

# ***Beyond Instinct***

***By***  
**Lynn Ames**

## **BEYOND INSTINCT**

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## **Dedication**

To Mom, who taught me that all things are possible.  
Even after all these years, I still miss you every day.



# Acknowledgments

No author is an island, to mangle a phrase. *Beyond Instinct* is a product of my fertile imagination, but the underpinnings for the story were born twenty-five years ago. In 1983, I made an extraordinary journey to Burkina Faso, West Africa (then Upper Volta), to visit my college roommate, who had become a Peace Corps volunteer.

I spent three weeks traveling around the country, meeting the people and observing their culture; it was a life-changing experience. Lo these many years later, I still carry the lessons of humility and happiness that I learned from the Burkinabe.

My deepest thanks to Dana J. Francis for thirty years of friendship and for introducing me to such incredibly rich cultural experiences. Your expertise in all matters West African was invaluable in the creation of this story.

As with any thriller, there are so many details that must be factually correct or at least plausible. To Dr. Hellen Carter, who always ensures that my bullets fly straight; to Clair Bee, who taught me everything I know about pyrotechnics; to Dr. Stephen Colodny, who kept my characters alive—barely; to Ann Marie Clinkscales, whose knowledge of Andrews Air Force Base was crucial; to Jac Hills for timely information regarding the Tuareg; and to my source at the FBI, for verifying facts and protocols—you all give my books the credibility that makes possible the suspension of disbelief.

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To my primary editor, Linda Lorenzo, who looks forward with such relish to sinking her teeth into my manuscripts—may I never disappoint you.

To the readers who continue to clamor for the next book—you make it all worthwhile.

Happy reading!



## PROLOGUE

The early morning mist rolled in over the Potomac, matching Vaughn Elliott's mood. She'd been back in the States less than forty-eight hours and wasn't looking forward to spending her first "free" afternoon briefing the section chief on the ins and outs of extricating a questionable asset from a jail in San Salvador.

The phone on her hip vibrated, eliciting a groan. "Elliott," she barked.

"I heard a rumor you were back."

"Hey." Vaughn's voice softened immediately. "Where are you?"

"I'm in town."

"Really?"

"Really." Sara McFarland's voice held its usual mirth, bringing a smile to Vaughn's lips as it had since the first time they'd met in college twenty-two years ago.

"Can we get together?" Vaughn asked.

"That was my plan. Meet you at the usual place?"

"Sure." Vaughn checked her watch. "I've only got a couple of hours though."

"They've already got you hopping? Good thing you never suffer from jet lag."

"Tell me about it. See you in fifteen."

"Bye, V."

Vaughn closed the phone and tapped it thoughtfully against her chin. She tried to remember the last time she and Sara had seen each other. It had been too long.

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Sara was her first lover. When the CIA recruited them both before graduation, they hadn't realized their assignments would take them to different parts of the globe. Distance and time separated them over the years, but their deep affection for one another never waned.

Vaughn shoved off from the railing and headed toward the Metro. It would be great to catch up.



Sara stared appraisingly at the tall, handsome woman who shouldered her way past the crowd at the counter on the way to her table. Apart from a smattering of gray hair mixed in with the chestnut, Vaughn looked much the same as she had that first day in Art History 101 when Sara accidentally dropped a heavy text book on her foot.

“What are you looking at?” Vaughn’s eyes narrowed.

“Just ogling,” Sara said lightly. “After all these years, you still have that effect on me.” She watched with pleasure as a blush crept up Vaughn’s neck and spread to her cheeks.

“Stop it.”

Sara smirked. “Why would I? Making you blush is one of my favorite pastimes.”

“I’ve noticed.” Vaughn walked around the table and scooped Sara up into a hug. “How are you?” she whispered against Sara’s ear. “You look a little tired.”

Sara disengaged herself and sat back down. “Yeah, well, not all of us get the cushy assignments.”

“Uh-huh. What was it this time? Muscovites smuggling love notes in vodka bottles?”

“Hardly.” Sara swallowed hard and leaned forward. “I was in Kabul, and I’ve discovered some real nastiness.”

