

CHAPTER ONE

The guards were particularly alert. There seemed to be an inordinate amount of traffic on the road in front of the embassy that day. Airport Road in Kabul was a straight road that seemed to compel people to rush along it, past the embassies of The United States, South Korea, and even International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters, on their way to and from Wazir Akbar Khan Hospital. It paid to be alert since American embassies were frequently targeted by extremists looking to make a name for themselves in this violent part of the world. Men, women, and even children were suspect as they wore the robes of their various tribes, which could hide anything from the daily groceries to a bomb. Anyone approaching knew to have their identification ready and their hands spread. Any suspicious behavior was dealt with immediately, not only out of self-preservation, but to protect this tiny strip of land that the Americans declared their own.

The guards were constantly looking, scrutinizing, and assessing any and all possible threats—from the donkey-drawn carts, to the expensive cars that careened down the street as though threatening to hit any and all pedestrians in their path. Pedestrians were especially viewed with suspicious concern as it was not unheard of for people to walk up to the U.S. embassy with a bomb strapped to their body.

Today the pedestrians seemed particularly plentiful, the hajibs hiding the identities of the women. No one could tell if they were young or old under the completely engulfing, black garb required by the men in this country. Purportedly to protect their women, it also provided anonymity from the many hordes of strange men who had come to this part of the world, supposedly to make peace. As the garb hid so much, it could be intimidating to those soldiers who were new to this part of a violent world.

The guards watched as a woman with two very young children observed from across Airport Road onto the Great Massoud Road where the embassy was actually located. She was assessing the embassy, at least that's how it appeared to their knowing eyes. She looked up and down the street carefully several times before cautiously shepherding the children across the busy street. A vendor using a cow to pull his slow-moving cart yelled at her and she bobbed her head in subservience, silently apologizing for having slowed his plodding along the busy street. She had her hands around both of the young children's shoulders, pushing them along as she approached the entrance. Both guards stiffened as it became obvious she was making her way towards them. A concrete barrier lay slightly behind them, stopping any cars from rushing the embassy and detonating a bomb inside. Still, as she could go by on the busy sidewalk, they watched her warily. She looked behind her repeatedly...this was not a good sign.

She approached the guards and smiled, but this goodwill gesture was hidden by the chador she was wearing—a black veil across the lower half of her face. Comprehending their increasingly alarmed looks at her presence, she realized her mistake. Taking her hand from the back of the older child she was shepherding, she held her hand wide and slowly reached for her face so they couldn't misconstrue her gesture as she pulled the cloth down to reveal her face. She smiled tremulously as she cleared her throat.

"I am Lieutenant Marsha Gagliano. I've been held captive for years. I am an American citizen and I demand refuge in the embassy," she stated, almost afraid to talk. She glanced around once more, her hand returning to the shoulder of the young child by her side.

"Ma'am?" the guard questioned her, disbelieving. This woman didn't look at all like an American with the full length burqa she was wearing, however, her accent was decidedly American, nothing like the natives who learned English out of necessity.

"Please," she pleaded. "I'm certain they are following me. They will take me back! They will take my children from me! They will kill me this time...."

