



FORBIDDEN LESSONS

in a  
*Kabul Guesthouse*

*the true story of a woman who risked everything  
to bring hope to afghanistan*

“The moving life story of a remarkable woman.” —Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*

*Suraya Sadeed*



*To the  
Children of Afghanistan*  
—SURAYA SADEED

*For Hamid Huneidi,  
for the gift of life*  
—DAMIEN LEWIS

## Author's Note

This is a true story. It took place between the year of my birth, 1952, and the present day. Afghanistan has been at war for decades. My home city, Kabul, has been particularly badly devastated. I have changed some people's names to protect family, friends, and communities.

*I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.*

—NELSON MANDELA

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## PROLOGUE

### Lessons by Lamplight

1997

I had no trouble finding a store that sold burkas in Peshawar, Pakistan. I'd started to hear stories about the Taliban's excesses in Afghanistan since their explosion into power started in Kandahar Province in 1994, and I wanted to blend in and go about my work unmolested once I crossed the border from Pakistan into my home country. All the burkas I could find were the same powder blue color and one-size-fits-all. They were too long for me, but the shopkeeper suggested I cut one off at the hem.

Later, in the privacy of my hotel room, I tried the burka on. I wasn't able to get my head into it. The gauze window remained stubbornly stuck on my forehead, and I couldn't see out. I went back to the shop and told the shopkeeper that I needed a burka with an extra big head. He found one that I could just about squeeze into. I figured it would give me a headache, but I'd make do.

The route I planned to take to Kabul was the same that I'd taken for the last three years, bringing money and supplies for medical and humanitarian relief into Afghanistan. Except for my route, though, everything had changed. This time, the entire journey would be in areas under Taliban control.

I exchanged our \$35,000 for a sackful of local currency. I had hoped to hide the money beneath my newly acquired burka during the trip to Kabul, but there was no way I could strap that much cash beneath even the world's most voluminous tent. Dr. Abdullah, Nawabi, and Sekander, my three trusted Afghan colleagues, had agreed to accompany me, so they would be able to share the burden of carrying the money.

The four of us caught a taxi from Peshawar to the Afghanistan border, where I donned my burka. As soon as the garment was on me, I could sense the difference. I could go freely wherever I chose without being stared at as a "foreigner." At first the front kept twisting around to the back, bringing my eyeholes along with it, so I couldn't see. And whenever I wanted to eat or drink, I had to hook my arm up like an elephant's trunk and pass the food under the burka, feeling for my open mouth. But I could live with that. For now, at least, the burka was a welcome refuge.

On the Afghan side of the border we joined a crowd of others who'd just passed through the frontier post. We all boarded a battered Soviet-era bus together, our fellow passengers carrying every sort of cargo you could imagine: suitcases, pots and pans, chickens tied up by the feet. I guessed that some of them had to be Afghan refugees returning home to chance their lot under the Taliban. A thick and heavy curtain hung halfway down the bus. Under the Taliban's rules, the bus had to be segregated: men in front, women in back.

The Taliban had strung roadblocks along the route where they stopped the bus and checked that their rules were being adhered to. If a woman was sitting in the wrong

section, or if she wasn't properly covered, then the men traveling with her would be punished. No woman was allowed to go anywhere without a male companion, so the Taliban always had a man they could give a good beating to.

As we set off down the potholed road, the bus creaking and groaning at every bump, I wondered why the women were holding pillows on their heads. Almost immediately, the bus cannoned into a massive pothole, and we shot off our seats. Of course the women with the pillows were pretty much okay, but my head hit the roof with an almighty crack.

"Shit! Goddamn it!" I yelled out in Dari. "Tell the goddamn driver to slow down!"

Everyone turned and stared. I was so glad that I was enveloped in my burka. They must have guessed that I was a "foreigner" from my accent, but they still couldn't see me. I turned to the woman next to me.

"At this rate I'm gonna have a bump on my head the size of a pomegranate," I joked.

I couldn't tell if she smiled or not because I couldn't see her face. It was like talking to a mask.

