

A decorative border of intricate, repeating floral and geometric patterns in black and white, framing the top and sides of the page.

DAY 14

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN

1

Three hours and the office would close. Marie scribbled another name—another Afghan official with a title, a stamp, and a signature that she still needed. If she focused, Marie could get it done; her project would be approved and she could go home to Shehktan.

Her cell phone chirped. She glanced across the room at the broken window blinds, bars of light streaming through the gaps, dust floating thick and dry. She looked back at the young man, whose rapid directions she'd suddenly lost track of.

Her phone chirped again. Instinctively, she caught the small yellow nylon pouch tethered to the strap of her black backpack. Her lifeline. She pulled the flap, slipped her fingers inside, and retrieved the phone.

The young man took a breath and continued talking.

Marie lifted the display before her eyes. *Carolyn? She knows I'm busy. Why is she calling?* A dozen possible reasons raced through her mind. The phone rang out again.

In front of her sat a row of three mismatched desks: two laminated wood, chipped on the corners, and one scratched, gray metal.

She looked at the dirty concrete-colored computer monitors with their red, white, and blue stickers, “USAID”—gifts of the American people—attached were keyboards with grease and dust-stained keys.

Her phone sounded a fourth time.

She clutched a sheaf of papers in her left hand: written instructions, recorded in uneven black script; names crossed out, rewritten, crossed out again. Some words written in Dari, their backward-looping shapes clashing against fragments of English instructions.

The phone chirped a fifth time. *Carolyn*. It was her coworker, housemate, and closest friend in Afghanistan. *Something must be wrong*. Marie waved her interruption to the young man. “One minute.”

He didn’t stop.

She pushed the green button and pressed the phone to her ear. “Hello.”

Carolyn’s voice was rushed, unnaturally high, and panicked. “Oh, thank God you answered! Thank God! You won’t believe it. I’m so glad you answered.”

The panic in Carolyn’s voice made Marie’s knees buckle, straighten, then lock.

The young man’s words fused and disappeared into the background as she tried to focus on Carolyn’s scattered message. “We got a text . . . a foreigner . . . a woman . . . executed right here, on the street, in Kabul . . . Did you hear? Are you all right?”

The pale blue room with the broken window blinds, mismatched desks, and USAID hardware convulsed in Marie’s peripheral vision, then settled. Marie reached for the corner of the desk in front of her. Her knuckles raked the edges of a cluster of nearly empty glass tea cups. Their smooth sides seemed to contrast with the broken cadence of Carolyn’s words.

“I was afraid it was you. It’s not you! Are you okay? Where are you?”

Marie pushed the desk away, fixed her eyes on the split shafts of sunlight holding dust in their slanted beams. She forced calm into her voice. “I’m here.”

“Where?”

Marie narrowed her eyes, forced her knees to unlock, and slowed her words into sentences. “I’m fine. I’m downtown.”

In the mismatched desks in front of her, two young Afghan clerks in Western clothing sat on half-broken chairs. A third stood silent, finally realizing his speech had been interrupted. “I’m at the Ministry of Economy getting approval for our literacy project.” *Of course*, she thought. *She already knows that*. She looked at her translator. His downcast eyes testified to his discomfort. Marie realized he could hear Carolyn’s side of the conversation. They could *all* hear. *A foreigner . . . a woman . . . executed . . . right here . . . on the street . . . in Kabul*.

An ugly, rough-edged word. *Executed*.

Carolyn, calling from the Kabul guesthouse, couldn’t see the three young Afghan men, Marie’s translator, the row of mismatched desks, the pale blue walls, or the broken blinds. She couldn’t see the sheaf of papers Marie held in her left hand or the scratched instructions in black ink that told her which office to enter next. The cell phone created a context in which these two incongruent scenes—the guesthouse and the Kabul office—clashed with such force that it created a third, surreal scene in her mind. Marie stood, phone in hand, disoriented. She felt engulfed in a sudden squall of churning dust. She caught her breath and groped for something solid, something firm.

Carolyn’s words still tumbled about. “Come back. Come back to the guesthouse right away.”