"Do you have any identification—" he began, but she interrupted him.

~~~~~



“Of course I don’t,” she stated angrily, looking around at the faces passing by, some curious, some minding their own business. “Weren’t you listening? I’ve been held captive. I am Lieutenant Marsha Gagliano,” she repeated, looking disparagingly at the insignia on the private’s upper arm, trying to intimidate him into believing her. “I am a lieutenant in the United States Army and I demand that you take me inside.”

“Ma’am, we can’t let...” he began, unsure of what to do.

“Come this way,” the other guard offered, believing her. If all else failed, they would throw her out if her story proved false. He gestured to her with his arm out, showing her into the gates, which another guard began to open as he escorted her. Once beyond the gates and on American soil, she breathed a sigh of relief. The tension in her shoulders immediately drained away as she shuffled along, still pushing the two young children forward.

The older of the two turned to her and in a pleading voice asked, “Moray?”

“It’s okay now,” she said consolingly, the fear she heard in her child’s voice hitting her in the chest. She shepherded them along behind the guard escorting her into the building.

“What is this, Private?” a voice stopped them once they were inside.

Marsha was relieved to be out of sight of the street and behind a door. Another mantle of fear began to draw off from her shoulders. She pulled the chador back from her face and pulled the hood of the burqa off, revealing another scarf tied over her head—a richer, more elaborate, and colorful grey scarf. She pulled this back too, revealing black hair pulled back tightly from her face. “I am Lieutenant Marsha Gagliano,” she repeated it as though a litany, as though she had said it so many times that she had memorized the inflections and tones over and over. “I have been held captive for years and I demand asylum!”

The woman looked alarmed. She did, however, believe the strange woman and ushered her into the office behind her. She looked curiously at the children. They too were wearing a smaller version of a chador, but in blue.

“You can take these off now,” the woman said in English to the children. They looked up at her, alarmed as she began to tug at the all-enveloping costume. Removing the garments revealed a young boy dressed in a blue dress-like garment that covered red pantaloons. He wore sandals on his feet and his hair was covered in a red scarf that matched his pantaloons exactly. He looked like a traditional Afghan child—much loved and picture perfect with dark brown eyes and a cherubic face.

The older of the children was a young girl. She was wearing a red dress to her knees, the same color as her brother’s pantaloons and scarf. Her pantaloons matched her dress as well. She was wearing a headdress that covered her hair, again the same color. It was as though a bolt of cloth had been stretched to make these traditional outfits to match on both children. She looked down at her feet, hiding her eyes shyly from the strange officious-looking woman that was staring at them curiously.

“You said you were Lieutenant...” the woman asked to start the interview as she sat behind her desk. She indicated the chairs across from her and the woman sat the older child, the girl, in the second chair before settling herself with the younger boy in her lap.

“I’m Lieutenant Marsha Gagliano,” she repeated for the third time that day. “I was on a helicopter that went down in the mountains. We were captured. I don’t know how long I’ve been held,” she said, the words rushing out of her as though she was afraid they wouldn’t be heard otherwise. “*I want to go home,*” she pleaded.

“I understand. Is someone looking for you...” she indicated the children, “for them?”

“Yes, their father,” she nodded agreeably. “If he finds us, he’ll kill me.”

She nodded, understanding the culture. A son was especially valuable to a father in this land. “They are yours?” she verified.

“Yes, and this one too,” she indicated her belly, hidden under the robes she was wearing.

~~~~~



The woman looked alarmed at finding out she was carrying a third child, but it was understandable, the robes hid everything.

She introduced herself, "I'm Leslie Murrough. I'm a Foreign Service Specialist," she quickly became officious as she began to question the woman.

Strangely, the lieutenant had a hard time answering some of the questions beyond her identity, almost as though she wasn't used to talking...especially in English.

After a while, the woman picked up the phone and spoke rapidly into it. Once she hung up, she turned to the woman again, "Someone will be with us shortly."

Marsha understood. She would be accused of, if not charged with, colluding with the enemy. They would ask her why she didn't take the opportunity to escape and evade, especially as it was obvious she had been with them for some time. Three children were the result of that so-called captivity. They wouldn't want to believe her. They would assume she was lying to save her hide, that she just wanted to go home now, with no consequences. She understood that. She resented the assumption, but she did want to go home. She wanted to take her children and go home *now*...but would they let her?

A man entered the office, looking curiously at Marsha and the woman across the desk. Marsha's children began to fidget. He asked the same questions as the woman. It took a long time.

"Please, I'll answer your questions, but it has been a long trip and the children are tired. I'm tired." She put her hand on her pregnant belly, "We need rest, food if you would."

"My apologies. Of course you do," the man said diplomatically. They had to be cautious. If she really was Lieutenant Gagliano and she had married an Afghan national, this could really be messy. He nodded to the woman who had listened to him asking the same questions to see if the woman deviated from her story. So far she hadn't. The woman, Leslie, made another phone call and in short order a younger woman knocked on the office door.

"Ah, Linda, would you please escort our guest to a room so that she and her children can wash up and rest. Have dinner brought to them," she said carefully, in code. Basically, she was saying they were allowing Marsha to stay, but only as they verified her identity, and she would be under supervision.

"Yes, Ms. Murrough. Of course, Ms. Murrough," she answered respectfully.

"Thank you," Marsha answered sincerely as she gathered her children. She put their enveloping robes over her arm and ushered them out of the room. She knew the two people left behind would be discussing her and her story, what they had gotten out of her. She couldn't tell them much as the children had been listening. While Bahir had listened and not really understood, Amir hadn't cared at all. He had, in fact, fallen into a light sleep in her arms. She was tired, so very tired. She had carried them so often on her trip to escape. Fear was a great motivator in keeping her adrenalin going, but it was now gone and she was exhausted.

"Here you are," Linda told them cheerfully as she showed them to a bedroom. "I hope you don't mind sharing, but I thought the children would want to be with you."

"No, I don't mind and you are right. They would be frightened in this strange place without me," Marsha told her gratefully. "Thank you."

"I'll bring your dinner in a little while," Linda promised as she showed herself out of the room.