"Here," she said, passing me a bundle. "Take this child's jacket. It's not a pillow exactly, but it might help."

"What do I do with it?" I asked her.

"Stuff it inside your burka. The hood should keep it in place."

I fed the kid's jacket up under my burka and wedged it into the headpiece. When I pulled the burka down again I had a weird lump on top of my head.

"I'm sorry," the woman giggled, staring at me. "It just looks so funny."

"I bet it does," I replied, laughing too.

As we drove on, the blinding sun beat down on us from the bright azure sky. The back of the bus grew horribly stuffy, embalmed within my burka as I was. We finally stopped at a place where a cool stream ran down from the mountainside, and the men got out to drink and to relieve themselves. I leaned forward and pushed the curtain aside so I could speak to Dr. Abdullah.

"I need to go pee," I whispered.

"Sorry," he whispered back. "There's nowhere for a woman to go."

"But I need to," I hissed.

"You can't. Women aren't allowed to get out."

"So under the Taliban, women can't pee? *I need to go!*"

"Just wait awhile. There's a restaurant a little farther on. You can go there."

The men soon climbed back in the bus and started lighting up these horrid cigarettes. Whether they were opium joints or not, I didn't know. But whatever they were, the acrid smoke soon drifted to the back of the bus and started pooling behind the curtain in a thick gray haze.

I leaned forward again and caught Dr. Abdullah's attention. "Can you tell them to stop smoking? We don't have a window back here."

"The women are having a hard time breathing because of the smoke," Dr. Abdullah announced. "There's no window in the back of the bus."

No one seemed to pay him any heed, and the smoke grew thicker and thicker. A few minutes later, as we approached a Taliban checkpoint, I leaned forward for a third time.

“Tell those bozos if they don’t stop smoking, I’ll unveil myself,” I hissed again. “And then the Taliban will beat the crap out of all of you.”

All three of my colleagues—Dr. Abdullah, Nawabi, and Sekander—turned to me and stared.

“You can’t do that,” Dr. Abdullah objected. “You never know what might happen.”

“I’m warning you guys—tell them to stop smoking, or the burka comes off.”

Dr. Abdullah nodded his head and smiled, figuring that I was joking. Nawabi tried not to laugh. But Sekander was horrified. Sekander knew that I was born and brought up in Afghanistan, but as far as he was concerned I came from a different planet. In his experience, no Afghan woman would act as I did; the only way he could rationalize my behavior was by labeling me as a “foreigner.”

“*Suraya-jan*, Afghanistan is not like it was when you lived here,” Nawabi remarked. “You’ve been away in the U.S. and things here have changed. We’re in a time now where women can’t—”

“That’s baloney! Can’t do what?” I demanded. “It’s precisely because I’ve lived in the U.S. that I can’t put up with this crap.”

“See, that’s what I mean. You’re impossible. We can’t reason with you at all.”

By now the rear of the bus was a dense fog of smoke. I felt nauseated and dizzy and I was quickly reaching the end of my rope.

“You men in the front!” I yelled out. “I swear to God if you don’t stop smoking I’ll unveil in front of the Talibs, and they’ll beat the crap out of every last one of you!”

Dr. Abdullah sunk lower into his seat. Nawabi did his best to hide his face, but his shoulders were rocking with laughter. Sekander stared out of the window with a stone-still face.

The men at the front turned to one another in consternation. “Who is this crazy woman? Is she with you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I’m with!” I yelled. “Stop the smoking, or I’m gonna unveil!”

A moment later the men started chucking their butts out the windows. The woman who had lent me the kid’s coat leaned across to me.

“Thank you for doing that,” she whispered. “I was about to die.”

Dr. Abdullah’s restaurant with the pee stop still hadn’t materialized, and I was damned if I’d quietly sit in the back of the bus and wet myself. In the Taliban’s world, we women were supposed to hold it in for the entire twelve-hour journey. We weren’t even allowed to function like human beings. It was completely insane.

