Excerpt from

Farishta

by Patricia McArdle

Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award

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Chapter One:

June 2004    Washington, D.C.

The first ring jarred me awake seconds before my forehead hit the keyboard. I inched slowly back in my chair hoping no one had noticed me dozing off.

Narrowing my eyes against the flat glare of the ceiling lights, I scanned the long row of cubicles behind me. I was alone.

The second ring and the scent of microwave popcorn drifting in from a nearby office reminded me I was supposed to meet some colleagues for dinner and a movie near Dupont Circle at eight. It was almost seven thirty.

The third ring froze me in place when I saw the name flashing on the caller ID.

If irrational fear could still paralyze me like this after all these years then perhaps it really was time to give up.

It wasn’t only real danger that would accelerate my pulse and cause me to stop breathing like a frightened rabbit staring down the barrel of a shotgun. It was little things. Tonight it was a telephone call.

I forced myself to grab the receiver halfway through ring number four.

“This is Angela Morgan,” I whispered struggling to suppress the anxiety that was forming a large knot in my throat.

My computer beeped and coughed up two messages from the U.S. embassy in Honduras. I ignored them and began taking slow, measured breaths.

“Angela, you’re working late tonight. It’s Marty Angstrom from personnel.”
Marty’s chirpy, nasal voice resonated like the slow graze of a fork down an empty plate.

He was stammering, obviously surprised that anyone in the Central American division at the State Department would pick up the phone this late on a Friday evening. I had apparently upset his plan to leave a voice message that I wouldn’t hear until Monday morning.

“Hello, Marty. It’s been a long time.” My heart was thundering. “Is this a good news or a bad news call?”

“It depends,” said Marty.

“On what?”

“On what your definition of good is,” he chuckled.

The wish list I’d submitted for my next overseas diplomatic posting had been, in order of preference: London, Madrid, Nairobi, San Salvador, Lima, Caracas, Riga, St. Petersburg, and Kabul.

“Marty, please get to the point. Did I get London?”

I could hear him breathing through his nose into the phone like an old man with asthma. He sounded almost as nervous as I felt. Not a good sign. Was I being sent south of the border again just because I spoke Spanish? But why would that make Marty nervous?

Before I retired or was forced out of the Foreign Service for not getting promoted fast enough, I was hoping for just one tour of duty in Western Europe. I desperately wanted it to be London, but I’d settle for Madrid. After all I’d been through—I deserved it!

“Well, you’ll be spending a lot of time with the Brits,” he replied eagerly.
“Meaning?” I put him on speaker and began to rearrange the stacks of papers on my desk. My pulse and breathing were returning to normal.

“Listen, Angela, I know you had some tough times a while back, but that was more than two decades ago.”

I drained the now flat Diet Coke I had been nursing all afternoon and reached up to brush my fingers over the small silver framed photo of Tom and me. We were sitting on our black Arabian geldings at the Kattouah stables near Beirut. Our knees were touching. His horse was nuzzling mine. We were laughing.

Tough times—a dead husband and a bloody miscarriage. Yeah, those were definitely tough times, I thought.

“You’re going to get kicked out of the Foreign Service in another year if you don’t get promoted, Ange.”

That was also true. My father’s prolonged illness and my frequent trips out west to see him had made it impossible for me to take an overseas assignment during the past six years. My career had been dying a slow and painful death in a series of dead-end positions at State Department headquarters in Washington D.C.

“Continue.”

“You really need this promotion, Angela.”

This conversation was becoming unbearable.

“Marty, I’m going to hang up the phone now if you don’t tell me where the Department is sending me.”

“OK, you’re going to Afghanistan in December.”
Oh, God, this has got to be a joke. I laid my head down on the desk blotter and closed my eyes.

“Marty, I don’t know a thing about Afghanistan,” I whispered into the speakerphone.

“It doesn’t matter, neither does anybody else. You put it on your bid list.”

“It was the very last post on a very long wish list, Marty,” I said, struggling to recover my composure. I had added Kabul at the last minute, thinking it would demonstrate that I was a team player and increase my chances for the London assignment. I foolishly presumed the Department would never consider sending me there after what had happened in Beirut.

“Listen, Ange, at this point we’re filling positions in Afghanistan and Iraq with anyone remotely suitable who volunteers. We may eventually have to start forcing people to go, but you’ll get more brownie points if you go willingly now. I know this was your last choice, but it’s only for a year, and I promise to try and get you an onward assignment to someplace great…like your dream job in London!”

In 2004, the U.S. was fighting not one but two wars. The second one in Iraq, which had begun with America’s “Shock and Awe” invasion in 2003, was sucking most of the air out of the State Department. Meanwhile, the ‘forgotten war’ in Afghanistan had been relegated to the back pages of the Washington Post and a few understaffed offices at State.

Rumors of torture, secret prisons and renditions to unnamed countries popped up in the media from time to time, but were vigorously denied by the administration and ignored for the most part by the American public.

I shared the sentiments of many of my Foreign Service colleagues, who believed we should have stayed out of Iraq and focused on completing our mission in Afghanistan. A few
brave souls actually spoke up and even resigned in protest. I’m ashamed to admit that I like many, kept my head down, stayed focused on my less controversial part of the world and tried hard not to think much about either war.

“Marty, I don’t speak Dari or Pashto.”

“Your personnel file shows you have a high aptitude for foreign languages. It says you got the highest score ever recorded at the Foreign Service Institute when you took Farsi.”

“That was twenty-five years ago, Marty, and no one in my Farsi class was ever sent to Tehran because the Iranians took everyone in the embassy hostage that year. You’ll see in my file that I was put in Arabic language training, reassigned to Yemen for a year and then sent to Beirut.”

Marty ignored my comments and continued. “I am told by unnamed sources that you still read and are able to recite Rumi in the original Farsi.”

“Who told you that?”

“Is it true?”

My eyes were now brimming with tears and the knot in my throat was returning.

Fortunately no one was in the office to witness my mini-meltdown.

“Ange?”

“So what? Rumi is the most popular poet in the U.S.”

“True,” Marty chuckled, irritating me even more. “But most Americans read his works in English translation.”

I was too upset to respond.
“The Department doesn’t have many Farsi speakers left,” Marty continued, “and they need someone up north who is fluent in Dari.

“I just told you I don’t speak Dari, and what do you mean, ‘up north’? I thought I was being assigned to the embassy in Kabul.”

“Remember I said you’ll be spending a lot a time with the Brits?”

“So am I being assigned to the British embassy?” His question puzzled me.

“You won’t actually be in Kabul. You’re going to be spending a year with the British Army at a PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif.”

Me? At forty-seven, they were assigning me to a military Provincial Reconstruction Team?

“We’re putting you in a one-on-one, Farsi-Dari conversion course next month,” Marti continued. “You should be fluent by December. They say Dari is just like Farsi, but easier. With your language aptitude, it shouldn’t take you too long to pick it up. I hear that your Russian may also come in handy up there.”

“My Russian?”

“Yeah, they say some of the warlords in the north speak Russian,” he said in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Look, Ange, they want you in Mazar by early January and you’ll need a few days in Kabul for briefings before you head north. Will that be OK?” Marty was now sounding almost apologetic. “Is Christmas a big deal with your family? Will they be upset if you aren’t home?”

“Not really,” I said, glancing at a favorite old photo I had tacked to the cloth partition in my cubicle. Mom and I were halfway down our winding driveway at the ranch in New Mexico
setting out *luminarios* for the annual Morgan Christmas fiesta. Her long, dark braid fell over her
shoulder as she bent to help me light one of the candles.

I remembered how much I had looked forward to coming back to the states from my
overseas postings for the holidays before she died—but that was almost ten years ago. After
Dad’s long illness and his miraculous recovery last summer he had surprised my brother and me
by marrying one of his nurses, a much younger woman from Albuquerque. The new Mrs.
Morgan didn’t ‘do’ Christmas.

“Hey, Ange, watch out for those British officers,” Marty added in an awkward attempt at
humor. “I think you’ll be the only female up there and with those big, green eyes you’re not too
bad looking even at your age.” He inhaled sharply, “Oops, I suppose I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Thanks for the kind words, Marty. Shall I file my sexual harassment suit now, or just let
it simmer until Monday morning?”

“Sorry, I’m kidding, Ange, nothing serious, okay? Say, have you ever been in a war
zone?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

“Does Beirut 1983 count?” I replied, gazing again at the photo of Tom and me. His
unruly mop of blond curls brushed against my long dark hair as he leaned over in his saddle to
kiss me.

“Oh, yeah, of course. I suppose it does. Sorry,” Marty said, his voice softening. “You’ll
do fine in Mazar. Have a great weekend, Ange.”

My colleagues were not surprised when I called to say I wouldn’t be joining them for
dinner. It happened often. I walked home in a daze.
My apartment, a few blocks from the State Department, was still the only place I felt completely safe. Other than my solitary evening jogs through Foggy Bottom, I spent far too much time alone here.

Tom and I had shared this place for the first eighteen months of our marriage. It was a small one bedroom, which we had leased to friends when we were sent to the U.S. embassy in Yemen. Our plan had been to sell it when we came home after a few years overseas and buy something bigger for the three kids we were going to have.

I put on an old jazz album that Tom loved, kicked off my shoes, poured a glass of wine, curled up on my couch and stared out the window at the diamond and ruby lights spinning around Washington Circle. This was not how I’d planned the final years of my diplomatic career. This was not how I’d planned my life.

Ever since Beirut, I hadn’t handled stress—or living very well. This evening’s call from Marty had been almost more than I could bear. I walked barefoot into the bedroom, my toes sinking into one of the Persian carpets Tom and I had purchased in Beirut, and scanned the photos covering the wall behind my bed: Tom and I laughing with our arms around each other on the front porch at Dad’s place in New Mexico; clowning with embassy friends in front of one of Sanaa’s medieval mud brick towers; Tom taking his horse over a water jump at the stable in Lebanon.

