

## Deep blue eyes

Back at the house, Roger told Omar he was anxious to see Lyle. “He’s still away. Musa says there’s only a foreign woman in the house now. She didn’t know when Mr. Lyle would be back. But never mind. This just means you can be our guest longer.”

The woman had to be Jill. Busted!

Roger tried to sound casual. “I’d like to go ask her myself. You say it’s not far from here?”

“I’ll take you if you really want—”

“Thanks, but I’d rather go by myself.”

Lyle’s house was about five blocks away in the exclusive Wazir Akbar Khan district. Omar said it was safe to walk there as long as he got back before curfew at dark. Roger found the house on what the Americans named First Street near the former Belgian Embassy. Although Omar had told him some American Embassy staff and Foreign Service personnel lived in converted metal shipping containers on the embassy compound, Lyle was employed by Grayrock. He lived in an Italianate villa.

Roger knocked. A latch clanked and a narrow metal panel in the door slid open. Two deep blue eyes peered out. Not Jill’s.

“Um, I have a message for Lyle. From the D.C. office.”

The door slowly opened to let Roger in. The blue eyes belonged to a pretty young woman in a loose white blouse and black slacks. She spoke with an accent Roger couldn’t place. “Lyle is in Kabul, but he’s on assignment now. I do not know when he will be back.” She stood waiting for Roger to say more.

“My wife works for Lyle. Maybe you know her. Jill Williams? I could give the message to her.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know your wife.”

“She’s American, about our age, dirty blond curls, green eyes, your height, taller than Lyle.”

“Lyle has never mentioned her. I have lived here more than a year, and I’ve never seen her.”

Roger frowned. The young woman introduced herself. “Sophie Martens. I work with Femmes en Crise, a Belgian NGO, a non-governmental aid organization.”

He shook the hand she offered. “You say Lyle’s ‘on assignment.’ Did he go alone? No one from Grayrock with him?”

Sophie’s eyes paused on Roger’s before she spoke. “Again, I’m sorry. Lyle tells me nothing. Only that he is protecting American personnel from enemies.” Her cheeks turned pink and she gestured towards a maroon leather couch, over which hung a US Army ceremonial sabre. “Lyle doesn’t want me to have visitors, but ...”

When she sat next to him, he asked what she did at the aid organization.

“Education of women. I guess you know the Taliban want to restrict girls to religious education. Everything women need to know is in the Koran, they say. They claim we’re enemies of God.” She took a breath. “But that hasn’t stopped us. We have set up a teacher-training school in Kabul. With a full curriculum.”

“That’s impressive.” Roger was having a hard time seeing Sophie as Lyle’s type.

She bit her lip. “The Taliban oppose our work. They burned down a girls’ high school in Farah Province recently. And the Islamic State, they are worse.”

Roger said he’d read about the school burning. “But have you had any success?”

Sophie pushed her long dark hair aside and smiled. “A little. That’s what keeps me going.”

Since his geometry lesson that morning, Roger had in the back of his mind the notion of spending a summer volunteering to teach in Afghanistan. Listening to Sophie made him think this might be

possible.

Sophie folded her arms. “I know. You probably think we’re wasting our time. ‘Simpler to just wipe the Taliban out.’ That’s what Lyle says.”

“Not at all. I admire you. You’re doing something important.”

The flush in her cheeks deepened.

“Besides,” he said, “wipe the Taliban out? What would that even mean?”

She held trembling fingers to her chest. “Please don’t misunderstand. I would never complain about Lyle. Please don’t tell him I said that.”

“No. Of course not.” Roger resisted the instinct to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. He found Sophie puzzling. She was devoted to helping Afghan women improve their lives. Yet she was living with Lyle, a man who saw violence as the only way of fixing things. “So you and Lyle—”

Sophie glanced away. “My friend Lexi came to Kabul to work for Femmes en Crise, so I wanted to join, too. But there was no room in their Green Village housing.”

“Green Village?”

“It’s different from the Green Zone. It’s a guarded compound southeast of the airport where international companies and aid organizations stay.”

“But you came anyway? Even though there was no room in the Femmes en Crise housing?”

“Yes. Our director met Lyle. He needed somebody to keep his house in order.” Sophie pursed her lips. “He doesn’t trust ‘hajis,’ as he calls them.”

“That’s Lyle. But I wonder how your director met him?”

“It was after the USAID robbery last year. He and a U.S. army colonel invited Femmes en Crise to the Grayrock headquarters to explain that a big shipment of grant money for our program had been stolen. It was terrible. USAID delivered the money to Lyle and a Belgian guard at the Bagram Airport. When they were

transporting it to our Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Green Village, four men ambushed them. Lyle said the Belgian guard was killed. The ambushers got away with the cash. All in U.S. dollars.”