At the next stop, I marched down the aisle and went and had a pee in the bushes. In spite of the dangers of getting beaten or worse, the rebel within me just couldn’t stomach the Taliban’s mindless rules. All of a sudden a row of women were beside me. They’d been dying to go, but none of them had felt they could break the rules until someone else did first.

We reached Kabul by sundown without the slightest hint of any trouble along the way. The Taliban seemed to have the country under control, at least where security was concerned. They had to be a powerful movement, for in a matter of months they had defeated the warring Mujahideen factions, and spread a blanket of iron control over this battle-weary and anarchic land. After my previous experiences in Afghanistan, I had to admit it was an impressive feat.

Dr. Abdullah, Nawabi, Sekander, and I had a private house at our disposal in Kabul that was owned by one of the patients from our Peshawar clinic. It was an upscale, modern property set in the Wazir Akbar Khan district, once the upmarket part of Kabul. Wazir Akbar Khan was now a ghost town, for all but the poorest inhabitants had fled. Still, the house made an ideal base from which to organize our relief mission.

Kabul looked almost exactly the same as when I last had been there three years before, in 1994. It was still a blasted, empty ruin of a city. But there was one crucial difference: there were no more terrifying rocket barrages or snipers trying to shoot those collecting their dead. In fact, Kabul was utterly silent. The more I tried to tune in to the pulse of the city, the more I sensed that something was wrong. The next morning when I got up it struck me what it was. The noise of fighting had been replaced by utter stillness. Apart from the five daily calls to prayer, there was practically no noise, or music, or life at all.

Convinced that Kabul was the embodiment of every sin known to man, the Taliban had descended on the city with their “vice squads.” These vice police roared around the streets in their white pickup trucks and set upon anyone they judged to be breaking the rules. People were being punished for everything—and for nothing. The men, for not having long-enough beards. The women, for having white-heeled shoes that the Taliban deemed a “provocation.” The vice police had long batons with heavy copper balls on the end. If a woman was spotted showing just a fraction of her ankle, they smashed her shins with those clubs. Elders were beaten and belittled in front of their families. No one seemed safe from the Taliban’s efforts to break the will of the city.

That first night I heard the only “music” that existed now—a Taliban dirge played repeatedly on the radio.

*I am a Talib.  
I will spread Islam.  
I will hate the infidels.  
I will destroy the infidels.  
And so I will spread Islam.*

Again and again the Taliban played that dirge, as if they were brainwashing the city’s inhabitants with the Taliban’s hatred and intolerance. I went to sleep with that mantra running leaden through my mind.

The following morning Sekander hired a taxi to take us to the old Security Service building, which now housed the Taliban’s secret police headquarters. I wasn’t allowed out of the car. Nawabi was a Pashtun, as were many of the Taliban, and I let him do the talking. When we arrived at the headquarters, he went inside to explain the nature of our mission. Nothing happened in the city without the Taliban’s knowledge or blessing.

They seemed happy enough that we had come to give out aid to displaced people in Kabul, but they wanted to oversee the operation. Four Taliban readied a pickup, and we set off in a convoy toward the old Soviet Embassy. The sight of seventeen thousand displaced people in the midst of Kabul city was disturbing enough. But to see them camped out in the skeleton of the wrecked embassy, the gray smoke of their cooking fires lying like a blanket of fog among the twisted ruins, was profoundly

unsettling.

It was like a scene from a movie set in the aftermath of nuclear war, when all normal order and life had broken down. As we got out of the car, the women gathered around us and told us their heart-rending stories of being trapped in the middle of the vicious conflict between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance. Many had seen family and friends torn apart by bullets and bombs as the two warring groups pounded each other into oblivion.

I asked the women what they needed most, and how the money we had brought might help. They told us they were surviving on three rations of halva—a kind of hard cake baked from flour, sugar, and oil—per day. They desperately needed salt, fruit, and vegetables. And they asked if there were any doctors who might tend to the injured and the dying.

