

KABUL TRAFFIC

**AN AFGHAN TALE OF DRUGS,
DIPLOMACY & THE DEVIL**

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction based on the author's experiences in Afghanistan while working as a contractor for different organisations, including the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office. This work, however, does not represent the views of the UK Government and should not be interpreted as such. The events, though based partly in fact, have been fictionalised, and any resemblance to characters living or dead is unintentional.

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Prologue

The explosion slammed Adam Harley's back against the wall: an overpowering roar, loud and long and full of hate. He slumped to the ground, arms up against the debris raining down, a clatter of glass and rocks. He waited. He breathed. Bloody hell, that was close. Was he OK? He looked down at his body, shrouded with dust, and twitched a leg, then an arm. An odd vibration filled his ears, but otherwise he was intact. He could still make it. If the mob had breached the checkpoint, he'd be blocked, but he had to try. He peered round a pile of sandbags, and through the waves of smoke to the Embassy garden. The verdant lawn was now hidden under a blanket of grey and peppered with unrecognisable objects of metal and concrete. But no bodies. At least that. He waited a few seconds, then got up and ran.

He ran through the fortress gates of the British Embassy and out into the Green Zone, past the Gurkhas shouting at him to stop, past the perimeter fence, towards the roundabout, towards the crowds. It was reckless, he knew, a fool's errand, they'd say. *'She's Afghan, she can take care of herself.'* But that was a cop-out. He was going to find her.

He sprinted past the checkpoint, now abandoned, as three men demolished the wooden hut with clubs. A crackle of automatic gunfire pierced the air. He had to hurry. He plunged into the shouting crowds, banners swaying in front of him; images of George Bush with blood splattered across his mouth, Tony Blair's head in a hangman's noose. He heard the sharp bang of a hand-grenade, and looked up the street. Smoke was billowing from the Embassy compound. It's what they'd always feared: locals turning on them, their tolerance of the invader exhausted, friends now seen as enemies. Only a single wall had separated the Embassy from the Afghan street, from those who could be whipped up against the foreigners defiling their country, again and again. Well, the wall was down, and there was no time left.

Adam pushed his way into the supermarket, the green-lettered sign of 'Afghan's Finest' hanging lop-sided over the door-frame. Inside, people were cowering behind shelves, their feet crunching on broken glass. Entire cabinets had been knocked down; cans of olives and roasted nuts rolled on the floor. Adam saw the fire crackling in the back room, as men beat the flames with their jackets. Clouds of smoke hovered near the ceiling. Where was Amina? Where would she go? He tried to suppress a wave of panic, as he scanned the faces of scared teenage boys and veiled women, all peering through the jagged windows at the mayhem on the streets.

"Amina," Adam shouted. "Where are you?"

A man with a hammer in his hand grabbed Adam's elbow. "Why are you here? Get out! You British!"

Adam held up his hands, breathing hard, the smoke now in his lungs. "*Aram bash, bebakhshid.* Help me. I'm looking for a woman, black hair, young."

It was pathetic. How would he know her? Why would he help? The man looked at him through bloodshot eyes, before pointing at the stairs. "More women, up." He retreated to the windows, and began nailing wooden planks across the shards.

Adam took the stairs two at a time, the staccato gunshots from AK-47s outside spurring him

on. Perhaps NATO troops were there, or the UK's own Quick Reaction Force? He hoped to hell they'd arrived. He scoured the upper floor, stumbling between aisles full of pots and dishes. Where was she? He couldn't lose her, after everything, not like this. His career was probably shot to pieces, but it didn't matter. Life was more important. She was more important. He repeated her name, over and over.

"Adam? I'm here!"

Not daring to believe it, he rounded a corner and saw his interpreter standing with two middle-aged women by a shelf of bowls. He gripped her shoulders. "What the hell are you doing here, Amina? For God's sake." The women stared at him in alarm.

Amina's amber eyes were glassy and her face flecked with blood. She seemed to look right through him. "I'm sorry, I just came...for plates. I broke two this week...Then it started, I didn't know what to do, I..."

He checked her over; she looked unharmed, though her camel-coloured shirt was torn and her hands were shaking. He wanted to touch her, but held back, remembering where they were, and what she had done. "Look, it's a full-blown riot out there, but we have to get back to the Embassy, and to a safe room. If those lunatics find us, well, me...Come on."

She looked at him. "Adam, I'm sorry. I want to explain everything."