“It’s a war zone, hon, not a playground.”

Sara glanced up at the face of the only human being on earth she truly trusted with her life. She smiled grimly. “Do you remember what they said about ’Nam? About the drug-smuggling ops?”

Vaughn pursed her lips. “Yeah. There was talk of some of our guys hiding the stuff in the corpses of American soldiers and



getting it back here that way, knowing no one would desecrate the bodies by searching them.”

“Exactly.”

“What are you getting at?”

Sara fidgeted with her napkin. “You know how much of the world’s heroin is produced in Afghanistan?”

“Far more than I want to think about.”

“Right.”

“You’re saying the same thing’s going on now?”

“I always knew you were a sharp cookie.” Sara patted Vaughn’s cheek. “I’m finally going to be able to prove it too.”

“Wai—wait a second here. You’re talking about putting the screws to our people?”

“These are really bad apples, V. They’ve got to be stopped. Imagine what the mothers of those poor soldiers would think if they knew.”

“Sara.” Vaughn reached across the table and covered Sara’s hand. For all intents and purposes, the two looked like long-time lovers out for a Sunday coffee. “You know how much I love your strong notions of right and wrong. It’s one of the reasons I fell for you so hard, but—”

Sara broke in, “It’s also one of the things that appealed so much to the Company, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. They loved your zealous patriotism and heightened sense of justice. But this is different.”

“No, it’s not.” Sara lifted her chin and set her jaw defiantly.

“You’re talking about going against people who’ve been trained in the same deadly warfare and dirty tricks that you and I have.”

“I realize that,” Sara snapped. “I’m a big girl now. I’ve got as much blood on my hands as you do, Vaughn.”

The pained look on Vaughn’s face stopped Sara cold.

“I know you do, Sara. That’s my fault. I never should’ve let you say yes to them.”

“You couldn’t have stopped me. I wanted to go.”

“Only because I did.”

Sara nodded grudgingly. “I would’ve followed you to the end of the earth and back again. And I admit that I was an idealistic kid back then who thought I could save the world.”

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“You still are.”

“Maybe a little.” Sara balled her hands into fists. “I’m so close, V. I’ve got them. There’s a delivery coming in late this afternoon. A flight from Kabul with fourteen bodies is due to arrive at Andrews. All I need is to get my hands on the proof.”

“Andrews? That’s not the usual protocol. Why isn’t it Dover?”

“I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. It’s going down at Andrews, and I’m going to be there when it does.”

“You’re not seriously thinking of going in by yourself,” Vaughn said, her voice rising an octave.

“I can’t trust anybody. I don’t know how deep this goes.”

“No.” Vaughn’s lips formed a thin line. “No, you’re not going.”

“They have to be stopped.”

“Find another way.”

Sara crossed her arms over her chest. “There is no other way. I have to catch them in the act, and this is my only shot.”

“If you don’t know how deep it goes, you’ll probably just end up with a flunky.”

“No. I’ve been watching them for months. I finally decoded the messages on the shipping end when I was in Kabul last week. The big fish is supposed to be here today.”

“So you say,” Vaughn said with a healthy dose of skepticism. She leaned forward. “How, exactly, do you plan to pull this off?”

“Don’t worry, V. I’m not some rookie. I’ve got a plan.” Sara knew her irritation was showing.

“This is crazy,” Vaughn said, running her hands through her hair. The gesture was one familiar to Sara. Vaughn did that whenever she was truly upset.

Sara softened her tone. “Please don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I tell you what, I’ll meet you for dinner tonight to prove it.”

“The hell you will.” Vaughn worried her lower lip with her teeth. “If you’re going, then I’m in too.”

“Over my dead body,” Sara said, her anger returning.

“Good one.”

“I’m serious.”

“If it’s too dangerous for me, then it’s too dangerous for you too, doll.”

“You’re not being fair.”

“All’s fair in love and war, remember? What time and where? What’s the plan?”