I went to the bookshelf, pulled out one of Tom’s small, leather-bound books of Rumi’s poetry and pressed it against my chest. When the tears began to flow and I dropped it on my pillow it fell open to a well-read page. I curled up on my bed, whispering the words in Farsi until I fell asleep.
Chapter Two:

August 2004   Arlington, Virginia

Sautéed garlic, the sweet charred odor of roasting lamb and a thundering Bollywood sound track blasted my senses the first time I entered Ali’s Afghan restaurant in south Arlington. Lunch here would become a weekly ritual during my four months of Dari language training with Ali’s uncle, Professor Mohammad Jalali.

I had been given no choice by the State Department. Learn Dari and go to Afghanistan or get ready to retire early when I didn’t get promoted in 2005.

Professor Jalali was spending six hours a day, five days a week alone with me in a small windowless room at the Foreign Service Institute. Our weekly trip to his nephew’s restaurant was essential for our sanity plus the food was delicious.

I had been given a private tutor and told that as few people as possible were to know how fluent I was becoming in Dari. Jalali had been instructed by his supervisor not to discuss my language training with anyone. Marty said it had something to do with a request from the Drug Enforcement Administration. I was too despondent to make additional inquiries about the reasons for the secrecy.

My evenings were spent alone in my apartment studying Dari, reading Rumi and flipping endlessly through the photo albums Tom and I had assembled during our few years together.

Professor Jalali, known to all as ‘Doc’ was a diminutive Afghan of Tajik extraction. He had a thick, grey crew cut, horn rimmed glasses, a broad smile and a Ph.D. in Persian literature.
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from Kabul University. Doc had been a teacher in Mazar-e-Sharif before fleeing Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion.

“Uncle, is this the woman who is going to live in our beloved city?” asked Ali as he rushed out of his steaming kitchen and wiped his hands with his apron on the first day Doc took me to his restaurant. The loud, smiling, rotund chef stroked his short black beard and shook my hand vigorously when Doc introduced us.

“Hamid,” Ali shouted in Dari to a tall young man leaning against the kitchen door, “bring palau, ketfa and bulonie for my uncle and his guest and don’t forget the naan.”

As soon as the steaming trays of rice, lamb brochettes, savory pastries, meatballs spiced with cinnamon, and hot flat bread were placed before us, Ali stepped behind me and folded his hands over his broad chest. In a booming voice he announced in English to his kitchen staff and the three customers eating lunch that his uncle Professor Jalali was teaching Dari to “this brave American woman, this angel” who had volunteered to spend a year living near the city of his ancestors in their war-torn country.

Not exactly volunteered, I thought.

“Angela Morgan,” he continued, “when you come to my restaurant, I will call you Farishta. This is our Dari word for angel—like your American name.”

Doc smiled at me, patted my hand and said, “This is a good Dari name for you, Farishtajan. I should have thought of it myself.” He looked up at his nephew and winked quickly at me, “Ali, you must always speak to my pupil in Dari, but very slowly or she will not understand what you are saying.” Ali nodded gravely before returning to the kitchen.

Each week when we left the Foreign Service Institute for lunch at Ali’s, Doc would urge me with profuse apologies to order my meal in halting Dari. “If Ali knows how well you are
learning to speak our language, he will quickly spread word of your fluency to our family in Mazar-e-Sharif, and the whole city will know” he cautioned.

There was little training available in late 2004 for American diplomats assigned to Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. Many of my colleagues were being sent out with minimal or no language instruction. Our only other preparation was a week of lectures on current Afghan history and politics, which raised my anxiety to new levels with its relentless focus on the conflicts that had led to the 9/11 attacks.

For me, far more interesting and strangely soothing—perhaps because it happened so long ago—was the astounding parade of historic figures, who had passed through Afghanistan over the past three thousand years.

It was the faded tourist posters nailed to the walls of Ali’s restaurant that first piqued my interest in this lesser known aspect of Afghanistan’s past. Their grainy photographs of crumbling walls, towers and temples reminded Ali’s customers that Alexander the Great, Darius, Zoroaster, Marco Polo and even Genghis Khan had been players in this country’s long and colorful history.

Inspired by Ali’s posters, I devoured any books I could find on ancient Afghan history. I was surprised to learn that some of the oldest archeological sites, including the birthplace of my favorite poet, were near Mazar-e-Sharif.

“Look, Doc,” I said pointing at one of the posters that featured an ancient Persian engraving, “your nephew likes Rumi!”

Doc snorted and shook his head.
When I had mentioned my love of Rumi’s poetry on the first day of class, Doc wrinkled his nose, straightened his glasses and made it quite clear that we would be reciting a lot more of his favorite poet Hafiz than my man Rumi.

“Angela, my dear, you must understand that Hafiz sings. Rumi merely recites,” he chided me gently. Doc was persistent, but he could not change my mind about Rumi, whose every verse reminded me of Tom.

I was savoring another mouthful of bulonie, a fried leek pastry slathered in yogurt when Ali came bursting through the kitchen doors carrying a small laptop computer. “Uncle, my brother has just sent me photos from last week’s buzkashi game. You must see them! Khan Cherik’s horses won again and my brother tells me that Governor Massoud is furious,” he said laughing.

Ali pulled a chair between Doc and me to show us his photos of the fierce riders on their rearing stallions. “Look,” said Ali touching the screen with a greasy finger, “there is your nephew Mohammad on my brother’s favorite stallion. You see how well he sits?”

Doc had introduced me to the game of buzkashi, which he missed terribly, on the first day of class. During my four months of language training we viewed his copy of the 1971 movie, “The Horsemen” at least seven times while he explained the details of the game. It involved hundreds of riders on powerful stallions bred only for this violent competition.

They battled each other for the privilege of dragging a headless calf around an enormous field at a full gallop. I was mesmerized by the power, beauty and fierce courage of the buzkashi horses and much to Doc’s delight I never tired of watching his favorite movie. The film, which had not done well at the box office, featured genuine Afghan chapandaz riders, some of whom Doc had seen compete in Mazar as a boy.
“Farishta-jan,” he told me in his most professorial voice, “only if you understand buzkashi will you ever understand Afghanistan.”

“But, Doc, how will I ever understand this game?” I moaned. “It’s too confusing. There are so many players and they move so fast I can’t figure out which rider is on which team.”

“Precisely,” he replied.

Chapter Three:

November 29, 2004  Washington D.C.

Language training was over. I had been deemed sufficiently fluent in Dari and the dreaded departure date was only three weeks away. Every night I was being shaken awake by stomach churning, heart-thumping panic attacks and night sweats. Was this more menopause? Was my post-traumatic stress disorder resurfacing or was I getting a combo package?

The term PTSD had only been coined by the psychiatric community three years before that April day in 1983 when I stepped out of a Beirut taxi just as the front of the American Embassy exploded in flame-licked clouds and collapsed with my husband Tom inside. Five days later I lost the child I’d been carrying for four months, almost bleeding to death before a Lebanese neighbor found me lying on the floor of my apartment and took me to a hospital.

I had struggled for years without professional help to overcome the trauma and loss of that week—an effort that had included significant amounts of legal self-medication and a string of disastrous relationships.
A stiff upper lip and a stiff drink had always been the State Department way to deal with the stress of traumatic events. Short of being hauled out in a straight jacket, Foreign Service Officers like military officers would never voluntarily consult with a shrink and risk losing their security and medical clearances.

After many years, when the excessive drinking, the pills and the parade of unsuitable men were about to drag me into a hole from which I would never emerge, I locked up my emotions, threw away the key and buried myself in a series of inconsequential diplomatic assignments.

Intellectually I knew that my anxiety about going to Afghanistan was irrational. Although it was technically a ‘war zone’, the possibility that I would be wounded or killed was miniscule. It was soldiers not diplomats, who were losing their lives there and in Iraq. No State Department employees had died in Afghanistan since 1979 when the U.S. ambassador was kidnapped and assassinated by Islamic extremists.

Mazar-e-Sharif was on the north side of the Hindu Kush, where the only fighting in the past year had been between competing Afghan warlords and their militias. All U.S. and allied combat operations were in the south along the Pakistani border.

By December 2004 the flood of employees going to Baghdad was getting most of the attention inside the Department of State. All Green Zone-bound volunteers were required to attend a security course, which included several days of first aid training as well as weapons and explosives familiarization. Those of us on our way to Afghanistan were told we were not eligible. After many phone calls and much pleading, I was grudgingly admitted to the course when a space became available two weeks prior to my departure.
Although American diplomats are not authorized to carry weapons even in combat zones, the Department of State decided that civilians going to Baghdad needed practice firing some of the small arms used by our military. It was never clear to me what untrained civilians were expected to do with weapons they had handled and fired only once, but since I was in the course, I resolved to use the afternoon ‘shooting party’ to help overcome my pre-deployment jitters.

“Alright gentlemen—and lady,” said our bearded instructor, as we filed into the armory next to the firing range, “today we’ll be loading, emptying, reloading and firing an AK-5 automatic machinegun, a Sig Sauer pistol, a Kalashnikov—that’s the one the bad guys use, a Colt M4 submachine gun and a Remington shot gun. Any questions?”

There were none as we stared in silence at the well-oiled firepower arrayed on long metal tables before us.

“How any of you ever fired a weapon?” he asked. Two of us raised our hands. The other fellow was a former Marine gunnery sergeant. The instructor turned to me, “Ma’am, would you like to share with us which weapons you have fired?”

“My brother and I used to go rabbit hunting,” I said, regretting immediately that I had raised my hand, “with an air rifle.”

I didn’t mention that I was a pretty good shot. That became apparent when we filed outside with our loaded weapons and I began blasting away at the targets, ripping out the center circles as I channeled my fear about going to Afghanistan and my rage at those nameless men who had killed my husband so many years ago. It was an incredibly cathartic experience and my Iraq-bound classmates were impressed.

The next three days of first aid training had quite the opposite effect. Our instructor Mike, a gruff but compassionate former Special Forces medic, had a genuine desire to prepare us for
what we might face in a war zone. He also kept us in a moderate state of terror so we would pay close attention to everything he said.