"Not now." His voice was hard.

She turned to the women and grasped their hands, but he wrenched her away and began pulling her along the aisles, towards the stairs. "Wait," she hissed, grabbing a *patou* from a pile on a shelf, and throwing the brown blanket over his shoulders. He looked down; she was right. He had to hide his suit, his absurd navy English suit.

Downstairs, the sound of breaking glass, and a scream.

"Fuck, let's go." Adam grabbed her arm and they ran down the steps. The man with the hammer spotted them and started to yell. "You Westerners burnt Koran. Get out of my shop."

There was no time to explain or deny. Adam pushed past him, holding the *patou* tight with one hand, and pulling Amina by the wrist, till they were outside. It was chaos. People were running in all directions. An acrid smell of flaming metal and rubber filled the air, as tongues of fire burst through the windows of a car. A crudely-shaped puppet with a Tony Blair mask, grinning and grotesque, bobbed in front of them and was hurled into the flames.

They darted across the road. He knew they'd be conspicuous as hell - a woman and a fair-haired man - but they only had a few hundred metres to go, across the roundabout and back to the Green Zone. Surely they could make it. Heads bent low, Adam and Amina pushed through the mass of people, fighting for space. Noise assaulted them from all sides: chanting, shooting, blasts in the distance. The mob threatened to engulf them with shaking fists and pictures of dead children, the word 'NATO' scrawled in crimson paint across their small bodies. Stones and shoes sailed through the air, sticks waved in their faces, then a brick was coming down on Adam's head, so fast he couldn't stop it. "Foreign pigs, you insult Islam!"

The crack on his skull reverberated through his whole body and his head seemed to explode. He punched at the empty air and staggered backwards, falling to the ground, his face close to

the marching sandalled feet.

“Adam.” Amina screamed, tugging at his arm. “Get up!” He forced himself to stand and they began running towards the Embassy, past the wooden guard’s hut, lying splintered on its side. High on adrenalin and pure fear, they ran, the mob still behind them, closing in. A round of bullets tore into the air near their heads, making them flinch. Amina stumbled sideways into a roadside ditch, nearly dragging Adam with her. With brute strength, he hauled her out and set his sights on an Embassy house, praying the guards would recognise him. Oh God, why hadn’t he learnt their names, said hello more often? Too late now. 30 more seconds, 20, 10. They lurched towards the iron door. The Gurkhas opened up, gripped their arms and pulled them through, before shooting above their heads towards the riot.

Adam fell onto the pathway, almost broken. This was a disaster, worse than he’d ever imagined. The entire mission was crashing down around them. How had it come to this? After everything, all that effort...He rolled onto his back and saw Amina hovering over him, mouthing something, but he couldn’t tell what. His eyes felt heavy and his head throbbed, but they were safe, at least for now; he drifted into the beckoning darkness.

Chapter 1

The Interview

Croydon, South London

January 2007

It hadn't been straightforward getting to Kabul, nor into the Foreign Office, not for someone like Adam Harley - no Oxbridge on his CV, no double-barrelled surname, no pedigree - just a middling student from a blue-collar family. But in 2006, Adam brushed aside the chip on his shoulder and applied to the UK's Diplomatic Service, attracted by Blair's adventurous foreign policy and plagued by a demoralising sense that his parents were right. He was a rolling stone, with no real goal.

"Why don't you get a proper job like cousin Tim?" his dad moaned. "Stop messing about in silly countries" To Adam's chagrin, his cousin's new anti-terrorism job at the Home Office left his parents in awe. "You know, that boy's doing something for his country. It's impressive," said his father, rattling the paper as he turned the page.

The barbs eventually got to him. He figured joining the FCO would get his parents off his back and allow him to gallivant round the world with purpose. But there was something more: after years spent writing travel guides, he'd begun to see beyond the 'not-to-be-missed' monuments and 'exotic' local delicacies, to the immorality of corruption amid poverty and the human misery in countries where life was cheap. Once he'd seen it, he couldn't unsee it, and he couldn't keep selling it. He felt like a fraud. Britain was so far ahead of so many places. He wanted to do something.

Adam steeled himself for the interviews at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office on King Charles Street. The grandiose building was a testament to the era of Britain's colonial ambitions, now transformed into an 'ethical foreign policy' aimed at projecting democracy and human rights into every corner of the globe. As Adam was led through the warren of corridors and up the grand staircases, he stared at the gilded ceilings and wondered if he belonged.