Back to the guesthouse—now? Before finishing?

But Carolyn kept talking. “We’re on lockdown. We’re *all* on lockdown. You have to come back.”

Another gust swept over her. “What?”

“The entire foreign community’s on lockdown. Can you get here? You have to come.”

It was protocol. *Lockdown; get inside the thick mud-brick walls of your compound. Lock the gate. Hide from the men with Kalashnikovs out on the street*. Marie was on the wrong side of the city, surrounded by

the wrong people. Lost in a Kabul government office with three young Afghan men behind a bank of mismatched desks and her translator, Fawad. *Strangers. Foreigners. No, I'm the stranger. I'm the foreigner.* She pulled her voice tight, careful, and thin; then whispered, "Who was it?"

Carolyn still rushed her words. "We don't know. I'm trying to find out. I'll let you know. When can you get back here?"

Marie looked at the sheaf of papers in her left hand. The first were instructions; the rest were letters, protocols, and statements. Each one required a government stamp and signature. That's why she was in this office, why she was in Kabul. She needed the stamps and signatures to start their literacy project. She couldn't fly back to Shehktan until she got them. No, she wouldn't leave, not without the approval.

Fawad in his rural Afghan clothes, and the young men behind the desks in their almost Western-style jeans were all watching her silently. Waiting.

Carolyn interrupted Marie's thoughts. "When are you coming back?"

She looked at the broken and twisted Venetian blinds, the thick layer of khaki Kabuli soil that coated each thin, white blade, the sharp streaks of sun piercing the gaps, and the dust suspended in shafts of light. Marie knew the protocol for lockdown: go home immediately, stay home. But home was far away, in Shehktan, and Marie had work to do. "I don't know. I'll be there soon."

"Marie!" Carolyn protested.

Marie caught her own breath and held it a moment before speaking. "Carolyn, calm down. Tell me what happened."

Carolyn's words were still rushed; her voice, still too high-pitched. "They said it was three blocks from the guesthouse. Two or three men in a car. I heard the bullets. Lots of them. Soon after you left. But I didn't think . . . I just thought, *Oh, a firefight somewhere with the Afghan National Army and insurgents. Taliban. Not one of us.* But it was one of us. Can you believe it, Marie? That never happens . . . right on the street! Right here, in our neighborhood. They shot one of us right

in front of the schoolchildren. That's what people are saying. That's all I know. Come back to the guesthouse. You have to. Come back now."

"Carolyn, stop. I'm at the Ministry of Economy, in the office. I'm safe here, and I have work to do. I'll call you soon."

Marie snapped her phone shut, slipped it back into its yellow nylon sheath, and watched the scene in her imagination. She shuddered. *I was there. Just blocks from where I caught my taxi. I missed it. I didn't hear the bullets. I must have passed just minutes before she was killed. I must've climbed into my taxi just before it all happened. I missed it. Missed it by only minutes.*

She looked at her translator's downturned face and followed the angle of his eyes. Fawad was studying the grimy, nearly empty glass teacups sitting on the corner of the desk. She looked up at the row of young Afghan men. They were still silent, all of them, watching her.

Finally, Marie spoke—her words sounded far away, foreign, words that came from a stranger, words spoken in a voice she could no longer recognize even though it was her own. "A foreign aid worker, a woman, was killed in Cart'e Seh."

The young men waited.

Cart'e Seh? Marie thought. Why do I even know that neighborhood? Its geography, its shape, its residents? How did these Dari words come from my mouth? Where did I get them? Was I really speaking them? Why am I shocked? We're in downtown Kabul. Afghanistan. Things happen. Bombs in trucks go off next to convoys full of soldiers. Mines explode under vehicles and kill women and children in nearby buses. People die. Every day, we hear news reports of people killed and maimed. Why is this different? She spoke her next sentence out loud as if to impress its truth upon her spinning thoughts. "A foreign aid worker, a woman, was killed in Cart'e Seh."