Mike was a gentle giant, with skin the color of polished ebony and a shaved head that glowed like an eight ball under the fluorescent lights in our crowded classroom. He showed us how to assess swelling and discoloration, when and where to apply pressure, how to treat a sucking chest wound with a credit card and duct tape, and some very creative ways to use Superglue.

On day two we held a mock exercise during which several of us were to conduct triage after a bombing. Our job was to determine who would be given immediate first aid, who could survive for a while without treatment and who would be left to die.

Carrying notepads, several of us followed Mike through a simulated disaster site, stepping carefully over the prone bodies of our moaning classmates in the auditorium of the training facility. The victims had covered themselves with realistic pools of latex blood and anatomically correct wounds.

I was moving along at a good clip, bending over each victim and shouting, “Can you hear me?” before checking them for breathing, bleeding, pulse and broken bones. The fifth victim was a man in his mid-twenties with shaggy blond hair and soft brown eyes. He reminded me of Tom and he was taking his role far too seriously. He grabbed my shoulders and began to gag, swinging his neck from side to side and rolling his eyes up into his head. “Help me!” he moaned.

It was too much. I doubled over and broke into a sweat.

Mike was next to me in seconds. He knelt at my side, placed one hand on my back and began to talk me out of the panic attack that had overwhelmed me. My eyes were closed and I was gasping for air. I bit down on my tongue to keep from screaming.
"Morgan!" he shouted. I whipped my head around and looked him in the eyes. "Check the shadows. Do you see a second bomber hiding?"

I scanned the perimeter and saw only the walls of the auditorium.

"No," I responded, my breathing still ragged.

“Look again and tell me exactly what you see. Every detail!” He was shouting over the bedlam in the auditorium.

I began to describe the color of the walls, the shape of the windows, the size of the doors and the length of the curtains. My breathing became more regular.

His hand was now resting lightly on my neck. He was subtly monitoring my breathing and heart rate.

“When did it happen?” he asked softly.


“The Marine Barracks?” he asked.

“No, the embassy, my husband. The building collapsed. I couldn’t help him.” I was sobbing.

“Jesus, Morgan,” he said sitting down on the floor next to me. “Have you ever talked to anybody about this?”

“Are you kidding?” I asked, laughing through my tears. “I’d never get another overseas assignment if I did. If I don’t get promoted next year in Afghanistan, I’ll be forcibly retired. Please don’t talk to anyone about this,” I begged. “It won’t happen again.”

“Okay, understood,” he said in a whisper.
“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” he asked. “You’ll probably be the only civilian at that PRT, not like the rest of this bunch who are all headed for the over-populated and well-stocked confines of the Green Zone in Baghdad.”

“It’s in the north—Mazar-e-Sharif—there’s no fighting up there. I’ll be fine,” I replied, “And yes, I’m ready.”

"Okay. If this happens again, you'll know what to do?"

"Yes."

"You see someone else freeze, you'll know how to bring 'em out of it?"

"Thanks to you I will."

“Morgan, you can’t keep this bottled up inside you forever. We are only as sick as our secrets, sweetheart, and this one’s eating you alive.”

“I know it is. I’ll talk to someone when I get back.”

"Good. Now, let's get the rest of these Green Zone weenies squared away."

On the final day of first aid class we were herded into a poorly lit windowless room for our final trial by fire. Mike slipped out the door after a worried glance in my direction. A burly red headed man handed out yellow hooded chem/bio escape masks and told us to take a seat. He slammed the door shut and we heard the loud snap of a lock.

“Listen up people,” he barked as he walked to the front of the room. “I’m only going to show you this once. Your lives depend on paying very close attention to me.” He slipped the mask over his head and tightened the straps around his neck in a single motion.

In a loud but muffled voice he shouted through his mask, “For your final exam, you will have fifteen seconds to put this hood on. If you can’t get it on before the gas starts seeping into
this room or into your future offices in Baghdad, you will die, my friends, a very painful death. Ready, set, GO!”

We struggled to get the masks over our heads and pull the straps that would seal out the poison gasses. Most of us failed miserably.

“Not good enough, people. You can practice again over the lunch hour. Now I’m going to show you plan B. What to do if you don’t get the mask on before the gas starts getting into your system.”

He and his assistant placed one single and one double-barreled plastic tube with spring-loaded plungers on the desk in front of each student. “Listen up! If you experience any of the symptoms of nerve gas poisoning, you should hold your breath immediately. What are those symptoms? Tight chest, runny nose, nausea, pinpoint pupils, coughing, difficulty breathing, twitching muscles.” He paused and scanned the faces of the nervous diplomats and contractors.

“Do not inhale first!” he shouted for emphasis. “Put on your protective mask ASAP. You will then inject one dose of atropine and two doses of pyridine-2-aldoxime methiodide into your lateral thigh muscle.

Several people shifted uncomfortably in their seats. The rest of us were frozen in place.

“Put the needle end of the injector against your skin like this.” He swung his boot up onto a chair and held the plunger against his thick khaki-clad thigh. “You can do it right through your clothes if you’re not wearing too many layers. Press, do not jab the tube until the spring releases. It will inject automatically. We will not be practicing this particular exercise,” he announced to a relieved class as he collected the tubes.

“I understand you’re going to a PRT in Afghanistan, miss,” he said as he passed me.

“Yes, I am.”
“You won’t have to worry about using any of these gizmos there because we only have enough for Iraq,” he laughed.

What a relief!

Our entire class was emotionally drained at the end of the first aid course. Mike confessed that he and his colleagues had pushed us hard. “It’s for your own good, people!”

On the final day of class, he handed out our certificates, wished us well, then pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his vest pocket and announced, “Here’s something from the IRS that might interest you.”

“Quote: ‘Federal income tax will not be imposed on a civilian employee who dies as a result of injury incurred outside the U.S. in a terrorist or military action for the tax year of the death and any prior taxable year in the period beginning with the last taxable year ending before the year in which the injury was incurred’—unquote.”

Mike looked up at our stunned faces and grinned. “The only way you’re going to get through the coming year is to find the absurdity and the humor in absolutely everything. And trust me on this one, people, over there it’s just one big fucking comedy.”

Chapter Four:

Dec. 18, 2004    Washington, D.C.

The State Department had ordered me to break my December trip to Afghanistan with a stop in London, where I was to meet with the desk officer at the Foreign & Commonwealth
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Office. He would provide me with the British perspective on the political situation in northern Afghanistan.

I hoped that the London briefings would be more substantial than what I was receiving at the State Department, where I’d been directed by a distracted secretary in the tiny Afghan Coordinator’s office to the bottom drawer of a file cabinet. It contained all the reports my predecessor had sent over the past 15 months.

“Please put the files back in order and lock the cabinet before you leave,” she instructed as she left for a medical appointment. “Use any of the empty offices. We’re not too busy in here as you can see.”

A colleague told me off the record that there had been a heated debate regarding the need to even assign another American Foreign Service Officer to the PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif now that the Brits were in charge and had one of their own diplomats there. So why were they sending me? I left Washington still unclear about what exactly I was supposed to do in Mazar.

“You’ll receive a more thorough briefing in London and when you get to the embassy in Kabul,” I was promised by the overworked State Department desk officer who penciled me in for a 20-minute appointment two days prior to my departure.

“What about this hush, hush deal with my Dari language ability?” I asked as he ushered me out of his office. “Oh, that,” he said dismissively. “Someone in DEA thought you might be able to pick up some side chatter during the meetings you attend with local officials. There’s a lot of opium poppy cultivation up north and they don’t think the interpreters are giving the Brits the whole story when they meet with the locals. Who knows, really? Good luck, Angela.”

Chapter Five:
Grey skies and a stiff breeze greeted me when I landed at Heathrow Airport where the thermometer hovered just above freezing. After a cramped overnight flight in economy class, all I wanted was to get to my hotel, crawl under several blankets and sleep off my jet lag.

The Churchill Hyatt Regency on Portman Square had the soft bed I needed and one of my few remaining prescription sleeping pills provided me with twelve hours of dreamless sleep before my briefing at the Foreign Office.

I had celebrated an early, snowy and somewhat awkward Christmas with my father, brother and their young wives at Dad’s place in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains. Dad and Bill had resigned themselves to my assignment after I explained that I really didn’t have any choice. Their wives thought it was insanity for a woman my age to be sent into a war zone. I reminded them that unlike females in the military who were flying planes, driving trucks and actually getting shot at, I would be safely typing reports inside a guarded compound hundreds of miles from any combat operations.

Walking to my meeting in London I tried to ignore the last minute holiday shoppers, muffled against the damp cold and crowded into department stores that shimmered with lights and hummed with tinny Christmas carols.

Having set my watch incorrectly when I arrived in London, I was an hour early for my appointment with Mr. Smythe, the British diplomat who monitored activities in northern
Afghanistan. I’d been waiting for thirty minutes on a couch near his secretary’s desk, when at 11:15 she poked her head into his office and reminded him that I was here. She left his door wide open, promised me I would be seen in just a few minutes, and dashed out for an early lunch.

Mr. Smythe’s phone was ringing non-stop. He concluded another call, and stepped out to greet me. “Miss Morgan, so nice to meet you face-to-face. I have just one short meeting before ours. I hope you’re not in a hurry.” I assured him I was not.

“Please feel free to sit at my secretary’s desk and use her phone to call the U.S. if you have the need,” he said before rushing back to his office to take another call. It was much too early to ring New Mexico and I really didn’t have anything more to say to Dad or Bill, so I settled into the secretary’s comfortable chair to review the questions I had jotted down for our meeting.

“Excuse me, miss, my name is Davies, Major Mark Davies, is Mr. Smythe…”

I glanced up from my notes and into the electric blue eyes of a dark haired man in a business suit. He tugged uncomfortably at his tie, which did not budge. Standing stiffly before me and halting in mid-sentence, he swallowed hard and cleared his throat.