Sara frowned. She hated that Vaughn had always been able to talk her into a corner. Grudgingly, she offered, “The caskets of the John and Jane Does are on a plane that arrives at 1715. The protocol is that the plane is led into a hangar at the far end of the tarmac and the caskets are unloaded in the privacy of the hangar, while all eyes will be on another bird. That one is carrying the IDed corpses for the public ceremony. I’ve got a mechanic’s uniform and a badge that will get me close to my plane. I just need to get access to one of the caskets.”

“What do you plan to do then?”

“Get the evidence, bag it, and get a copy of the manifest to see who signed for delivery of the goods. Oh, and see who shows up to collect the bounty.”

“You know the big guys will keep their hands clean.”

“They’ve gotten greedy and sloppy in the past few months. The message I got was that they would all be here today. This is the biggest shipment yet, and they want to supervise personally.”

“Are you sure your source is good?”

“Positive.”

Vaughn was staring hard at her, and Sara stared back. It took great self-control for her not to squirm under the scrutiny. She knew Vaughn was testing her resolve.

“Okay, then we go together.”

“No.” Sara slapped her palms on table. She lamented, yet again, that Vaughn never seemed to have faith in her ability to do the job. “I can do this, V.”

“I know you can, hon, but there’s no way I’m going to let you go in without backup. And there’s only one person I trust to watch your shapely backside—that’s me.”

“I appreciate the compliment, I think, but I’ve got it under control.”

“It isn’t a matter of control, damn it! This isn’t an exercise, Sara. If this is as big an operation as you say, it’s got to be sophisticated. That means high-level involvement and high stakes. They’re not going to let you just waltz in and collar them.”

“I know that.”

“What are you going to do once you have the proof?”

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“I’ve got someone inside the FBI who’s got a clear channel to the top.”

“This is nuts.”

“I’m going, Vaughn. You can’t stop me.”

“Maybe not. But you can’t stop me from joining you, either.”

“You’ll create too much suspicion. I’ve been planning this for months.”

“Find a way to get me in.”

Their faces were close together, nostrils flaring, eyes glittering.

Finally, Sara conceded. “There’s a locker inside the terminal, number 342. There’ll be a uniform in there for you. I’ll meet you there at 1600 hours.” Sara shoved her chair back and stalked away.



Vaughn’s meeting ran late. By the time she reached Andrews Air Force Base, it was past the appointed hour. She swore under her breath as she skidded to a halt in front of locker 342. There was no sign of Sara.

“Damn it, Sara. You’d better not be doing anything stupid,” Vaughn muttered as she quickly shrugged into a set of greasy coveralls, zipped them, and pulled on the battered sneakers Sara left for her. She secured the fake ID and sprinted toward the tarmac.

She was inside the hangar and had nearly reached her destination; in fact, she could just make out Sara’s silhouetted form approaching the open cargo bay and the line of caskets on a mechanized conveyor belt. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed movement. It was little more than a suggestion of a shadow, but it was enough.

Vaughn veered off behind a nearby pallet and cautiously inched her way around it, her Glock-40 held out of sight down by her side. She caught a glint of steel—the barrel of a gun, and it was pointed in Sara’s direction. She swung her arm up, tucked, rolled underneath the shadow, and kicked the legs out from under a compact man whose face resembled a pug.

The man’s head hit the concrete with a hard thud and his gun skittered across the floor. One look at him told Vaughn he was unconscious, and would be for a while. The same look told

Vaughn he was Company through and through. She took the time to retrieve several items from his pockets and dragged him behind the pallet.

“Shit. Shit.” Vaughn took off again at a dead sprint toward Sara. When she was about ten feet away, she yelled, “It’s a set-up. Get down!”

Even as she screamed, she watched helplessly as Sara bent over and lifted the lid of the nearest casket. The world narrowed down to just the two of them as a huge sonic boom knocked Vaughn off her feet. The last thing she saw was Sara’s head exploding and her lifeless, but completely intact, lower body crumple to the ground.



