

The Iranian Scorpion

Chapter 1 Vizier Ashraf

“So, I remind you of your father’s girlfriend?” Kate inquired with one eyebrow arched provocatively.

Robert was clearly enjoying this conversation. He leaned towards her, his hands clasped around the Gordon’s martini which rested on the hotel’s grey granite bar.

“Yes, you do.” He watched her with a not-yet-predatory interest.

She, too, smiled, indicating her willingness to play the game. “In what way do I remind you of your father’s girlfriend?”

“Well . . .” he glanced briefly at the open button on her khaki shirt, then, he studied his martini. “Mary Jo is very good looking . . . and she has a rather nice figure . . . and she is a clever, out-going girl.”

“Girl?” Kate raised that eyebrow again, but this time it expressed scepticism. “If she’s your father’s girlfriend, wouldn’t the word ‘woman’ be more appropriate?”

“No. She’s my age.”

Kate sat back on her tall chair. “And how old would that be? – give or take a few years.”

“In my case it would be thirty-two; in Mary Jo’s, about thirty-four.”

Kate chuckled and took a sip of her white wine. “So the old man likes young skirt.”

He stirred the martini with his forefinger. “Yeah.” There was a note of sourness in his response.

She considered him for a moment: brown hair with sun streaks, dark eyebrows, hazel eyes, mouth that turned up – just right – at the corners; not exactly a Leonardo DiCaprio, but OK. She rubbed her forefinger around the rim of her wine glass, and shrugged. “Well, that’s all right. Some women like younger men.”

“Do they?” He studied her face: framed by straight, shoulder-length, coal-black hair, large dark eyes, and full, glossy lips. There were creases in the corners of her eyes, but they only contributed to her attractive maturity. “Any one you know?” He posed the question off-handedly.

She thought for a moment. “Yeah. I know a few.”

“Good,” he said, as if that settled the matter. “My name is Robert Duval.” He put out his right hand.

She took it. “Mine is Kate Conway, and what brings you to Kabul, Robert? Or do you prefer Rob?”

He considered this. “Depends on one’s perspective. If I’m the older man, it’s Robert. If I’m a bit younger, it’s Rob.”

She laughed. “OK, Rob, and the answer to my other question is?”

He pursed his lips and looked her in the eyes. “I’m on an assignment for the US DEA – Drug Enforcement Agency.”

She shook her head. “What boss did you piss off to get that assignment?”

“Actually, I asked to be reassigned. I’ve spent seven years on the Rio Grande, and the last two in Laredo, trying to stop the deluge of cocaine, methamphetamines, and the rest of it from crossing the border. Pardon my French, but it’s just fucking hopeless, and I’ve seen too many of my colleagues killed by the cartels. I mean, they didn’t always get shot. Some of them were beheaded.”

“Awful!” She was listening attentively.

“To be honest, Kate, I didn’t ask for Afghanistan. . . . But . . . when it was suggested, I thought, ‘well, we have a military presence in country and there doesn’t seem to be the mindless savagery which defines the Mexican drug trade.’”

“It’s a big business in Afghanistan, Rob. Over eighty percent of the world’s opium is produced here, and most of that is converted to heroin.”

Robert considered her. “How do you know that?”

She looked around the hotel bar. “This has been my home for the last two years.”

“What do you do, Kate?”

She smiled. “I’m a freelance journalist. I’m after stories that will get people talking – and thinking. Being on my own, I rarely do television work – I don’t have a cameraman, but sometimes I’m asked to comment for a network on a particular event. Mostly, I release copywrite stories to the print media.”

“Two years in Afghanistan. You don’t get to spend much time with your husband.”

“Don’t have one. I tried it a couple of times – it’s not for me. Like I say: I’m freelance.”

Robert nodded appreciatively.

She said, “I could ask you the same question.”

“Never tried it. I rather like my freedom.”

“Well, we agree on that. Tell me – if it’s not classified information – what is your remit from the bosses at the DEA?”

“That’s a good question. It’s pretty vague, really – focused on strategy – no hard man stuff. The DEA has concluded that if the US to try to impose sanctions on the growing of poppies it just won’t work. For the million plus Afghans engaged one way or another in the opium/heroin trade it would mean going back to subsistence farming, and their income would be cut by at least two thirds. If there are going to be sanctions, they’ve got to be imposed by the Afghan government.”

She shook her head. “Far chance of that! The Karzai government would attempt it only on the basis of a huge international bribe. They see poppy spraying as an act of political suicide.”

“OK, but the Taliban did it successfully.”

“Sure, but they didn’t have to worry about being re-elected.” Her finger circled the rim of her glass again; this time it produced a discordant whine. “So telling the Afghans to plant wheat instead of poppies isn’t an option. What might the other options be?”

“There’s got to be interdiction of the routes of supply out of Afghanistan: particularly the routes that supply the US.”

“You probably already know this, but there are three principal routes out of the country.”

He gave her an abrupt smile. “How come you’re so knowledgeable on this subject?”

“I wrote an article for the Chicago Tribune last year. Involved quite a lot of research.”

Robert looked at her thoughtfully. “Kate, would you be willing to share sources?”

She considered this sceptically. “Look, Rob, I’ve been here for two years; you’re just getting started. I have to keep my sources sweet, and it won’t do to read them their rights and then interrogate them.”

“Point taken. But I’m not a one trick pony. Depends on the situation. Sometimes I’m the curious novelist: ‘tell me about yourself, Mr. Drugs Baron’, and sometimes I jump over the fence: ‘Look, let’s not cut each other up here. You take this piece of the territory and I’ll take that bit. And if I hear that there’s a bust coming in your area, I’ll let you know.’”

Kate was amused. “So you sometimes wear a sombrero, look pretty gritty and speak Spanish.”

“No. None of my contacts spoke proper Spanish; they spoke drug cartel Mexican – a completely different language.”

“You’ll have to learn drug runner Pashto.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’m pretty good with languages and I just finished a two-month, total immersion course in Quetta.”

“I’m impressed,” she said, “but how conversant are you with the drugs trade in Afghanistan?”

“I have been well briefed. We believe that forty percent of the exports go to or through Iran, fifty percent through Pakistan and ten percent through the former Soviet Union.”

She regarded him with new deference. “Very good. How are you at dialects?”

“They’re not really a problem for me. I can pick up vocabulary very quickly, and each dialect seems to have its own musical register. I just tune in. In my experience, the way you present yourself – your dress, body language, facial expressions – are actually more important than what you say.”

