



A persistent ringing jarred Elsa out of a sound sleep. She fumbled for the phone, her eyes still closed, as the bright sunlight seeped through her tightly shut blinds.

“Hello,” she groaned into the receiver.

“Hello, hello, Elsa.” A faintly familiar French accent greeted her. “It is Jean-Claude calling from Aide du Monde in New York.”

“Oh, hello,” she answered, suddenly awake. She hadn’t heard from ADM in over five months.

“I am sorry we have taken so long,” Jean-Claude continued, “but I am happy to say that, finally, we have a posting for you.”

“That’s wonderful,” she said quickly. “Where is it?”

“We still need you in Afghanistan, in a place called Bamiyan,” he replied. “The home of the famous Buddha statues. Well, there are no Buddhas now of course, thanks to the Taliban, but there in Bamiyan, we have a clinic and hospital. The mission will be for one year. You can go, yes?”

*A year*, she thought, pushing aside her fears.

“Yes, of course. When will I leave?” she asked.

“Probably in a few weeks. We just wanted to be sure you would accept the post. Thank you for saying yes. I will call you later this week with details. Until then, good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” Elsa replied. She hung up the phone with trembling fingers.

It was really going to happen—she was going to *Afghanistan*. She almost couldn’t believe it.

It was a cold, gray morning in early March when Maureen drove her to the airport and said a tearful good-bye.

“I’m so proud of you, Elsa. Promise me you’ll be careful,” Maureen said, her voice straining with emotion. “Just come back to us safe.”

Only later, when Elsa stood in the long line that led through the security maze at Logan airport, did she feel the first real threads of worry about Afghanistan. But the arrangements had all been made; it was too late to back out now, not that she wanted to anyway. This trip was everything she’d ever wanted. She tried to shake off her anxiety, but tears gathered in her eyes as she boarded the plane and sat peering out of the scratchy little window at the blurred runway. It would be her last look at Boston for a long time.

The first leg of her journey took her to the ADM offices in Paris to pick up medicines and some of the supplies she would need in Bamiyan. It was the first time she’d been outside of the United States, and she yearned to see some of the famous City of Lights, but there was no time.

There were no commercial flights into Afghanistan, so she was booked on a flight to Peshawar in northern Pakistan, the tribal, frontier city that was the point of entry for all the aid going into Afghanistan. Peshawar was a crumbling old city teeming with refugees, freedom fighters, aid workers, intrigue, and centuries of history.

Elsa landed in Peshawar in the late morning, and the instant she emerged from the plane, she was hit by the full sun and murky heat of the day. She stood in the plane’s doorway at the top of the metal stairs and looked out, the scents and sounds full upon her, and paused.

“*You!*”

She jumped as a soldier barked at her and motioned brusquely with his machine gun. Her palms were sweating—along with just about every other part of her body—as she descended the staircase

and stepped onto the cracked and steaming tarmac. The soldier frowned and pointed the way to the arrival terminal. Elsa fell in behind the other passengers.

The terminal, a squat two-story building, was teeming with activity. Turbaned men in oversized pajama suits and women in loose dresses and veils filled every available space. Elsa hesitated, looked at her own jeans and cotton shirt, and felt conspicuously out of place in the heaving, exotic crowd.

Suddenly she realized she'd lost sight of the line of passengers, who'd somehow blended into the crowd. She stood there alone and tried to read the signs. Panic began to grip her when she realized none of them were in English.

A flash of movement caught her eye and there, at what seemed to be the entrance to the terminal, she saw a young man waving a sign with her name on it. Relief flooded through her, and she hurried to his side.

"Come, come," he said. "My name is Ajmal, and I am here to help you with the rest of your travels. Follow me, please." He took her passport and visa and guided her through the long lines and confusing maze of Immigration and Customs, and then he collected her lone suitcase and a bulky carton of supplies she'd gathered in Paris. He lifted the carton onto one shoulder and lifted her suitcase with his free hand.

Finally, he paused.