Vaughn scrambled to her feet, only to have her legs give way. She blinked her eyes furiously in an attempt to focus. *Sara. Oh, God, not my Sara.* Vaughn crawled forward. She was vaguely aware of people running everywhere, and the fact that her right arm felt like it was on fire. Something was sticking to her side. She looked down. Blood soaked through the left side of the coveralls. Breathing was agony, and the ringing in her ears would not abate.

None of it mattered.

Vaughn reached Sara and gathered her close with her right arm. She doubled over as a sharp stab of pain ripped through her. She sucked in a breath and hissed it out through clenched teeth. When she finally straightened and looked down, pieces of bone and tissue were stuck to her bloody coveralls.

The flesh from Sara’s face was gone, and only tiny fragments of bone remained where her jaw had been.

With her left hand, Vaughn felt around on the ground, mindlessly gathering small bits of skin and bone, and pushing them into the wide crevices where Sara’s face had been.

Vaughn rocked Sara. “It’s okay, beautiful girl. You’re okay. I’m here. I’ll never let you go again.” Tears streamed down her face.

Vaughn lashed out viciously when hands tried to pry her fingers from Sara, and a shockwave of pain shot through her. A shadow appeared and Vaughn became aware of someone in a

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military uniform standing over her. His mouth was moving, but she heard no distinct sound. She felt herself being lifted. Although she tried to hold on, Sara slipped from her grasp. Vaughn cried out.

She struggled against the hands that were forcing her to lie down flat. Several faces loomed over her. They were blurry and she was unable to make out distinct features. Vaughn blinked, but her vision wouldn't clear. Again, she could see mouths moving but could not make out any words. An oxygen mask was placed over her nose and mouth and she felt hands strapping her down. Vaughn wanted to scream. *I have to stay with Sara...to protect her.*

The world began to spin. Seconds later, everything went black.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *One year later*

A blast of hot air assaulted Vaughn as she disembarked from the plane. She squinted in the bright sunlight, quickly donned her shades, and headed in the direction of baggage claim. *Welcome to West Africa.*

“Vaughn Elliott?”

“Who wants to know?” Vaughn barely glanced sideways to acknowledge the presence at her shoulder. Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline when her gruffness was greeted with lilting laughter.

“I’m Sage McNally, political officer at the U.S. Embassy and your control officer here in Mali. Welcome to Bamako.”

Vaughn tipped her sunglasses down and faced the owner of the laugh. Her heart stuck in her throat, and she shoved the shades back up. *Sara. The smile, the eyes alight with amusement, the petite build and Irish complexion.* Vaughn swallowed hard and struggled to regain her equilibrium.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh.” Sage, having clearly mistaken Vaughn’s reaction for anger, shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “It was just...”

“S’okay.” Vaughn looked down at Sage’s outstretched hand and grasped it in a firm handshake. “I’m Vaughn Elliott, Diplomatic Security.”

“Nice to meet you.” Sage paused, seemingly unsure how to proceed. “Um, I thought we would get your bags, then I could take you to the hotel and we could talk over lunch. Is that okay with you?”

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“Fine.” Vaughn turned her attention to the young Malian standing at rigid attention just behind and to the right of Sage.

Sage followed her line of sight. “Henri is our driver. He’ll get your luggage.”

Vaughn pointed to a small duffel just appearing on the luggage carousel and looked at Henri. “Le voilà.”

The young man plucked the bag up and slung it over his shoulder.

“You travel pretty light,” Sage said. “Usually poor Henri gets stuck hauling multiple suitcases.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not most people.” Sage flinched at the brusqueness of her tone, and Vaughn instantly regretted it. *It’s not her fault she reminds you of Sara.* Marginally more softly, Vaughn said, “I’ve traveled extensively and often, so I’ve gotten the packing thing down to a science.”

“Oh.”

Sage was silent the rest of the way to the car.

*Damn it, Vaughn. Give the girl a chance.* “So, have you been in Mali long?”

“A year-and-a-half. My tour here is almost up.”

“Where were you posted before this?” Vaughn studied Sage’s profile as they sat in the back seat of the Toyota 4x4. From this angle, she bore less resemblance to Sara.

“I was in Brussels.”

“Wow. Mali must have been quite a come-down from that.”