The doubts persisted as precocious civil servants asked him about his 'core competencies,' 'leadership skills' and 'decision-making abilities.' He scoured his memory for every sliver of experience in his five year career in the travel industry. "What that has given me," he explained, "is a solid grasp of foreign cultures and deep knowledge of history." They didn't need to know that he'd spent most of his time sourcing budget hotels for stingy students. But he had a degree in politics, so he played that up and hoped for the best.

It didn't end there. They needed more. The final security vetting was the most personal probe, but necessary to gain top-secret clearance. They had to gauge his trustworthiness and susceptibility to blackmail, through background checks and an in-depth grilling at home. To put it simply, was he really Foreign Office material? Was he willing to suppress all rampant individuality from here on out, for the sake of his nation? A spindly man calling himself Eric, came to Adam's flat in Croydon to find out.

The man from the Vetting Unit stared at Adam, stroking his chin slowly and breathing loudly

through his nose. "Let's dive straight into your personal life. Some of these questions may seem intrusive, but just be honest, so we can get to know the real Adam, mmm?"

Adam nodded, opening his eyes wide to appear sincere. They were on the same side after all, he and this bland government man.

"So, to start... are you gay or straight?"

Adam dug his nails into the black leather couch. Eric certainly didn't mess about. "I'm heterosexual, 100 percent."

"And how many girlfriends have you had?"

Ah, trick question, thought Adam. "Does that include one night stands?"

"No, just stick to proper girlfriends. Anything over, say, six dates..."

Adam nodded slowly, calculating. Outside, he could hear the deep rumble of a rubbish truck. "Seven girls, including my first at school when I was seventeen. Beverly. My first girlfriend, I mean, not the first time I..." The man nodded once. "Anyway, then four at university, and someone in Moscow, Irina." Adam pictured the Russian girl's cropped black hair, as she swayed to loud jazz music in her favourite cellar bar. She'd hooked him there and then, on his first night out, and fleeced him for every ruble. He smiled wryly. "And then...now, there is Emily."

Adam felt relieved. He'd faced down the first tricky question, peppering his sexual history with names to seem more truthful. Even though it was the truth. Bloody hell, this bureaucrat was already making him feel there was an enemy within, ready to betray Queen and country. This grey-haired, grey-faced man with round glasses and an incredibly small mouth was judging his life based on a few tasteless questions.

The man pushed his glasses up his nose. "Back up a minute, Adam. You were in Russia?"

Adam blinked. "Yes, in my year off. Three months of cultural immersion," he said, trying to elevate its purpose from pure adventurism.

"I see. I don't remember this on your forms. This will take a bit of unravelling..." The man put his pen to his lips, before unleashing a slew of questions. What did Irina do? Who did she introduce him to? Where was she now? Were they still in touch? Who else did he meet?

Unbelievable, thought Adam, batting back the questions as best he could. Wasn't the Cold War over? He imagined Irina, now working in a Moscow boutique, receiving a random call about a spotty English boy she seduced years ago and barely remembered. "Who? Adom? No, you have wrong girl," she'd say, with customary abruptness, before hanging up.

Adam watched the man make spidery notes in his Moleskin pocket book, jerking his head up sporadically to look round his living room. What on earth was he looking for? Revolutionary tendencies in his book collection, or his stack of CDs? Sure, there was a Sex Pistols album in there and probably a Che Guevara T-shirt somewhere. But so what? Adam tried to see his place through his inquisitor's eyes - a small two-bed apartment in Croydon that he shared with Eddy, his best mate from University days. He'd scraped cash together for a mortgage, with some help from his parents, and vetoed Eddy's efforts at furnishing the place. Instead, he kitted it out with a second-hand black leather sofa, matching recliner and flat-screen TV, to create a stylish

bachelor pad and base of operations. He'd had to sanitize the place that morning, locking away bizarre objects like the dried crocodile's head from Ghana, as well as Eddy's X-rated magazines and half-eaten jars of Marmite. Adam wanted to project the image of a mature political male - Eddy and his Neanderthal tastes didn't fit.

Adam looked directly at the man and tried to relax.

"So what kind of sex do you practise, Adam?"

Jesus. What a pervert. Adam craned his head forward a couple of times, buying time, and recalling advice from cousin Tim, who'd breezed into Government with a pragmatic approach to the whole vetting process: "*Don't be a prude, because they won't believe it, but don't be too maverick either. Give them something, but not too much.*" The words rattled round Adam's head, as he faced the official. "My sex life's above average, I'd say. We do it in the kitchen, in the bed, on the floor by the bed. You know..."