Resting his fingertips on the edge of the desk, leaning forward and staring at me with his brow slightly furrowed he examined my face as though we’d met before but he couldn’t quite remember where. The intensity of his gaze had rendered me momentarily speechless.

He was younger than I, but it was hard to tell by how many years. His olive skin was taut, although age or experience had added a thin tracing of lines around those intense blue eyes. He was clean-shaven, but a pale shadow already visible across his chin emphasized the hard sweep of his jaw.
It was our similarities that fascinated me—silky black hair—although mine was loose and layered, his clipped and military. The planes of both our faces were angled with sharp cheekbones and his nostrils like mine were slightly flared.

We had each inherited pale but permanent suntans from ancestors who had likely not fit well into polite western society. One of mine had been my great grandmother, a Comanche woman from the Oklahoma Territory, who had fallen in love with and married my great grandfather, an immigrant Irish farmer. My green eyes, my last name and a sprinkling of freckles across my nose were the only remnants I carried of my Celtic heritage.

With his dusky complexion that so resembled mine, the major’s deep blue eyes were as incongruous as my hazel green ones, which my mother Luisa used to call ‘los mares tempestuosos’ when something would upset me and they would darken to a storm-tossed grey.

Our intense but wordless exchange lasted less than ten seconds. With his eyes still locked on mine, the major snapped to attention and his voice returned.

“I’m quite late for my appointment with Mr. Smythe. Is he in?” he asked shifting his gaze to Smythe’s open door.

“Yes, he’s....”

Not waiting for me to finish my sentence, and without a thank you, he spun around and walked toward Smythe’s office.

“Mark,” said Smythe rising to greet him, “how nice to see you again. Thank you for stopping by. So sorry to disrupt your final day in town, but I wanted to speak with you in person before you left.”

“Sir, shall I close the door?” asked the major glancing back at me with a look that I could not decipher.
“No need,” said Smythe. “This will be brief.” I could see Smythe through the open door, sitting at his desk and tamping loose tobacco into his pipe. It was lunchtime in London and his phone had gone suddenly quiet.

“Sir, my apologies for being late.”

“Not a problem. When are you leaving for Kabul?” asked Smythe, his unlit pipe clenched between his teeth.

“I leave tomorrow morning to spend the holidays in Brunei, sir. I’ll be reporting to NATO headquarters in Kabul in early January.”

“Excellent. Listen, Mark, I’m aware that your preference is to return to Basra and continue the fine intelligence work you have been doing for our forces in Iraq, but as your commanding officer has hopefully explained to you, we need you right now in Afghanistan.”

As Smythe recapped the overarching political concerns of the British government in northern Afghanistan, it was soon apparent why he had wanted me to hear his conversation with the major.

“I presume that you are aware the Americans have decided to post one of their diplomats to our PRT in Mazar for another year,” said Smythe at the conclusion of his briefing.

“Excuse me, sir, I thought the Yanks had decided not to send any more diplomats to Mazar. Don’t we already have one of our own up there? The U.S. Army turned that PRT over to us more than a year ago.”

I sat without moving, my hands folded in my lap, hoping the phone would not ring and the secretary wouldn’t return. I listened with increasing interest to Smythe’s conversation with the major.

“Yes, they did, but…”
The major broke in, “Permission to speak freely, sir.”

“Go ahead,” said Smythe—a slight sharpness in his voice betraying his irritation.

“I really don’t think at this point we need to muck up what is already a very delicate situation in Mazar-e-Sharif with another Yank moving in and trying to tell our boys what to do. Is this a firm decision, sir?” asked Davies.

“You must understand, Mark,” replied Smythe, “that whatever we may think of the Americans, they are in fact funding hundreds of millions of dollars in reconstruction projects in northern Afghanistan including police and army training.

“If they want to have one of their own people up there reporting back to Washington, there’s not a great deal we have to say about it. Also the State Department and our Foreign Office both want a diplomat in Mazar, who is fluent in Dari. Neither our current diplomatic representative nor his replacement speaks the language.

“We suspect that some of the interpreters may not be briefing our officers accurately on all the side conversations taking place during their meetings with the local warlords. Mind you, no one at the PRT except for the commanding officer is to know about her language ability until she is able spend a few months going out on patrols with our boys and assessing the accuracy of our terps’ translations.”

“She, sir? They’re sending a woman?” I could hear the agitation rising in the major’s voice.

“That camp is quite small and really, sir, no place for a female. I know I have no right to object since I’ll be in Kabul, not Mazar, but in all honesty, sir, I think sending a women there would be a huge mistake.”
“Regardless of what you think, Mark, Her Majesty’s government, NATO and the commanding officer of PRT Mazar-e-Sharif have already expressed their full approval of and support for her assignment.”

Smythe glanced at me through the open door, one eyebrow raised then turned back to the major before continuing. “Even more important, however, the gender of the diplomat the Americans choose to send to our PRT should be of no concern to you, whatsoever.

“The British Army has temporarily housed females at PRT Mazar—medics, journalists, supply clerks. Just because there haven’t been any women there on a permanent basis doesn’t mean we can’t accommodate one now.

“You should also be aware that you won’t be spending all your time in Kabul, Mark. The Foreign Office intends to ask your commanding officer to release you for duty in Mazar-e-Sharif for at least six months.”

There was no reply from the major to this new information.

“You’ll spend a few weeks at NATO headquarters in Kabul filling in for the Chief of Staff, but you are urgently needed to take over the running of the intel shop at PRT Mazar. It’s a total mess. Our embassy in Kabul needs detailed and accurate reporting from Mazar and we believe you are the man to sort things out. We also need someone of your caliber to begin organizing the smooth transition of the whole intel operation to the Swedish Army when they take over the PRT from us at the end of 2005 and our boys move south to Helmand. We have requested your transfer north, but of course it’s entirely up to your commanding officer to approve it.”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir,” the major replied in a barely audible whisper.
Smythe tapped his pipe on an empty ashtray and continued. “We also need a fluent Pashto speaker like yourself in Mazar for the same reason we need the American diplomat’s expertise in Dari. We understand that the Afghan government will be moving some Pashtun police officials from the south into senior positions in the northern provinces. We may get even less accurate translations when our officers meet with these individuals. We’ll need both Miss Morgan’s and your linguistic talents to help us with this.”

“Is this woman with the CIA, sir? It would not help our credibility if word got out that we are providing cover for one of their agents.”

Smythe glanced at me through the door and saw me shaking my head at the major’s concern.

“The State Department says she’s one of theirs,” he assured Davies. “She’ll have a small private room in the officers’ section at the PRT and she’s quite agreeable to sharing their shower and bathroom facilities.”

“And how can you be sure of that, sir?” asked Davies.

“Trust me, Mark, she knows what she’s getting into,” replied Smythe.

“Yes, sir, but with all respect…” the Major’s voice was rising again.

“Mark, the decision has been made,” said Smythe as he stood to indicate that the meeting was over. “Would you like to meet Miss Morgan?”

“Who is Miss Morgan?” Davies seemed momentarily confused as Smythe led him out of his office and up to the desk where I rose unsmiling to greet him. My fascination with his dazzling blue eyes and swarthy complexion had been replaced by the simmering anger I’d felt so many times during my career when I faced the unreasoning prejudice of men who couldn’t imagine working with me as an equal.
Davies’ demeanor toward me had also undergone a dramatic transformation. He took my outstretched hand briefly into his, muttered, “Pleasure to meet you,” thanked Smythe with great formality for their meeting, turned and was gone.

“Is this the reception I should expect when I get to Mazar?” I asked Smythe.

I was accustomed to such behavior, having occasionally been on its receiving end since the day I became a Foreign Service Officer in 1979. I had been warned after I passed the written and oral exams that I was entering a fraternity which had been dominated for more than two centuries by eastern educated, white males, many of whom resented any effort to create a diplomatic corps that more closely resembled America.

My gender had been a significant impediment, given the fact that until 1972, a female diplomat who had the temerity to marry was forced by law to resign from the Foreign Service. My tawny skin and black hair—green eyes and freckles notwithstanding—had made even more problematic my acceptance into this stuffy old boys club, many of whose members were accustomed to being waited on by people who looked just like me.

Smythe thrummed his fingers on his secretary’s desk as we watched the major exit his office. “Miss Morgan, please let me apologize for this unpleasantness. I deliberately left my door open, because I thought it was important for you to understand what you’ll be facing when you get to Mazar.

“I…we have the greatest respect for our military and their contributions to our national security, but we struggle at times seeing eye to eye on matters of diplomacy. Major Davies is one of the finest intelligence officers I have ever met, but he is very much of the old school. He is a highly respected member of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, the most traditional regiment in the British Army.
“The Gurkhas have a distinguished history going back to our south Asian colonial wars of the 19th century. The Nepalese Gurkhas fought so valiantly against us and then with us that the crown decided to enlist a select few in the British Army. Our Gurkha recruits have been commanded for more than a century by British officers like Major Davies.”

“Do you know where the major is from?” I asked, still annoyed at Davies’ rudeness, but curious about his background and his physical resemblance to members of my own extended family in New Mexico.

Smythe had attended Oxford with a first cousin of Davies and was able to relate a few details about the major’s personal history.

“His mother was the daughter of a minor Indian princess from Kashmir and a British tea merchant. The family left India and moved to England in 1947 when the war of partition broke out. His father is from an old Hertfordshire family and was also a member of the Royal Gurkha Rifles. I believe Davies’ parents met at university in London in the early fifties.”

When Smythe’s secretary returned, he was desperate to step outside for a smoke. “Miss Morgan, could I invite you to join me for a spot of tea? There’s a pretty little place just around the corner.” His lit his pipe as soon as we reached in the street.

Over a pot of Earl Grey and a tray of scones I asked for more details about the British personnel I would be working with at the PRT. Smythe’s response was not encouraging.

