

CHECKPOINT

Brian Kirkpatrick

THE CONVOY RATTLED along the mountain road, throwing up dust and gravel.

Second Lieutenant Nancy Koss rounded a curve and slowed her truck. "Did you know there was a checkpoint up here?"

Sergeant Michaelis, twice her age, said, "No, ma'am. But they pop up in new places all the time."

Koss stopped the truck and fought the parking brake into place. "Someone should have told us."

"All right with me to stop bouncing for a while," Michaelis said. "The Army didn't go for comfort when they bought these trucks."

Koss smiled. "I'm with you there."

She and Michaelis got out of the truck and walked toward three Humvees that were parked in a staggered formation in a wide, level stretch of the road. Past the trucks, the road disappeared into the forest that covered the slopes below them.

Koss studied the trucks' staggered formation. "That's a high-security configuration," she said.

"It's a rough neighborhood," Michaelis said.

Koss and Michaelis approached an officer with first lieutenant's bars. His nametag said Sanders. He was sweating, with dark rings under his arms.

Koss thought Sanders looked familiar. Maybe we met at the Academy, she thought. She came to semi-attention and saluted. "Three-fifty-eighth Supply."

Sanders set a clipboard on the Humvee and returned the salute. "Nobody told us you were coming," he said with a faint Southern accent. "Where you headed?"

"Into the town."

"This area's sealed off."

"We've got humanitarian aid. Food, medicine, blankets."

"Lieutenant, I would want to help you complete your mission if you were delivering dirty socks. But without specific orders, nobody gets through."

Koss reached into her pocket. "I've got written orders," she said. A year ago, I would have taken this personally,

she thought.

Sanders didn't take the papers. "Who are they from?"

"My brigade."

"Without orders from Regional Command, you're not going down that hill."

Koss wondered if she had made a mistake. "Do you have contact with them?"

Sanders nodded toward the tent. "You can try calling in if you want, but I doubt you'll be able to reach them this afternoon. There's a thunderstorm on the other side of this mountain."

Two old Renaults came out of the trees downhill and labored up the slope. The driver in the first car leaned out of the window without stopping the car and shouted something in a local language.

"They look excited," Koss said.

"Everybody's excited out here," Sanders said. He glanced at the West Point ring on Koss's hand. "They never told me at the Point that I was going to spend my time like a schoolteacher prying apart kids in a fight."

Koss grinned. "You think they knew?"

Sanders almost smiled. "I thought they knew everything."

"You mean they don't?" Michaelis asked. The others laughed.

Three men, all talking loudly, piled out of the cars. One held a woman at arm's length, as if her appearance alone explained something. The woman's face was bruised, her hair disheveled.

"I'll try calling in," Koss said. "Can my people take a break?"

"Are they armed?"

"We've got weapons in the trucks, but the two of us are the only ones who are carrying anything."

"Then keep your people at least fifty meters uphill." Sanders nodded toward the locals, who were being blocked by the soldiers at the Humvees. "I'd better find out what they want." He headed for the checkpoint.

Koss and Michaelis walked toward the tent. Koss re-

membered where she'd first seen Sanders. During basic training at West Point, several third-year students had given talks to the plebes. She couldn't remember what Sanders had talked about, but he had had the same slightly tired tone of voice that day in the hot woods of the Hudson Valley. His tone of voice had said he wasn't arguing, he wasn't scolding, he was explaining. Koss remembered she'd liked him then, and she decided she still did.

She turned back toward the checkpoint when she heard shouting. The local men stood in front of the American soldiers and were all speaking at once in loud voices. The woman with them had her head down. Sanders gestured at the men, palms down, trying to quiet them.

"That doesn't sound like Serbian," Michaelis said.

"Time for us to look good," Koss said. "Let's get Brown up here."

"Yes, ma'am," Michaelis said, and he trotted back to the trucks.

The woman at the checkpoint slumped against her companion. He slowly let her down onto the ground and knelt over her, speaking sharply to Sanders the entire time. The other Albanian men pointed down the hill and yelled at the Americans.

Sanders walked away from the checkpoint, waving his hand at the Albanians, and moved toward the tent. One of the Albanians started after him. Two soldiers stepped forward, their rifles held across their chests, and the man stopped.

Michaelis rejoined Koss, a young male private in tow. Koss stepped in front of Sanders and said, "I may have a translator for you."

"Does he speak Albanian?" Sanders asked.

"Yes, sir."

Sanders looked at the private's nametag. "Brown, come with me," he said. He led Brown, Koss, and Michaelis back to the checkpoint. Koss glanced at Michaelis, who gave her a discrete thumbs-up sign. Koss suppressed a grin.

The group stopped in front of the woman and her companion. "Tell him to quit yelling," Sanders said.

When Brown spoke, the woman's companion waved his arm and spoke loudly in reply. Brown frowned and asked a question. The other Albanians pointed down the hill, all of them speaking at once.

"Sir, they say there's a Serbian raid going on in the town," Brown said. "They say a Serbian soldier raped the woman, and that these guys—they're her brothers—overpowered him and got her away. Now they want you to go stop the Serbs." He frowned. "They're a little hard to understand."

Koss said, "If you're not sure of the translation..."

"It's not that, sir," Brown said to Sanders. "They've got a real strong accent of some kind. They don't sound like the other Albanians I've talked to."

Sanders turned to one of the other soldiers. "Janacek, bring up the radio. Double time."

