

# 1

It was a vibrant blue-skied Afghan morning, the kind that made Yazmina stop to loosen her scarf and tilt her face to the sun. She and her younger sister, Layla, were returning from the well, their calloused feet accustomed to repeated treks on the ancient dirt. The tiny cowrie shells that decorated Yazmina's long black dress clacked with every step. She looked toward the snow-capped peaks to the north and prayed that this winter, *Inshallah*, God willing, would not be as bad as the last. It was so cold, so unforgiving, killing the goats, freezing the earth, destroying any chance of a good wheat crop. Another winter like that would surely make the threat of starvation real.

Her secret, the one she carried in her belly, the one she could hide for only another month or two, flooded her with nausea. She tripped on a rock, her body not as sure and strong as it had been working only for one. She almost spilled the water from the *kuza*, the clay pot that she carried on her shoulder.

‘Yazmina, be careful! You’re walking like a donkey with three legs,’ Layla said, even as she struggled with her own *kuza*. It was almost bigger than she was. Layla had been in high spirits all morning. She was too young to be covered in a *chaderi* like the one Yazmina was wearing, and her dark hair shone in the sunlight.

When they arrived at their uncle’s compound, they carefully placed the *kuza* in the cooking room and headed back to the main house. An unfamiliar black SUV with tinted windows was parked outside, and Layla ran toward it, letting out a squeal of delight.

‘Look, Yazmina! Look at the *landawar!*’ Layla called. ‘It’s bigger than our house!’

But Yazmina knew that since no one in Nuristan could afford a car like this, it must’ve come from the city, and nothing good ever came from the city. A car like this brought a warlord or a drug lord. When cars like this had arrived before, girls had gone missing.

Yazmina tried to laugh with Layla, but her heart sank. Heavy beads of perspiration formed on her brow and nausea overcame her again, though this time it had more to do with her fears than with the baby growing inside her. She stood by the door of the main salon where her uncle was talking to an older man with brown teeth wearing a tan-colored *shal-waar kameez*. Her uncle looked panicked. He pulled a small cloth purse of money from his pocket and offered it to the man.

‘This is baksheesh,’ money fit for a beggar, the man said with a sneer, and struck her uncle’s hand, making the purse drop to the floor.

She couldn't hear what else was being said, but she could hear her own heartbeat and over it she imagined her uncle pleading for mercy. She leaned heavily against the wall, letting out the breath she'd been holding. She couldn't blame him for what he'd done. After last year's harsh winter, he could barely afford to feed them all. But when Yazmina's husband was killed three months before, the one she'd known since she was a child and married when she was fifteen, she and Layla had nowhere else to go. It was tradition that forced her uncle to take them in and borrow money from these thieves. She knew what was coming. He would not be able to protect her since he could not repay his debt.

'Take my goats!' her uncle cried. 'Take my house,' he begged as he dropped to his knees. 'But do not take Yazmina. It is as if I am selling her. Would you sell your eyes? Would you sell your heart?' He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, to think. 'Besides,' he continued, looking up into the cold eyes of the man looming over him, 'my goats are worth more in the market than she is. She has already been married.'

'Yes, she is not a girl anymore,' the man answered. 'What I should take is your little one.' He turned to Layla, who was now by Yazmina's side, his black eyes boring a hole through her.

Yazmina's uncle pleaded with him. 'No, Haji,' he said, using the common name for such men. 'I beg you. She is too young yet. She is still a child.'

Yazmina felt her sister take her hand and hold it tightly.

'If I cannot get the money you owe me from this one, I'll be back for the little one after the snows have melted. Now come,' he commanded Yazmina.

Her uncle stood, and as he looked from the man to Yazmina, his strong jaw worked hard to keep his mouth closed against the curses he was struggling not to utter. He brushed the dust from his knees and escorted her to the car. He told her not to worry, but his face revealed what Yazmina already knew in her heart. She would be driven from her home in Nuristan, southwest on rubble-lined, pockmarked roads, to Kabul, and sold to the highest bidder, to be his third, perhaps even fourth wife, or worse, a slave, or worse yet – she would be forced to be a prostitute.