“I’m sorry, Miss Morgan, I don’t know much about the British Army regiment that is there now. Our new diplomatic representative with the PRT, Richard Carrington is still on holiday. He’ll be arriving in Mazar a few weeks after you get there. I’m sorry there’s so much ambiguity about your role in the command structure. I don’t envy you this assignment,” he sighed.
Chapter Six:

December 22, 2004   Dubai

To reach Afghanistan from London, I had to overnight in Dubai, where I’d been instructed to pick up an onward UN Humanitarian Air Service flight that carried aid workers and embassy personnel the last seven hundred miles into Kabul.

Dubai from the air took my breath away. As our plane descended over this obscenely rich city-state it appeared that someone had arranged an expensive collection of cut glass perfume bottles across a long swatch of green felt. Those bottles were in fact massive glass walled hotels and office buildings, each one taller and more architecturally daring than the next. Rolling lawns of perfectly manicured grass lined the silky highways and wrapped themselves around the buildings, which marched in random patterns from the empty golden desert to the edge of the lapis blue Persian Gulf.

I arrived exhausted from London after another crowded, overnight flight in tourist class. The U.S. consulate in Dubai had made my reservation at a hotel, which they promised would offer a rate covered by government per diem. I was expecting no more than a comfortable bed, dinner in my room and a shower. I had to report to the United Nations air terminal by 9 am the following morning for the onward flight to Kabul.

A man in a chauffeur’s uniform was waiting in the sleek arrivals lounge, holding a sign with my name. “Miss Morgan,” he called when he noticed me staring at him, “I’m here to take you to your hotel.”
“Thank you, but I didn’t order a taxi.” I wondered how much he would charge if I did accept his offer.

“Don’t worry, the consulate travel office put in a request for a taxi, when they made your hotel reservation. You don’t pay me. It’s part of your hotel bill,” he said with a soothing accent that I couldn’t place,

He took my bags and led me to a polished black Mercedes. It was spotless inside with smooth jazz playing through speakers in the doors. Awaiting me on the back seat were a chilled bottle of sparkling water and the English-language Dubai paper. There must have been an error. Surely my per diem would not cover this.

The driver, when I asked where he was from, said he was Indonesian. “Emiratis don’t drive taxis,” he told me. “They actually don’t do any manual labor. I’m not sure what they do other than shop,” he added with unconcealed bitterness.

For the rest of the drive he maintained a discreet silence as we motored along the silky Sheik Zayed Road with its perfectly manicured shrubbery and thick green lawns.

The native born citizens of the United Arab Emirates who made up only 10% of their nation’s population lived a privileged existence, relying on hundreds of thousands of imported guest workers to keep their country running like a fine Swiss watch.

As we passed an enormous glass-enclosed luxury mall, I could see clusters of pampered young Emirati men, walking hand-in-hand, wearing creamy floor length dishdashas. Black silk cords held their crisp white headdresses in place as they gazed into the shop windows. Trailing behind them in dark billowing clouds were their female relatives shrouded from head to toe in voluminous black abayas.
My destination, the Emirates Towers Hotel, reached via a winding flower-lined driveway, was one of a pair of identical thin, angular, smoked glass buildings.

A smiling Filipino bellman took my bags from the taxi driver and led me into the soaring ten-story atrium. Glass elevators slid silently between the floors. As I approached the reception desk and my shoes sank into the thick burgundy carpets, I resisted the urge to pluck a piece of fresh fruit from one of the cut glass bowls scattered about the lobby. Elaborate fountains splashed next to clusters of well-dressed men sipping tiny cups of coffee and conducting their business in discreet whispers.

My clothes were wrinkled. I was tired, sweaty and felt totally out of place in the presence of these manicured customers being attended to by a very solicitous hotel staff.

“I think there may be a mistake about my reservation,” I whispered with some embarrassment to the desk clerk, an elegant Asian woman who was examining my diplomatic passport. This place had to be at least three times my per diem and I did not plan to go out of pocket for one night in a hotel.

“No, madam, There is no mistake. We offer a special rate for our diplomatic customers. Please do not worry. Your travel allowance is quite enough to cover your hotel, your meals and the taxi. Shall I put in a request for a car to the airport tomorrow morning?” I must have looked relieved when I nodded yes to her question because she laughed and added, “Don’t worry, this happens frequently with diplomats who stay here for the first time. Isn’t that right, Mr. Borosky?”

“It happened to me last year,” laughed a tall, blond man in tan slacks and an open collared white shirt—Russian I presumed from his name and accent. He was leaning on the
counter and looking at me with a bemused smile. “Stefan Borosky, first secretary Russian embassy, Kabul,” he said, extending his hand in greeting.

“Angela Morgan, U.S. Department of State. I’m on my way to the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazar-e-Sharif,” I replied shaking his hand while attempting to smooth my uncombed hair.

“Welcome to the emerald city, Angela,” he said still smiling. “I’m sure you’ll want to take a hot shower and rest up after your trip, but could I interest you in joining me for an early supper this evening? I’m leaving for a few weeks of R&R in Moscow tomorrow morning, but I’ve actually spent some time in Mazar and can tell you a bit about what you’re getting yourself into.”

It had been years since I’d been to dinner alone with a man, but I had no plans for that evening and he could perhaps provide me with useful information.

“Thank you, I’d love to,” I said before allowing myself any time to consider refusing his invitation. After one hour in Dubai, I had accepted my first ‘date’ in almost a decade—with a total stranger and former cold war adversary in a luxury hotel on the steamy shore of the Persian Gulf. Maybe this year wouldn’t be so bad after all.

I’ve kept my weight fairly steady over the years, and with a bar of soap, some moisturizer and a little eyeliner I’m still able to make myself fairly presentable even as I approach the mid-century mark. My mother used to tell me that olive skin was a blessing in disguise because it didn’t age as quickly as the pale pink Caucasian variety.

“Mom was right,” I sighed as I checked myself in the mirror before heading downstairs.
Wearing a short black linen dress, the only knee length outfit I had packed for my year in Afghanistan, my hair swept up and with a light touch of lip gloss, I got that silent whistle I was hoping for when I saw Stefan in the lobby.

“Miss Morgan, I hardly recognized you,” he said with a grin.

We dined at a dimly lit Lebanese restaurant near the hotel. The conversation and the wine flowed easily, but we each revealed only as much personal information as two cautious strangers, both representing governments that were former and possibly future competitors for world domination, felt comfortable sharing—which was not much.

Like most Russians, Stefan was a heavy smoker, as was almost everyone else in the restaurant. When he offered me one of his unfiltered Gallois, I was sorely tempted to accept, but not quite enough to break my ten-year streak without a cigarette.

Stefan was 53 and divorced with three grown children in Moscow. He was planning to retire after one more overseas tour.

I was fairly vague about my professional background, leaving out my knowledge of Russian and the two years I served at the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg when it was still Leningrad in the mid-1980s. I said nothing about Tom’s death in Beirut, only revealing that I had been a widow for a long time.

We shared an interest in horses, although neither of us rode any more. Stefan had taken a nasty fall years ago when his horse stumbled and put him in a body cast for six months.

After losing Tom I had lost all desire to ride, but I invented a story for Stefan about being thrown off a horse in New Mexico when a truck backfired. Ever the gentleman, he did not probe for details when I began avoiding his questions. It was time to change the subject.
“So what is Mother Russia doing in Afghanistan these days?” I asked as I fingered the stem of a glass of mellow Shiraz, which Stefan had ordered with our kabobs.

“We’re watching you attempt what we failed to do thirty years ago,” he said with a smile.

“When you get up north, you’ll see the rusting detritus of our futile and very expensive efforts to civilize Afghanistan.

“Let’s begin with the sad procession of derelict fifty-meter transmission towers, perched like lonely sentinels across the northern desert. They once carried reliable electric power from the USSR to Mazar-e-Sharif and over the Hindu Kush into Kabul.

“That ring road your government is spending tens of millions to rebuild? Both of our governments attempted that as well. Fifty years ago, your Army Corps of engineers built the Afghan section of the trans Asian highway from Herat to Pakistan, but no one maintained it and eventually it became impassable.”

He took a long swig of wine and closed his eyes. He was just getting started. “We built the road from Uzbekistan to Kabul and our engineers drilled the two-kilometer long Salang Tunnel through solid rock at the highest pass in the Hindu Kush. That tunnel cut 200 miles off the trip to the border, but the Afghan militias bombed it shut during their civil war.

“If you have the good fortune to attend a buzkashi game in Mazar, you’ll see just south of the field an abandoned multi storied structure. Locals call it the ‘silo’. It used to be a bread factory—built by us, of course. It produced thousands of loaves a day and provided hundreds of jobs.”

Stefan raised his glass to the USSR’s many development projects in Afghanistan then continued with his litany. “We built hundreds of schools for boys and girls and insisted they all attend. We prepared women for professional careers and told them they didn’t have to leave
their houses hidden under burkahs. That really got the mullahs mad.” He took a puff of his Gallois and blew a thin stream of smoke into the air.

“We offered scholarships and training to thousands of Afghans. We sent them to the Soviet Union to study. We brought in agronomists to help farmers improve their irrigation systems. We introduced fertilizers, pesticides and new strains of drought tolerant cotton and wheat.”

After three shots of vodka and several glasses of wine Stefan’s voice began to lose its edge. I was intrigued by his frank assessment of Mother Russia’s long and failed involvement in Afghanistan, but I was also getting sleepy.

“Am I boring you, Angela?”

“No, not at all,” I replied forcing my eyes to stay open. “I had no idea the Soviet Union had done so much development work in Afghanistan.”

“We did indeed,” he replied after another long sip of wine, “but we didn’t understand their culture. I’m not sure any outsiders ever will. The Afghans didn’t take to our godless communism any more than I think they’re going accept your egalitarian, democratic capitalism.”

He leaned back into the jumble of multicolored cushions, closed his eyes and took another long drag on his cigarette. “So what are we doing? Watching and waiting, as your country repeats our mistakes one-by-one.”