The man waggled his pen. "No, Adam. I know this is difficult, but that's not what I asked. Not where do you have sex but what kind. Anything out of the ordinary? S&M perhaps?"

An image of Irina in a backless dress came to mind, sitting on the bed, dangling a pair of handcuffs. But that was a long time ago; Emily was never that adventurous. "God, no! Maybe a couple of toys once, but that's standard, isn't it?" Adam laughed, man-to-man, into the sparse room.

"No whips or other devices?"

"Not exactly." Adam waved his hand dismissively, the crack of Irina's cane on his backside resounding in his head.

"Downloaded porn?"

Oh God, hadn't everyone? "Just the basics. On my own time, of course."

The man scribbled further, pursing his small mouth to the size of a Polo mint. Had he ever considered surgery, Adam wondered. Was 'mouth enlargement' even a thing?

"You know, it doesn't matter to us what you've done, Adam," the man said, crossing his bony legs. "It only matters if you're prepared to lie about it. That means someone could blackmail you. Understand?"

"Of course. Next question?"

"So you tell me you're not gay. Have you ever experimented in that area?"

Adam shifted in his seat, letting out a leathery squeak.

"Nope. Saw the film *Brokeback Mountain*, but it didn't do much for me." *Don't protest too much*, remembered Adam, but then he wasn't gay, he really wasn't. He looked round in the showers sometimes to check, but didn't every man? In fact, until that day, Adam had seen himself as a fairly normal guy, if a little rough around the edges. There was only one incident he wanted to bury, but it wasn't sexual. It was perhaps the most shameful moment of his life, so far anyway. It was time to regroup. "Cup of tea?"

After tinkering in the kitchen for a while, Adam reappeared with a tray. Eric took the mug with a wan smile. "Now, let's move to your work history, shall we?"

Safer ground, at last. Adam exhaled. "Since University, I've worked in an adventure travel

company, writing books for the discerning traveller. I love it, but it's begun to feel... insubstantial."

The man looked at him thoughtfully. "Oh?"

Adam paused, looking out of the window. It was raining and skeletal branches on the plane trees trembled. He wondered how to phrase his reply. It wasn't just his parents who were unimpressed. He was nearly thirty and time was passing. He no longer just wanted to skate through life as an observer. But Eric didn't want to hear all that. "I want to do more," he said simply. "Make a difference."

"I see. And you studied Politics at Manchester University from 1996 to 1999." Eric scanned a piece of paper. "Quite a radical place. Any political groups you joined? Demonstrations you went on?"

"Errr, yes, General Pinochet was arrested in London in my second year. A few of us came down to shout outside the Chilean Embassy. It was disgusting that they released him." Adam shook his head, wondering whether moral zeal against washed-up dictators would be appreciated.

"So you disagreed with the Government's decision, did you? To let him go?" Eric took off his glasses and began cleaning them with his tie.

"Well, there were so many abuses under his dictatorship - torture and disappearances. It's documented."

"So you disagreed?"

Adam balked. Was this a trick question? Everyone had disagreed at the time. "Yes, the Law Lords said he had no immunity so he could be tried, finally, on behalf of all victims. We should have extradited him to Spain for prosecution. Absolutely." Adam's voice rose with remembered anger. They had waved their banners in the rain and shouted till they were hoarse, hoping Britain would make a stand for justice. But the UK bottled it, and he and his friends returned to Manchester deflated. Thinking about it again, made Adam wistful. It had been a long time since he'd cared that much about anything.

Eric leaned forward, his grey eyes bulging out from behind his glasses. "Well, Adam, if you join the Government, you may well have to defend a policy you disagree with - like the Pinochet decision. Could you do that?"

Adam was taken aback. He hadn't expected the question, though, of course, it was an obvious one. He had voted for Tony Blair, though the Iraq invasion had troubled him. What if he'd been on the Government side of the fence then? Implementing a policy he detested? He suddenly wasn't sure. He ran a hand through his hair and rubbed his neck. "I emmmm...well, if it's for the overall good, if the intentions are good, then yes. Whatever it takes."

As he spoke, Adam felt it was a lie.