She nodded. “Yeah. I know; I’ve seen that data.”

“I’m ready for a refill. How about you?”

“Yes. OK.”

He signalled to the barman, a tall, sharp-featured man, wearing a grey, karakul sheepskin hat, a long dark shirt, and an apron in need of washing.

She sipped her wine. “Maybe,” she suggested, “you’d like to meet one of my contacts. He’s a senior guy in the Taliban.”

“Yes, I would. What does he do?”

“He won’t tell me, but he’s over sixty, so he’s no longer on the front line, though I think he did serve as a mujahideen during the Soviet occupation. Probably he’s a key figure in policy and strategy.”

“Reports to Mullah Omar?”

“Most likely, but he says not.”

“Where is he?”

“In Kandahar – always in the same place, but I don’t know where it is.”

“Use my car and driver?”

“No. I’d rather use mine. Don’t want to introduce too much new stuff. But you can pay for the gas.”

“How shall I present myself – not as another reporter?”

“No. How about as some important functionary from Washington who’s been asked to look at new ways of dealing with the poppy problem.”

Robert nodded. “He should have an interest in that because of their past banning of poppies and their current ten percent cut of raw opium production. I’ll look in my business card file for a likely persona.”

* * *

It was in the spring of the previous year that Robert had first met Mary Jo. It was on a Saturday that Robert, who was in Washington on DEA business, had been invited by his father, David, for lunch at his favourite restaurant, 1789, in Georgetown. David had made no mention of the reason for the lunch when he had called to ask, “Say, are you free for lunch on Saturday?” Naturally suspicious, especially when it came to his father, Robert had wondered what was on the agenda.

¹ This font is used whenever the language used is Pashto or Farsi

So, Robert was early arriving at 1789, and he took a seat at the long bar in F Scott's room, positioned so that he could spot his father's entrance. Just after he had taken the first taste of the Plymouth gin martini, his father arrived. He was standing in the entrance to the room, tall, erect, commanding, and wearing a beige linen suit, open shirt and no tie. No uniform of the Army full colonel today. He surveyed the room, and, on spotting Robert, he gave a kind of salute, and his tanned, creased face broke into a smile. He turned slightly, captured the arm of the woman slightly behind him, and marched with her to where Robert sat, bemused.

"Robert, I'd like you to meet Mary Jo Mignot. Mary Jo, this is my son Robert."

Robert rose from his seat, and offered the tentative, but curious lady his hand. Her large hazel eyes took him in, and her mouth opened to say, "Pleased to meet you, Robert. Have you been waiting long?"

Her posture, standing close to his father, and the proprietary tone in which she had been introduced, defined for Robert the nature of their relationship: intimate.

OK, he thought irritably, so, the purpose of this lunch is to meet my new step mother, who actually looks more like a damn good-looking step sister. Her hand felt warm, and firmer than he expected. "Glad to meet you, Mary Jo. No, I just got here ten minutes ago."

David announced, "We have a table in the Carroll Room." He gestured to the barman to put Robert's drink on his bill, then he turned and steered Mary Jo toward the dining room. When they were seated amid the white cloth and walnut colonial splendour of the Carroll Room, David placed his folded hands on the table cloth in front of him, and considered his son, sitting opposite him. Mary Jo, seated on David's right, turned slightly toward the older man.

She doesn't know what he's going to say! Robert thought. *Well, for that matter, neither do I!*

"Robert, I thought this would be a good opportunity for you to meet Mary Jo," David began. "We met several months ago. She works for Barnegat Services, which is a contractor for the DIA (Defence Intelligence Agency). We met in connection with a project I was working on." There was a slight edge in David's voice: a recognition, perhaps, that his son might not entirely welcome what he had to say. Robert continued to look expectantly at his father who paused, briefly, then plunged on.

"Mary Jo and I have been going out for some time now . . . and . . . we're what one might call an 'item'."

Robert was unable to contain his amusement. "Oh, I see!" he said.

Mary Jo sat back in her chair. She regarded David with smiling scepticism. "What, exactly, is an 'item', David dear?" she asked.

David shrugged, "Well, you know, it's a warm and close relationship, sweetheart."

Mary Jo acknowledged this explanation with a knowing nod and a smile. "I thought it might be more like a news item."

Oh my! She's a handful! Robert thought *and not just physically!* He surveyed Mary Jo with new interest, taking in the neatly ironed blue shirt, the gold necklace, smooth pale skin at her neck, the hint of décolletage, and the emerald ring on her right hand.

"What do you do at Barnegat, Mary Jo?" he asked.

She turned to face him, her gaze now confident. "Oh, I read a lot of stuff, and write reports."

Robert was annoyed. "Topics?" he asked curtly.

"Maybe the best way to explain Mary Jo's work," David interposed, "is to explain that she used to work at Sandia National Labs – in the nuclear weapons area."

Robert looked at her, slowly shaking his head. "But . . ."

“But what?” she asked.

“You don’t look like a nukie.”

There was a soft chuckle from Mary Jo. “And what does a ‘nukie’ look like?”

“They would be mid-fifties, balding, long white coat, bushy eyebrows, evasive eyes and a thin, reedy voice.”

Mary Jo laughed aloud and shrugged.

“How did you get to Albuquerque?” Robert persisted.

“I graduated from Berkeley with a degree in nuclear physics, then spent four years in the air force learning the practicalities.”

“Where are you from originally, Mary Jo?”

“San Diego.”

Memories of San Diego flashed back, and he asked suddenly: “Did you ever play over-the-line?”

“Yeah. We used to play in the tournament on Fiesta Island.”

“What was the name of your team?”

She shook her head, looking slightly embarrassed. “It’s too dirty.”

David held up a hand to stop the conversation. “What are you two talking about?”

“Dad, over-the-line is a beach bat and ball game – like softball, but simpler. It’s played in San Diego where it’s famous. Thousands of people turn up to ogle the girls in tiny bikinis competing in teams with the sexually explicit names.”

David frowned. “How do you know about it?”

“I was stationed in San Diego – remember? In July, everybody went to Fiesta Island to drink beer, watch the girls, and try to hook up with one. Not as good a spectator sport as beach volleyball, but the atmosphere is a lot raunchier with all the beer and testosterone.”

An uncertain David looked from Mary Jo to Robert and back again. “And you used to play in those . . . tournaments?”

Mary Jo lifted her chin. “Yes. All my friends did. We didn’t win any prizes and we didn’t participate in the after hours stuff.”

“But you were on a team with a dirty name.”