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But I wanted to come here. My specialty is French-speaking African countries, so this is where the action is for me.” Her good humor apparently restored, Sage laughed easily.

To her surprise, Vaughn found that she was relieved. “Hmm, chocolate, culture, all of Europe at your feet...or dust, heat, inedible food, and rudimentary accommodations. I can see your point.”

Sage blushed. “Well, when you put it that way, it does sound pretty ridiculous.”

“Nah, you followed your passion. Good for you. More people should do that.”

“Here we go,” Sage said as they pulled into the parking lot of a Hilton. “There’s a pretty good restaurant in here. The food is



definitely edible. How about if I meet you at the bar after you've checked in?"

"Sure. Give me fifteen minutes."



Sage noted that Vaughn was back in exactly fifteen minutes, despite a change in wardrobe. She was unsurprised. Punctuality seemed in keeping with the woman's no-nonsense demeanor. She studied Vaughn as she made her way to the bar. Without her reflective sunglasses, she still cut an imposing figure.

"Shall we get a table?"

"Sure."

At her signal, the host appeared at Sage's elbow. "Oui, Mademoiselle Sage?"

"Un table pour deux, s'il vous plaît, Maxim."

"Bien sûr, Mademoiselle." To Vaughn, he said, "Right this way."

"Merci, Monsieur." Vaughn answered in impeccable French.

Once they were seated, Sage said, "Your accent is better than mine."

"I would hardly think that could be judged by a few simple phrases."

Sage waved her hand dismissively. "Perhaps, but I can always tell someone who's comfortable with the language from someone who isn't. Where did you study?"

"Paris, in my youth."

Sage pursed her lips. Vaughn's tone implied that further illumination would not be forthcoming.

It was Sage's avocation, as well as her vocation, to read people. It was clear that Vaughn cultivated her aloofness. This, of course, aroused Sage's curiosity all the more.

She had not been able to glean anything from the information she'd received about Vaughn from Washington several days ago. That was not unusual, but what was odd was that the information had not come via the normal route.

While Vaughn had hardly shown herself to be chatty, Sage decided to forge ahead. "Well, it's nice that at least they managed to send someone who speaks the language." She paused for effect

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and adopted what she hoped was a casual tone. “Maybe that’s because your assignment didn’t come through the usual channels?”

When Vaughn neither responded nor reacted, Sage tried again. “I mean, normally I would’ve gotten news of your arrival and background information from some mid-level bureaucrat at State. You were different.”

Still Vaughn remained maddeningly silent.

Sage sighed. The direct approach seemed the only way. “So, why did your assignment come directly from the secretary of state? I’m assuming that’s where the assignment came from, since that’s who sent me your details.”

Vaughn shrugged, her eyes fixed on a spot somewhere over Sage’s shoulder. “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask the secretary?”

“Very funny.” Sage decided to try a different line of questioning. “Where were you before? You must have been somewhere exciting, right?” She knew that Vaughn’s classification was 01—meaning she was an experienced officer.

“This is my first assignment.”

“Wow.” Sage couldn’t hide her surprise. “The secretary of state himself sends you to protect a high-level congressional delegation your first time out of the gate? No offense, but that seems pretty strange.”

“Not really. I’ve been in law enforcement for twenty-one years. I’m no rookie. I’m fully capable of coordinating security for this visit. Feel better now?”

Sage blushed as Vaughn fixed her with a pointed stare. “Oh, I wasn’t questioning your ability. Honest.” Sage bit her lower lip. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* “Which agency were you with? Do you have any good stories to tell?”

“Another branch of government. And no, I don’t have any good stories to share. I’ve been behind a desk for the past year.”

Vaughn’s voice was flat, but there was something in her eyes that told Sage there was much more to the story.

“You don’t strike me as the kind of person who would enjoy pushing papers. What’d you do to end up in the doghouse?”

“Can we please talk about the assignment?” It was more a command than a request.

“Of course. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Sage cleared her throat and adopted her best business-like tone. “As you know, a congressional delegation led by the senate majority leader will be here three weeks from now. It’s part of a larger visit that will include Ghana, Senegal, Cameroon...”