We decided to give a set amount of cash to the head of each household so they could buy the food they so desperately needed. Dr. Abdullah would tend to those who had been injured in the fighting or hurt during the long march south from Northern Afghanistan to Kabul. I asked the Taliban to unload the sacks of money and help divide it into small bundles to give away. I was intrigued to see how they would react to all that cash.

The leader of the four Taliban was older than the others, somewhere in his midforties, I guessed. He was dressed in a typical Arab-style Muslim outfit, a long black robe that falls from shoulders to feet, almost like a dress, and a small white skullcap. He directed the others to sort the cash, and I was amazed at how honest they appeared to be.

They were strict and fair with the displaced people, giving priority to the older women and the grandmothers who had young kids to care for. I hadn't expected to see such respect from the Taliban "women haters." And they never once asked for anything. I cast my mind back to my earlier trips, when lawless militias demanded—and took—whatever they wanted at gunpoint. Dealing with these guys was quite a contrast.

At the end of the distribution we had a little cash left over. "You guys worked very hard," I said to the Taliban commander. "Will you please take something?"

I'd removed my burka because we were inside the embassy compound, where it was mostly women and children. The Taliban commander stared at the ground. He couldn't look into my unveiled face.

He shook his head. "We don't want anything. These people are the ones in need."

"But you worked hard. You earned it."

"Are you saying this because you're afraid of us?" he queried.

He wasn't being aggressive or threatening. He just seemed curious.

"I'm not afraid of you. Why should I be? I'm not afraid of anyone, apart from God." I smiled and started handing them the remaining cash. "*Basmela rahman rahim*—in the name of God the most merciful . . ."

I could see the shock on their faces. "She knows Holy Koran!"

"I'm a Muslim," I told them.

"You are?" the commander asked.

"Yes, I am."

They still looked as if they didn't believe me. To them a Muslim woman would

have acted differently than I did. But I couldn't change the way they saw things, and in any case it wasn't what I was here for.

The women must have felt they could confide in me, for they told me that the Taliban had forbidden them from seeing a male doctor. But under the Taliban's rules, women weren't allowed to work, so they were effectively barred from seeing a doctor at all.

I checked with Dr. Abdullah. Unbelievably, what the women had told me was true. The entire female population of Afghanistan's capital city was effectively deprived of access to medical care. Right then and there, I knew that I had to start an underground women's clinic in Kabul.

Dr. Abdullah had once been a very wealthy man, and he still owned a couple of properties in Kabul. He reckoned we could fix up one of them fairly easily so it could serve as a clinic, and for now we would purchase whatever medical supplies we could find locally. His property had the great benefit of having two separate entrances. We could run it as if it were operating according to Taliban rules, but the back entrance would be the secret one for the women. Female patients could sneak in and out of that entrance, and the men and women would never run into each other.

Over the next few days we hired some male doctors and nurses whom Dr. Abdullah knew well, plus some female doctors who were brave enough to carry on working in the face of the Taliban. And we sent out word for the women patients to come.

Incredibly, once word got around about our clinic, the wives of the Taliban started coming, in secret, for treatment. We learned from them that the senior Taliban were sending their wives to hospitals in Peshawar, or even as far away as Dubai. What vile hypocrisy. While thousands of women remained trapped in this wreck of a city with zero access to medical aid, the Taliban bigwigs sat back and took care of their own.

At the clinic I met a women patient called Masouma. We got to talking, and she asked me where I was from.

"America," I told her.

"But you speak such fantastic Dari."

"Well, I was born in Afghanistan."

"You know, there's another American woman working here in Kabul," Masouma remarked.

I thought I must have misheard her. Surely no foreigners had remained in Afghanistan during the Mujahideen years or under the Taliban. But Masouma was adamant: there was an American woman living just down the street from our clinic. Masouma offered to take me to meet her. We donned our burkas, snuck out of the clinic, and approached the door of a residence that looked pretty much like Dr. Abdullah's apartment. Masouma knocked, and we stood back to wait.

"Who is it?" a voice called out in broken Dari. "What do you want?"

"It's Masouma," Masouma replied.

"Masouma-*jan*," said the voice, "I'm still waiting for the money to buy the raw materials. I'm so sorry."