A young man, unusually tall for an Afghan, with a black beard and deep-set eyes, was at the car's heavy back door, holding it open for Yazmina. Another was sitting in the driver's seat.

Yazmina wanted to fight, to kick and scream and run, but she knew that to resist meant they'd take Layla. So she asked, 'May I get my things? Can I bring a change of clothes?'

'Get in the car!' the man yelled at her, pushing her shoulder roughly.

She started to climb in, then turned to her uncle and hugged him. He whispered in her ear the poem that her own mother had recited to Yazmina when she was only a baby:

*The moon is made round by the right hand of God.*

*The moon is made crescent by his left.*

*But it is God's heart that*

*Makes my love for you forever.*

She recited the last line along with him with much difficulty, choked, as she was, by the fullness in her throat.

Then Yazmina gave Layla three kisses, each saltier than the last from the tears on her cheeks. ‘You’ll have a blessed life, little one. Now show me that smile of yours, for that’ll be my parting gift,’ she said. But the younger girl had started to cry herself, afraid she’d never see Yazmina again, knowing she could be next. From her pocket she pulled her prayer beads and put them into Yazmina’s hand, clasping it tightly with her two little hands, not wanting to ever let go.

‘Enough good-byes,’ said the man with the brown teeth. ‘Get in the car.’

Yazmina quickly put the beads into her own pocket, gathered her long dress, and sat inside, pulling her legs in after her.

Layla ran away, back to the cooking room. ‘Wait, wait for me!’ she called. Yazmina knew she was getting water to throw at the car, a tradition to ensure that the person leaving would return one day. But Yazmina knew she would never be back, so she squared her shoulders, forced her eyes straight ahead, and sat tall as the old man got into the front seat with the driver and the young one got in next to her and closed the door. The SUV pulled away in a cloud of dust.

By the time Layla got back with the water to throw at the car, it was already gone, a black speck on the road leading far down the hill.

The coffee shop was jammed with regulars – misfits, missionaries and mercenaries, Afghans and foreigners – and Sunny, as usual, was at the counter. She surveyed her domain, pleased with the business, the buzz, the *life* that pulsed in the room. This was her very own place, here, in the middle of

a war zone, in one of the most dangerous locations on earth. After a lifetime of hard luck and bad choices, finally, at the age of thirty-eight, she'd found a home. Sunny was the center of the café, and she planned never to leave.

Kabul was the perfect place for her. Since nothing here was on solid ground, anything was possible, and anything could happen. Five men had just walked in, dressed in black, Foster Grants hiding their eyes, machine guns slung over their shoulders, sidearms hanging from their waists. She hadn't seen such beautiful men in a long, long time. In another country they'd mean trouble. But here, she knew they were five tall lattes and a plate of biscotti.

'Hey guys,' she said with the slight Southern lilt that she couldn't shake loose after all these years. 'If you want a menu, you need to give me your guns, like the sign says.' She nodded toward the door where a placard read: PLEASE CHECK YOUR WEAPONS AT THE DOOR.

With a thick Eastern European accent, one of the men started to argue, and all eyes in the café turned toward them. Sunny flashed her biggest smile and assured him their guns would be safe. 'And besides,' she said, 'with guns, no menu. You want to eat? You give them up.'

They reluctantly handed their firearms to Sunny, who then handed them to her barista and right-hand man, Bashir Hadi, who put them in the back room, where weapons were stored along with mops and brooms. They took off their leather jackets and scarves and Sunny hung them in the front closet.

She met Bashir Hadi back at the counter. 'I have some errands. I'll be back as soon as I can,' she said, taking off her apron.

‘I’ll go with you,’ he said, as he always did.

‘I’m fine,’ she replied, in their daily tradition. She knew what was coming next.

‘Make sure that you lock your doors. Keep your windows up. Promise me you will not drive with the top down, for goodness’ sake! Avoid the roadblocks. Don’t stop unless you have to. Don’t take the side roads, or the alleys.’

‘I’ve already asked Ahmet to get the car from the alley and bring it around to the front.’

‘And I know I don’t have to remind you—’

‘But you will.’ Sunny smiled.