Janacek ran toward the tent.

The men continued yelling at Sanders. "What do they want now?" he asked.

"More of the same, sir. That if we don't hurry, all the men will be dead and the women will all be raped."

Sanders said, "Tell him I'm calling my superiors."

Janacek trotted back to the checkpoint, a radio slung over his shoulder. The Albanian men continued yelling.

Brown said, "They're pretty convinced—"

"I get the idea," Sanders said. "If they don't have anything new to say, you don't need to translate it."

"How do I calm them down, sir?"

"Turn the Balkans into Kansas." Sanders took the handset while Janacek held the radio. "Regional Command, this is Checkpoint Delta Four. Come in, please."

The local men continued yelling. Sanders muttered, "I can't hear myself think." He walked toward the tent, his back to the locals. Janacek followed him with the radio.

Koss saw a small cloud of dust rise among the trees on the mountainside far below them. She said, "Do you have your binoculars, Sergeant?"

Michaelis hurried to the truck and returned with binoculars. Koss took the binoculars and studied the road below them. "Not good," she said.

"Ma'am?" Michaelis said.

"There's a truck heading up the switchbacks. Coming fast."

"Trying to get away from the raid?" Michaelis said.

"Then why do they have a machine gun mounted in the bed of the truck?"

Koss trotted toward Sanders. Michaelis followed her. Sanders looked up and tried to wave them away.

"Sir," Koss said.

Sanders closed his eyes, frowning, and covered his free ear.

Damn, Koss thought. "I'm sorry, sir, but you need to hear this," she said.

He waved her away again.

She held out the binoculars. "Sir! This is important!"

Sanders lowered the handset and grimaced. "What's the problem, Lieutenant?"

"A truck with a machine gun mounted in the back is coming up the hill."

Sanders cocked his head in doubt, then took the binoculars and gave her the handset. "If you can get through, let me know."

Sanders scanned the mountainside with the binocu-

lars. "Where is it?"

"About halfway down, on the switchbacks."

Sanders studied the road. "I see the truck," he said quietly, "but I can't tell anything for the trees."

Koss glanced at the checkpoint. The woman was kneeling in the road with her face in her hands.

Sanders said softly, "That's a fifty-caliber machine gun in that truck."

"Yes, sir, it is."

Sanders lowered the binoculars.

"I don't think the people in that truck and the people at the checkpoint should run into each other," Koss said.

"We could put these folks in one of our trucks," Michaelis said. "It would give us time to sort things out."

Koss thought, I love this: good people, working together.

Sanders looked at Michaelis for a moment then hurried toward the checkpoint.

"You're pretty good at giving young officers advice," Koss muttered to Michaelis as they walked toward the checkpoint.

"Not all of them are as smart as you are, Lieutenant."

"Bullshitter," Koss said.

Michaelis grinned.

Ahead of them, Sanders said, "Brown, tell these people to follow Lieutenant Koss." Sanders examined the mountainside with the binoculars while Brown spoke to the woman and her companions.

"They're asking me why, sir," Brown said.

"Because some of the people who raided their village may be coming up here."

Brown translated, and the woman's party quickly followed Koss, Michaelis, and Brown to the trucks. The group passed Koss's men, scattered beside the road. One of the Albanian men held the woman tightly by the arm and whispered to her as they walked.

Michaelis said, "Maybe we should have a medic take a look at that woman."

"The last thing she'll want is for another man to touch her," Koss said.

"We could ask her."

"Later," Koss said. She pointed to a truck up the road. "Put them in there." She turned to Brown. "Tell them to be quiet and they'll be fine."

"Yes, Lieutenant."

Koss looked back at the checkpoint. The truck coming up the hill stopped ten yards from Sanders and pulled broadside. No one was visible in its bed.

Koss heard a commotion behind her. She turned and saw two of the Albanian men wrestling with Michaelis. She began to move toward them. The third snatched the pistol from the webbed holster at Michaelis' side. Koss

stopped walking. The man clicked off the safety and aimed at Koss, who dove behind the nearest truck. The man fired at her, the bullet whining over her head.

The man with the pistol turned to Michaelis and slammed the pistol into the side of Michaelis' head. Michaelis slumped against one of the other men. The man with the gun pressed its barrel into Michaelis' chest and pulled the trigger. Michaelis jerked back, and the men let him drop to the ground.

Koss scrambled to the rear of the truck. Her soldiers, sprawled on the grass, were staring at her in wonder. As she ran to the next truck, she yelled, "Get your weapons!"

Her men ran toward the trucks.

"Stay down!" she yelled. She peered from behind the second truck. One of the local men was holding the woman's arms behind her back. The man with the pistol stepped to her, lifted his arm and pressed the pistol into her forehead. He pulled the trigger and her body flew backwards.

Koss ran down the line of American trucks. She heard the roar of a machine gun from behind her. She thought, that's not an American weapon. She stopped at the tail of a truck and looked for the man with the pistol. He and his companions were running toward the checkpoint.

She saw Sanders and his men lying on the ground. They weren't moving. A man stood in the bed of the truck, his hands on the machine gun. The truck turned and pointed downhill as the three men scrambled into the back, then it roared down the hill and disappeared into the trees.

Koss stared at Sanders' still body. Her ears still rang with the sound of the guns. She thought of Michaelis and buried her face in her hands.

"I thought they knew everything," she whispered.