

CHAPTER ONE

August 23, 1978

Wednesday

In her shabby room in Kabul, Cassie decided she'd had enough of the doll. The realization was tinged with a little guilt - it had been a gift after all - and some regret, a traveling companion for weeks, since the train from Muzaffarpur, India. But the doll was almost a foot long, with unbending legs, the cheap plastic sort sold at train stations they'd passed, and it demanded too much space in her backpack. The doll violated her careful packing plan of five months before, when she'd left New Orleans with minimal clothes and gear, only what she would need, only what she could carry. She'd even eschewed face blush, if she'd ever need it, instead counting on rose-colored lipstick smudged on her cheeks. She'd violated the plan herself when she picked up a shawl in Bangkok and small feather pillow in Malaysia, but they were essential for sleeping in second and third class trains.

Eating chunks of sweet watermelon, Cassie sat cross-legged on the room's tattered carpet. It might have been beautiful once, the product of painstaking labor by small-

fingering Afghan girls, most likely. She didn't mind sitting on the floor and, in any case, she had no choice. The room in the Jam Hotel boasted no furniture but a low table and a mattress. She studied the round unblinking face of the doll. "We part ways here, Maude," she informed it. "You should be with a little girl."

A girl. Maybe that's how the Hindu mother had seen her in the women's second class compartment three weeks before, red henna staining the palms that presented the doll. Cassie was twenty-four but not big. Not like the mother, her substantial girth swathed in a yellow silk sari. Even the small chubby son appeared to weigh more than Cassie did. The gift was an implied trade. The curious mother had rummaged through Cassie's backpack and decided she wanted the two inflatable plastic hangers. Cassie had intended to give her just one, since hangers were scarce in the rooms she could afford. But the mother, delighted, had taken both, and somehow Cassie's harmonica had disappeared as well, probably in the boy's pocket. She couldn't complain; the family had shared their meal with her: spicy cucumbers and a red dusty powder with a bitter taste. Sumac maybe, dried crawfish?

So she had reluctantly acquired Maude, and carted it with her through the rest of India and Pakistan. Now the doll would be left behind to find its own way in Central Asia. Maude, propped upright against the mattress, accepted her fate with stoic silence.

Cassie finished her bites of melon, set the rest aside for Ralph, and stood. Her hands and mouth felt sticky with juice, and she wiped them off on her towel. She marveled again that

such succulent fruits could grow in this arid place. They'd long been a hallmark of Afghanistan; Marco Polo had mentioned them seven hundred years ago. They were a godsend, really, since it was Ramadan and restaurants wouldn't open until eight in the evening, a little earlier for non-devout foreigners. Then she and Ralph would eat kebabs and naan, only thirteen Afs per plate, about thirty cents.

Getting food, though, was not always easy. Three days before, in Pakistan, they had spotted a beautiful loaf of bread on display in a baker's window, and she'd counted out coins to buy it. But the bread was as dusty and old as this carpet. She had given most of it away, to a stooped woman begging a block away. The loaf disappeared into folds of her dirty black burqa. Cassie was ashamed at the poor quality of the gift, uncomfortably aware of her own affluence.

Ralph would be returning soon. He was a writer, out collecting "life experiences," as he put it. She had met him a year ago at a poetry reading, and almost instantly fallen in love. He was tall and good-looking, brown hair in a ponytail, soulful brown eyes. He wrote stories and poetry, and talked about writers he admired and the sacred trust of the craft. He had seemed so knowledgeable and deep that she'd felt a little intimidated at first, and more than a little pleased, even privileged, that he was interested in her. He treated her as an equal, not a fragile thing on a pedestal, and she liked that. Some of her idealism had faded - doesn't it invariably? But she still thought of him as her great love. How thrilled she was when he had said he'd come along on this journey. An overland trip around the world had long been her dream, her

passion, and she had been saving for years. But he had embraced it as his own, borrowing money from his parents to help cover his expenses. He even told their friends it had been his dream too. This was evidence, she thought, that they were soul-mates.

After they'd arrived in Kabul yesterday afternoon, they met a few sleepy-eyed Australian travelers slumped in chairs in the Jam's lounge. They reminded Cassie of the stoned travelers and expats she'd seen in Chiang Mai and Kathmandu, places with easy access to hashish. Hashish must be here as well, she thought as Ralph started up a conversation with one of them, a guy from southern California. Then she and Ralph had joined the friendly group, spending much of the evening sharing beer and stories about places they'd seen on their travels.

