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## **Stationed in Somalia**

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## **Judy Jensen**

### STATIONED IN SOMALIA

It wasn't the nightly sniper fire that spooked me when I first got here; it was the screams that rake through the barracks every morning around two. For weeks, it went on unnamed until my buddy caught a porcupine in the amber O of his flashlight, a porcupine the size of a full grown hog, with quills thicker than the meanest syringe you ever saw. Seems the porcupine doesn't like the U.S. Army stationed in the Russian tank factory he'd called home. Three months I've been here and I could get used to the dehydrated beef patties, the pounding heat, even the drive bys that pepper the compound with live shells but the porcupine's cries flailing against concrete walls still set my teeth on edge. But it's not so bad during the day. We listen to the radio station I jerryrigged with a Walkman, trade our lunches with the Italians (who get a little bottle of cognac with theirs), play pinochle and euchre until the cards become as soft and worn as dollar bills gone through the wash. Sitting on my ass in one of the trailers, a useless fan of cards in one hand, I daydream about the wife, the pool in our apartment complex, the grease of a Big Mac glazing my fingers and mouth, any kind of beer. Sometimes I wander back to when I was a kid, spending my days as loosely as pocket change, swimming, fishing and hunting in the lakes and scruffy hills of Oklahoma. Hell, there's hunting here. Just last week a guy bagged a lynx prowling along the top of the compound's wall, picking his way carefully through the concertina wire, the same wire some of the Somalis crawl through to steal food and water. We give them water all right, right after we beat them like stray dogs, kicking them good around the face and shoulders. Then we drive fifty kilometers out into the desert where we dump them like surplus. They call it a ride out of town; it's the official policy intended to send a message to other would-be thieves. It's not like they die out there for sure; they've got their quart and a half of water and there's tribes that spill across the desert in slow concentric circles all the time. But time is the problem for these thieves. They can't wait another desperate second to get supplies through the proper channels. And if it were my wife going without for months and months, I can't say it wouldn't be me caught in the snare of curved steel and razors. Fuck the army, this assignment, this merciless sun as

I remember the sweet sweat of the wife as she weeds her balcony garden, her cheek and fingers stained tomato green. I remember thrashing through the chlorinated water of the pool, rolling tightly into a flip against the lightly slapping waves at the end of each lap. I remember cranking up Led Zeppelin and Clint Black during the twenty minute drive to Tulsa for crab legs and iced bottles of Coors. And I can still remember the pinprick of guilt as I gutted my first fish at ten, scraping scales and guts over week-old newspaper, the loose lens of one blind eye distorting the text laid out neatly in black and white.