"No, it's not that," Masouma called back. "I'm here with a lady from America."

"Oh my God! Oh my God! From America?"

The door flew open. A face peered out and glanced around, searching for someone

not draped from head to toe in a burka.

“Masouma-*jan*, where is this American lady?”

“Hi,” I said, in English. “I’m here.”

“Oh my God! Well, hello! Why don’t you come in?”

I went inside, and as soon as I removed my burka, the woman enveloped me in a bear hug. She had to be in her late seventies, but her tall frame was ramrod straight, her blue eyes sparkling with life under a fine head of white hair.

“Are you really an American?” she exclaimed.

“I’m Afghan-American,” I replied.

“Well, thank you. Thank you for coming. I’m Mary. Mary McMaken. Come on, let’s go into the kitchen.”

Mary bustled ahead, talking incessantly. I guessed she hadn’t spoken English for a long time.

“Now, forgive me for the appearance of the place. If I’d known you were coming . . . But I can offer you homemade cookies and some tea. Zainab! Sara! Fetch the cookies, please,” Mary called to two young Afghan girls she had working for her. “And do we have any dried fruits? No? They’ve all gone? Never mind. Just cookies and tea then.”

I took a good look at Mary McMaken as she scurried around the kitchen. For a moment I wondered if she might be CIA. Who else would be here in war-torn Kabul? But something told me that wasn’t the case.

She joined Masouma and me at the kitchen table. “I’m so sorry but we’re all out of money. That’s why there’s no dried fruit. The money doesn’t always come easy, you know.”

“Well, I have some money,” I remarked. “Maybe I can help?”

“Oh no, I couldn’t . . .,” Mary began. “Well, maybe just a few afghanis . . .”

I smiled. “The cookies are delicious. But hey, *what are you doing here?*”

“Well, you know, I kind of like this life. It’s so simple. You don’t have a lot of bills to pay. In fact, I guess I like it here all around. I mean, it’s a crazy country, don’t get me wrong, but underneath these people are so genuine. Plus there’s real need here among the women, and that means I can do a little to help.”

Mary explained that she ran a tiny charity helping Afghan women develop income-earning projects. She had a weaving program and an embroidery workshop, and she sold the handicrafts in America. She traveled back and forth, carrying the raw materials and then returning with the finished goods. She was the only woman who went around Kabul without a burka, and she managed to get away with it because she was this old, white-haired grandma.

In short, Mary was incredible. Once she’d finished telling me about herself, she refilled my teacup and asked me why I was in Kabul. I told her about my charity, Help the Afghan Children (HTAC), and everything we’d been doing up until now. And then I told her about the secret women’s health clinic that we’d just started in Kabul.

Mary clapped her hands together in delight. “That’s fantastic! You know, there is so much suffering under these stupid Taliban and their insane rules. . . . But it’s great your clinic’s so close to here. I can let my women know.”

“Spread the word, Mary, spread the word.”

“Suraya, there’s such great talent here that’s being wasted,” Mary remarked. “All

the girls' schools closed down, and the Taliban banned women from working, so there're teachers and school principals just sitting at home with nothing to do."

I paused for a second, thinking over what Mary had said. "You know, my real passion is education, and making girls a part of Afghan society again. . . . You know what I'd really love to do?"

Mary fixed me with a look. "What do you have in mind, Suraya-jan?"

"I want to start a school."

"Well, it's a fine idea," Mary remarked, slowly. She was obviously thinking it through. "But it's not going to be easy. . . . I do know this lady who was the principal of a Kabul school, and now she's sitting around doing nothing. I guess you could start by talking to her."

"Well, get her here! And we can meet."

I left Mary with a bundle of afghanis, so she could buy some ingredients and bake us some more of her delicious cookies. In return, she agreed to get her teacher friend to come around to her house. The next day I was at the clinic when one of Mary's girls arrived.

"The teacher lady is here with Mary-jan," she whispered. "Her name is Sabera."