“I never read about that.”

“I’m told the U.S. likes to keep incidents like this quiet.” She gripped her hands together. “We were planning to build a second school in Kandahar. Now we’re not sure we can afford to.”

“I’m sorry. And you say you’ve lived here for more than a year?”

Sophie frowned. “Yes. Six months after I got here, there was an attack right outside the Green Village walls. The United Nations staff left. Femmes en Crise stayed, but most of our women quit and went home. There are only three of us now. So when the director moved into a room of her own, I wanted to move in with Lexi.” Sophie bit her lip. “But Lyle said no.”

“He wouldn’t let you?”

Sophie’s cheeks reddened. “He has a strong personality. Is that the way you put it?”

Roger would have put it another way, but he only nodded.

Sophie blinked away a tear, and Roger was moved by her dark eyelashes. Her deep blue eyes met his. “You’re a friend of Lyle’s. I should offer you something.” She lifted a little brass bell from a mahogany table next to the couch, rang, and called out in Dari to someone in another room.

Roger noticed an envelope on the table from the “Pulshui Bank” addressed to Lyle in English. He’d walked past that bank on the way here. The building seemed to be nothing more than a door with a sign over it wedged between a shoe store and a casket maker.

Sophie saw him eyeing the unopened envelope. “Lyle tells me nothing about his business. I’ve learned not to ask.”

A handsome Afghan boy about twelve years old in a black prayer cap came in and placed a glass of wine and a can of Budweiser on the table. One of the boy’s arms was in a cast.

“It looks like he hurt his arm,” Roger commented when the boy left the room.

Sophie toyed with her wine glass. “Oh, it’s nothing. A simple fracture.”

“I was just wondering. You know, because of all the bombings, attacks on civilians—”

“It was nothing like that. Lyle caught Ishak loitering near a Grayrock truck and grabbed him, thinking he might be a terrorist. Lyle’s a powerful man. The arm was broken. Of course, Lyle was sorry when he found out the boy was not one of the enemy, just a boy on the street. He brought him here to be his house boy.” Sophie sipped her wine, leaving a faint trace of pink lipstick on the edge of the glass. “Lyle is very enamored of Ishak. I don’t know if enamored is the right word.”

“Well . . .” Roger snapped open the can of Budweiser.

Sophie smiled. “I thought you’d like that beer. It’s Lyle’s favorite.”

How could this woman speak affably about a man who considered her work a waste of time? Who broke a boy’s arm?

“I know what you must be thinking,” Sophie murmured. “Lyle can be violent. But I’ve learned how to ‘stay out of his way.’ That’s what Lyle tells me.”

Sophie took another slow sip, gazing at Roger over her glass. Now Roger felt his own cheeks warming. “You should be proud,” he told her. “You’re helping people. I wish I could do the same.”

“Why can’t you?”

“Maybe I could for a little while.” He told Sophie about the lesson he’d taught in Karim’s high school.

“*Formidable!* You could get a position like mine to help train Afghan teachers. Check with USAID.” She smiled. “You’d be perfect.”

Roger sipped some beer.

“The pay isn’t bad,” Sophie went on. “Not anything like Grayrock pay, of course.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I could do that for more than a few months. Not a whole year like you.”

“We get thirty days’ leave every six months. R and R, Lyle calls it. In fact, my leave is coming up soon. I was thinking of visiting my

aunt in America. She has a bakery in New York.” Sophie paused. “Is it dangerous in the U.S., though? I read that a family planning center was bombed. They said it was the second time that the same place was bombed.” She touched her heart. “And two men who worked there were murdered before that.”

“That was about twenty-five years ago.”

“So things are better now? Yet I read about a Molotov cocktail bombing of a family planning center just last winter.”

Roger took the last sip of his beer. He wished he could guarantee Sophie she wouldn’t find strains of Taliban-like thinking in America. But the thought of Father Joy still preaching his catechism to the boys at Saint Michael’s silenced him. People like Karim’s English teacher and Sophie risked their lives sticking to their principles. All Roger risked if he let his objections to the Saint Michael’s indoctrination be known was losing his job.

Sophie checked the time on her phone. “Almost curfew. You should probably be going. You’re welcome to come back tomorrow.” Her face reddened as she added that.

Roger realized he’d completely forgotten why he came here. “Will you give Lyle my phone number, ask him to call me when he gets back?”

“He doesn’t have it?”

“Uh, just in case.” He turned on his phone.

“All right. May I?” She put her hand under his and texted herself from his phone to get his number.

When she stood at the door, Sophie said, “I hope nothing I’ve said made you think I’m critical of Lyle.”

“I’d hate to think you’re afraid of him, Sophie.”

Without responding, she took his hand. Her blue eyes met his. “I’m pleased to have met you. I hope you find your wife soon.”