‘You should not be driving and you should not be alone. Call me when you get there.’

‘I always do.’ She reflexively clasped the cellphone that hung from her neck on a woven red cord. She’d lost too many setting them down on the counter.

Today Sunny had a mission to bring flowers to the newly elected head of the Women’s Ministry. Though they’d met before at the café, a formal visit would secure an important relationship, necessary for a woman in Kabul running a business. Sunny put on a coat and took a chador from a hook behind the counter and covered her long, wavy brown hair, carefully wrapping the silky fabric around her neck and shoulders, pretending it was a luxurious, chic stole that she wore out of choice.

‘*Salaam alaikum*,’ she said to Ahmet, the café’s *chokidor*, its guard, as she passed through the front door, which he held open for her. ‘Keep an eye on that bunch inside, okay?’

‘*Wa alaikum as-salaam*,’ Ahmet replied. He was small, like most Afghan men; the machine gun he carried over his

shoulder probably outweighed him, making him look like a toy soldier, especially with his hair slicked back like a helmet on his head.

Sunny smiled, understanding now where the gel she kept in the café's bathroom had gone. She rattled off in Dari the usual niceties: How are you, Ahmet? And how is your sister in Germany? And every other living relative? Then she inquired about their states of health. In Kabul, it would be rude to do otherwise. Ahmet was a serious traditionalist, and following the rules – both unspoken and in the Koran – was important to him. He had earned her respect. He'd kept her and her customers safe more times than she could count.

He asked her the same questions and a few minutes later she was free to leave. She looked up and down the pedestrian-filled street and in front of every other business was a man dressed just like Ahmet, with dark glasses, black shirt, and black pants. Some had even bigger guns, bigger knives. She laughed to herself. These *chokidor* are competing with one another, she thought, like the schoolgirls back home with their cellphones, handbags, and jewelry. The difference was that in Kabul the accessories were Jacky clubs, guns, and daggers.

Sunny navigated the narrow, tumultuous city streets in her big brown diesel-powered Mercedes with more confidence than she ever had driving her trusty little Toyota in her hometown of Jonesboro, Arkansas. Passing the carts of figs and fruits, goat heads, fat-tailed sheep, and cardamom, and the stalls selling grain, apples, watermelon, and honeydew from the north, or colorful, hand-woven cloths from India and Pakistan, Sunny noticed clusters of men with heads bent

together in discussion, and other men walking proudly, followed by women in sky blue burqas. The disparity between men's and women's lives here was something she'd never get used to. She rolled down her window to hear the hollering of children running after her car, one shouting, 'Hey, mister, need a bodyguard?' The smells of dung and sweat and spices and diesel exhaust fumes merged into a heady mix that reminded Sunny why she loved Kabul and why she had chosen to stay.

She parked near Chicken Street. Here stall after stall of Afghan souvenirs – handmade carpets, woven pashmina, turbans, clothing, jewelry, boxes, and belts of the extraordinary native blue lapis, and the hand-carved dark wood furniture from Nuristan that she loved – extended two full blocks. Today it was unusually quiet. The shop owners raised their heads and smiled eagerly as Sunny walked by, hoping for a sale. She was one of the few foreigners not afraid to shop there since business had been beaten down by recent suicide bombings. Everyone in Kabul was affected by the blasts, including Sunny. But shopping made her feel that her life had some normalcy. She could choose, barter, and trade coins for products, as if she were a regular person and Kabul a regular place.

At the juncture of Chicken and Flower streets, East met West, with imports of cameras and electronics from Pakistan and China, juices (most had expired in 1989) from Uzbekistan, pirated videos, postcards, potato chips, Italian bottled water, cheese from Austria. Here, too, was Behzad, the one and only English-language bookstore in the country, where she and her friends bought books that they discussed as if

experts on *Oprah*, and the store next door where they got their DVDs.