*Sabera* means "the person who is very patient." It was the perfect name for a teacher and for the person with whom I might be setting up my first Afghan school.

Sabera was the spitting image of Rahela, one of my own teachers at my Kabul high school. Rahela was my literature teacher, and she'd nurtured my love of reading. I'd had a lot of respect and affection for Rahela, and I just knew I was going to feel the same about Sabera. She'd worn a burka to get to Mary's place, but underneath was a smart suit and long pants. She had a real presence, and exuded both character and cultivation.

We made small talk for a while and then got down to business. "I hear you were a school principal. I'm thinking about opening a girls' school."

Sabera gave me a confused look. "A girls' school? Are you new to this city?"

"I know what's happening. That's exactly why I want to do this—girls are being excluded from education."

"It will be very difficult," Sabera remarked, hesitantly. "You know how the Taliban are." She glanced at me, inquiringly. "But what can I do?"

I held her gaze. "I want you to help me start the school."

I went on to outline my idea in greater depth—of starting a girls' school under the very noses of the Taliban. As I invited Sabera to be the principal of the first HTAC school, I detected a mix of hope and fear in her eyes. She asked me for a couple of days to think about it.

That evening I decided to share my idea for starting a girls' school with Dr. Abdullah and Sekander. It was far from definitely happening, but I knew I would need their help if it was to succeed.

"It is a fine idea, but it may prove a little dangerous," remarked Dr. Abdullah with typical understatement.

"Well, if I worried so much about danger I wouldn't be here, would I?"

Sekander shook his head in dismay. "This is no good at all. In fact, it is extremely dangerous. The Taliban are watching everyone. I'm advising you not to have anything more to do with this, or that American Mary woman."

“What is it, Sekander, you don’t want girls to get educated?” I countered. I knew he was trying to protect me, but sometimes I had to balance the danger with what was needed to counter the Taliban’s blind madness. Getting girls into schools was one of those times. “You’re just like the Taliban if you’re so against it.”

“No, I’m not!” Sekander retorted, angrily. Being accused of being like the Taliban was about as bad as it could get for him. “But I *am* concerned for your safety, Suraya-jan. That’s all there is to it.”

“We came here to do what’s needed, and this is something I really want to do. I’m going ahead, Sekander. And I need you guys to help me.”

Two days later I met up with Sabera again at Mary’s place. She looked happier and more upbeat than when we first met.

“I’ve thought about it,” she told me, barely able to suppress a smile, “and I’ve talked to some of my teacher friends. And guess what—we are willing to give it a try! But we can’t do it somewhere public, otherwise the Taliban will know. We’ll have to do it secretly.”

“That’s great!” I exclaimed. “But how will it work? How can we have a secret school?”

“I can offer up my house,” said Sabera. “It’s an old guesthouse, so there’s lots of rooms. It’s even got a big basement. We can hold lessons down there by lamplight. That way no one will see us or hear us teaching the girls.”

“But an underground school in a disused guesthouse . . .” I shook my head. “The impact will be so minimal.”

I’d had visions of us opening up a huge school, and somehow getting away with it, as we had the clinic. This home-based education initiative felt so small. It wasn’t what I had imagined at all.

“We can start with my house and see how it works,” Sabera remarked. “If it does, I think I can get twelve teachers to open up their homes. All they’ll need is a few basic school supplies.”

“Well, that’s easy,” I told her. “And I can pay their salaries too. But even if it’s twelve, the impact will be so small. It’s not like our health clinic, where we can treat thousands. I mean, what would it be—maybe two hundred girls in total?”

“You think two hundred girls aren’t worth it?” Sabera asked me, quietly. “That’s still two hundred girls who would otherwise have no education. And remember, Suraya-jan, *quatra, quatra darya mesha*—drop by drop a river forms.”

I felt chastened by her words. Of course she was right. I smiled. “*Quatra, quatra, darya mesha*. Fair enough. I agree.”

“So, we’ll do it?” Sabera asked.

“We’ll do it,” I confirmed. “I just hope I can come back and really grow these schools, that’s all.”

