his right shoulder. In one continuous motion he hit the ground - bounced up - and pulled Claire into the wrecked machine gun bunker.

Claire wanted to scream as Sweat hauled her toward the ground, perhaps she did during the mind shattering roar of the explosions. She knew but did not understand that her face hurt, that she was being dragged across the ground, that she was thrown against a sandbag wall, that a rifle was thrust into her hands, that Sweat told her to shoot at the flashes, that she could see little flashing sparkles in the dark, that she pointed the rifle and pulled the trigger, that the rifle bucked once, that she pointed at another sparkle and pulled the trigger again, and again, the simple repetition allowed her to wonder about the sparkles, a maddening, painful, physical, solid roar pounded on her skull, all was lost but point and pull, point and pull, point and pull, a black and white picture layered over the sparkles, the sparkles were still there, point and pull, point and pull, a man in the picture fell down, more sparkles, point and pull, point and pull, point and pull, a hand pulled the rifle away from her, pulled her into the darkness, sat her down, lights shined in her eyes, something pulled on her face - then it got dark, peaceful, and quiet.

### Chapter 8

Sweat could hear occasional M-16 fire in the darkness to the east as he approached the headquarters tent. Captain Mcguire was using the radio when he arrived,

“Sergeant get everyone back inside the perimeter, the air force is coming,” he told the radio.

“On our way,” the radio replied.

The Captain changed frequency and said to the radio, “Thunder flight, this is Charlie.”

The radio replied, “Charlie we have 40 plus targets on infra-red about a mile and half to your west.”

“Negative Thunder flight, our attackers are retreating to our east,” he told the radio.

“Understood, wait one,” the radio replied.

The Captain looked up at Sweat and shook his head.

“Charlie my controller evaluates the force to your west to be the greatest threat. Commencing attack,” the radio announced.

“Thunder flight are you positive about our location?” he asked the radio.

“Affirmative, commencing attack now,” the radio replied.

Both Captain Mcguire and Sweat held their breath, tensed up, and closed their eyes, but the long series of explosions came out of the darkness to the west.

“The goats?” Sweat asked.

“The goats,” the Captain agreed.

### Chapter 9

The metallic clank of things being loaded into the truck woke Claire.

“Claire, are you back with us?” Sweat asked as he kneeled beside her.

Claire sat up, felt the bandage on her face and mumbled, “What happened?”

“We were attacked,” Sweat replied.

“Who? How? When?” Claire rambled.

“I’ll tell you all about it but first I have some work for you doctor. If you feel up to it,” Sweat said.

“What’s the problem?” Claire asked straightening up some.

“I’ve got something in my shoulder and need you to get it out. Your tools are in that bag next to you. Boy, come hold the light for the doctor,” Sweat said and took off his shirt.

“How long was I out?” Claire asked when Sweat sat down.

“About three hours,” Sweat replied.

“Why hasn’t someone taken care of this?” Claire demanded.

“They’ve been kind of busy,” Sweat replied.

By the uneven glare of the flashlight, sitting in the dirt beside the Duce-n-half, Claire carefully removed the piece of shrapnel imbedded in Sweats shoulder.

### Chapter 10

Captain Mcguire watched the Duce-n-half pull out of the C Company area then turned to Sergeant Jones.

“Sergeant, what kind of shape is C Company in this morning?”, he asked.

“Sir, C Company is ready for battle,” Sergeant Jones replied, “80 men on duty, 4 dead and 12 wounded evacuated this morning. We’re in good shape sir. And damned lucky.”

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"Give me your take on what happened last night," the Captain said.

"We were lucky Captain, damned lucky. Sweat and the lady saved our asses, and it was just plain dumb luck that they were there," the Sergeant started.

"How's that?" the Captain asked.

"Well sir, those RPGs killed or wounded everyone on that side of the parameter. If Sweat and the lady had been a few steps closer they would be dead too. As it was Sweat got a little piece of shrapnel in the shoulder and the lady had her cheek cut by another. After the blast they rushed up and met the first assault. Peterson told me that when he came to Sweat was burning up the M-60 and the lady was popping away with a 16. They drove the initial rush to ground sir and gave the response team time to get on line. Without that time, well I don't know sir," the Sergeant replied.

How many do you estimate?" the Captain asked.

"Hard to say sir, 60, 80, I don't know. We killed 24, took two wounded prisoners, and recovered 14 weapons," Sergeant Jones said.

"They didn't all have weapons?" the Captain asked.

"They all had AK-47 rifles Captain," the Sergeant said. "Sweat recovered 12 of them and maybe 3,000 rounds of ammunition," he added quietly.