"Thank you," Marsha repeated politely. Once the door was closed, she sagged in relief. She was here! She was free! Free of Zabi, free.... She couldn't quite believe it. She wondered how long she had been gone. She protectively rubbed her stomach and the baby seemed to understand her need to be quiet. She worried now that maybe she'd done something to harm the fetus growing inside her. Zabi would be angry, especially if this were a son too. Then she realized, she didn't have to worry about Zabi and his anger...ever again.

~~~~~



“Moray?” Bahir asked anxiously. She hadn’t understood where they were going and the surroundings seemed so strange. She was frightened of these people.

“It’s okay, my flower,” Marsha told her consolingly, speaking her native language. It had taken more than a year to understand as much as she did of the dialect that Zabi and his people spoke. A lot had been hand gestures and angry demands, but now she pushed that aside. She was on American soil and she was free now. She knelt down to her daughter, smiling at the native dress she was wearing...her best, there hadn’t been time to change. The covering robes were full of dust from their travels. The clothes they wore were stereotypical of Afghan children—his daughter and son were Zabi’s pride and joy! They looked beautiful in their best clothes. Marsha was proud of her children and relieved that she had gotten them both away. She was incredulous that she had managed, finally. “Why don’t we bathe? That nice lady is going to bring us food and then we can sleep,” she indicated the huge, by her children’s standards, queen-size bed in the middle of the room. The furniture was sparse, but to the children the room was luxurious and strange.

“Bathe?” Bahir asked, a little more enthusiastically. She loved bathing. The mountain streams were a favorite playground of the children. She was still young enough to have gotten away with playing in them. In a few years she wouldn’t have been allowed.

“Dib?” Amir said, understanding the word.

Marsha smiled. The children were so young. She’d tried to teach them as much English as Zabi had allowed. He took pride in his Persian heritage and his temper was so mercurial that Marsha had learned not to push her own culture on their children. His beatings had only stopped when she was *with child*. He didn’t want to lose ‘his’ sons to his temper. He had been disappointed when Bahir had been born, but he’d allowed Marsha to heal sufficiently before he was on her again, raping her until she was, once again, pregnant. She shuddered in remembrance of the child she had lost to Zabi’s temper. She looked down at the two survivors before her.

“Yes, let’s bathe,” she said, using the Tajik word dib that they both understood. She explained the use of the toilet, fascinating the children with this indoor phenomenon. She soon had them stripped down and in a bathtub, another new novelty to the two children. Zabi’s tribe had been very remote. She supposed that was deliberate, to keep from being discovered. They had no luxuries and lived pretty much like generations of his people had for thousands of years. Nomadic to a degree, but with very little to show for their lifestyles, they had no need of modern conveniences or luxuries.

She dressed them back in their outfits after she had shaken as much of the dust from them as possible, and was just in time to hear the knock on the door. She let Linda in again. She came with a tray bearing foods Marsha had only dreamed of. “Oh, thank you,” she said in a most heartfelt way. The smells emanating from the tray made her mouth water in anticipation.

“I’ll put it down here,” Linda indicated the small couch in the room with a coffee table before it.

“Do you know when they will want to question me again?” Marsha asked.

“No, they’ll let you know,” Linda said, her glance taking in the woman who had removed her burqa, revealing a richer, enveloping outfit of gray with black patterns on the material. She looked rich and not at all like the prisoner she claimed she had been. Marsha noticed her looking at her garb.

“We were celebrating when the opportunity to escape came up. These were our best clothes,” she explained, gesturing at her own outfit and then the children’s. The children looked fresh and clean after their baths. They were staring intently at the strange, but delicious smelling food on the tray.

“You don’t have to explain to me,” Linda assured her, although she had wondered. She smiled cheerfully, “If you need anything, just pick up the phone and dial zero.”

“Thank you,” Marsha said warmly, feeling so tired. She too wanted a bath...a real bath after all this time. The food, however, was not only smelling good, but was a necessity after days going without.

~~~~~



Linda left them and Marsha sat down wearily on the couch. She filled two plates for her children, watching as they used their fingers to eat. She smiled. They would learn. She herself picked up a fork and delved in. The food proved as delicious as it smelled. Perhaps it was the hunger they were all experiencing or perhaps it really was the food. Marsha was careful not to let any of them eat too much. Days without food, while common where they came from, meant that their stomachs had shrunk. She didn't want either of the children to eat and get sick. So, despite their protests that they wanted more, she cut them off at one point.

"No, it's time for bed," she assured them. They were both drooping from fatigue. She herself was ready to sleep too, the food having made them even more tired. She did, however, want that bath before she slipped between the sheets.