On Flower Street itself, her breath caught in her throat. Amid the rubble and pale beige stone, and sitting next to an open sewer, there were the roses. In pink and peach, in red and white and yellow, roses everywhere, in every stall in every shop, the pride of Kabul, glorious and life affirming. Hope grew in Sunny with each bucket of flowers she passed. Some buckets held cheap plastic flowers from Taiwan that the Afghans used to brighten their homes, as if the real roses weren't good enough simply because they were Afghan. Sunny picked two bunches of fresh pale peach roses and carried them away nestled in the crook of her arm.

She took a step in the direction of her car, back the way she'd come. But she stopped. She felt the brisk air, with its hints of winter, and could see the hospital down the road ahead. The Women's Ministry was adjacent to it. But she could hear Bashir Hadi's warnings about the dangers of a woman walking alone in Kabul. Three years ago, it was safe to walk, but today, as the Taliban and fundamentalist thinking were finding ground again in Kabul, it was not. She was courting kidnappers, Bashir Hadi had told her again and again, and was at risk of being shot. Take the car, he'd told her, and if she had to walk, she must keep her head down, not speak unless spoken to, never take the same route twice, do this and that and never this and always that, and it made her sick. She respected the ways of this country – she knew, for example, to always cover her head and her arms – but she also respected herself, and sometimes, she simply had to walk.

And so she did. She arrived at the ministry safely, and with her roses in hand. The gray-walled, somber building reminded her of the hospital where her mother had died, except for the layer of earthen dust that covered everything in Kabul. When she reached the minister's waiting room, she found a young woman shrouded in a dark blue veil sitting behind a dilapidated metal desk. The minute she saw Sunny, she clicked off her computer screen. Sunny knew from the look in her eyes that she'd been on the Internet, probably chatting with someone, the only way a boy and girl could talk to each other freely in Kabul. The woman told her to sit, and from the cheap velour chair Sunny could easily see into the minister's office, a lavish space covered in deep red rugs and lined with couches. Standing in the center of the room, a young woman wearing the clothes of her native tribe pleaded with what looked to be an assistant of the minister, while the minister herself sat at her desk and talked on the phone. Sunny couldn't help but listen. Though her Dari was halting at best, she understood enough to pick up the gist of the girl's story.

Yazmina had stared straight ahead, afraid to fall asleep on the long drive, afraid to look out the car's window at the land passing by, afraid of what the man next to her might do even before she arrived in Kabul. She'd lost track of time. Had it been two days? Or three? Her fate was not her own. First her parents, murdered by the Taliban years before. Then her husband, killed three months ago by a land mine while walking with his goats in the field. Now what would happen when her 'owner' found out about the life inside her? She knew the

answer: He would beat her, or worse. It would be impossible to pretend that her new husband was the father. Her stomach was already round; she could rely only so long on the heavy drape of her dress to save her from showing.

The man next to her suddenly moved, making her jump. He laughed and put his arm around her. She knew what he was thinking: She was no longer a girl and he could take her sexually without her new owner ever finding out. She pulled away, her heart pounding against her chest, and realized then that they must've entered the outskirts of Kabul. The wall along the road was mottled with bullet holes, and there were posters for Coca-Cola and for campaigns for Parliament. The man put his hand on her leg. She screamed, and he put his other hand over her mouth. She continued to look away and noticed the blue of the sky as he moved a hand to her breast then down her belly toward her legs. He stopped.

'What is this?' he yelled. 'What have you done, you bitch whore?' His face was so close that Yazmina could feel his hot breath.

Yazmina saw the driver's eyes on her in the rearview mirror.

'What is it?' he barked.

'This mother of a whore is pregnant,' the younger man said with disgust, not taking his eyes from Yazmina. He spit at her, and then slapped her hard across her face.

Yazmina looked down, tears streaming, her face swelling, her nose bleeding. She put a protective hand across her belly.

The car stopped short, sending dirt and dust past the windows.

'She is worth nothing,' the old man said. 'Get rid of her.'

The man next to Yazmina pulled a knife from the sheath on his belt, but the old man said, 'No, no blood in the car. Get her out.' He turned to Yazmina. 'You stupid bitch. I should cut your uncle's throat for stealing from me. And then take your little sister. Now that tight little virgin would be worth something.'