“Sure.” There was a defensive edge in her voice. “If you didn’t have an interesting name, nobody would come to watch you. Anyway, it was a long time ago.”

Robert suddenly decided that he liked Mary Jo; he decided to rescue her. “What brought you to Washington?”

She shrugged. “Oh, I had some relationship problems in Albuquerque, and I needed a change of scene. I was head hunted by Barnegat. It was a good offer. I decided to go for it.”

“Been here long?”

“About four months. I like Washington. It has class, and it’s where the action is.”

I wonder what ‘action’ Mary Jo is looking for, Robert wondered. Marriage? Money? Sex? All three?

The lunch began to unfold for Robert, pleasantly at first. He was encouraged to talk about his work at the DEA; he sensed his father’s pride and Mary Jo’s genuine interest. “Where were you before the DEA?” she asked.

“In college,” Robert said, “It’s kind of a long story.” He smoothed a crease in the table cloth in front of him.

Mary Jo glanced at David who was waiting for his son to continue.

“I’m listening,” she prompted.

“I started out at U Va . . . but I didn’t make it through my freshman year.” He continued to smooth the non-existent crease. “I did a little too much partying and not enough studying . . . so . . . “

“That was U Va,” Mary Jo finished the sentence. “And then?”

“For a while I took various night courses at the University of Maryland, and I had a part time job at an internet café. Made a little money trading stuff on EBay.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Anything that could be part of a collection. Old china, tin soldiers, model railroad cars. I’d buy things at local auctions, then list them on EBay. It was just moving the items from a small market to a very big market.”

“But you weren’t sure about the market for Robert,” she suggested.

“Yeah.”

David said quietly, “It was a tough time for you, Robert. Your mom and I were splitting and you were caught in the middle.”

“It wasn’t just being in the middle. It was all the acrimony.” There was bitterness in his voice.

David said nothing; he looked at Mary Jo, who sensed it was her turn for a lifeline.

“Well, you have a good job at DEA. Where did you get your degree?”

“From Maryland. It took me five years- the last two were full time – a got a degree in sociology. Then I took two more years to get a master’s degree.”

Mary Jo considered him thoughtfully. “Sounds like something motivated you.”

He nodded slowly. “It was Annette.”

Mary Jo looked toward David, who only pursed his lips slightly.

“What happened to Annette?” she asked.

Robert made eye contact with her. “She went back to Colorado.”

Two months later on Memorial Day, Mary Jo had a barbecue at her condominium, near the Chevy Chase Country Club. Actually, the six owners of the condo – who all seemed to be young professionals without children – put on a communal barbecue. Robert was pleased, but surprised, to be invited by an email which said.

If you’re in Washington for Memorial Day, I hope you can come to my barbecue, starting at 6 – Mary Jo, 3B Cedar Parkway, Chevy Chase.

He hadn’t planned to leave Texas that weekend, but he thought, *I’d like to see that nukie, over-the-line girl in her own environment. I wonder how she and the old man are getting on.*

When he arrived, the only people he knew were his hostess and his father. But there were about fifty people – mostly twenty-five to forty-five – and half a dozen kids, all gathered around the heated pool, Jacuzzi, hot tub and three Weber grills. Mary Jo greeted him with a kiss on the cheek and a squeeze of the hand. Having introduced him to some of her guests, she pointed him toward the bar, where – wonder of wonders – he found unattended Plymouth gin. There was Schweppes tonic water, of course, but there was also dry vermouth and a small dish of lemon peels. He opted for a martini (*first drink only*) and went to speak to his father.

David was holding forth with two older, attentive men on the subject of dealing with the Somali pirates. Robert, having introduced himself, listened thoughtfully, as opinions were expressed and refined, until, the subject exhausted, the men wandered off.

“Glad to see you, Robert. How are things on the Rio Grande?”

“Same as always, Dad. It’s a damn nightmare. I’m thinking of applying for a new posting.”

"Where would that be?"

"Could be almost anywhere."

"Let's hope not Columbia."

Robert shook his head. "I don't think so." He looked around the colourfully-dressed, chattering patio. Smoke was beginning to rise from one of the grills. "Looks like a good party. Very nice of Mary Jo to invite me."

"Oh, I think you hit it off well with her."

They strolled over to where she was talking with a small group of friends. As they approached, she broke away. "Hi, guys. Where are your drinks?"

"I'll get myself another beer," David replied, "then I'll have to leave after dinner, sweetheart."

She put an arm around his waist, and looked up at him. "Why so soon? The party will just be getting started then."

"Unfortunately, I've been conned into participating in a panel discussion at West Point tomorrow morning at 8:30 am. I've got a seat on tonight's nine o'clock metro liner."

Mary Jo was right. The party was just getting started as darkness arrived. The conversational noise level increased, the fires went out in the grills, and the gin and tonics became more popular. Many of the guests began to appear in bathing suits; there was boisterous foolishness from the pool. Robert spotted Mary Jo across the patio. She was wearing a rather immodest, red bikini. The wet fabric clung to her. *My God! Is she built! The lucky old bastard!*

More by instinct than design, he approached her, drink in hand. "You look terrific!"

"Thank you. Did I not mention that you should bring a swim suit?"

"No, but it's OK; I'm having a good time."

Her eyes searched the crowd. "Hey, Andy," she called, "Have you got an extra swim suit that Robert can borrow? He's about your size."

"Yes, sure. Be right back."

"You can change in my place. It's there," she said, pointing, "The door's open, and the bedroom's at the end of the hall."

Swim suit in hand, Robert paused in the living room: white walls, white gauze curtains over the large windows that looked toward the country club, and a very large replica of a Bukhara carpet. What caught his attention, though, were the bookshelves: they covered one entire wall. Stepping closer, he scanned the titles, which appeared to be organised by subject matter: political commentary here, scientific titles there, stacks of technical journals, three or four rows of novels, and a section on psychology and sociology. *I wonder if she reads all this stuff.*

He moved on to the bedroom: white, with touches of blue and dark red. This room had a Heriz carpet. The king-sized bed and its pillows were covered with a blue India print spread. *Nothing fluffy or girlie about this room*, he thought. On a bedside table were two books topped with a copy of the *Journal of Nuclear Physics*. He picked up the journal and riffled the pages. One article on centrifuge technology was marked with yellow highlighting.

Still dripping from his immersion in the pool, Robert collected another gin and tonic, and looked for Mary Jo. "I'm afraid," he said, looking down at himself, that Andy is a size or two smaller than I am."