The reality settled. A solitary woman, executed at close range, intentionally killed on a Kabul street just blocks from Marie's guesthouse. Killed in an area considered safe for foreign workers. The woman's scarf, her cell phone, the aid work that she did, the welcome she had

in the community, none of it mattered. She was killed, left in a pool of hot blood on a dusty Kabul street. This was a new thing. Marie shuddered.

She, too, walked those same Kabul streets. She, too, wore a cotton headscarf, long coat, and sandals. She, too, carried a cell phone. *It could have been me.* She stood unsteady and silent for several moments.

The three young men behind their dust and grime-covered desks watched and waited. Finally, the standing one broke the silence. “It’s okay. Cart’e Seh is far away.” His voice was gentle, soft.

Marie was not reassured. The rules had suddenly changed. Never before had an aid worker been so publicly executed. Yes, others had been kidnapped, and years before—during the wars—aid workers were killed, but that was a long time ago.

This was almost seven years after the fall of the Taliban. Since 9/11, aid workers had poured into Afghanistan. They brought medical care, education, training, and reconstruction. They were welcomed by Afghans throughout the country.

Marie looked at the sheaf of papers in her hand; half were printed in Dari, the other half in English. Project setup forms: a women’s literacy project. The people in Shehktan had asked for this project. The women wanted to learn to read and the men had approved. Stamps. Signatures. She needed the approvals of government leaders in Kabul.

She checked the time on her cell phone. *Three hours and the office will close. If I leave now, I’ll have to come back after the weekend. No. I want to go home to Shehktan. Start this project.*

She looked around the office. Every surface laced with fine Kabuli dust. Of the four young men, three worked for the government. Kabulis in skinny khaki and olive jeans edged with zippers and pockets in odd locations. They each wore tight fitting, polyester shirts, two with loud prints, one solid gold. All were clean shaven. One wore his hair short on the sides and back, but long in the front. His bangs fell down to his eyebrows. The other two wore their hair slicked back.

She looked at Fawad. Her translator was country, not Kabuli. He

wore a crisp white *shalvar kameez*, a long shirt that fell down to his knees, with matching trousers that spilled over long, pointed black shoes. His neat beard, mustache, and carefully cut hair all looked out of place in this Kabul office. Marie watched him study three thick, fingerprint-covered glass cups that sat on the edge of the desk.

The still-standing clerk spoke in careful English. "We're at war. Sometimes these things happen. Of course it's terrible, but these things happen. Did you know her?"

Marie cocked her head sideways. She had no idea who'd been killed. "No."

"Then there's nothing to do." The young man shrugged. "We should continue."



Marie looked again at the stack of papers in her hand. She thought of the mullah in Shehktan, with his gray-and-white turban and gray-streaked beard. He was the first to ask for the project. "Our women must learn to read," he had said. "It's important. Without literacy, they're blind." When she asked if they wanted to learn, he had said they did. "Yes. Of course."

Marie had not believed him, so she conducted her own survey. She hired six Afghan women, each from different neighborhoods around the city, and sent them out to interview neighbors. The results were overwhelming. The women wanted to learn.

Marie had already raised the money for the project. She had approval from her NGO, the nongovernmental organization for whom she worked in Shehktan. All she needed were the Kabul stamps and signatures.

She made the decision that the young men behind their mismatched desks wanted her to make. She nodded, reread the instructions she'd already recorded, and asked the standing man to continue.

The room relaxed and returned to work.

The young man delivered the last set of instructions. When he finished, Marie thanked all three for their assistance, even though only one had helped. She placed her right hand over her heart, the appropriate gesture for a respectful greeting, and wished them safety in God.

Fawad turned and followed her out of the office into a long, empty, gray, tiled hallway with dull, light blue walls and rows of closed wooden doors. Marie walked several feet down the hallway, out of earshot from the office, then stopped.

“Do you understand our instructions?”

Fawad nodded. “Yes. The next office is over there.” He pointed to a closed door on the right, about eight feet away. “Mari-jan. We should call Mr. Dave.”

Dave was their boss, the director of the NGO for which both worked. “Yes, but I need to call Carolyn first.”

“Who?”

Marie smiled. She’d used Carolyn’s American name, not her Afghan name. “Nazanin.”