Eric made a note, then stood abruptly and hoisting up his trousers, began to walk slowly around the living room. He stopped at the mantelpiece and started flicking through a pile of photos, inhaling noisily. Adam looked out of the window, through the trees to the grassy square. A woman in a green woollen hat and scarf was sitting on a bench drinking from a take-away

cup. He wished he were with her. As the seconds ticked into minutes, he felt his stomach turning into knots. He stirred the teapot to keep busy and poured out more of the lukewarm liquid.

“We’re near the end, Adam. Just one more thing?”

Adam was beginning to sweat, despite the cold draft seeping into the flat. Why didn’t this man leave? It had been two hours already, and the spicy smell of last night’s curry was becoming embarrassing.

“Drugs.” Eric punched out the word, scrutinising Adam’s face.

“Drugs,” repeated Adam. *Shit*. There it was. The question he was dreading. “Well, I don’t use them, if that’s what you mean...”

“What about before? Come on, I don’t believe you’ve never tried. At university, did you ever meddle in say, cannabis or ecstasy?” Eric smiled innocuously.

Adam’s heart hammered. He had to give him something. “Ah well, let me see. There was this one slightly out-of-hand weekend in Amsterdam for a stag-do. I took a few puffs of something. Made me sleepy really,” Adam laughed, hoping Eric would buy it. The silence grew. God, why had he mentioned Amsterdam? *Next question*, he thought, *come on*.

“Did anything happen there?” Eric tilted his head and waited.

God, he was good. Adam smiled and looked at the ceiling, as if resurrecting some fond, distant memory. “Ah, now that you mention it, it was a funny night. I think someone fell into the canal, splashed about for a minute. Smelt pretty bad after, poor guy.”

OK Eric, move on, move on. The Foreign Office wouldn’t check, would they? Talk to Dutch police? Find out that a British group had got into a fight with some Germans, equally drunk and equally stoned and looking for trouble, that what should have been a harmless rumble ended in disaster. One of the Germans fell into the water. No one noticed him flailing about till it was too late, they were all so stoned. Adam and his friends had run away like cowards, leaving the Germans on the dock, thumping on the poor guy’s chest...It made him cringe to remember.

But Eric clearly smelt blood. “So, what year was this exactly?”

“Oh, gosh, ages ago, ‘98, ‘99. Can barely remember.”

The man wrote emphatically in the notepad, and drew noisy whipping circles around something. “And when was the last time you touched drugs? Sorry to press you on this, Adam.”

“Several years ago now, but I don’t intend to touch the stuff again. It was just student antics,” he said brightly, glancing out of the window. The green-hatted woman was still there, draining her coffee dregs. She looked nice, friendly. As he drew his gaze away, his eye snagged on a transparent sachet on the window ledge, nestling against an ashtray. Full of leafy, moss-like...*Oh God. Weed*. Eddy must have left it there, the idiot. Adam didn’t even smoke any more, not since Amsterdam. He snapped his head back towards his interviewer with a frozen smile.

Eric was looking quizzically out of the window, before shaking his head and pushing up his glasses. “Well, the ‘antics’ will have to end, if you did join the Office. No drugs or excess alcohol.” He stood up and with one quick move, buttoned his suit jacket. “That’s enough to go on for now. We’ll be in touch.”

“No problem. Ask me anything, anytime.” Adam ushered Eric towards the hallway with his hand at his back. The man took his wide-brimmed felt hat from the coat-stand and opened the door. An icy blast rushed into the corridor.

“Try not to worry,” the man said, pulling down his hat, and stepping out quickly. Adam leant his back to the door and slid down onto the carpet. Of course, it didn’t end there, and he did worry. He and Eddy jumped on the phone and tracked down all the guys from the stag-do, almost six years before. No, they wouldn’t breathe a word about the fight. They didn’t think the guy had died anyway. It was just a *‘harmless weekend with a bit of weed,’* they recited helpfully. Over the next fortnight, there were other baffled phone calls from friends and relatives who’d received probing questionnaires about him by post. What to do? Talk me up, he urged, and don’t mention Amsterdam, or drugs, or Russia.

Three weeks later, the verdict landed on his doormat - a brown envelope stamped with the Foreign Office crest, ‘On Her Majesty’s Service.’ He tore it open and scanned the page. “We are delighted... Welcome you to the Diplomatic Service... Induction will begin on February 15th...”

Adam banged his fist on the wall. “Eddy,” he yelled towards the living room. “Crack open the beer! We’re in.”