“Who knows, maybe God will be kinder next year,” Sabera replied. “Next year maybe the Taliban will be gone, and we can open a proper school.”



## CHAPTER ONE

# Help the Afghan Children

**I**n Dari, which is my language, the name Dastagir means “The person who is always helping others.” It was the perfect name for the man I had fallen in love with and married against my parents’ wishes during the wild days of my Kabul youth.

Dastagir adored all kinds of music. He loved the way different songs and instruments caressed the senses and lifted or lowered the mood. And he was particularly in love with Indian classical music. As smoke from a Sunday afternoon barbecue drifted across our sunny terrace in June 1993, the lilting tones of Ravi Shankar’s sitar floated from speakers Dastagir had set up in a second-story window of our home. The music sent a tiny shiver up my spine. My husband had a way of conjuring atmosphere and magic from nothing, and today he had created a small piece of heaven in our Virginia backyard.

That Sunday afternoon I basked in the spring sunshine and laughed and chatted with Dastagir’s sisters. He served us delicious American burgers and spicy Afghan kababs from the barbecue. It was a perfect day: perfect weather, perfect company, perfect eating.

By nine that evening I was anxious to get some rest.

“Guys, let’s wrap up,” I announced. “Tomorrow is work, and I need to be at the office by eight sharp.”

His sisters said their farewells. Dastagir and I cleared away the barbecue things. Yet once we’d retired to bed he still didn’t seem to want to call it a day.

“Let’s watch a Ravi video,” he suggested. “Just one before we sleep.”

“Are you crazy? It’s Sunday night. We have work tomorrow.”

“Just this one,” he pleaded. He held up a video of Ravi Shankar doing a live performance. “Please.”

With Dastagir I never could find it in myself to say no. So we plumped up the pillows and sat up in bed, watching that Ravi Shankar performance.

It was nearly midnight when he gave me a pained look. “You know, I feel like vomiting.”

He hurried into the bathroom. I went after him, but as I reached the door he fell backward into my arms. I lowered him onto the floor, and his eyes met mine.

“Can you fetch me a pillow?” he murmured. “I feel kind of odd. I need to lie here a moment.”

I went to grab a pillow from the bed. But by the time I was back his face had gone a deathly white, and he was gasping for breath.

“Oh my God!” I cried. “Mariam! MARIAM! Dial 911!”

Our eighteen-year-old daughter, Mariam, came dashing out of her room. She took one look at her father and made a grab for the phone. Three minutes later there was an

ambulance at the door. The medics glanced at Dastagir, his head cradled in my lap.

“We need to get him to a hospital,” one remarked. “Like now!”

In the back of the speeding ambulance I stared at the man I loved with a drip in his arm and an oxygen mask on his face. I told myself that this could not be happening. Dastagir was in his midforties, and a month earlier he’d had a full physical. “Your husband’s as healthy as a horse,” the doctor had told me.

Twice during that ambulance ride Dastagir let out a terrible scream, one that pierced the rasping, alien suck and blow of the oxygen mask. My husband was as healthy as a horse, yet here he was, white-faced and screaming.

On reaching the hospital the medics hustled him onto a gurney and rushed him toward the emergency room. I tried to go with them, but an orderly steered me to one side.

“It’s best you wait here,” he told me. “They might be busy in there, okay?”

I nodded, dumbly. Busy doing what? They wheeled Dastagir—“the person who is always helping others”—toward the double doors. Just before he went through I saw him raise his one free hand and wave at me. I felt a warm blast of reassurance. He was waving. It was nothing serious. He was going to be all right.

“You’re gonna be fine,” I called after him. “You’re gonna be fine.”

A doctor approached me. “Ms. Sadeed? Suraya Sadeed?”

I nodded.

“Ms. Sadeed, I need you to tell me how old your husband is.”

“He’s midforties. Forty-seven.”

The doctor shot me a look, then shook his head nearly imperceptibly. Before I could ask anything, a voice started yelling from the direction of the emergency room.

“Code Blue! Code Blue! Code Blue!”