She eyed him briefly. "You look fine. Come sit over here. Let's finish the conversation we started when we first met." She sat next to him on the cushioned, wrought iron bench, setting her gin and tonic on the flagstone beside her. "I want to

hear more about the time when your parents split up, because I went through something similar when I was fourteen.”

In spite of his temptation to glance furtively at her bikini top, Robert found letting his eyes wander over her lovely face very pleasing. Her large, dark eyes and mobile lips seemed to reflect his feelings. “Well, as I said, it wasn’t so much being in the middle between them. . . . I guess it’s rare not to be in the middle. What made it so difficult was all the hostility.”

”What was that all about? It sounds like you were living in a war zone.”

”Exactly. Mom accused Dad of adultery with some one he met while he was away from home. Dad denied it. She said she had evidence. He said that was garbage, and he accused her of being a frigid shrew. It went on and on, with each round getting more personal and savage.”

She sipped her drink. ”Couldn’t you get away from it?”

”You may have noticed that Dad can get pretty loud, particularly in command and control mode, and when Mother’s angry, she not only gets loud, but her voice rises about an octave. When they were at home and awake, they were at each other’s throats until Mother finally moved out.”

”When was that?”

”It was toward the end of my first year at U Va. Unfortunately, it didn’t end there. Whenever I was with Mom, I’d hear – incessantly – what a bastard my father was. And vice-versa.”

”Did you have to choose which side?”

”When I came home from U Va, Dad was impossible to live with. He was angry at Mother, at me for having flunked out, and probably with himself. I tried to stay with Mother in the small apartment she had on Fifth Street South East . . . “

Mary Jo interrupted, ”That’s not a very nice area.”

”I know. I couldn’t stay there very long. Mother was also difficult to live with. So I got a job and moved in with some friends.”

”When did they finally get a divorce?”

”It must have been five or six years after they split, and in the meantime, Dad was always late with his support payments, so I was living hand to mouth, while he was living in that big house.”

”Do you trust your Dad now, Robert?”

He paused to think. ”I guess it depends on what the issue is. On money, probably not. I think he’s sorry for the way he behaved: he hasn’t said so, but he’s hinted at it. I think he loves me – in his awkward way.” He studied her face for a moment. ”Look, Mary Jo, I don’t want to foul up your relationship with Dad.”

She shook her head. ”Nothing you’ve said really surprises me, and I certainly wouldn’t use what you’ve said.” She grinned. ”Tell me about Annette.”

A faint smile played on his face. ”I met her at Maryland. She was really smart – studying psychology – and very sweet. Not particularly pretty. She had wonderful dark brown hair that came down . . . to her bottom. And I remember . . . “ He paused.

”Go on.”

He shrugged. ”We couldn’t get enough of each other. It was glorious. She made me feel special – as if I could climb any mountain.“

”Why did she go back to Colorado?”

His mouth turned down in the corner as he considered her question. ”It was a combination of things. She knew my parents didn’t approve of her and would always be a problem for her. They thought she was ‘ordinary’. I thought she was anything

but. She wanted to go back to Colorado, and she knew I didn't like the idea. She wanted to get married, and I wasn't ready. So . . . "

"What's happened to her since?"

"According to the alumni bulletin, she married a doctor, and is a practicing psychologist with four kids."

"Do you miss her?"

He smiled. "Yeah. Sometimes I do." He looked at her empty glass. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes, please."

When he had resumed his seat next to her, he asked, "You said you had something similar at the age of fourteen. What happened?"

Forlornly, she contemplated the bubbles in her drink. "I was an army brat. We moved around a lot. My mom started drinking; my dad started fooling around. My two older brothers had joined the Marines and were overseas, so I was at home, at a new base, with a mom who was wrapped up in her own world of booze and grief, and an absent father. I remember thinking, 'will somebody ever give me a hug?' I was homely, with braces, very few friends, awkward socially and physically, and feeling pretty miserable in the midst of puberty."

"You were homely and awkward? I don't believe it!"

She smiled at the recollection. "Yes, I really was. You want to see the pictures?"

"Yes, but not now. What brought about the transformation?"

She took a long sip of her drink. "My mother died, and my father persuaded his sister in San Diego to take me on." She looked wistfully into the distance. "I remember being very worried about what this aunt, whom I barely knew, would think of me. I'm sure I radiated insecure apprehension when I was standing in front of her. She was rather stout, in a sort of faded house coat, with a puffy face, big eye brows and brown, lace-up shoes. She took one look at me, and she said, 'Mary Jo, you and your Aunt Barbara are going to get on just fine!' Next thing I knew, she had me wrapped up in her arms, and I was crying."

"So you stayed with her right through high school?"

"Until I went away to Berkeley. She's an amazing woman. I still talk to her about once a week." Mary Jo sipped her drink. "She was tough, but she would listen, and I remember thinking, 'I believe Aunt Barbara would love me even if I did something stupid'."

"She had no children of her own?"

"No. Her husband died in an automobile accident, and she never re-married."

Robert nodded. "What I really want to know is: how did an awkward fourteen-year-old get to compete in the over-the-line tournament?"

Mary Jo shrugged, "Well, there were some things that I didn't let Aunt Barbara know about."

"I'm sure. But what I meant is: the transformation from awkward fourteen-year-old to eighteen-year-old, over-the-line star?"

She chuckled. "I wasn't really a star, but I was a pretty good pitcher. I don't know. In high school, I started playing tennis and basketball. I discovered I wasn't completely un-co-ordinated. Some of my friends asked me to come to the beach on weekends to play over-the-line, and I really enjoyed it."

"I'm ready for a refill. How about you?"

"Yeah, OK."

When he returned, he asked, "Do I get to ask one more question?"

She took a long swig of her drink. "Sure."

“You said you had a relationship problem back in Albuquerque.”

She sighed heavily. “Oh, God!”

“Scratch the question.”

“No, it’s OK. Sometimes it’s better to talk about things. . . . There was an older guy I met out there. He was separated from his wife – not yet divorced. He was an executive at Sandia – very important guy. He paid a lot of attention to me, and I was kind of dizzy being taken out to all the best restaurants. He’d take me skiing and to Acapulco. It was great, and I thought, ‘this is it!’”

She toyed with her glass; then, she looked at Robert. “I got pregnant.”

In the awkwardness, she sipped her drink again.

“At first, I thought, ‘this is OK. We’ll get married’, but . . . we started to argue . . . about little things – not the real issue. . . . He became distant, uncommunicative. I began to worry that people would figure out that I wasn’t just gaining weight.”