“And, naturellement, gay Paris on the way home,” Vaughn interjected.

“Of course,” Sage conceded. It was a well-established practice that “fact-finding” or goodwill trips to third-world countries by VIPs would include a high-value bonus location like France.

“Mali is the last stop before Paris, so by the time they get here they’ll probably have had their fill of hospitals and schools.”

“Normally, I’d agree with you, but Mali is strategically important to the U.S. It’s a model for democracy we can only hope other West African nations would adopt.” Sage warmed to the topic. “Mali has had four democratic, multi-party presidential elections since 1990. That’s remarkable.”

“Is that so?”

Vaughn smiled at her indulgently and Sage got the distinct sense that she was being patronized. “Are you playing me?”

Vaughn barked a laugh. “What makes you think so?”

Sage frowned in answer.

“I have done some homework, but I’d rather get your perspective. I really wasn’t jerking your chain, Sage.”

It was more of a concession than Sage expected. “Okay. So, what is it you want to know?”

A waiter appeared with their food, and conversation was temporarily suspended.

When he’d gone, Vaughn said, “Tell me about the scheduled stops, personal observations about the politics, situations our group might encounter...”

“Right. Well, the new president is a bit eccentric and fancies himself a ladies’ man, so that might present an interesting dynamic with Majority Leader Stowe.”

Vaughn raised an eyebrow. Madeline Stowe, the first female leader of the Senate, was a shrewd politician with a well-deserved reputation for eviscerating anybody, of either sex, who treated her with anything other than complete respect and professional courtesy.

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“Maybe we should sell tickets. Could be quite a show,” Vaughn said. “By the way, I’m impressed.” She held up a forkful of coq au vin. “Real French food.”

“Mmm, don’t expect that outside of the hotel.”

“Good to know.”

Sage continued around a mouthful of food, “The audience with the National Assembly will be less fascinating—just a mutual rah-rah session. Then there’s the obligatory party thrown by the ambassador...”

“What about the stops outside Bamako?”

“There are two visits scheduled to schools in the countryside. These are more like photo opportunities and made-for-television events.”

“Anything I should know about the areas around the schools? What are the people like?” Vaughn asked, taking a last bite and pushing the plate away.

“The schools border on Tuareg territory—up near Timbuktu. Generally speaking, the Tuareg keep to themselves. Every now and again they get riled up about something, but mostly they stay true to their nomadic roots, riding around on their camels in the desert, trading goods, and looking imposing in their flowing dark indigo robes with only their eyes visible.”

“Only their eyes, eh?”

Sage nodded. “Beginning at age twenty-five, every Tuareg male wears a head veil—it’s a turban that also wraps around their neck and lower face. They’re never seen without the veil, even by family.”

“Are the Tuareg worked up about anything at the moment?”

“Nothing in particular, but it’s good to remember that they have no allegiances except to themselves.”

“Noted.” Vaughn pushed back from the table. “So what’s on tap for the rest of the day?”

Sage regarded her with something akin to awe. “You’re not jet-lagged?”

“Nope.”

“I didn’t schedule any meetings for today because I didn’t think you’d be up to it, but I could show you around town and give you a sense of the place.”

“Sounds good, unless you have other things you need to be doing. I don’t want to take you away from your work.” Vaughn pushed away from the table and stood up.

Sage signaled the waiter. “Not a problem. I’m at your disposal for as long as you need me. It’s my job to schmooze, get intelligence, and be visible. Since I’ve set up meetings for us with Malian officials, I can kill two birds with one stone.”

“I’ve got it,” Vaughn said, placing a restraining hand on Sage’s wrist as she looked at the check and reached for her wallet.

Sage shook her head and smiled. “Embassy business. The government’s picking up the tab.”

“Better yet.”



The heat created the illusion of steam rising off the pavement as they rode toward the outskirts of town. Abruptly, the quality of the pavement changed.

“I take it we’re leaving the city limits,” Vaughn said drolly.

“You really do have great powers of observation.”