The doctor whirled and was gone. I glanced around myself, bewildered, then a nurse approached me.

She bent toward me. “You’d best take a seat.”

“I’m okay standing,” I told her. “I’m fine just here.”

“Ma’am, please take a seat,” she repeated. “Your husband’s not feeling well. And, ma’am, maybe you should call your family.”

“My family? But Mariam’s got school tomorrow, and graduation Tuesday.”

“You might still want to call. I think it’s best to.”

I telephoned Mariam and told her to take a cab to the hospital. I told her that her father was ill, but not to worry, it was just that the staff had said it was best she come.

The same doctor returned and took me into a side room. I had little sense of time now. He sat me down, just the two of us, me facing him. My mind was blank. I had no idea what was coming.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” he began, “but I’m afraid your husband didn’t make it.”

I stared at him with total incomprehension. “What do you mean—*didn’t make it*?”

“Ms. Sadeed, I’m sorry to say your husband has passed away.”

*Didn’t make it . . . Passed away . . .* I shook my head, refusing to believe what I was hearing. “Doctor, how do you *know* these things? You’re not God. . . .”

“Suraya, I know I’m not God,” he replied, gently. “But I am a medical doctor. I’m afraid your husband has suffered a massive heart attack. We did everything we

possibly could, but he didn't make it. I think it might help if you saw him."

The doctor led me to a side room. Dastagir was lying on the same gurney. He looked so calm. I couldn't believe for one moment that he was dead.

The doctor withdrew. I sat on a chair at my husband's side and reached for his hand. I would just talk to him and touch him and stop all this nonsense. I'd hum him a Ravi Shankar tune, and in no time he'd be smiling and singing along. Who the hell was that doctor to tell me that the love of my life was gone?

The hand I touched was cold. I held it, trying to warm it with my body heat and my love, but the hand just kept getting icier and icier. I knew this wasn't right.

Gradually I felt Dastagir's presence in one corner of the room. I glanced over and smiled at him uncertainly, as if to ask what on earth he was doing standing there, and not lying here by my side. He pointed at his body. I heard his voice in my head.

"Stay away from the body, Suraya. You need to leave the body, now. It's time. This is our parting."

A horrible chill ran down my spine, as if someone had injected ice into me. Perhaps the doctor was right. He wasn't God, but perhaps the impossible truth was that my husband was gone. I slid the wedding ring off his finger and onto my own.

Dastagir's death was devastating and totally unexpected. Many times since then I've wondered about seeing him like that, standing apart from his body. It was as if he were alive and speaking to me, and I think he was trying to help me let him go.

I did let him go. But in the aftermath of his dying I felt as if I had nothing left to live for. The hardest part was Mariam's high school graduation, two days after his death. She had reserved seats for us, right at the very front. My brother-in-law offered to go in Dastagir's place, but Mariam would have none of it.

"No way," she told me. "No way is anyone going to sit in my father's place."

She put a single white rose there instead. And she insisted that I not come in my mourning clothes—I was to dress and wear makeup like normal. Well, it wasn't normal. It was the darkest time of my life. But I did what she asked of me, and somehow I got through that day.

Many times in the months that followed Dastagir's death I asked God, why *me*? We knew so many couples who fought like cats and dogs, so why us? *Why us*?

I was angry for a long time: angry at God; at fate. I felt as if God had cheated me. I was angry at the world for letting something so dark destroy our perfect lives. I was even angry at Dastagir for deserting me.

A black depression swept over me like a huge and crushing wave. On many dark and lonely nights I lay awake despairing, thinking over our lives together in America and of all that we had lost.

Dastagir, Mariam, and I had come to the United States as penniless Afghan refugees in the spring of 1982. The Soviet Union had invaded our country, and as the daughter of one of Kabul's ruling elites, there was no way that I could survive the pogroms. Because my father was a prominent politician, I would be targeted. So we fled to the land of the free, convinced that in this nation of opportunity we could build a new life for ourselves.

My younger sister was living in Virginia at the time, and we went to stay with her