She leaned against Robert.

“I finally said to him, ‘are we getting married?’ . . . We had a terrible row. It turned out that he had misled me: he hadn’t filed for divorce, and that he knew his wife would contest it. His divorce was at least a year away. I said, ‘I’m not having your baby while you’re still married!’ He mumbled something about my problem. I just lost it. I said, ‘tomorrow morning I will be waiting to see the chairman of Sandia.’” She took a pull on her drink.

Robert asked softly, “Did you see the chairman?”

“No. He paid for the abortion, and I left Albuquerque.” She looked at him forlornly.

“I’ve told your dad all this.”

He nodded, unable to bring himself to ask about his father’s reaction. Instead, he hugged her, rocking gently.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

He paused, searching for words, “I think Dad’s awfully lucky.”

Her voice was slightly slurred. “Why do you think that?”

“Because you’re absolutely real, and it’s impossible not to like you a lot.”

Gently, she stroked his cheek. Her lips brushed his – for a moment, then longer.

Suddenly she said, “I gotta pee.” She stood, looked around her, and moved erratically toward her apartment.

Robert stood, looking after her. Then he sat down again, feeling the conflict surge back and forth within him: *Oh God! Just another kiss! (Though he knew he wanted more of her.) No, you can’t. . . . But she’s had too much to drink. What if she falls and hurts herself?*

He stood and followed her. She was not in the living room . . . or the kitchen. . . . She was not in the bedroom. The bathroom door opened.

She stood, swaying slightly, in the doorway, trying to tie the bikini bow at her hip. It was difficult.

He said, “Let me help.”

She looked at him, smiled wistfully and shrugged. He overcame an impulse, and tied her bow. “There,” he said. He took her shoulders, drew her to him and kissed her. Her mouth opened. She made sounds deep in her throat, as she pressed against him. The bow at the centre of her back yielded. He moved slightly so as to gently rub her nipple. Her arms around his neck, she was growling softly into his mouth. His hand found the other bow at her hip, the bikini fell away, and his fingers found her.

Suddenly, her pelvis retreated. “No, Rob, no,” she moaned. She pushed him away, and looked at him unsteadily. “No, Rob, we can’t.”

Trembling with desire and frustration, he pleaded “I want you so much, Mary Jo!” She reached for the ends of her bikini bottom, to cover herself. “I do, too, Rob.” She glanced at the front of his swim suit. “But, . . . you know we can’t. . . . We just can’t!” Her words reverberated in his head: “We can’t!” *Not now*, he thought, *but maybe . . . some other time . . . maybe some other time.*

* * *

Kate was waiting in the lobby of the Safi Landmark Hotel near the heavy glass security barrier, where four Afghan soldiers – two inside the hotel and two outside – were watching every movement in the street outside. She was wearing sand camouflage fatigues, and laced leather boots. Beside her, on the quarry tiled floor was a brown canvas satchel. She considered Robert as he approached her from the far side of the lobby. He, too, was wearing fatigues, and he had a large green knapsack slung over one shoulder. His floppy canvas hat and dark cowboy boots seemed somehow out of place.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“You got a vest?”

“Yeah. It’s in here.” He gestured at the knapsack.

“A helmet?”

“No. Do I really need one?”

“Maybe not today, but you ought to get one and keep it with you.”

“OK.”

“Let’s go.”

When they had passed through the security barrier, Kate handed each of the two soldiers a dollar bill. “*For your wife.*” They grinned and offered slight bows.

“Is that expected?” Robert asked.

“No. I just do it so they take a more personal interest in the people they’re risking their lives for.”

A dusty, black Toyota five door RAV4 suddenly appeared. The driver, an energetic young man wearing a Yankees baseball cap, a long black shirt and faded jeans, leapt out, and opened one of the rear doors for Kate. “Yes, ma’am!” He put her satchel on the seat next to him, and gestured for Robert seat himself in the back.

“*Nadim, have we got a full tank of gas?*”

“*Yes, ma’am.*”

She leaned back in her seat and turned her attention to Robert. “We have a five hour drive to Kandahar, crossing through at least two check points. Sometimes the Afghans will add a check point or two.”

“The Taliban – do they create check points?”

“Not on major roads like the one we’ll be on. But, yes; on back roads, in the country they’ll do it.”

“Have they ever stopped you?”

“Yes, occasionally.”

“What happens?”

“Well, when we see a Taliban road block, the first thing that happens is that Nadim hands me a niqab, which covers my head and face, except my eyes. I’ll also pull up this black thing (she gestured toward the floor of the car) so it looks like I’m wearing a jilbab. Wearing it caters to their arrogant beliefs about women, and puts them on the defensive: who is this strange woman in transit wearing the complete Islamic veil?”

Robert smiled. "And then?"

"Then they start questioning Nadim, wanting to know his relationship to me. The Taliban don't believe women should leave the house at all. But if it is necessary, they should be accompanied by husband or blood relative."

Robert nodded.

"At that point, I interrupt, and I tell them Nadim is my nephew and that I am on a mission for Vizier Ashraf Ghilzai – the man we're going to see. A vizier, by the way is a high-ranking political officer"

"And they believe you?"

"Not at first. I show them this." She withdrew a carefully folded letter from her breast pocket and showed it to Robert, who studied it. The letter, written in script similar to Arabic, appeared to be a safe conduct pass covering Kate Conway, and signed by Vizier Ashraf Ghilzai.

"So, at that point they let you go?"

"No. They want to know the nature of my mission. I tell them that I have promised Vizier Ashraf to keep my mission secret. If they persist, I ask for their names, and if they object, I'll ask Nadim to make a note of the time and place. Invariably, this makes them uneasy, because they're afraid of being punished for disobeying a high-ranking officer."

"Do they ever ask you to get out of the car?"

"No, that would be a serious breach of Pashtun etiquette."

"So they give you back the letter and let you go?"

"No. They keep the letter and waive me through. Two reasons for keeping it. First, about half of them are illiterate. They know it's important, but they're not sure what it says. And, second, if they're questioned later by senior Taliban, they can produce the letter."

"But the letter you just showed me looks like the original."

"It's not. I keep the original at the hotel. This is a high quality, colour photocopy."