Last night, Ralph told her he'd decided to take on Danny, the California guy, as a city guide for today. Cassie had been invited along but had demurred. She really needed to find a money exchange and wash her hair. And she hadn't felt that well this morning. Maybe it was the heat that enervated her so. Maybe she was simply hungry. She certainly was thirsty most of the time. She had come to hate the iodine taste of treated water.

An ice cold shower down the hall had energized her, though. It was the only temperature available, but she didn't mind. She'd developed a system after weeks without hot water. First, she'd wash her face in the sink. Then she'd step into the shower and quickly wash her body, leaving her long sandy-colored hair as dry as possible, a cloak around her

shoulders. She'd towel off before bending her head into the weak stream to shampoo. She added a variation this time, putting her dirty jeans on the floor of the shower so that soap, water and her feet could beat out the grime. The jeans were drying now at the end of the bed. Not ideal, but what could she do without a chair or a hanger? At least they'd dry faster here than in humid Thailand.

Hunger a little satiated and hair still damp, Cassie picked up her pocket journal and reread the lines from the previous night's entry:

Just sent the 5th roll of film back for processing in the States, mostly photos from India. I think Mom & Dad will like them. Unfortunately, I'm now out of slide film. All I have left is the print film Jack sent. I didn't have luck finding slide film in Pakistan. Will have to check here.

We left Peshawar at dawn today. Fresh mango drink and 6 cookies at the border; bread, dates & tea for lunch at a roadside café; kebabs last night after we arrived in Kabul. We're staying at Jam Hotel near Chahrahi Taurabaz Khan, called Chicken Street. Price is good: U.S. \$3.50/a double.

Took 1½ hours to cross the border into Afghanistan. Khyber Pass is fascinating, edged with ruins. We were held up briefly at a security checkpoint. Soldiers everywhere here; situation tense. But as Americans we're ok.

That was as far as she'd gotten before they went to the Jam lounge last night. For today's entry, she settled on her knees in front of the low table and found a prized pen in her bag.

Exchange rate: 39 Afs to \$1. Enroute to the bank, I saw several Afghan women in chic western clothes. Talked with one who's a doctor. She told me women who wear traditional robes called burkas (sp?) are mostly from rural villages. I also met a Russian engineer at the bank. (Lots of Soviets here.) He spoke a little English & said he hadn't met an American woman before. Then he asked me out to dinner! I said no thanks of course. But he's right. I haven't met any American women either, or, in fact, many Americans at all. Travelers are mostly British, Australian or French, all on the same path between Asia & Europe. We're like ants.

Cassie stopped. She couldn't think of anything else to note. The afternoon wasn't that interesting, and paper and ink were scarce. She tended to hoard both when making journal entries and writing letters home, even to her parents.

She'd picked up a letter from them at General Delivery in Lahore a few days before, and her father sounded anxious. Her mother wasn't thrilled at her being so far away, either, but she seemed to understand her daughter's obsession with travel. Cassie needed to let them know she was alive and mostly well. She pulled out a sheet of blue air postal paper, so thin that it was almost translucent.

I hope you got my last letter from Srinigar. We stayed a week on the houseboat on Dal Lake. You'll see from the photos that are coming. We were able to hire a shikara (a long boat with pillows) to take us around the lake, past once elegant lakeside gardens of Mughal princes and through acres of white lotus blooms.

From Srinigar, I wanted to see Ladakh but monsoon rains make traveling into the Himalayas tough. So we went to Amritsar & Peshawar and yesterday crossed into Afghanistan. We're in Kabul now at a small hotel that caters to young travelers. We're both well, taking vitamins and getting lots of exercise walking. Ralph is busy writing and I'm taking a million photos. I just sent back my fifth roll to the States for developing.

She shifted her sore knees; the carpet gave little padding. She added,

I picked up your letter in Lahore. Thanks so much! Next mail pickup is Tehran General Delivery. Your letters mean a lot to me. Mom, I hope your arthritis is better. Dad, have a happy birthday next month! A gift is on its way (mailed from Srinigar). I love & miss you both. Please give my love to Miss Millie too. I'll write again soon.