"You are from Amrika, yes?"

"Yes, yes, I'm Elsa. Well, you know that, I guess," she said, grinning. "After all, you have the sign." As he smiled back, some of her nervousness melted away.

"I am from Afghanistan." He put his hand over his heart. "It is the place of my birth and where my heart resides. You are here to help my people?"

"Yes, well, I hope so, but I'm sure I still have a lot to learn."

"You have come here, a stranger, to help us." He paused and pointed out his car, a small, white sedan held together with duct tape and wire. "We are already grateful to you." Ajmal grinned broadly again, and Elsa noticed that he was missing almost half of his teeth.

"We do not have much time, mees." (He pronounced "miss" as

“mees.”) “You cannot even see the old city. There is too much to do. These medical supplies will be sent on to your destination. *You* will need Afghan clothes and some additional supplies, and you will be on the United Nations flight to Afghanistan this afternoon.”

Ajmal spoke in short, rapid bursts, and he drove the same way. As he pulled away from the airport, Elsa hung on tightly, certain the tires were about to fly off.

While he maneuvered the car through the dusty alleys and streets of Peshawar, she got a dizzying look at the city that Kipling had once described as “the Oldest Land.” From the looks of it, not much had changed. The streets swarmed with starving children, crippled beggars, frail men, and skeletal horses. Veiled women hurried along, lugging babies and parcels.

*Could Afghanistan be worse than this?* she wondered.

Ajmal brought the car to a screeching halt outside a maze of stalls selling everything from clothes to rifles. He ushered Elsa inside a tiny shop where the dim light brought needed relief from the sun. He gestured to her as he spoke to the shopkeeper. After a few minutes, Ajmal turned to her.

“This man is a great tailor, and he supplies clothes for everyone that ADM sends into Afghanistan. He says it is an honor to meet you.” The shopkeeper looked briefly at Elsa and laid his right hand over his heart and bowed slightly as Ajmal continued.

“He cannot touch you or measure you for clothes, so—from your appearance—he will guess your size and bring out dresses and pants that he has already sewn.” Ajmal settled himself cross-legged on the carpet and motioned for Elsa to join him. She wasn’t sure how to sit on the floor; she tried to cross her legs too, but it didn’t seem right, so she knelt and sat back on her heels.

A young boy scurried into the shop from a back room. He balanced a silver tray that held a delicate teapot and several cups. He squatted and placed the tray on the carpet and in one swift movement, he poured a cup of steaming tea and pushed it to Elsa. Smiling, he passed her a bowl of sugar cubes and a small pitcher of cream. He stood and almost ran from the shop.

“Thank you,” Elsa called after the fleeing figure. “Is he afraid of me?” she asked her guide.



“Perhaps. Though there are more and more foreigners here now, not many locals have a chance to meet one. He’s probably running home to boast that he saw a foreign woman.” Ajmal flashed his toothless grin and filled his little cup with spoon after spoon of sugar cubes.

Elsa grimaced as she watched. That explained the state of his teeth.

The shopkeeper appeared, laden with several long dresses and large, wide-legged pants. He held them up for Elsa’s approval and laid them on the counter. He produced several large head-scarves and draped them alongside the dresses.

Elsa pulled herself up, glad to be off the floor and standing again, and leaned over the items.

“Oh,” she said, “they’re beautiful. Should I just hold them up to myself?” She held a dress in front of her and turned to Ajmal. “Does it look right?”

Ajmal nodded his approval, and she set aside the items she wanted to buy. He spoke again to the shopkeeper, who hurried to the back, returning with a full-body cloak called a *burqa*. It was enormous and intimidating with its accordion-like folds of fabric. Designed to slip over the wearer’s head like a tent, it covered everything from her head to her toes.

“You will need this, mees,” Ajmal said. “There are still places where women must stay covered. Better that you should get it now and keep it with you.”

Elsa’s final purchase was to be a pair of shoes, and Ajmal pointed out some cheap plastic sandals, the only footwear available at the little shop. Their shopping done, Ajmal signed the bill.