Yazmina struggled to open her door to get away, but she felt a heavy punch in her back that sent her sprawling to the ground. She could taste the blood in her mouth, feel the dirt stinging her eyes. She felt the kick in her side, something hard and heavy hitting her head, her face pushed into the ground, then she heard the car speed away as everything went black.

The woman's name was Yazmina, she told the minister's assistant, and she was from Nuristan, which Sunny knew was an area in the north that bordered the western edge of Pakistan. It was said that the people there were among the most beautiful in all Afghanistan and direct descendants of Alexander the Great. Jack had worked up there for a time, and Sunny remembered him telling her that the area was originally called Kafiristan – *kafir* meaning 'unbeliever' or 'infidel,' and *stan* meaning 'land of.' A hundred years ago the people were forced by the Muslims to convert to Islam, and the name of the area was changed to Nuristan, the land of light. In her coffeehouse, Sunny had more than once heard one Afghan insulting another by calling him a *kafir*.

She listened to Yazmina explaining how an old beggar woman had helped her up and walked with her from the far edges of Kabul to the police station. They struggled with what to do with the young woman whose blood was dripping

down her face, staining her *chaderi*. Should they take her to the hospital and risk being blamed for her condition? She was too ashamed to tell them what had happened, and they were, in turn, uncomfortable with her tears, embarrassed. Matters of women were handled within the family, not out on a busy street. So they dropped her off at the Women's Ministry, where someone would attend to her.

Her eyes ran with grateful tears as the assistant glanced over her shoulder to the minister, who seemed to be winding up her phone call, and whispered to Yazmina that she could sleep in the old Kabul Beauty School, now a dorm, until they were able to find a family to take her in, perhaps as a cleaning lady.

Another woman might've responded by putting her hand on her chest, or clasping her hands together, in both worry and gratitude. But this young woman responded reflexively, impulsively, Sunny thought, and gave herself away. She put an open hand on her belly, and Sunny understood what she was protecting there: She was pregnant. So that was why she'd been thrown out of the car. She'd omitted this detail when she told her story, and if the minister's assistant had figured it out, she didn't let on.

The minister hung up the phone and rose from her chair, walked around her desk, and said, 'Only one or two nights, Alayah. Not until she finds a family. There are rules. We are not running a hotel for runaways.'

'But,' Alayah said, 'she has nowhere to go. You know what will happen.'

Sunny understood what was not being said: that if Yazmina was sent back to her family, it would mean death, and that if

she wasn't, she'd probably end up as a beggar or prostitute. And Sunny knew that once her pregnancy had become too obvious to conceal, the baby would surely die, and she would probably be killed, too.

'There are rules,' the minister said haughtily. 'Besides, who knows if what she's saying is the truth.' She looked at Yazmina with disdain, probably thinking what everyone thought of girls like this in Kabul – that it was their fault they'd been kicked out of their homes, that they'd taken a lover or had refused sex with their husbands or had done something else to deserve this treatment. 'Two nights. That's it. And be sure to do the paperwork, Alayah.'

The injured woman thanked the minister, kissing her left cheek, then right, and then left again, three times in the customary fashion.

'Come, I'll show you the way,' said Alayah.

As Yazmina was escorted out, she glanced at Sunny but quickly looked away. In that moment, Sunny was struck by the defiance in her stunning green eyes, that even after all that had befallen her, this woman was still proud.

Sunny paid her respects to the minister as best she could. She would've told the minister where she could shove her bureaucratic attitude, but her mind was on the desperate woman and her haunting eyes.

That night, alone in her bed, Sunny couldn't sleep. She couldn't shake the image of that woman locked in the car with those thugs. She couldn't bear the thought of what would happen to her and her baby once it was born. *Shit*, she thought, the last thing she needed, the last thing the café and her customers would tolerate, was an annoying newborn

crying all the time. But early the next morning, she returned to the Women's Ministry to inquire about the young woman. When she found her in the dorms, Sunny offered her a room in her home and work in the coffeehouse. Only then did the young woman raise her eyes from the floor and look straight at Sunny to say in Dari, 'Thank you, may God light your way,' as she placed her open hand on her belly.