Stefan reached across the table with the wine bottle and I held my hand, fingers outstretched over the lip of my glass. He pulled back, annoyed that I had refused his offer of more wine.

“Are you afraid I’m trying to get you drunk?” he asked with a frown.
I ignored his question. “So, Stefan what would you advise the world’s only remaining superpower to do in Afghanistan?

He shook the last drops of wine into his own glass and rested his elbows on the table. “You can give up and leave with your tail between your legs like we did and like the once mighty British Army did twice more than a century ago. Or your generals could adopt Alexander the Great’s tactic of establishing permanent settlements. Marry your officers off to the daughters of the warlords and leave them behind with a few hundred soldiers to breed with the locals for a few decades.”

We both laughed at that improbable image.

Stefan reached over and patted my hand in a gesture of sympathy. “I fear, my dear, that your country may be digging itself into a 21st century version of Vietnam.”

He called for the check then snapped at the waiter when he brought us the separate tabs I had requested.

“I must insist on paying for my own meal, Stefan,” I said handing my credit card to the waiter.

He grumbled but we concluded the evening amicably. We agreed to meet in Kabul for another dinner at an undetermined date and parted in the lobby with a handshake.

Although our initial encounter appeared to have been completely coincidental, I assumed that even with my inconsequential and ill-defined assignment to Mazar-e-Sharif, Stefan would go back to his hotel room, dutifully write up an account of our conversation and send it off to some office in Moscow.
I wasn’t too concerned, but my guard was up, a remnant of the bad old days when even a minor brush with an eastern bloc official required a detailed report to diplomatic security. I would definitely be reporting this encounter when I got to Kabul.

Despite my exhaustion, I had trouble falling asleep, but I was afraid to take an Ambien after all that wine. At 3:30 a.m. I gave up and called room service for an early continental breakfast of rye-crusted croissants, a pot of strawberry jam, strong coffee and fresh orange juice.

CNN was broadcasting grainy videos of a suicide bombing in Iraq from earlier that morning. It was narrated by a distressed reporter, who explained that twenty-two of our soldiers dining in an Army mess tent in Mosul had been killed and sixty injured by a man in an Iraqi army uniform. He had walked unchallenged into the tent and pulled his explosive cord. I switched off the TV.

The following morning at the airport I had my first exposure to the private contractors and relief personnel who specialize in war zones. Most of this crowd was on their way to Iraq. Their conversations indicated they were a hard-drinking, hard living lot. Hawaiian shirts, snakeskin cowboy boots, expensive leather jackets and heavy gold jewelry seemed to be popular with the men and even with some of the few women among them.

Throaty smokers’ voices were common among this crowd, which seemed to be having a collective nicotine fit as delay after delay was announced in the smoke free airport lounge where we waited. After the Iraq-bound crowd had departed, those of us who had dressed for winter weather were informed that it was snowing in southern Afghanistan and the UN plane was grounded. If it couldn’t take off by noon, it wouldn’t be able to make the round trip flight and get back to Kabul before dark. Night landings were not permitted in Afghanistan.
Just after one p.m. we were told to go back to our hotels and try again the next morning. As soon as we exited the air-conditioned airport into Dubai’s eighty-degree weather, everyone shed their coats and sweaters and lined up for taxis. I was welcomed back like an old friend at the Emirates Towers reception desk and informed that Stefan had checked out. He was on his way to Moscow.

Chapter Seven:

December 24, 2004   Kabul

I am that rare grownup, who still gets a thrill from peering down at the earth from 30,000 feet and always asks for a window seat. The two-hour UN flight from Dubai to Kabul did not disappoint my inner child. We traveled north through Iranian airspace under a cloudless sky. As we approached the Afghan border, I pressed my nose to the window prepared to have my first look at a geologic feature I had read about but never seen.

The flat, dusky landscape of Iran’s northern desert began to rise and buckle under the pressure of the Indian sub-continenal plate, which was pushing slowly northward as it rammed into and slid under the much larger Asian plate. Massive sheets of sedimentary rock sliced jagged gashes in the desert floor as these two colossal tectonic masses experienced the geologic equivalent of a slow motion car crash that had been underway for 50 million years.

Further north, these slabs of what was once a seabed had been squeezed, shattered and thrust skyward to form the massive Himalayan mountain chain that stretched in a wide arc across southern Asia.
The pilot took us higher, cresting the jagged white peaks of the Hindu Kush then circling once over Kabul before flipping into a steep corkscrew dive toward the airport. We touched down just before noon under an ice blue sky.

Kabul’s mud houses and grey government buildings were still coated with yesterday’s snow. There were few trees left in or near this city that had been famed for its lush gardens and long shaded avenues and was now draped with rubble filled barricades and thick strands of razor wire. The snow-covered mountains, surrounding Kabul like a pearl necklace provided the ruined capital with its only touch of elegance.

According to the Afghan solar calendar, which I had copied out under Doc’s guidance with its Gregorian equivalents, it was the third of Capricorn 1383.

It was also Christmas Eve.

As our plane taxied down the runway, those of us arriving in Afghanistan for the first time stared silently out our windows at clusters of turbaned men huddled around fifty-gallon drums. Orange flames flickered above their rims into the dry winter air. Behind the men, dark skeletons of rusting airplanes and twisted tanks lay half buried under the grimy layer of day-old snow.

Another group of men wrapped in thin grey blankets and wearing plastic face guards, walked shoulder to shoulder along barren patches of earth between the runways. They swung long handled metal detectors back and forth in an endless search for the stray landmines that still littered the country.

Unsmiling Afghan employees from the embassy collected our passports, loaded our bags into a truck and herded us like a flock of confused sheep, through perfunctory immigration and customs formalities in a bare wooden building far from the main terminal. We climbed into
armored vans and were instructed by our stern American drivers to, “strap yourselves in for Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride” to the embassy in downtown Kabul.

As we sped along the narrow highway into the city, I had my first glimpse of Afghanistan’s female population, gliding like silent blue ghosts down the sidewalks and hidden from prying male eyes under their all-enveloping burkhas.

Twenty minutes later as we pulled up in front of the barricaded embassy on Great Massoud Road, our driver barked out more instructions, “Get out of the vehicle here, walk through that door single file, go through the security checkpoint inside and show the guards your passports. We’ll unload your bags in front of the admin trailer inside.”

“Hiya, I’m Mike Edgerton,” said a pale, middle-aged man with a thinning comb-over. He walked up to where I stood next to my suitcases. “Are you Angela Morgan?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Hope your flight was OK. Bet you’re tired, huh?” He inhaled quickly before continuing, “The dining hall is right behind us. Coffee, tea, sodas and snacks are available in there from 6:00 am until 9:00 p.m. Breakfast is from 6-9 in the morning. Lunch is from 11 to 2:30. Dinner’s from 5:30 to 8:30. You can pay in dollars or you could just run a tab if you were going to be here for a while—which you’re not. There’s also a little workout room next to the dispensary.

“You can read all this in the welcome kit, of course, but I thought you’d like to know the basics,” he added without taking another breath.

Waving expansively toward the white shipping containers laid end to end in long rows, he announced with an oddly proud flourish, “Welcome to Containerville!
“Follow me, and I’ll show you to your hooch. Need any help with those bags?”

I did. We each rolled one down a narrow sidewalk with a small sign identifying it as “Kandahar Row”. Mike stopped before container number 36. “Here’s your key. If you’re lucky, you might have this hooch to yourself until after New Years. We aren’t getting too many new arrivals over the holidays. Generally you transients have to share. Sorry about that.” He paused for my reaction to this bit of bad news and seemed vaguely disappointed when my face remained blank.

“So far it’s just us embassy folks who get our own containers,” he said, smiling at his good fortune.

“Any idea what you’ll be doing up in Mazar?” he asked as I struggled with the lock.

“Not really,” I said pulling my door open and gazing into the sterile interior of my temporary residence.

A C-5A Starlifter thundered overhead bringing supplies into Bagram Air Base, and drowning out Mike’s chatter which finally ended when he handed me a welcome kit and left me standing alone in front of my hooch. The door of a neighboring container opened soundlessly as I was pulling my suitcases inside. A sullen, heavy-set man in a khaki uniform with no insignia and a black rifle slung over his shoulder slammed his door shut and stomped past me without a look or a greeting.

The walls, floor and ceiling of my hooch were of molded white plastic. The furniture—two narrow cots, two metal lockers and one desk—was bolted to the floor. The whole place resembled a minimum-security prison.

After a longing stinging shower, I slipped into sweatpants and sneakers and spent more than an hour on the treadmill in the empty gym.
Night fell quickly in Kabul. The snowy mountains, which cast a pale tangerine glow over the city late in the afternoon, vanished quickly into blackness moments after sunset. The whine of the embassy’s generators seemed louder as the rest of the city, much of it without electricity, shut down and locked itself in for the night.

Standing alone outside my hooch, I inhaled for the first time the smells I would forever associate with this country—an intoxicating mix of cooking fires, grilled meat, crushed spices, mud, sweating pack animals and the rusting detritus of Afghanistan’s many wars.

I was hungry. It was time to find the dining hall even though I dreaded joining a room full of strangers for Christmas Eve dinner. No planes flew after dark, leaving the night sky to the millions of stars visible over Kabul. I picked out the Big Dipper, found Polaris, locked the door of my hooch, switched on my flashlight and headed off to the cafeteria.

Bundled against the icy mountain air, I approached the door of the doublewide trailer Mike had pointed out when I arrived. The windows were dark and there was a “Closed for the Holidays” sign taped to the door. A passing security guard told me there was another cafeteria near the old embassy building. He took me to an underground tunnel, which he promised led to the far side of the compound and a hot meal.

Walking through the dimly lit concrete passage, I saw a lone figure approaching in the shadows. He was carrying a rifle. I couldn’t see his face and kept my flashlight pointed at the ground. His unmarked khaki uniform indicated he was one of the contract guards. I could tell by his round face and almond eyes that he was a Nepalese national, and likely a former member of the Royal Gurkha Rifles, Major Davies’ regiment.