“ADM will pay for your clothes,” he explained as he guided her back to the car.

Behind the wheel of the car, the polite Ajmal became a demon again, speeding through the narrow streets, beeping at donkeys and people alike. Elsa held on to her seat until they came to a stop in front of ADM’s little local office. He looked at his watch and asked her to hurry. “You will need to change into your new clothes for the trip to Kabul. Please hurry, we don’t have much time.”

He showed Elsa to the bathroom and once she was alone she



pulled off her jeans and shirt. She'd been wearing them since she left Boston, and it was good to peel them away. She looked at her new clothes and chose a tan-colored dress and pants. She pulled the pants on, fastened them around her waist, and pulled the long dress over her head. She draped one of the scarves over her head and turned to look in the mirror. A woman from another time stared back at her. In the full-length dress, the puffy pants, and the scarf, she looked as though she might have stepped from a history book, a character from one of Kipling's stories. If it hadn't been for her familiar green eyes, thick chestnut hair, and full lips still toting a faded coat of cherry lipstick, she might not have recognized herself.

She smiled at her reflection and swiped a fresh layer of color over her lips. *Now* she was ready.

Ajmal knocked and again asked her to hurry. She picked up her things and joined him. In a flurry of instructions, he told her that the UN flight was early, and she would be flying to Kabul—Afghanistan's capital—within the hour. He packed Elsa, her lone suitcase, and her new purchases into the car and drove her to the UN booking office, where he said good-bye.

"*Khoda hafez*, good-bye," he said.

"Thank you so much, Ajmal." She gripped his hand and pumped it as she spoke. Uncomfortable with her effusive thanks, he slipped his hand from hers and hurried away, grinning nonetheless.

Pulling her bags and her suitcase behind her, Elsa found a seat in the lounge and waited. There were only three other passengers, Japanese aid workers heading to northern Afghanistan for a brief stay. They were loaded down with heavy boxes, filled—they said—with computers, radios, and satellite phones.

After a short wait, the small group was taken by van to the airport, but this time they were driven right past the crowds of travelers lugging bags of every size and shape. They were ushered to the UN terminal, a relatively quiet place, where they waited yet again. Finally, an hour later, they were led out to the runway to wait for their flight.

They stood with their luggage under a raggedy plastic tarpaulin held up by sticks, protecting them from the sun. They watched as a small plane with the UN logo on its wing taxied up to them. The



pilot appeared in the plane's doorway and jumped down to greet them.

"Hello, hello," he said briskly. "Things are pretty calm right now, so I think we will have a good flight, but there's never a guarantee, so it's best to cover the procedures if we go down." His words sent a shiver through Elsa, who hadn't considered the possibility, and he continued, pointing as he spoke.

"Once we're on the ground, pull that lever by the front window, push open the door, jump onto the wing, jump down toward the back of the plane, and wait there for me." He paused and pointed away from the plane.

"But if I don't follow you, or if we're under direct fire, then run like hell for the best cover you can find."

Elsa marveled at the way he calmly described a situation she could hardly imagine, and she forced herself to listen carefully to the rest of his instructions.

A short time later, their seat belts clicked securely into place and they were off to Kabul. She could barely contain her excitement. Her fears had evaporated. Ajmal had been so kind and the pilot so skilled. Everyone, it seemed, knew just what to do. She settled into her seat. She was going to be fine.

Within the hour, the little plane descended into Kabul, and Elsa pressed her face against the window to watch as it was all but swallowed by the soaring mountain ranges that ringed the city. As they touched down, she saw that the airport was dotted with machine-gun-toting soldiers, tanks, antiaircraft turrets, sandbags, and military aircraft. The plane stopped in the middle of the runway and the pilot released the little door and staircase. The passengers descended and waited while he threw down their bags. To Elsa's surprise, he didn't follow them but turned to slip back into the plane.

"Good luck," he yelled as he pulled up the hatch.