Vaughn chuckled. “Told you I was good at what I do.”

They’d spent several hours touring the capital city, and Vaughn was finding it increasingly difficult to maintain an air of remote detachment. Sage’s enthusiasm and genuine curiosity were hard to resist. Vaughn glanced out the window, noting the periodic appearance of small earthen huts. It was a far cry from the bustle of Bamako.

Over the course of her career, she had been in many third-world countries, although she had never been to Mali. The barren landscape reminded her of neighboring Burkina Faso. The entire country looked like a red-clay tennis court, the natives lived in extreme poverty, the climate was arid, and yet the people seemed happy.

“Have you ever been to West Africa before?”

“Mmm. Once or twice. I was just thinking this place reminds me of Burkina Faso.”

“I can see that,” Sage said, “but politically, the two nations are worlds apart. Burkina Faso traditionally has been very unstable. I

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can't count the number of coups they've had in the last twenty-five years."

Vaughn flashed back to the last time she'd been there. It was a coup that she'd been ordered to help engineer in the summer of 1983. She wondered what Sage would think if she knew. "In that case, better to be here than there."

"That's very true."

"How did a nice girl like you get to be in the diplomatic corps?"

Sage shrugged. "It's not a very interesting story, really. I always wanted to go into the Peace Corps. So I signed up right after college. Since I was fluent in French, they sent me to West Africa."

"There are a lot of French-speaking countries," Vaughn said. "Why West Africa?"

"I thought it would be exotic and fascinating. My purpose in going into the Peace Corps was to help save the world. I didn't really think Paris, Switzerland, Belgium or Canada needed rescuing."

"True." Vaughn looked over at Sage. "How did you find the experience? Was it everything you expected?"

"Yes and no." Sage shifted her attention from the road to make brief eye contact with Vaughn. "It was certainly a part of the world that seemed like it could benefit greatly from Western ideals and technologies."

"Sounds like there's a 'but' in there somewhere."

"Mmm. The longer I was there and the more time I spent with the people, the more I began to question why our ways were supposed to be better than theirs. Was it simply our arrogance? Who were we to tell them the way they'd been doing things for centuries wasn't the 'right' way? Or could we really improve their lives? Should we, just because we could?"

Vaughn smiled. Sage's face was alive with the passion of conviction. For the first time in a year, Vaughn was enjoying the company of another human being. *Welcome back to the world, Elliott.* "What did you decide in the end?"

"I never really reached a firm conclusion. I mean, the area was rife with famine, people were starving, and disease was rampant. Still, the people were generally happy. Go back to the States and

watch folks in a grocery store. They have everything they could ever want, all in nice, neat little rows with more choices than they know what to do with, and they're miserable. They complain about the checkout lines, the fact that the bananas aren't ripe enough, their brand of toothpaste isn't on sale...you get the idea."

"Mmm. The people who have nothing, who lead simple lives that revolve around survival, seem to be more content than the society that has every advantage."

"In a nutshell, yes."

"But it still doesn't eradicate their very real suffering."

"Exactly. So what's the answer? Get them healthy and let them be as unhappy as we are?"

"Is it fair to assume that they would be? That seems a bit of a leap. Maybe they've sufficiently internalized the things that make them happy and external factors won't affect that." Vaughn was enjoying the intellectual conversation. It seemed like forever since the last time she'd gotten outside of herself. *Since the last weekend you spent with Sara*. She closed her eyes against a stab of pain.

"Are you okay?"

Vaughn opened her eyes to see Sage staring at her, her brow furrowed with concern. She became aware for the first time that the car had stopped.

"Fine," Vaughn answered, more curtly than she intended.

"Right," Sage said, and turned her head away. Her jaw muscles were tense, and Vaughn cursed herself.

Sage continued, "I thought you might like to see the Marché—the market. It only happens once a week out here. Vendors come from all over to ply their wares—goat meat, fabrics, tools, wood carvings. If you're not up to it..."

"No. I'd love to see it. Lead on," Vaughn said, unbuckling her seatbelt.

Sage got out of the car without saying another word.

*Way to go, Elliott.*