Fawad nodded. He knew Nazanin. Carolyn, he’d never met.

Marie stepped to the side of the hallway, pulled the Velcro from her nylon pouch, and retrieved her phone. She found Carolyn’s number in the list of contacts and wondered what she would say to her.



Carolyn was young, twenty-three when she first arrived in Afghanistan. Now she was just shy of twenty-five. She did her first six months in Kabul, learning the basics of Dari. When she could speak enough to get by, she moved to Shehktan and settled into Marie’s house. She joined Marie in the middle of the last project, a teacher-training program that led them out to remote villages.

At first, Marie had been hesitant. Carolyn was so young, almost twenty years younger than herself and breathtakingly naïve. Marie

assumed she would arrive addicted to her cell phone and the Internet. She couldn't imagine how the young woman would cope with the unrelenting summer heat or the brutal winter cold of northern Afghanistan. Marie was convinced that traveling rough roads in spring-shot vehicles and walking donkey paths would be too much for the young American woman, but she was wrong. Carolyn had done well and the Afghans adored her.

Over time, Marie grew to rely on her young companion. It wasn't just the work, although Carolyn was good at that. There was more. She had become a treasured friend. They laughed together and cried together. They shared their meals, the challenges of living in-country, and the joys of getting to know people and seeing new things. They shared their own stories and the stories of the Afghan women whose histories so often broke their hearts. They prayed and worshiped together. In many ways, they'd become closer than sisters.

Now there was a guy. He'd been in the picture since the beginning, just as a distraction at first. Marie had watched the relationship develop. More than once, she'd listened to Carolyn debate the young man's attributes, wonder what she wanted, and vacillate between hope and disregard. When Marie planned her trip to collect approvals for the new project, Carolyn jumped at the opportunity for shared travel from Shekhtan to Kabul. She'd left Marie to the government work and flown on to Dubai, where her young man joined her for a week of ice cream, hamburgers, and conversation.

She had returned to Kabul giddy. He hadn't actually proposed, but they'd had the talk. Now Carolyn was proposing departure dates; before the summer when the heat saps everyone's strength, or at the start of Ramadan, when the Afghans grow short-tempered. Marie measured the time before Carolyn would leave: nine months, ten? It was too soon.

Marie sighed. Of course, she wanted Carolyn to be happy. Still, it was too soon. She pushed the green call button on her phone.

Carolyn answered. "Marie?"

“Hi, Carolyn.”

“Are you on your way back to the guesthouse?”

“No. We’re going to finish our work and then return. I’ll call you when I head back.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Have you heard anything new?”

“Not much.”

“Okay. Text me if you hear anything.”

“Marie? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Look, we’re already here. If we’re lucky, we can get the project approved today. Go back to Shehktan on the next flight.”

“Okay.”

Marie knew she was already pulling her heart away from Carolyn. She could hear the distance in her own voice. She would have handled the call differently, the day differently, if she didn’t already know Carolyn would leave in just a few months. Surely she wouldn’t have left her friend alone at a Kabul guesthouse on a day like this. The dull edge of guilt pressed into her temple. “Hey, Carolyn, are you okay?”

Carolyn didn’t respond.

“Carolyn?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I mean, no. I’m not fine. How could I be? One of us was killed. Right on the street. It could have been any of us.”

Marie understood. Every day they walked past Afghan men with Kalashnikovs in their hands. They had to believe they wouldn’t be shot or they couldn’t do it. “Carolyn—”

“It’s okay.” The younger woman sighed heavily. “Do what you have to do. I’ll be here when you get back. Don’t worry about it. I’m safe. Just call me before you leave the ministry. Okay?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure. I’ll talk to you later,” Marie said, ending the call. Then she scrolled through her contacts and placed another.

The smooth, deep bass of a man in his sixties answered the phone. “Hello.”

“Dave? Marie here.”

“It’s good to hear your voice. I talked to Carolyn. She said you were fine, but downtown.” Dave, always straight to business.

“Yeah. We’re still here.”

“Fawad with you?”