Cassie signed her name and added a postscript: "Ralph says hi!"

That letter sealed, she brought out another sheet of postal paper. At the top, she wrote, "Hi, Jack." She had smiled when Jack told her about the trouble his name was causing friends in the aftermath of the plane hijackings. She knew it was no joke, with three hijackings last year and another just weeks before they met. Still, he told the story with such an engaging self-deprecating humor. Perhaps that explained how easily they talked that day last April, starting at the check-in counter in New Orleans and ending ten hours later in San Francisco.

It felt a little odd to correspond with someone she barely knew, yet she wrote to him weekly, sometimes more often, and spent intervening days thinking about which experiences she'd recount, what phrases she'd use. There had been two letters from him waiting at Lahore. In one, he'd included a photo of himself with a Labrador puppy. In the other, with lots of padding, was a roll of Kodak print film, 36 exposures. She preferred slides, but the gesture was generous. And timely.

Writing to him was a release; she could be as opinionated and honest as she wanted. More than with her parents, of course, because they worried so much. Even more than with Ralph, because she wanted him to think the best of her. With Jack, honesty was easy. After all, she didn't know when or if she'd ever see him again.

In minute handwriting to fit as much as possible on the page, she wrote:

Thanks for writing & sending film - much appreciated! I laughed when I read about your adorable new puppy; Sherlock clearly has excellent taste in shoes. I hope you both are well and that your dissertation is coming along.

Sorry to hear the news about your breakup with Helene. I know it must hurt. Maybe it's just temporary, like she says. I'm glad you've got Sherlock.

Cassie paused. Without Helene, would Jack be interested in her? She instantly put that idea away, a tiny folded note in her brain's back pocket. She loved Ralph. And Jack was in San Francisco, thousands of miles away; an intellectual, doing serious work. In comparison, she was still a kid.

She continued writing.

I sent you a postcard from Amritsar. Did you get it? We traveled thru Pakistan for a few days, and now are in Kabul. The Khyber Pass is stunning – mountainsides like black glass, crowned with ruins of fortresses and caravanserais.

Something must be going on here. There were lots of tanks & troops near the border. Then, outside Kabul, our bus was pulled over so soldiers could board & check our papers. One aimed a gun at my head as he held out his hand for our passports. I had both in my bag & quickly handed them over. Ralph missed the whole thing. He was reading Frank Herbert's Dune and didn't even look up. Finally an officer arrived & waved the soldier away. He barely glanced at the passports before handing them back and thanking me politely in English. Strange times!

She stopped writing, suddenly conscious that her palms were damp and her breathing rapid and shallow. She didn't remember being frightened at the time; was this her body's delayed response? A new experience, having a firearm pointed at her head. The episode probably lasted no more than a minute, but it felt much longer in retrospect. As if she had sat all afternoon in that aisle seat with an armed soldier looming over her. She wished now she had looked at him squarely, seen his face, given him human form. But she had kept her eyes averted, her head down, trying to seem insignificant. After the soldier left and then the officer, other soldiers came and grabbed a young Afghan sitting behind her. She watched as they roughly pulled him from his seat. For a

second, he caught her eye. She wondered who he was: a criminal, a conspirator, or an ordinary man on an ordinary bus. She wondered what happened to him.

Cassie wished she could talk with Ralph about it, but he hadn't been paying attention. Instead, with his long frame hunched up next to the window, he had kept reading. She was glad he wasn't overly protective, that he saw her as capable and independent, but she could have used his support. She almost wrote that in her letter to Jack, but it felt like a betrayal. And, after all, what could Ralph have done?

At that moment, Ralph walked in and Cassie hastily slid her parents' letter on top. He wasn't the jealous type, he'd made that plain early in their relationship. Even so, she didn't want him to see the letter; he already made enough disparaging comments about Jack. Ralph would crook his fingers in invisible quotation marks and call Jack her "pen pal professor." He meant it sarcastically; Jack was still in graduate school, and Ralph didn't hold graduate studies in high regard. The important thing, he told her repeatedly, is to live life.

Ralph was in an exuberant mood. "Great news! Come on," he almost shouted. "We're meeting Danny and his friend."

Cassie stood, ran her fingers through her drying hair, then slipped on flip flops. She grabbed her travel bag, and stuffed the journal, pen and letters inside next to the camera.