Short, stocky and muscular, he greeted me warmly in a clipped British accent, “Good evening, Mum.” This ex-soldier could probably snap my neck with his little finger, but his smile
was genuine and I felt safe in his presence. I returned his greeting and continued my hunt for the cafeteria.

The poorly lit, rubble-strewn and very muddy construction site surrounding the old and new embassy buildings made walking treacherous. After five minutes of searching, I located a narrow path and a hand-drawn sign, which led me to another doublewide trailer strung with garlands of winking Christmas lights. This was the dining hall for the Marine security guards and for embassy personnel living in a jumble of shipping containers on the south side of the compound.

‗Charlie Brown’s Christmas‘, broadcast from a wall-mounted TV set by the door, was competing with the chipmunks’ version of Jingle Bells on a portable CD player in the kitchen. The room was overheated and the conversation deafening as the Marine guards and the embassy skeleton crew—those who had volunteered or been forced to stay in Kabul for Christmas—tried to make the best of a bad situation.

The ambassador had gone back to the U.S. for the holidays. His deputy chief of mission, wearing reindeer antlers and dishing up slices of turkey roll, greeted me as I joined the serving line.

“You must be Angela,” he said, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead. “Welcome to the embassy and Merry Christmas. I’m Paul Plawner.” He dropped a slab of rubbery white meat on my plastic plate.

“There’s plenty of food for everybody, so don’t be shy,” he said. “Take Christmas Day off, of course but please call my secretary first thing Sunday morning to set up an appointment. I’ll try to see you in the afternoon.”
The workweek in Afghanistan as in most Muslim countries ran from Sunday through Thursday. The Embassy was officially closed every Friday, the Islamic day of rest and it was in theory closed on Saturday, although most American embassy employees were hard at work six and even seven days a week.

An excessively cheery personnel officer was passing out homemade Christmas cookies in plastic sandwich bags—three cookies per person.

“I didn’t bake these myself but I did put on all the sprinkles,” she gushed, as she offered me a bag, patted my hand and said, “Come on, honey, it’s not that bad here.” I forced myself to smile until she turned her attention to the next customer.

Alcohol, even a small glass of wine, which I desperately craved, was not permitted in the Marines’ cafeteria. I washed down my turkey, wilted broccoli, scoop of powdered mashed potatoes and jellied cranberry sauce with one of the liter bottles of water that could be found stacked by the case in front of every building on the compound. Tap water here was safe for bathing, but not for drinking.

I sat down at a bare metal table with three young Marines and attempted without success to make small talk. They shoveled down their food, eyes glued to a football game playing on another Armed Forces TV set bolted to the wall near their table. As soon as their plates were scraped clean, they rose as one, explaining in monosyllables that they had to report for guard duty. After picking at my food for a few more minutes, I grabbed the bag of cookies, switched on my flashlight, walked back through the tunnel and returned alone to my hooch.

Chapter Eight:
December 25, 2005

At 6 a.m. I ate the three cookies and washed them down with a microwave cup of instant coffee from a jar left by a previous occupant. It was raining, my hooch was warm, and I couldn’t face another walk through the tunnel and across the rubble to the embassy cafeteria. Crawling back under the covers, I unwrapped the small package my brother had made me promise not to open until Christmas morning. It was a plastic cube with six old black and white photos of Bill, me, Mom and Dad on the ranch. I fell asleep with the cube on my pillow and didn’t wake up until the sun was setting—just in time to throw on a pair of jeans and a jacket, switch on my flashlight and force myself to go again through the tunnel and into a room full of strangers for more turkey roll.

There are many reasons for a diplomat to go unarmed and virtually untrained into a war zone—a sense of duty, an unhappy marriage, a big mortgage, or a less than brilliant career like mine that was about to crash and burn. Did I honestly add Afghanistan to my wish list because I thought it might get me promoted, or had this been an unconscious effort to force myself out of the protective shell I’d been hiding behind for the past twenty years?

One picture in the photo cube of me riding my pony Novio reminded me of the many times I had fallen off when Bill and I raced back to the barn. My strategy, which usually worked, was to jump over instead of walking through the smaller arroyos. When that plan failed and I would arrive home limping, crying and leading Novio, Mom would not let me in the house until I got back in the saddle and rode at a full gallop down to the main road and back. I had not been on a horse or in a war zone since I lost Tom. Perhaps it was time to remount.
I was late for my Sunday morning appointment with the DCM, but he didn’t seem to mind. Everyone on the embassy compound with access to a television had been mesmerized by CNN’s endlessly looping tourist videos of the massive tsunami that had swept over Indonesia while we slept.

“I understand you speak very good Russian and got highest score ever in Farsi many years ago,” Plawner said after welcoming me into his cramped office in the old embassy building. He remained behind his desk and motioned for me to take a seat on a worn leather couch.

“I was also told that you took a Dari conversion course and reached fluency after only three months. Pretty impressive,” he added as he stared out the window at the barricaded embassy grounds.

“It was actually four months, sir, and languages come fairly easily to me.” I replied.

“Good, good,” he said, nodding absently. “You’re aware, of course, that DEA wants to know if the interpreters at the PRT in Mazar are giving the full picture to the British Army about what’s being said regarding the whole narcotics mess up there. We need reporting on poppy production in Balkh province and of course any evidence of involvement of government appointees in the narcotics trade.”

“Excuse me sir,” I interrupted, “other than listening in on the interpreters and reporting on poppy production, what precisely will my role be in Mazar?”

“We’re trying to get the central government to convince local warlords to tell us where their hidden weapons caches are so the Afghan army can confiscate them, but that’s a bit of a hard sell right now.”
“I’m supposed to convince the warlords to hand over their weapons?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” he replied still staring out the window, “but we do want you to report on any successes the British army has in this regard and of course you’ll be serving as a political advisor to the British PRT commander and his officers.” Plawner ran through a laundry list of issues, droning on as though he were alone and dictating into a tape recorder.

“Most of the weapons and ammunition the Afghans have squirreled away were taken by them from the Russians, but a number of their stockpiles also contain the remnants of some pretty nasty toys we gave the mujahadeen back in the eighties.

“We certainly don’t want all that fire-power used against us in the future—especially the shoulder-launched Stingers. They can take out a helicopter or even one of our big transport planes. We’re paying a pretty penny to get them back,” he said pausing to observe my reaction as he added, “up to $100,000 for one.”

I raised one eyebrow, scribbled in my notebook and looked suitably impressed.

“You know of course that we’re cooperating with the British embassy on all of these issues. You’ll be working closely with their diplomatic representative at PRT Mazar. That should make things much easier for you,” he added, having no idea how wrong that statement would prove to be.

“You might be interested in looking into the treatment of rural women,” he continued. “It’s appalling and I don’t know there’s much we can do about it, but some reporting would be useful.

“No hostiles are shooting at NATO forces up north right now, Angela, but please do be careful. Armed combat between the ethnic Tajik and Uzbek militias ended in your area a few
months ago, but we expect political tensions to heat up again as local strong men start positioning themselves for next September’s parliamentary elections. That could be interesting,” he added without much enthusiasm.

“Of course, you understand that the U.S. government’s main focus is in the south where the fighting is, but we’ll definitely be looking forward to reading your reports.”

I nodded silently as he continued, “I do hope you’ll be able to get out and explore some of the historical sites near Mazar. I understand they are quite remarkable. I’ve been here for more than a year, but I don’t get to leave Kabul very often. The ambassador does the traveling while I stay back and mind the fort.”

An alarm went off somewhere in the building. We both froze until it was switched off. When no one came in to report an emergency, Plawner droned on. “I’ve learned to my dismay that many Afghans, even the educated ones, have little appreciation for their country’s remarkable past. A French archeologist I met a few months ago at an embassy reception told me that many rural Afghans are taught a strange mix of historical facts and hero sagas by their village elders—legends of Alexander the Great blended with stories of Genghis Khan, King Amanulla and the prophet Mohammad. Such a pity.” His voice trailed off and his eyes focused on the ceiling. I waited for him to continue.

“I’m no expert on this country. None of us are,” he sighed, shifting in his chair, which squeaked loudly. He leaned forward and looked straight at me for the first time. “We armed this place to the teeth, abandoned it fifteen years ago and now we’re paying a hellish price. We assign Foreign Service Officers here for one year at a time, the Afghans barely get to know your names, and then you leave taking all your knowledge with you. It’s an almost impossible…”

His secretary poked her head in the office, “Sir, you’re next appointment has arrived.”
Farishta by Patricia McArdle

“I know your job description is a bit vague, but that’s the nature of the game here. We’re all sort of making things up as we go along. Please don’t quote me on that. But seriously, if you have any problems don’t hesitate to call me,” he added with little enthusiasm as we shook hands. “Best of luck. I’m sure the Brits will take good care of you.”

The man was clearly overwhelmed. I doubted we would ever meet again, but I wished him well, exited through his double cyber-locked doors and headed down the poorly lit back stairway of the old embassy building to my next meeting. No one mentioned the tsunami for the rest of the afternoon. The problems we faced in Afghanistan made it all but impossible to give any attention to that terrible tragedy. It was as though it had happened on another planet.

After four more appointments, including a stop at the security office to report my encounter with Stefan, I returned to my hooch just before dark and found a small envelope taped to my door. Inside was a typed note from DCM Plawner.

Chapter Nine:

December 25, 2004

Dear Angela,

I will be hosting a small dinner party later this week. If you are still in Kabul and are free Wednesday December 29, I would like to invite you to join me, and a small group of colleagues at one the few restaurants we are still allowed to frequent after dark.

I received a call this afternoon from the French archeologist I mentioned during our meeting today. He is working on a project at the Kabul Museum and will be heading to his dig in the
north as soon as the snow melts this spring. I thought you might enjoy meeting him and hearing a bit about the excavation he is supervising just a few miles from your PRT. Our embassy political counselor, an Afghan archeologist from the Kabul museum, and my counterpart at the British Embassy, will also be joining us.