Marie looked over at the translator. “Yeah. We’re going to try to get the project approved. Then I’ll go back to the guesthouse and send Fawad home. Can he still take the bus?”

“To Shehktan?”

“Yeah.”

Dave was a details man. He liked to consider every piece of information he could get. “Yes. He’ll take the bus to the provincial capital, then catch a line taxi to town. It’s no problem. He knows how to do it.”

“I just wanted to know if it was still safe enough for him to travel that way.”

“Oh.” Dave’s voice lightened. “Yeah. Of course.” His voice dropped back down. “But you can’t. That road’s closed to us. Wait for the plane. Okay?”

Marie was impatient. “Yeah, I know.”

“Okay.” Dave’s voice lightened again. He was back to collecting information. “Do you know who was killed yet?”

“No. Do you?”

“I heard her name, but we don’t know her. She’s with a different NGO.”

Marie hesitated. She didn’t know that many people in Kabul, but it was possible she knew the woman. “What’s her name?”

Fawad raised his eyebrows but kept his eyes on the floor.

Dave gave the name. “You know her?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Yeah. Neither do I. But she’s one of us and no one’s been caught.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means the killers had permission.”

Marie caught her breath. *Permission*. “Government? Mullahs?”

“Yeah. Someone.”

Marie looked at a chip of peeling, blue paint. “Yeah.”

“Call me when you leave downtown.”

“I will.”

Marie snapped the phone shut, but it chirped before she had a chance to slide it back into its little yellow pouch.

“Yeah, Dave.”

“Margaret and I are flying down this afternoon.”

“What?” Marie stepped back against the wall. “Why? It can’t affect us, right? Not in Shehktan.”

“It might, Marie. I need to assess the situation. Figure out what all this means. I’m going to meet with some of the other heads of NGOs. We’re staying at the guesthouse. We’ll arrive this afternoon.”

“You got a flight?”

“We called. They added us to the Faizabad leg. We’re leaving in about two hours. Security, you know.”

“Yeah, they’re good that way.” Marie envisioned the small white King Air that served aid workers in remote locations across the country; noncommercial, nonprofit, and invaluable. “You’re coming to the guesthouse?”

“Yeah.”

Of course, it made sense. This was a crisis. There would be meetings. People who knew things would collect information, talk to one another, and assess the situation. Was this a new normal or an outlier? Was it personal or random? Did the Afghan government or the religious leaders sanction the killing? And if they did, had they called for more? The foreign community would have to figure all that out. The leaders would make decisions. Of course Dave would come.

Marie nodded. “Okay. I’ll see you later. Travel safe.”

“Thanks.”

Marie slid her phone back into its yellow pouch. She looked up at

Fawad. “Mr. Dave and his wife are coming to Kabul.” She didn’t say when.

The young man nodded, but said nothing.

Marie bristled. Fawad probably thought the married couple was coming down to look after the poor single women. “He has work to do here.”

Fawad nodded again, but still said nothing.

“Okay, let’s see what we can get done.”

Marie walked from desk to desk, her stack of project papers in her hand, Fawad beside her. They walked into and out of dingy offices with threadbare, dust-and-tea-stained carpets, spring-shot sofas with blackened armrests, and Afghan men with thick beards and creased, poorly fitting suits. Marie explained her project over and over, presented her papers for stamps and signatures, and counted on Fawad to understand the next steps.

2

Finally, just before the government closed for the weekend, Marie and Fawad reached the last necessary office. A large, gold-trimmed sign marked the door. Inside, an overweight, middle-aged Afghan government minister sat behind a huge, dark brown desk, a cigarette limp between his fingertips.

The man took Marie’s sheaf of papers, carelessly waved it in the air, and demanded, “Why are you working in the north? You should do a project in Kandahar. Our women there need help. You should go there and help them.”

Marie stiffened. She felt her shoulders and neck lock. Was this a game? A joke? She had no idea. She thought about the woman killed. *Does he know?*

She thought about Kandahar, just across the border with Pakistan. Home of the Taliban. Outside real government control. Kandahar, where aid workers disappeared in broad daylight. Marie lived on the far side of a mountain range that cut the country and once divided its disparate tribes. If her town, Shehktan, wasn't held together by the government, it would be chaos. It would be like Kandahar.