The Captain started to say something but the Sergeant cut him off, "Captain, without those flares we'd have been in really deep shit, you didn't ask where the flares came from, and I didn't ask where the rifles were going."

"Understood. We recovered 14 weapons, go on with your evaluation Sergeant," the Captain said.

### Chapter 11

They were dirty, tired, scratched, and bruised, this plus the bouncing hindered conversation. Mostly Sweat gave driving instructions to Rufus and pointed out landmarks. Rufus drove, Claire watched the countryside, and Sweat watched the countryside intently. Claire sat in the middle, a M-16 separated her from Rufus, a M-16 and an AK-47 separated her from Sweat.

"Last night, was that the price of my ride?", she asked Sweat.

"No, that was just the cost of a nights lodging", Sweat replied. "But I think you have a room at

the C Company hotel anytime you want it," he added with a grin.

"Wonderful. Are we still going to get to Jabar by noon?" Claire asked.

"I'm afraid not, we started late and still have to stop in Shelah. It will be around two before we get there," Sweat replied.

### Chapter 12

Tom Harrison sat on the highest roof top in Jabar. He watched the old men wander the street below. He scanned the brown desert for movement. He studied the goats in the pen. He listened to Paul's hammering. He smelled the dying cook fires. He felt the butt of the ancient revolver in this shoulder holster. He was alert.

Tom had company on the roof, Rashid the only guard he had been able to hire sat gazing toward the mountains. A scratched and worn bolt action rifle lay across Rashid's knees, the rifle looked older than the man who could have been 50 or 90 for all Tom knew. Tom did know that Rashid was the fittest man in the village, spoke a bit of English, and had his own rifle. He also had six cartridges for the rifle but Tom wasn't sure they were of the same caliber.

"Some security I am," Tom muttered, "About the only thing I'll be able to do is see who comes to kill us. If they come in the daylight."

### Chapter 13

The Duce-n-half stopped in the middle of the dusty single street of Shelah, no one was in sight.

"Keep the engine running Boy," Sweat said, "Claire, come give me a hand."

Sweat grabbed his M-16 and got out, Claire picked up her AK-47 and followed. Outside she saw that Sweat had his rifle slung over his shoulder, she did likewise. They walked to the back of the truck and Sweat helped her climb in.

"All the way to the front there are eight paper grocery bags, bring them back here," he told her and shifted his attention to watching the buildings carefully.

"That's all," Claire said when she sat the last bag against the tailgate.

Sweat looked in at the bags, then around at the buildings again. "Hand them to me one at a time," Sweat told Claire and started waving his left arm in a come here gesture.

From the door ways eight women in ankle length robes and hoods rushed up to Sweat. "Quickly, quickly, go, go, go," Sweat said as he handed each a bag. Within 15 seconds the street was empty again - almost.

"What's going on here?" a strong voice boomed. Claire looked up to see a large middle aged man striding toward them. "Sweat, why are you giving my women gifts?" the man continued to yell.

"I thought it was obvious Khan," Sweat yelled back, "I want your women."

The man stopped two paces from Sweat, put his hand on the hilt of a large knife, and said, "Anyone else I would kill for that. But Sweat you really are an ..."

Sweat cut his speech short by saying, "Thank you, it's always good when someone notices. I do work hard at it, but honestly, I was born an asshole."

The big man chuckled and said, "It's good to see you Sweat."

"Was that you behind the doorway watching in that little chip of mirror glued to the wall?" Sweat asked.

"No that was Abdul. I was in the hall looking through a crack in the door and out through the window", Khan answered pointing at a window.

Sweat looked at the window then said, "Very good."

Khan's mood darkened. He said, "Sweat, I need some help."

"What is it?" Sweat asked.

"I'll show you," Khan answered and walked away.

"Stay in the truck," Sweat told Claire and followed Khan through a doorway.

Claire sat on a box and watched the doorway, the rifle across her knees. Shortly a very serious looking Sweat came back out and walked to her.

"Doctor I need you to come look at this boy, his foot has been blown off by a land mine, the infection looks pretty bad," Sweat explained.

Claire followed Sweat into the building and examined the boy. "We have to get him to Jabar right away," she announced.

"Can you save him?" Khan asked.

"No. I can't," Claire said, "I can remove most of the infection, give him antibiotics for the rest,

keep his fluids balanced, then maybe he can save himself." She paused and added, "There's a very good chance that he can."

"Khan, get him in the truck and let's get moving," Sweat said.

"Is there any other way? Sweat that truck is killing me and I have both feet," Claire protested.

"I have car," Khan said. "But no fuel, diesel," he added looking at Sweat.