Sincerely,

Paul Plawner
Deputy Chief of Mission
American Embassy Kabul

One did not turn down a request from the DCM and I was anxious to meet the archeologist. I called his secretary and accepted the invitation.

Plawner had given me a long list of people to contact for briefings while I was in Kabul. As I began my meetings, I found they fell into three broad categories: Those who were in Afghanistan to collect hardship and danger pay, and do as little as possible. Those who enthusiastically carried out the policies dictated by Washington but were averse to boat rocking. And then there were the rebels who challenged the status quo by criticizing existing programs and proposing unconventional solutions.

Members of that third group—a distinct minority—were constantly reprimanded or simply ignored. They had the guts or the insanity to speak the truth even when it went against official policy. They actually seemed to care about what was happening to the Afghan people. As I would learn from personal experience, they were a very frustrated bunch.

My first exposure to a category three individual was at a disarmament strategy meeting at the embassy, which I attended as an observer. A U.S. Marine colonel, who had been trying for a
year to defang illegal militias in Kandahar province, stood up and openly mocked a proposed national decree that would give warlords and their followers one month to disband and hand over their stocks of weapons and ammunition.

“Who the hell do we think we’re kidding here?” he snorted. “The Afghans have been living in these mountains for thousands of years. If I’ve learned one thing here, it’s that these are a damned patient people. Hell, they can sit on a rock watching a herd of sheep eat grass all day and not get bored.”

There were a few snickers around the table, but the colonel wasn’t finished.

“The Russians were here for twenty-five years, but the Afghans knew they’d eventually drive them out. They don’t know how long we’ll be here, but they do know one thing for damn sure. We won’t be here forever. And when we get tired and pull out, they’ll dig up all those munitions they have wrapped, oiled and buried in their back yards or hidden in caves, and control of this country will go right back to the guys with the most guns.

“Let’s not kid ourselves, folks. We know there are at least five hundred big, bad, illegally armed groups with more than a million weapons hidden around this country.” As he sat down, he added with a grim smile, “I’m a card carrying member of the NRA back home. I’ll bet if Afghanistan had a branch here, the NRA would be on the side of the goddamn militias!”

I had an awkward meeting with a U.S. government civilian employee who supervised contractors hired to rebuild the Afghan police force. He was an unpleasant man who clearly didn’t want to be in Afghanistan and resented my questions. When I asked for details about the regional police training centers, he didn’t even know how many there were. “You know, Miss Morgan, you really don’t have to worry about the police where you’re going because British
trainers are running the center near Mazar,” he was becoming more annoyed with each question I asked.

“Yes, but didn’t we build that center with U.S. money, and aren’t we funding everything except the salaries of three British police instructors?” I asked looking at notes I had taken in another meeting. He shook his head and said he would have to get back to me, which he never did.

At the counter narcotics office, I was told that in the spring large teams of Afghans led by a U.S. contractor would be sent into the southern provinces to manually chop down the poppy plants in designated fields. The Brits had the lead on counter narcotics, but the U.S. was funding much of the program.

Another U.S.-backed proposal under consideration involved the use of crop dusters to spray the poppy fields of Afghan farmers from the air with herbicides. Not all of our forces thought that was such a good idea.

“You must understand, Miss Morgan,” said a young U.S. Army captain pulling me aside after another briefing, “that those of us who work in PRTs down south are dead set against the poppy eradication programs. If the farmers think our soldiers are involved in destroying their crops, it won’t be safe for my boys to patrol outside the wire. I don’t know what the answer is, but pissing off a few hundred thousand Afghan farmers is a really bad idea.”

U.S. Drug Enforcement agents were training an elite interdiction force of Afghan soldiers to swoop down in helicopters, capture drug traffickers and destroy their stores of opium.

“You may see a certain amount of poppy production in Balkh province, where you’re going,” a senior embassy officer cautioned me, “but the governor up there is cooperating, and we expect the number of hectares under cultivation to drop significantly by next year.”
Our meeting ended abruptly when a young staff aide appeared at the door with a worried look on his face and a sheaf of papers in his hand. I showed myself out of the building.

The DEA official and I would not meet again until May when I would take him on a guided tour through one of the hundreds of fields planted as far as the eye could see with red, white and pink opium poppies. At one point, when our vehicle got stuck, a crowd of laughing poppy farmers pulled us out of the mud and posed for photos. That was before the eradication teams arrived to begin destroying their fields.

A cold drizzle fell on my third day of consultations, leaving Kabul awash in a sea of ashen mud. My grim faced Afghan driver steered our armored embassy vehicle through Kabul’s soggy streets, swerving aggressively around the endless security barricades that had turned the city into a rain soaked obstacle course.

The weather reinforced my grey mood, which was growing darker after every meeting. Each person I spoke with confirmed the depressing realization that I would be spending the next year in Mazar as a helpless and unwelcome bystander writing reports that no one would read.

My next meeting was with a distraught young electrical engineer, who had been hired by USAID to work on the design of Afghanistan’s new electric power grid. He was as fiercely critical of the plans for electrification as the Marine colonel had been about efforts to disarm the illegal militias.

“Take a look at this, Miss Morgan,” he said, unrolling a 1960s-era Soviet map of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan across his battered desk. Plastic overlays with red and yellow dotted lines indicted where the new power grid and transmission towers were to be installed.
“The international community—and,” he added looking up at me with narrowed eyes, “your tax dollars—are about to fund the construction of an obsolete twentieth century grid that will force the Afghans to purchase electricity from Central Asia for decades to come!”

Stefan had taken great delight in describing this very plan to me during our dinner in Dubai. “This is one move on the ‘Great Game’ chessboard, Angela, that your side may regret in another decade,” he had said with a grin before tossing back another shot of vodka.

The young engineer put on a pair of thick black eyeglasses, rolled up his map and pulled a file from his desk drawer. “Here’s why this makes no sense, Miss Morgan. Last year, the U.S. spent millions of dollars to map the solar and wind energy potential of Afghanistan.” He pointed to a cryptic diagram in his file.

“This shows that Afghanistan has the potential to generate much of its energy requirements using renewable resources. We should be helping these people build a 21st century power system with wind and solar thermal plants. Don’t you agree?” he pleaded as though I could have some effect on these decisions.

I knew little about energy and nothing about power generation, but his arguments certainly made sense to me. “So why aren’t we doing it?” I asked.

“Vested interests, the fossil fuel industry, ossified, unimaginative development officials, greed, corruption. How’s that for starters?” he asked. “Sorry, I’m being a very bad host. May I offer you a cup of coffee? Diet Coke?”

I shook my head and he continued.
“The whole electric grid project is being lumped together with plans to build oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia. U.S. companies have been angling for rights to build these lines across this country for years. Did you know that Taliban representatives actually went to Texas to meet with Enron officials back in the mid-1990s?”

I shook my head again and he plunged ahead.

“Even the Russians are hoping for a piece of the action.”

That I knew from Stefan.

“They want to create a Eurasian energy cartel that will resemble OPEC!” he cried, snapping the pencil he had been holding and throwing it into the trash. He looked as though he were about to burst into tears.

“They’ve found a bit of oil up north and the warlord who claims control of that land has convinced the Afghan government and the U.S. that developing these sites will create jobs for his people. I hope you’ll be able to visit one of those oozing hellholes so you can see the horrendous conditions under which the locals are currently extracting oil. These are not jobs I would wish on anyone.”

I was fascinated by this man’s passion for renewable energy, but his angst was making me increasingly uncomfortable. When he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me across the room to look at another wall map, I began to perspire under my sweater.

“Once the international community pulls out of this country—and someday soon we will—how will Afghanistan ever be able to compete on the global market for energy when China, Russia, Western Europe and the U.S. will be vacuuming up every available kilowatt hour at premium prices?” His question was rhetorical and he didn’t wait for my response before continuing.
“Even large-scale hydroelectric power is risky. Afghanistan has been suffering from a drought that has dried up most of its dams. With the melting of the glaciers in the Himalayas it’s questionable how long hydropower will be an affordable option. Our whole misguided energy policy will guarantee that Afghanistan remains an economic basket case.” He was barely taking a breath between sentences.

“It’s criminal that we’re doing this to a country where the sun shines more than three hundred days a year,” he added while wringing his hands and shaking his head in frustration.

“In just a few months, you’ll see hundreds of little boys out flying their kites. The early spring sun will cast long shadows as they run through the streets. Afghanistan’s sun and wind are just waiting to be tapped for their endless free energy.” He led me to the door still in a very agitated state. “Thanks for stopping by, Miss Morgan. I’m sure to be fired soon because I yammer away at this in every meeting I attend, but someone has to.”

My final briefing was in the old embassy building with a young political officer who added his own cynical perspective to the tangled web into which I was about to plunge.

“We’ve divided up the areas of responsibility for reconstruction among our coalition partners so that it appears to be a joint undertaking. Smoke and mirrors, my dear. The truth is that the U.S. is footing most of the bill. Take police training—the Germans are supposed to be in charge of this, but all they’re doing is running an elite, three-year police academy for a lucky few hundred candidates. We’re funding all the training for tens of thousands new policemen.

“The Italians are nominally in charge of reforming the judicial system. Don’t even get me started on that one. Our dear friends the Brits are supposed to be running the counter narcotics program, but it’s a total mess and we’re throwing millions of dollars down that hole as well.
“We’re funding the construction of cinder block school buildings that are boiling hot in the summer and freezing in the winter. Sub-sub contractors are doing most of the construction work, so when the roofs fall in or their generators and ventilation systems break down, nobody is responsible. We’re building new asphalt roads that will never be repaved or repaired once the contractors go back to Dubai or Turkey or wherever the hell they’ve come from. You’ll see all of this when you get to Mazar.

“I’m really not sure what you are supposed to be doing up there, Angela, but whatever it is, I wish you the best of luck. I’m leaving this place in twenty-seven days and I hope to god I never come back.”

End of Excerpt