The man in the big chair behind the big desk scowled. "Why should I approve this? You should work in Kandahar. Our women need help."

Marie looked down at the carpet. She searched for wisdom, prayed. *Is he serious?* She had all the stamps and signatures she needed except this one man's. In that moment, she chose a response. She forced a smile and looked into the man's bearded face. "Ah, Saeb, I can't go to Kandahar."

The man roared. "Why not?"

Fawad hung his head.

Marie looked across the room through another set of broken Venetian blinds. She lightened her voice even further. "They would steal me."

Marie knew the word for "kidnap," but had chosen "steal" instead. She was looking for humor and praying she would find it.

The big man scowled.

Marie waited.

Suddenly, he tilted his head back and laughed. He laughed hard and deep. He laughed from the pit of his stomach and the room rocked. Fawad jumped. Marie's legs relaxed.

The big man ripped open a drawer. He pulled a stamp and ink pad from the darkness and slammed them against the surface of his desk. He flipped the ink pad open, jammed the stamp against it, and in one violent stroke, smashed the stamp onto Marie's document. He pulled a silver pen from a wooden stand and signed the page with a flourish.

Marie breathed.

The big man stood, pushing his chair backward until it hit the wall behind him. In four quick strides, he stepped in front of Marie.

She tried not to flinch, but failed.

If the man noticed, he said nothing. Instead, he shoved the approved project documents toward Marie with his left hand and stretched forth his right to shake hers.

Marie reached for the papers, but he didn't release them. She lifted her right hand, bracing herself.

The big man engulfed it, squeezed too hard, and congratulated her on her approved project. Then he released the papers into her left hand with a firm warning. "But they may steal you in Shehktan, too. You cannot trust anyone."

Fawad winced.

The big man threw his hands in the air in mock exasperation. "This is Afghanistan!"

Rattled, Marie forced a smile. She placed her right hand over her heart, bowed slightly, wished the man God's protection, and carefully fled the room.

Once in the hallway, Marie leaned against the cool blue-gray wall and closed her eyes. The big man's warning clashing in her mind.

Fawad's words entered the swirl. "He is a very powerful man."

She whispered. "Yes, Fawad-jan. He's powerful." She stood up straight. "And our project's approved." She took a step toward the stairwell.

"Mari-jan. When will you return to Shehktan?"

Marie stopped and looked at Fawad, disturbed by his question. Instantly she imagined strangers waiting for her on the airport road. Dave's security lecture replayed in her mind: *"Never tell Afghans where you're planning to go—not the police, not our coworkers, not your friends. Even if they're completely trustworthy, they might tell someone else."* She chose her words carefully. "Fawad-jan, I will return to Shehktan soon."

The translator looked down at the gray floor.

Marie added. "My work here in Kabul is complete. Thank you for your assistance."

Fawad put his hand on his heart and nodded.

Marie would say no more.

The two walked down the concrete stairwell and stepped into a wide, tiled hall. Marie found a small, metal table inside the building's doorway. She dropped her backpack on it. "I have some calls to make, then we'll leave."

Fawad nodded.



Marie slipped the now complete papers into a plastic folder inside her backpack and pulled her cell phone back out to call Dave. She scrolled through the contacts, selected Dave, and pushed the call button. "Hey. It's me, Marie."

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah. We got all the approvals."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. All the stamps and signatures required. Everything's set."

"How did you do that? I mean, it usually takes me several days."

"It's easier for a woman, especially one who speaks Dari," she said lightly. They'd been over this before. Only this time the evidence was on her side.

Dave didn't agree, but then he'd never been a foreign woman in Afghanistan. Marie knew that the Afghan men in their offices didn't see her the way they saw men. She wasn't competition. Instead, she was their guest: helpless and vulnerable, a woman who needed their guidance and protection. That was a role they could understand.

"Well. Congratulations," Dave said.