"For kebabs?" she asked hopefully. "I'm starving. Aren't you? And there's still some watermelon left"

"No, thanks. I got something to eat while we were out." He strode from the room, clearly excited by something. "Wait until you hear," he said over his shoulder.

She trailed after him to the Jam's seedy lounge area. A makeshift bar was set up along a side wall, with a crudely lettered sign in English offering beer, hot tea, Coke and Limea. Nothing was refrigerated or iced. Perhaps at more expensive hotels, but the Jam's amenities were simple; drinks here were chilled slightly in a tub of lukewarm water. Cassie noticed that the room smelled pungent and sweet, almost cloying. She suspected it was incense to mask the reek of some of the unbathed clientele.

Ralph approached two men seated at a corner table. One was mellow Danny, Ralph's guide for the day. He was tall and well-muscled with a tan weathered look that fit well in the rustic surroundings. In contrast to other travelers, his hair was very short, little more than fuzz. He had explained the day before that he'd shaved his head when he had briefly lived at an ashram in northern India. Now he wore the wool felt cap ubiquitous in Kabul.

Cassie hadn't seen the other man before.

"Hey, Danny, you remember Cassie, my girlfriend," Ralph said. Danny nodded and grinned at her. Then Ralph turned toward the unknown man and added, "This is Martin, Danny's friend."

"Marton," the man corrected. "With an O." He nodded briefly in her direction.

He hadn't been there yesterday, laid low by a bout of diarrhea, Danny reported. Marton, dropping his head shyly, flushed with color. Their table was littered with brown beer bottles and a solitary bottle of Limea, still half full in front of Marton.

“Been here awhile?” she asked Ralph with a tight smile that belied her irritation. Beer wasn’t cheap.

“Here’s the great news,” he said. “Marton has a VW van and he’s driving to see friends in Geneva. He’s invited us along. We just help with gas. No more buses, babe! Isn’t that great? Later, he plans to sell it for only three hundred bucks. We could buy it and keep traveling around Europe. We can camp in it, Marton says. There’s a bed and everything. Think of the money we’ll save on hotel bills.”

“Runs all right,” Marton explained. “Tires are pretty new. A 1968 Volkswagen, a good year.” He lit a cigarette.

Ralph nodded at Cassie eagerly. A good year.

Cassie studied Marton as he spoke. He was shorter than Ralph and less muscled than Danny, a thin pale man with quick movements. His eyes were half hidden by his long black hair, and he looked down a lot, especially avoiding eye contact with her. There was something about his mannerisms that spoke of uncertainty, caution. She couldn’t read him very well. She couldn’t place his accent.

“Maybe so,” she said hesitantly. She caught Ralph’s frown in the corner of her eye, and amended her response. “Well, actually, that does sound like a good plan. Getting a ride. We’ll have to think about buying it though.” Ralph relaxed and nodded.

Marton said, “Of course.”

Cassie added, “We’re going to Bamiyan tomorrow to see the Buddha statues, but we’ll be back in a few days.”

Now Marton was slowly shaking his head and Ralph quickly interjected, “That won’t work, babe. First, it’s a seven

hour bus ride to Bamiyan, and we don't know when we'll get back here. Buses don't run every day, you know. And second, they need to leave tomorrow," His gesture encompassed both men. To her quizzical look, he added, "Danny's coming as far as Herat."

"But we've just arrived in Kabul." Cassie tried to keep the whine out of her voice.

"Well, you ask me, there's not a lot to see here. And we can always come back someday." Ralph helped himself to one of Marton's cigarettes. Cassie saw a tiny flicker of Marton's eyelids; irritation?

"You'll like Herat," Danny jumped in. "You like history, don't you? There's lots of history there; it was part of the old Silk Road. Alexander the Great was there. Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. A really cool mosque. Hey, and Persian poets," he turned, appealing to Ralph.

Ralph nodded enthusiastically. "I could get into Persian poets."

That quickly, the decision seemed to be made. Danny bought more beer as they worked out the details of splitting gas costs and sharing driving. On Danny's urging, Marton produced a road map of Afghanistan. Ralph and Danny pored over it, animated and excited. Even the guarded Marton seemed pleased.

Cassie wished she felt the same.