"So much for the technical sophistication of the Taliban. . . . Tell me, Kate, have you any experience with roadside bombs or IED's?" (improvised explosive devices)

She grimaced. "No, thank God! When I first got here, I was given one cardinal rule: never go first! When I'm on foot, I follow in the footsteps of the person who's guiding me, and I always have a local guide. In a car, you're pretty safe as long as you're on the pavement. The trouble is, only the main roads – like this one between Kabul and Kandahar – are paved; other roads are dirt tracks. So my instruction to Nadim is to keep another vehicle that's going the same direction in view, and to try to stay in his tracks."

"How about remotely detonated IED's?"

"The Taliban are trying to kill soldiers. It's very unlikely that a black Toyota is carrying soldiers, and the Taliban are hated for killing more civilians than soldiers with their IED's. No point in making that problem worse."

The A01 road ran west out of Kabul across a level ochre plain, with occasional green plots of orchards. There were collections of one- and two-storey tan brick houses with flat earthen roofs. And on the outskirts of Kabul, there were signs of commerce: small, three-wheeled motorised carts, bicycles, and two-wheeled hand carts, their drivers clad in dark earth tones, and their heads down to the task of movement.

At an elevation of nearly 6,000 feet, it looked dry. In fact, each time they passed a small truck or battered car moving in a side street or along the shoulder of the road, it would raise a cloud of the ochre dust.

"Rob, tell me about your father," Kate asked.

Robert shrugged. "Well, he's just been made a two-star general, and he's very pleased about that."

"Where is he posted?"

He was at the Defence Intelligence Agency doing some kind of spook work. He never told me what he did at DIA, and I couldn't ask. He's going to be moved to the Pentagon – a staff function – something about procurement. I think he's quite disappointed not to get an operational command, though he would never admit it."

"Has he had operational commands in the past?"

"Yes. He had command of a battalion in Iraq – got a Presidential Citation for that. And in the first Gulf war, he had a tank company that broke through the Iraqi lines. Won a silver star for that. In between those two assignments he was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma for six months: nuclear weapons training, and then he was the military attaché to the Vice President.

"He sounds like a proud man."

"He is, but he's not arrogant. He has good reason to be proud of his career. But, sometimes he just doesn't listen, or give the impression that he cares about other people."

"Could it be that some of his behaviour is a cover-up for feelings of uncertainty?"

Robert paused to consider. "Yeah, maybe so. . . . It's just that in command and control mode, he radiates total security."

Kate nodded. "OK, but I think that really secure people come across as being open, rather than remote. What you describe is a person who – at least sometimes – is a bit closed."

"OK, Kate, are you going to analyse me next?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I was. What's your relationship with your father like?"

"We keep each other at arm's length."

"Why do you do that?" she asked, "if you were more accepting of him, he might reciprocate."

There was a long pause while Robert considered this. "I guess I'm afraid. Afraid of his disapproval. Afraid he'll think I'm weak. You know, all during my childhood – and beyond – he was this remote, absent authority figure."

"What do you mean: he was 'absent'?"

"Well, when he was on a combat assignment, we didn't see him for months, and there were a number of postings he took where my mom just wouldn't go with him, so we stayed in Washington."

"Are you a little uncertain, Rob?"

He studied her face, but instead of judgement, he saw only affection. He nodded.

"Perhaps."

"That's OK, kid. You stick with me." And she patted his knee.

At Ghazni, the road crossed the one of the tributaries of the Helmand River, and thereafter the road followed the river valley southwest to Kandahar. The patchwork parcels of cultivated land were green with the new growth of spring, and contrasted with the backdrop of flatlands and low hills in burnt beige and brown. The villages and towns along the way were mostly mud brick, but, here and there were splashes of colour from shop signs and the fruit, vegetables, and clothing on display.

When, at last, they approached the outskirts of Kandahar, Nadim asked: "*Where to, ma'am?*"

“At the main square with the monument in the middle, turn left and follow that road all the way to the bottom, where it intersects with the river. When we get there, I’m to call, and we wait.”

Nadim parked and they waited. A small group of little children, having given up a street game they were playing, stood to one side, watching curiously and patiently. After twenty minutes, a battered black Ford Fiesta pulled up behind them. Two bearded men in black turbans and the long dark shirt and baggy pants of the shalwar kameez got out and sauntered up to the Toyota. They peered inside.

Nadim rolled down his window. *“I have Kate Conway and Robert Duval here.”*

“They come with us. You wait here.”

Kate and Robert got out.

One of the men said, *“One moment please. I take mobile phones. Switch off, please”* They were blindfolded and seated in the back seat of the Fiesta. No one spoke during the quarter of an hour drive. Robert had the impression that the car was not following the most direct route. Kandahar’s streets are laid out in a north-south/east-west grid, but the car followed a torturous route.

“You get out now. Do not touch blindfold.”

They were led into a building, up some stairs, down a short corridor and into a room. Their blindfolds were removed. The room was large, in an industrial building, with naked, white-painted brick walls, and a row of windows high on one wall. There was a grey steel desk and chair below the windows, and six or eight folding metal chairs were scattered in front of it. Against one wall were book shelves onto which were stacked ledgers and manila folders of various types.

“You wait here,” the man ordered, and took a seat by the door. They waited in silence. The door opened and two men came in. One was a tall, spare figure with a manicured grey beard, large, narrow nose and deep-set, dark eyes. *“Ashraf Ghilzai,”* he said, and seated himself behind the desk. The other man stood watchfully behind him.

“Vizier Ashraf, it’s good to see you again,” Kate began.

“We can speak in English. You know is not a problem for me.”

“Yes, I know. And thank you for agreeing to see us. I’d like to introduce Robert Duval, who works for the US Department of Treasury. He is anxious to meet you.” Ashraf Ghilzai turned his attention to Robert, studying him briefly and impassively. Then with a slight sneer, he said, *“You are thinking to impose a tax on Afghans to pay for the war you have brought here?”*

“No. My interest is in opium.”

“You want to buy the crop of opium? I can sell you some.”

“No. I think that the interests of the Taliban and the United States rather coincide on the issue of opium, and we might consider a kind of partnership.”

Ashraf Ghilzai frowned. *“A partnership?”*

“Yes. You prohibited the cultivation of poppies when you were in power, and we, also, would like to see the cultivation of poppies cease.”

Vizier Ashraf considered this. He motioned to the man at the door. *“Bring us some tea.”* Turning his attention back to Robert, he said, *“Our reason for prohibiting the cultivation of poppies is religious: the Qur’an forbids it.”*

“Actually, the Qur’an doesn’t mention opium or any other drug.”

“You are some kind of scholar of Islamic studies?” Ashraf Ghilzai sneered.

