

HEATHER PAXTON

Sand, Sweat and Gunpowder

Hussein stood by himself that morning, lurking in the corner of the guard shack. I pulled the HUMVEE up to the designated parking spot, grabbed my M-16, and walked to the front gate. Before he said hello, he handed me a box wrapped in a cheap blue plastic bag. I stared at the bag, not quite sure what to do with it.

I shielded my eyes from the never-ending sun in the clear Iraqi sky. "What's this?"

"A present. Perfume. Women should smell like women, not men." On his face was a mischievous grin.

"You need to think of me as a soldier, not a woman," I said. This wasn't the first time he had given me a gift, and I was torn between feeling flattered and horrified. His crush on me only seemed to get worse as time went by. His two wives didn't approve, and neither did my commander.

Hussein was the local Sheik's first-born son, and a critical asset in catching insurgents and gunrunners in Diyala province. One day it would fall to him to run his tribe and keep his people safe. My job required that I transport him every day from the front gate to the operations center to meet with my superiors. This made my attempts to ignore him difficult.

"I can't accept this, and you know it." I thrust the bag back into his hands.

The smirk on his face vanished, and he stared at me with his dark eyes. "Why? You not accept my gift because you a soldier, not a woman? Take it. You a woman too. You make me happy if take gift."

I snatched the bag from his outstretched hands. "Get in the vehicle." I barked. "We're running late."

After I dropped him off with my superiors, I stole away for a moment to my room. I untied the knot in the plastic bag and took out the

box containing the perfume. Inside was a beautiful oblong glass bottle, a mixture of clear and smooth, milky and rough, like fine sandpaper. It was topped with a white cap shaped like a fresh budding blossom. A gold pendant hung from the neck of the bottle: *Parfum D'Or*.

The only scents I'd smelled for the past four months were sand, sweat, gunpowder and the overpowering cologne that our Iraqi interpreters poured on every day. I pressed the pump and a spray of perfume shot out, saturating the air around me. I savored its spicy bouquet. My heart ached for the world I left behind. I was tired of the stench of fear that clung to every pore of my body. I dreamed, just for a moment, that the fragrance of the perfume could bring me back home, back where I was safe. But no amount of perfume could cover my fear. So I put the bottle into my trunk, washed my face, and went back to work.

Two months later, Hussein was dead. Shot in the chest five times while driving home from work. The day I learned of his death, I took the perfume bottle out of my trunk. I pictured his mangled body on the side of the highway. I pulled the cap off and inhaled, trying to recapture the joy his present gave me, but it only deepened my grief. When he gave it to me, I'd felt normal, like a woman and not only a soldier. Its scent had brought me to my own home, away from bombs and guns and death. Inhaling now, I was sorry I'd never thanked him. He'd given me a sense of home, where I felt safe and where I was loved.