Elsa picked her bag up and hesitated, not certain what to do, wondering if she'd missed something Ajmal had said.

Should she wait where she stood or somewhere else?

Was someone coming for her?

The little trio of Japanese men picked up their own bags and headed into the main terminal, glancing back to see if she was



following. Deciding there was strength in numbers, Elsa picked up her things and shuffled after them into the terminal, and there in the crowd stood an ADM staff member waving another sign with her name on it.

She smiled, turned, and waved good-bye to her fellow travelers before joining him. He grabbed her suitcase and plunged into the hubbub, guiding her through Immigration. Once the necessary forms were signed and filled out, he led her to another decrepit sedan and drove her through Kabul's crowded streets to the Aide du Monde office.

He was silent as he drove. He was a bearded man with drooping eyes and a full head of bushy, black hair. Elsa smiled and tried to speak with him, but he never answered.

The city was bursting at the seams with people and animals and rubble, so there wasn't an inch of room left. Turbaned men, veiled women, and raggedy children hurried through the streets, competing with dogs, goats, donkeys, and automobiles for precious space.

The murky, sour smell of exotic foods, spices, and body odor filled the thick, lazy air. She surely wasn't in Dorchester anymore, but Dorchester had just as surely prepared her for this place. Misery was misery, and if there was one thing she knew, it was that.

Despite the chaos of the route, this driver—to Elsa's relief—was much less frenetic than Ajmal had been. After a short ride the driver stopped on a quiet street and yelled out. A large gate opened and the driver maneuvered the car inside, where it jerked to a halt alongside a beautiful, old stone and stucco home surrounded by surprising bursts of bright roses.

"Thank you," Elsa said to her driver as she stepped from the car and was greeted by a bearded, turbaned man. He wore thick glasses and a pleasant smile. He bowed his head and held his hand over his heart.

"Hello, hello, we are very happy to see you," he said in a deep, booming voice. "I am Qasim and you are Elsa, yes?"

Elsa nodded and bowed to the man.

"No, no, miss, do not bow to me. I bow because I cannot touch you in greeting; Islam forbids it. But you can say hello. That is enough."

Elsa smiled in return. "Good to meet you, Qasim. And thank you, I could use more lessons like that."



“It will come to you quickly enough,” he replied, still smiling.

Qasim ushered her into the house, which, he explained, was empty save for the cook and a guard. He also told her that he was retained by ADM to maintain the house as a place for new volunteers to rest before the last leg of the journey.

“ADM has not enough staff these days,” he said apologetically. “There is no one here but us,” he added, and he pointed to a smiling, toothless man wearing a grimy apron. “This is Faizul. You are hungry, miss? He has cooked for you.” Faizul bowed slightly and showed Elsa to the table.

“Please sit,” he said.

Too tired to say no, she sat and watched as Faizul brought out the food. *He must be expecting a crowd*, she mused, because he carried out a platter of rice, one of greasy chicken, and a bowl of yogurt. To that he added large loaves of warm, flat bread and a glass of water.

“Please, will you join me?” she asked both men.

“No, no. This is for you,” Qasim insisted.

“Please, it’s too much for just me. Won’t you sit?”

“Thank you, mees, for your kindness, but we cannot. You must eat and enjoy.”

She inhaled the scent of the flat bread, realized that she was hungrier than she had expected, and broke off a piece. It was warm and soft and grainy. She bit into it and smiled. She ate the rice and chicken, and then finished the bowl of yogurt. Faizul had guessed correctly after all. He must have seen plenty of others like her, tired and famished more than they knew.

“Thank you. It was wonderful,” she said. The cook grinned broadly.

“You should sleep now, mees,” Qasim suggested. “You leave early.”

She was shown to a small bedroom with an adjoining bathroom—a luxury, she guessed. From what she’d been told, this would be her last night with electricity and running water. She took a long hot shower and threw herself onto a lumpy, stale-smelling bed. But she didn’t care; she fell asleep quickly and slept soundly on the stained sheets.

