

A pride of lions was stalking an Overland Roadster lying on its side in the narrow, steep-sided ravine. Jonathan counted eight lionesses. The cubs were hanging back in the grass. An adult male emerged from the brush, all lean muscle and stealth. It was Black and Tan. The big cat had been killing the cattle of the Masai herdsman and had a price on its head, making it a target for game hunters. He'd been tracking it for months, hoping to catch it and release it in the Serengeti. But all thought of capturing Black and Tan vanished from Jonathan's mind when he spotted a movement in the motorcar. Someone was in there. Someone who was about to become lunch for a pride of hungry lions.

Lifting his rifle, he fired into the air, but the pride didn't scatter. Several tenacious females hung in, unwilling to give up their prey. Black and Tan let out a chilling bellow.

Jonathan had to do something quick. With rifle in hand, he took a deep breath and made a run for it. He didn't have to see the lions to know they were behind him. He could hear the dry grass rustling from their rushing bodies and smell the strong musk of their summer coats. He managed a hasty look over his shoulder. One female was closing in on him. To stop and turn around now to shoot would be suicide.

The sunlight momentarily blinded him as he ran. He didn't see the figure that emerged briefly and then disappeared back into the car, but there was no mistaking the shot that cracked the summer air, nor the acrid odor of gunpowder that stung his nostrils. Turning back, he saw the lioness drop in the grass and the rest of the pride scatter.

Jonathan's heart hammered as he approached the vehicle and climbed onto its fender to look inside. What he saw stunned him.

There was a woman inside, her body slumped in the seat, lips cracked, face unrecognizable beneath dirt and matted strands of hair. Close by was the Rigby .350 bolt-action rifle she'd used to kill the lioness.

He lifted the nearly unconscious woman out and carried her to a nearby tree, then dashed back to his horse to retrieve his canteen. Dropping to his knees beside her, he raised her head and held the canteen to her lips. At first the water slid unnoticed over her mouth. Then, with a flutter of dust-laden lashes and a quiver of swollen lips, she regained consciousness and gulped as much as she could, coughing in the process.

"Take it easy," he cautioned, removing the canteen from her lips.

He untied the white cotton bandana from around his neck and saturated it with water. She made no protest when he slid the wet cloth to the back of her neck to cool her overheated skin. He opened the top button of her safari shirt and was about to apply the cool compress to her skin when he froze in mid-motion.

Around her neck, suspended on a chain of silver links, was an iron cross. At its center a translucent red disk glowed in the brilliant sunshine. A bolt of recognition slammed into him. He'd seen that red disk before. Turning it over, he ran his thumb across the inscription worn thin by the passage of centuries. *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. The shining red orb cast a reddish glow over his fingers as he let it slip back against her flesh.

With a knot in his throat, he bathed her face with the wet bandana, starting at her forehead and working down across her cheeks. The layer of dirt he washed away revealed smooth cheeks and a brow that were all too familiar to him. Her lashes, no longer caked with red dust, framed eyes that were the color of dark coffee, eyes he remembered only too well. He glanced around. The lioness lay lifeless in the grass. The tilting vehicle looked like a giant carcass. Overhead, the vultures were still circling. Looking back down at the woman, he felt sick.

He staggered to his feet and returned to the Roadster. Inside, he spotted a calfskin suitcase. He grabbed the suitcase and the rifle and returned to the barely conscious woman. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her to his horse. Her body felt slender and supple, as light as a feather and incredibly warm to the touch. Securing the suitcase and rifle to the back of the saddle, he got her onto the horse and mounted behind her. The vultures didn't wait for him to ride away before swooping down to feed on the dead lioness.

Twilight was stretching across the African plain as Jonathan headed for home. A blood-red sun touched down on a cloudless horizon in a burst of crimson afterglow just as a crescent yellow moon rose in the eastern sky. The simultaneous panorama of sun and moon lasted only minutes before the land turned pitch black.

Jonathan tried hard to concentrate on something other than the woman, but her warm body, lithe and pliant against him, and her dark-haired head resting against his shoulder made it impossible to think of anything except her.

Beautiful seemed too simple a word to describe her. She seemed oddly out of place amidst the parched surroundings. He snorted at the cruel irony of it. Of all the places on earth for her to wind up, why did it have to be in the middle of his world? What was she doing here? Why had she come back?