"Let's do it," Sweat said.

Outside while everyone was preparing to leave Sweat pulled Claire aside. "Work hard doctor, that boy could be a very good down payment on your ride," he told her.

### Chapter 14

Tom didn't think it particularly odd to see Sweat's truck chasing a black Mercedes down the road, after all he's been in Afghanistan for three weeks. But he was curious when both turned off into Jabar, and he was concerned when both stopped in front of the clinic. Sweat jumped out and yelled, "Yo, Tom, I've got something for you."

Tom stood to yell back but saw Claire's red head come out of the Mercedes. Sweat was forgotten as he watched her stand straight and adjust her shirt. She bent at the waist and reached back into the car, the khaki pants pulling tight across her buttocks. She came out with an AK-47, slung it over her shoulder, and Dr. Claire Barker marched toward the clinic.

"That the doctor?" Rashid asked.

"Yeah, that's her," Tom answered not taking his eyes off of Claire.

"She walks like a soldier," Rashid observed.

"The lady is full of surprises," Tom said and rushed down the stairs.

Tom met her just outside the clinic door, "Claire," he said.

"Well hello, big boy," Claire replied, "Is this the clinic?"

"Yeah, are you okay Claire?" Tom asked looking at the bandage on her cheek.

Claire waved to the Mercedes, a huge man emerged and ran toward them carrying a boy. "I'm fine, but I have work to do. Later sweets," she whispered. She kissed Tom on the cheek and went into the clinic.

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Tom held the door open. The man with the boy rushed in. Sweat walked up.

"Thanks for bringing her Sweat," Tom said and they shook hands.

"No big deal. I was coming this way anyway," Sweat replied.

"Out! Out! Out!", a female voice yelled inside the clinic. Tom and Sweat looked up in time to see Khan being pushed out the door by Julie. The door slammed behind him.

"Tom, this is Khan. Khan, Tom," Sweat introduced them.

Khan shook Tom's hand and asked, "Is the doctor your woman?"

"People who don't know her sometimes make that mistake," Tom replied.

Khan smiled and said, "She is a strong woman."

"Come on Tom, I've got something for you," Sweat said.

"Something else?" Tom asked.

"Oh? Well, yeah, come one, both of you," Sweat replied.

They walked to the back of the truck where Sweat uncovered 11 AK-47s and a huge bag of ammunition clips. "These should help with security," Sweat said.

"That's incredible. I can use a couple but don't have anyone to carry the rest. Thanks anyway Sweat," Tom said.

"You can have as many men as you need," Khan said, "The doctor is working on my boy, I will protect her."

"Khan, think about this a minute. Your boy's in very bad shape. If the doctor hadn't been with me, I would've given you a pistol. The doctor's working hard but he may die anyway," Sweat said solemnly.

"I know, and I already had a pistol, but she tries. She asks nothing, but she tries. If not him, there will be others. This is something I can do for my people, this place will be protected. You have my word Sweat," Khan said just as solemnly.

"That's good enough for me," Sweat said, "The boy and I have to be at D Company before dark, so get this stuff out while I wave bye to Claire. Then I need to talk with you for a minute Tom."

### Chapter 15

Claire lay naked on the bed watching Tom get dressed.

"I'm not sure that I like my men getting dressed and leaving me in the middle of the night, I'm used to them going to sleep. Am I losing my touch?" she said.

"Not by a long shot," he replied, "But Khan and I have to check the visibility at each of the guard stations, it has to be dark for that. I'll be back."

"Tom, last night I killed a man," she stated.

"I know," Tom said and sat on the bed. He took her hand in his and continued, "From what Sweat told me, you didn't have any choice. They would have killed you if you hadn't. Don't feel bad about him."

"Sweat. He's right of course. But what bothers me is how easy it was. I barely remember it. I was just mindlessly shooting. My big memories are the noise from that damned big gun Sweat had, and of sitting in the dirt pulling shrapnel out of his back. Surgery in the dirt! But the man? He just fell down. I didn't hear the shot, I didn't hear him scream, I didn't see his face, I just saw him fall down, it was easy, too easy. Killing someone should be harder than that, it's dangerous for it to be so easy. It should have more impact on you. Be careful out there Tom," she said.

"Claire, war can be an emotional roller coaster, some incredible high points and some abysmal low ones. Don't think about it too hard, allow some time for the high points to average out some of the lows. Yesterday afternoon you had men laughing, last night you killed a man, this afternoon you saved a boys life, and tonight you almost killed another man - me. Give it some time. This is one hell of a ride you're on," Tom said.

"Ride?" Claire said, "Of course."

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