Marie thought she heard disappointment in Dave's voice. Originally, he had wanted to send his translator alone to get the approvals. Marie had argued, as she so often did when her understanding clashed with his. In this situation, she was sure she could get the approvals herself. Dave hadn't agreed with her, but in the end he consented to let her go if she took Fawad with her. She had agreed to the compromise.

Marie thanked Dave, even though he didn't sound sincere. Their relationship was a delicate balance on both sides. As NGO director, Dave was responsible for Marie's safety—a responsibility he took seriously enough to limit her movements when he thought it best. For her part, Marie recognized his authority but often chafed at his decision-making process. She had her own perspective on what was safe and appropriate and enough experience in-country to voice her opinions. This time, she'd been proven right. Still, she knew better than to rub it in.

She stood beside the hallway desk, cell phone in hand, and looked up at Fawad. His eyes were averted. She bit down hard, pressed her lips, and turned her face away.

"Where to now?" Dave asked, clearing the air.

"I'm going back to the guesthouse."

"Good. Be careful. Text me when you get there, okay?"

"Yep. I always do. When are you arriving?"

"We're on the runway. Plane's on its way. Should be in Kabul in an hour, guesthouse in two."

"Okay. Thanks."

Marie called Carolyn next.

"Hey Marie." Carolyn's voice was weary, but lighter, more measured.

"How you doing?"

"I'm okay. Chad and Casey got here about half an hour ago, so I've got company."

"Who are they?"

"New couple from Texas. Just arrived. They're going to live here in the guesthouse until they can set up their own home."

"Our guesthouse?"

"Yeah. Dave didn't tell you?"

Marie shrugged. She didn't have the energy for the naïveté, enthusiasm, and endless questions of those at the beginning of their Afghan journey. Still, they had arrived, and she would have to engage with them. "Well, good. I'm glad you're not alone."

“Yeah, and they have a little boy. Simon. He’s adorable!”

“You know Dave and Margaret are on their way, right?”

“Where?”

“Kabul. The guesthouse.”

“Now?”

“Yeah. They should be there in a couple hours.”

“Why?”

Marie shrugged. “Meetings. You know.”

“Does Dave think this could affect us in Shehktan?”

“Maybe. He’s looking into it.” Marie changed the subject. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re not alone. How old’s the boy?”

“He’s two and a half, and into everything. I found some wooden puzzles, and we’re playing with them.”

“Do they know?”

“Yeah. Their coworkers met them at the airport. Told them on the way.”

Marie looked over at Fawad. The man was staring through the wood framed glass door toward the enclosed garden beyond. “I’m glad you didn’t have to tell them.”

“Yeah, me too.” Carolyn slipped into sarcasm. “Welcome to Kabul. We’re on lockdown. One of our own has been killed on the street, but don’t worry. You’ll be safe here.”

Marie sighed. “We’re completely safe until the moment we’re not.” *The problem is*, she thought, *sometimes you don’t recognize the moment until it’s too late*. “Listen, I’m leaving downtown. I should be back there in about forty minutes.”

“Be safe.”

“Will do. See ya.”

She didn’t tell Carolyn that she was planning to stop at the Internet café before she went back to the guesthouse. Marie knew her friend would argue and so would Fawad. She didn’t want to debate it. There was no Internet at the guesthouse and she wanted to connect with her

friends and family back in America. She knew they would panic when they woke up and read the news.

Marie checked her clothes, made sure her brown and gold scarf was draped properly around her head and shoulders. She didn't want to be fidgeting with her stuff when she needed to pay attention to the Afghan street.

Fawad pushed the double doors of the building open, stepped out onto a concrete patio, and walked down a short flight of steps and onto a concrete walkway lined with red rosebushes. Marie followed. They walked to a guardhouse where three Kalashnikov-wielding uniformed men waited with a notebook that contained their names and signatures. Marie nodded at the guards, looked at their guns, and felt a sharp twist of tension. She turned away and left Fawad to sign the book and chat with the men.

She stepped toward a dark shipping container, just to the right of the gate. She pulled the cloth curtain aside, leaned in, and called into the darkness. "*Salaam alaikum*, Missus. Peace be upon you."