"No, but I have read the Qur'an cover to cover."

"Well, if you were a scholar of Islamic studies, you would know that the Prophet Muhammad was asked about other intoxicants, and he said that they are forbidden. Opium is an intoxicant; it is forbidden."

"Muhammad was also concerned about doing harm to one's body." Ashraf Ghilzai nodded. "That is our concern also: that opium and heroin are damaging to the human body."

"What is your proposal, then?"

"The proposal is that, together, we interdict the supply routes. As we choke off the routes to market, we will take away the incentive for the farmers to grow opium poppies."

Vizier Ashraf snorted derisively: "It is much simpler to tell the farmers that the cultivation of poppies is forbidden. Those who do not obey the order are shot."

"Well, that is an option you can pursue, if you win the war, and we will have neither the inclination nor the ability to intervene."

"We will win the war, just as we won the war with the Russians. In Afghanistan, these things take time."

"I think it is more likely that the war will end with a negotiated settlement. The Taliban will have some role in government."

The vizier shrugged. "So we are back to my proposition: shoot the farmers."

Robert shook his head. "Vizier Ashraf, have you not followed what is going on in North Africa and the Middle East: the Arab Spring?"

"This doesn't concern us."

"Oh, yes, it does."

The tea arrived, and was served in old, white glazed mugs, the insides of which were stained light brown by long use.

The vizier was sceptical. "How does the Arab Spring concern us?"

"In the Arab Spring there is one very clear message from the people to the rulers: we want democratic government! There will be a new civil war if the Taliban attempts, once again, to rule Afghanistan with a heavy hand."

Vizier Ashraf gazed into his mug for several moments. "The farmers can be taxed for growing poppies. That's democratic."

"Yes, and they can be given tax incentives for growing wheat or apricots, but we don't think that's enough. We think that at the same time financial pressure is put on farmers, they must face a shrinking market."

"How do you propose to shrink the market?"

"I'm not sure, and this is where I need your help. Perhaps there is something in the refining process, or in the transportation which is vulnerable. Or perhaps couriers can be targeted, and maybe funds can be restricted in some way. Or new sanctions placed on buyers. The point is that I am willing to develop specific proposals if I can get closer to the refining, transportation and payment processes."

Vizier Ashraf considered this for a time. "*You speak Pashto?*" he asked.

"Yes."

"*You are willing to wear a black turban and grow a beard?*"

"Yes, and I'm willing to wear a dirty shalwar kameez."

"*Are you willing to sleep on a rug in a simple Afghan house?*"

"Yes, of course."

"*Are you willing to become a Muslim?*"

"No, that's not necessary."

“Are you willing to pretend that you’re a Muslim?”

“I am willing to abide by the Qur’an.”

“Do you swear that you will not reveal anything you find to your superiors before you report back to me?”

“No, but anything I tell them, I will tell you.”

The vizier looked thoughtfully at Robert for a long moment. *“All right. What is your phone number?”*

“I have an Afghan SIM card: 07012 923116.”

The vizier picked up a pencil and made a note. *“I will get a message to you about a contact who may be useful.”*

“May I contact you on the number which Ms. Conway has?”

“No. If necessary, Ms. Conway can get in contact.”

“Is it possible for you to provide me with a safe conduct pass, as you did for Ms. Conway?”

Kate held up an intervening hand. *“It’s been enormously helpful to me, Vizier Ashraf.”*

The vizier stood, looked briefly at his visitors, and left the room without a further word. Robert was about to get up also, but Kate placed a restraining hand on his arm. *“Sit tight for a while,”* she said.

They sat in silence for a quarter of an hour.

Their earlier escorts entered the room. One of them handed Robert a neatly folded piece of paper.

“Thank you,” Robert said

“You blindfold now,” the man said.

When they arrived back at the cul-de-sac where they had been picked up, their mobile phones were returned to them.

Robert looked out the window as Nadim threaded the Toyota through the slow-moving congestion of the Kandahar main thoroughfare: there were three-wheeled, motorised carts, bicycles and pedestrians everywhere. The stalls on either side of the road were protected by heavy canvas awnings. *It’s business as usual,* he thought, *No hint of a war going on just to the west of here.* Small children ran alongside the car, their voices keening and their hands outstretched in supplication. Kate shook her head, and looked straight ahead. The children gave up.

Robert asked, *“What do you think, Kate?”*

She turned and looked at him. *“I think you did very well. I particularly liked the bit about the Arab Spring. It’s about time the Taliban thought about the implications.”*

“Do you think that Vizier Ashraf is going to send me a contact?”

“Yeah, and I think he also means it when he says you’re going to have to go native. Are you really up for it?”

Robert nodded. *“It’s the only way, and if the natives can do it, I can too.”*

“You’ll be filthy dirty and covered with fleas and lice when you get back to Kabul. I’m going to have to wash you like a little kid.”

“That’ll definitely make it worth while!”

Kate snorted derisively, and looked away. *“What would your bosses think about you seeming to speak for the U S government, and implying that you could negotiate a deal with the Taliban?”*

“They wouldn’t like it. They’d like to think of their agents as puppets on strings, but they would admit that progress is only made when agents – and therefore their bosses – take risks.”

“Do you really think that there is some peculiar aspect of the processes of converting opium to heroin, transporting and selling that makes the processes vulnerable?”

“I rather doubt it, but raising it seemed like a good ploy. And he did buy into the possibility enough to give me a chance to begin some serious research.”

They were travelling northeast on highway A01 as the sun began to set behind the hills to the west. There was little traffic on the road. Most travellers would have completed their trips during daylight. About every five miles, on this stretch of the highway, there would be a small collection of mud brick houses. Small groups of people could be seen cooking their evening meal over charcoal braziers just outside. In between these tiny villages, there was nothing but the darkening landscape, and the occasional stand of evergreens marching down from the foothills to the highway. “*What’s that?*” Kate asked.

Nadim said, “*I think it’s an army truck, ma’am. Afghan army.*”

Looking ahead about three hundred yards, Robert could see the red taillights and the bulky outline of a large lorry. They were closing the gap; the standing figures of helmeted soldiers were discernible now.

“*Keep you distance, Nadim!*” Kate ordered. “*I don’t like this!*”

Nadim slowed to maintain a distance of one hundred and fifty yards. Suddenly the truck braked to a halt. From the right, a small orange fireball streaked toward the truck, passing over it.

