

THE HUNTED

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PROLOGUE

Nangarhar Province, Afghanistan

The woman was interrogating two prisoners at the base of an unnamed mountain when Austin first laid eyes on her.

It was hot and dusty and his mouth tasted of grit and sand.

He was crouched behind a large boulder, alternately scanning the perimeter through the scope of his rifle and keeping an eye on what was happening with the small group clustered about a hundred and seventy-five meters to the rear of his position.

An American patrol had been ambushed several hours earlier. One dead, one wounded. Austin's Ranger squad had also been on patrol in the area and had arrived quickly, killing four of the Taliban fighters as they fled, and capturing two. They had talked amongst themselves about what to do with the captives. They were pretty evenly split between shooting the bastards and leaving them for the buzzards, or calling it in. Austin didn't care one way or the other. Finally, the squad leader made the decision and called it in.

In short order, two armored humvees arrived and parked a short distance away behind a small rocky hill out of view of the squad.

The squad leader and another soldier led the bound captives over to where the humvees were parked.

Austin, the squad's sniper, and his spotter, Jocko, had been sent forward on overwatch. They climbed to an elevated position and set up on a rock outcropping that gave them good cover and concealment, and also a fairly expansive view from higher ground while the remaining members of the squad fanned out below guarding their perimeter. They had been told an APC and a gun truck were on the way to evac them out of the area.

From his vantage point, Austin could see past the small hill to where the humvees had stopped. He guessed her to be a little over five feet tall, blond haired, wearing a black ball cap and mirrored sunglasses. She had on khaki cargo pants, a black tee shirt, and a green military-style flak jacket, all coated in fine dust. He also noticed a sidearm in a holster on her hip.

He watched the squad leader hand over the prisoners, speak with the woman for a minute, and then walk back around the hill to where the squad was arrayed.

"Wonder who the fuck they are?" asked Jocko. He was looking through his spotter's scope at the small contingent to the rear, his tanned skin glistening with sweat.

Austin scanned the area all around them carefully, paying close attention to other rock

outcroppings and scrub brush where an enemy might be hiding. Satisfied, he rested his rifle on the boulder he was crouching behind and turned his gaze back to the woman. The two captives were now squatting on the ground in front of her, their hands zip tied behind their backs. She lowered herself down onto one knee in front of the men and began speaking quietly. An Afghan interpreter wearing military fatigues and a combat helmet got out of one of the humvees, walked over and stood next to her. She looked up, said something to him, and then he began shouting questions at the men in a language that Austin did not understand.

"They're probably CIA or OGA," said Austin, "maybe private security contractors."

"Well shit," said Jocko, "that really narrows it down."

Austin continued watching as both captives looked down at the ground. Neither one answered any of the questions being shouted at them.

After a few minutes, the woman raised her hand and the interpreter quieted. She glanced up and said something to him again. They were too far for Austin to hear what was said. She swiveled her head and yelled to the group of other men who had arrived with her, now standing near the humvees, which were parked not far from where she and the captives squatted. The men looked to be Americans, dressed in quasi-military attire. One of them walked over and spoke to the interpreter, then the two of them walked back to the humvees. The woman unholstered her gun and then sat down in front of the prisoners, her legs crossed Indian style, her hand with the gun resting in the cross of her legs.

Austin watched as the interpreter and one of the Americans got into one of the vehicles and drove away.

"That chick is pretty hot," said Jocko.

"Shit, dude, you'd fuck a snake if I'd hold it."

"Yeah, that's true."

Nothing happened for about five minutes, the woman and the two prisoners just stared at each other in silence.

Then one of the remaining men from the group of Americans walked over to where the woman and the two prisoners sat.

"Lemme see that scope," said Austin. He raised it to his eye and watched the scene.

The woman pointed to one of the prisoners and the American grabbed him by the shoulders roughly and lifted until he was upright. They both stood looking down at the sitting woman and the remaining bound man.

Without saying a word, the woman raised the gun in a two-handed grip, pointed it at the still squatting prisoner in front of her, and then pulled the trigger. Austin, startled by the gunshot, watched the back of the man's head explode into a cloud of gore. The man's body was jolted backwards and then fell sort of sideways. Austin could just make out a small fountain of blood pulsing from what was left of the back of the man's head. The small, bloody fountain pulsed once, twice, and then seemed to peter out and the man lay still.

"Holy shit, you see that!" said Jocko excitedly, "She just blew that Haji's head clean off!"

Austin looked over at his friend. Jocko looked back at Austin smiling happily. "Man, I think I'm in love!"

Austin looked through the scope again and zeroed in on the scene.

The other prisoner shrieked once and then slumped, his knees buckling and would have fallen but for the American holding him up by the shoulders.

The woman got awkwardly to her feet, glanced around casually, then holstered her weapon, dusted off her backside, and stood looking down at the dead man. She rolled the body with her foot, reached into her pocket and came out with what appeared to be a pocketknife. Reaching down, she slit the plastic ties that had bound the dead man's hands behind his back, straightened back up, then slipped both the plastic ties and the knife back into her pocket.

With that, she turned and began walking toward the waiting humvee. The other American followed, half walking, half dragging his bound prisoner and then shoved him into the back of the vehicle.

Austin stood up slowly, almost unconsciously, in order to get a better view.

"Ace, man, what the fuck are you doing?" Jocko began tugging at his arm. "Sit your ass back down before you get shot!"

The woman opened the front passenger door, but before she got in, she removed her sunglasses, then turned and looked in Austin's direction. Her gaze was drawn to the lone soldier standing totally exposed near some rocks on a hill in the distance looking down at her. Somehow their eyes met. She stared at him, not looking away. He lowered the spotting scope, smiled, and gave her a thumbs-up sign. She didn't react at first, then slowly returned his smile, nodded once, replaced her sunglasses, and got into the vehicle.

He didn't see her again until nearly a year and a half later when he spied her across the bar while sitting in an airport cocktail lounge in Newark, NJ.