She stripped them down to their underwear and put them to bed, telling them a story she made up as she went, until they both fell to sleep. She then stripped and bathed, washing out her underwear in the bath with her, then hanging it to dry. She looked at it thoughtfully, wondering, not for the first time, what other Afghan women wore. She also wondered, again, not for the first time, where Zabi had obtained an American bra. The chemise many women wore, but the rest of the underwear was sexy, alluring, and surprisingly comfortable. She knew Zabi had liked seeing her in these fine clothes, the best she owned. It showed off his status. It showed he could provide for her better than any other man of the tribe and showed he had deserved to take her as his wife. His first wife, much older than both of them, hadn't been pleased, especially when Marsha had proved fertile. She had instigated the beating that caused Marsha to lose a child. Zabi had sworn never to touch her again when she was pregnant and she was grateful for that consideration at least. She had detested his touch from the beginning.

As she laid back in the tub, her hair longer than she could ever remember having it, she luxuriated in the feel of the warm water. The heat of the water sank into her bones, relaxing her. She nearly fell asleep, but pulled herself up with a jerk. She quickly washed her hair using the little bottle of sweet-smelling shampoo that was provided, just like a hotel. It was wonderful after years of using only whatever they managed to make. The rough-feeling soaps that they created were a far cry from these manufactured luxuries. Marsha loved the feel of the soap in her hair. She found a brush on the vanity, and after squeezing out the excess water, brushed out her long curls. She remembered how proud Zabi had been of her hair as it grew. He had hated the short length that she previously wore as a necessity of being in the Army. Not that all women felt that way, but Marsha had liked the ease of caring for short hair back then. She looked at herself in the mirror. She looked very different from the woman who had gotten into that helicopter, however long ago it had been. Rough living had aged her. Childbearing had aged her. Zabi and his beatings had aged her. She'd fought back at first, but the sheer number of beatings had worn her down. Not wishing to be gang raped, she had succumbed to Zabi. He felt he had tamed the American lieutenant, but he also respected this warrior woman, in his own way. Roughly translated, lieutenant was *lomri baridman*. She'd forgotten the meaning, but he was proud that he had conquered her. At least Marsha let him *think* he had...to avoid gang rape and to avoid the beatings as much as possible.

She looked at the hair under her arms, wondering if there was a razor, but not bothering to look for it. The hair on her legs had gotten to a certain length and stopped growing. She wondered again how long it had been since she had shaved away these excesses. She closed her eyes for a moment, luxuriating in the fact that she didn't have to answer to anyone at the moment.

She toweled off once more, tempted to use the hair dryer, but knew it would terrify her children. Even a car, the jeep she had managed to steal, had terrified them until they got used to it. A robe had been provided for her, just like in a hotel, and she put her arms through the sleeves, feeling 'normal' for the first time. She hung up her towel and looked around the bathroom, a luxury she hadn't seen in forever, and turned out the light.

~~~~~





Suddenly curious, she went to the door of the room and opened it. It was not locked. In fact, she saw there was no lock on the inside. Looking out into the hall, she saw an armed marine from the embassy security detail come to attention when he saw her. She nodded stiffly and withdrew back into the room. Of course they would have her watched. It wasn't unlike being back in the village. She was watched, all the time she was watched. Now, it was by her own people. Only now, instead of being that American woman who some despised, she was that American deserter, at least she suspected that's probably what they thought of her. She didn't blame them. She wouldn't believe her story either.

Approaching the bed, she saw that the children were soundly asleep. Exhaustion had played a role in that. They had been afraid for days, hungry and afraid, and the combination had made them all a bit weary. She smiled. That was an understatement! She had been terrified that Zabi or his men would find her, that they would find where she had gone. She'd deliberately turned east to throw them off her trail once she left their mountain roads. The asphalt highway had hidden her tracks well when she turned around and made her way west toward civilization. The highway had been like a river of lava to her and she sped along as quickly as the vehicle allowed. She had left the jeep only when she got into Kabul. She had run out of gas and been too afraid to purchase more. Keeping her head covered, her eyes lowered, and carrying the children when they couldn't, or wouldn't walk, she had made her way down Airport Road to the Great Massoud Road, where she knew that the American embassy was located. She was grateful to be able to sleep in a bed, a real bed, with her children. She sent up a little prayer. To Allah, to Yahweh, to God...whoever might be listening. All she said was, "Thanks," but that was all that was needed as she bowed her head and then got into bed with her children. Her robe felt warm under the smooth sheets, but she wouldn't sleep naked with her children. It took mere minutes for her to fall into a dreamless sleep.

~~~~~