A middle-aged woman called back, "Walaykum salaam, my friend." She was wearing an orange-and-yellow headscarf, brown jacket and matching skirt, with black lightweight trousers beneath. She stepped up to Marie, clasped her hands, and kissed both her cheeks. "Are you leaving?"

"Yes, our work is finished. We must leave now. Say hello to your family for me."

"Yes, yes. Come to my house. What kind of food do you like? I will make you lunch."

Marie laughed. She'd only met the woman in the morning when she'd stepped inside the booth to be searched. They had laughed and teased each other. Now, they acted like old friends. "I'll visit you when I come back to Kabul."

The woman smiled broadly. "Come. We will drink tea and share stories."

Marie released the woman's hands and leaned back into the sunlight.

She offered a common good-bye. “*Pahno ba khuda*. Hide in God.”

The woman responded. “*Khuda hafez*. Be safe in God.”



Marie turned, glanced at Fawad, nodded, and waited for him to open the gate to the Kabul street. The two stepped through and let the gate close behind them. Instantly, the muscles in Marie’s hips and around her knees pulled tight. She drew a deep breath into her abdomen and took the measure of the street. Two dark Toyotas were parked in front of a wall. Four men walked from the left, toward them. They weren’t together. Three wore ill-fitting counterfeit suits and pointy-toed shoes. The fourth wore a neatly pressed khaki shalvar kameez, with a black suit jacket over the knee-length shirt. He carried a black faux-leather computer bag in his hand. Marie studied the bag. *A laptop?* To the right, another half dozen men, similarly dressed and equally alone, dotted the sidewalk. She focused her breath. *Inhale, exhale.*

Across the street, two bearded men in suits walked toward the gate of a different government office. The men stopped to purchase a newspaper from a boy-vendor. In the distance, several other men walked toward the white-and-blue barricade that blocked the entrance into the street. Six Afghan police officers in dark gray uniforms with guns holstered stood around the barricade.

Marie breathed easily. The scene was normal. All was well. She followed Fawad toward the barricade. “I’ll take a taxi back to Cart’e Seh.”

Fawad nodded, then lowered his head slightly. “We should hire a driver for you. You shouldn’t take a regular taxi.”

Marie shrugged, her stomach twisting at his advice.

Beyond the barricade, the Kabul street was thick with bright yellow taxis. All private vehicles, used Toyota Corollas, or old Russian sedans, each one owned by a single family. There was no radio network linking

the taxis, no central dispatch, just fathers and brothers driving the streets, picking up passengers, and dropping them at their destinations. To most, Marie was a guest, a woman to be protected and delivered safely.

Of course, Marie knew kidnapping was always a very real threat, even in Kabul, but it usually wasn't random. She'd been to the security trainings. She'd paid attention. Usually, when they take you, it's because they've watched you, tracked your movements, paid your staff for information, and grabbed you. It's not because you were walking down a Kabul street or riding in a random taxi.

In Kabul, the taxi drivers were all just normal men. Some had been schoolteachers, some soldiers, some government officials. Others were simply returnees from Pakistan or Iran. They'd borrowed money from every family member they could tap to purchase their vehicle. They worked hard to pay off the debt and support their families. Virtually all the drivers she'd met had children, most of them in school. They might wake up in the middle of the night wondering how they could get more cash, but they weren't connected to the violent factions intent on destabilizing the country. They were just men trying to earn a living on the traffic-choked streets of Kabul. Marie reasoned her way back to confidence. *I can trust them.*

Professional drivers were different. They were connected and accustomed to making a lot of money off foreigners. They could easily sell her to the highest bidder. Those men, Marie didn't trust. Still, she thanked Fawad for his advice.

Marie waited on the corner while Fawad waded into traffic. She looked down, and then behind her at a row of street vendors, mostly boys, surrounded by their newspapers and posters of military and religious heroes. The boys watched her silently, their eyes giving nothing away.

Marie stood still, her knees and hips locked.

Men and women, walking down the street, stepped around her. She tried not to watch them, pretending an ease she didn't feel. It