“*Oh shit! Back up, Nadim!*”

Nadim slammed the car into reverse, and swerving from side to side in his nervousness to avoid the unpaved shoulder, backed the Toyota up two hundred yards.”

“*OK. Lights off, Nadim!*”

They sat in silence, watching what they could of the fire fight unfolding before them. The Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers had come spilling out of their lorry, and had fanned out to the right. There was the persistent sharp crack of rifle fire, and the loud rattle of a heavy machine gun firing tracers from the truck into the hillside to the right. Orders were shouted. Two more fireballs were fired at the truck. One fell short; the other passed in front. For fifteen minutes more the fighting raged on, but it was impossible to determine who was getting the upper hand.

“*Helicopter coming!*” Nadim announced. They heard the clattering crescendo of its blades, and its dark shape passed well above them. Suddenly, another fireball came streaking down and exploded into the hillside. There was cheering. The machine gun started rattling again. The helicopter swooped back and unleashed a second fireball which exploded with a loud boom. The rifle fire became sporadic, and then it ceased. The helicopter flew away. The soldiers began to reappear by their truck, two or three being supported by their comrades.

One soldier came marching resolutely down the road toward the Toyota. He was followed by two comrades, their rifles at the ready. He stopped by the driver’s side and demanded, “*Papers!*”

Nadim rolled down his window and handed an identity card to the officer. *"I am driver for Kate Conway - American journalist, and Robert Duval - American government official."*

The officer peered into the back seat. *"Papers, please."*

When he had studied the passports, he said, "Please not use road at night. Is dangerous."

As the car moved slowly past the ANA truck, they saw two soldiers dragging a body off the road. They dumped it unceremoniously by the road side.

"Taliban," Kate said.

"They're just going to leave it there? Not going to search it for papers, or take it away for burial?"

Kate shrugged. "I think they only search for papers when they're pretty sure it's a Taliban commander they've killed. He was probably just a poor villager who joined the Taliban for the pay: better than he was making from his apricots. Bad decision. Burial? That's his family's problem. They'll come and collect him tomorrow."

Robert said, "I suppose the money for his pay came from the sale of heroin by the Taliban."

"Yes, I think so, but they have other sources of funding: possibly Iran, wealthy individuals in the Gulf, and – rumour has it – the ISI." (Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency)

"What does Vizier Ashraf have to say about funding?"

She turned to face Robert. "He doesn't. The subject is off limits."

He nodded. "I understand that some elements in the ISI see the Taliban as a potential ally in the event that India tries to raise its influence in Afghanistan. But, why would Shia Iran want to do business with the Sunni Taliban?"

"You're confusing religion with politics, Rob. Iran sees Afghanistan as a great opportunity to twist the tail of the Great Satan." (USA)

Robert sat silent for a time, considering. Then he said, "If, one way or another, we could stop the production of heroin in Afghanistan, we could not only keep the stuff off the streets in the USA but we could deny a vital source of funding to the Taliban."

She smiled at him indulgently. "I can't wait to see how you're going to do it."

Neither spoke as they watched the darkened terrain slide past. Then, Robert asked: "Kate, how did you know that there was going to be trouble when we came up to that ANA truck? Did you see something?"

She shrugged. "No. I just felt something."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not exactly intuition. That seems to me to involve an actual thought. It's a sudden anxious feeling, right here." She put her hand over her stomach. "And I've learned to trust it."

"So that wasn't the first time?" She shook her head. "And this feeling has warned you in other situations?"

"Yeah."

He studied her face, which slowly put on a secretive smile. "I see several possibilities," he said. "Either you've got your own sixth sense, or you're very lucky, or you're being protected by somebody up there." He gestured up.

"Why divide it into categories? It's all the same thing."

"All the same thing," he mused, repeating her several times. "Kate, can I assume that you're a religious person?"

She regarded him, tongue in cheek. "You can assume anything you like."

"No, come on, Kate. I want to know."

"Why?"

"Because I like you."

She gave his thigh a brief pat, and turned her attention to the road ahead. "I suppose I'm not a religious person in the usual sense, because I'm not affiliated with any particular denomination. I mean, I was brought up as a Lutheran, but I've drifted away from it. . . . I can't really believe in some of the things that Lutherans are supposed to believe, but I do believe in God and in Jesus Christ."

"Do you go to church?"

"The only Christian church in Kabul is a Catholic chapel in the Italian embassy. If I'm feeling particularly naughty, I'll go there, but my Lutheran upbringing doesn't sit well alongside Catholicism."

"Why would you ever be feeling particularly naughty?"

"She raised her chin and regarded him coolly. "I have certain weaknesses."

What, he wondered, *are her weaknesses?* He wanted to ask, but sensed that the subject would be off limits. "OK," he said, "It seems unlikely, but I can accept that you're quite human. Tell me a bit more about yourself. You said that you grew up in Des Moines."

"Actually, it was a little town of Redfield, west of Des Moines. My parents had a farm there: wheat, corn and hogs."

"I could have sworn that you were a city girl."

She smiled wistfully and shook her head. "One of my fondest memories, as a child, is of standing behind my father on the tractor as he was ploughing. Watching the earth turn over like a dark wave . . . or pretending I was lost in a cornfield."

"Brothers and sisters?"

She shook her head. "An only child."

"Must have been kind of lonely on an Iowa farm."

She shrugged. "I lived in my own world, with my collie, Buster. He was my best friend. When I rode my bike to school in Redfield, he'd run alongside me and wait outside 'til school was over." She paused as if to see the images more clearly.

"When I went to high school in Adel, I had to take the bus. He'd wait for me at home."

"And when you went to college?"

She pursed her lips. "He had died by then, and I went to Iowa State alone. Got a degree in journalism."

"So where does the city influence come in?"

"It started in St. Louis. After graduation, I went there to work for the Post-Dispatch."

"And after that?"

"Oh, I moved around: Cleveland, Baltimore, Boston. If you're going to be a serious journalist, you have to work for a big city paper."

"Why Kabul? Why not New York or L A?"

"I . . . I felt I was getting stale. . . . I needed a new challenge. . . . Being on my own in a strange country, with a strange religion, language and culture, but still important because it has this strange war."

"Still have family back in Iowa?"

"No. My parents are long since gone. They were in their forties when they had me."

When they were back in the lobby of the Safi Landmark, she said: "Tomorrow's Sunday, Rob. Some friends and I get together and do our own church service. Care to join us?"

For reasons that weren't altogether clear to him, he said, "Yes."

"OK. Meet you here at a little before eleven." She turned and walked to the elevator.