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The Taliban Cricket Club

Written by Timeri N. Murari

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THE TALIBAN CRICKET CLUB

TIMERI N. MURARI

ALLEN&UNWIN

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Allen & Unwin
c/o Atlantic Books
Ormond House
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Phone: 020 7269 1610
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For Roger and Briony, to celebrate our long years of friendship. And for Maureen, with love.

Cruel leaders are replaced only to have new leaders turn cruel.

—Ernesto "Che" Guevara

There is no place for any act of violence on the field of play.

—Preamble No. 6 in the Laws of Cricket

BOOK ONE

THE SUMMONS

He hadn't forgotten me. One of his minions delivered the note to our home.

> *Rukhsana, daughter of Gulab, is to appear in person at 11:00 A.M. at the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, Salang Wat, Kabul, Lekshanbeh 18 Sawr 1379 at the command of Zorak Wahidi, Minister for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.*

No further explanation. I was just to appear in only a few hours' time on this Sunday of May 7, 2000. I had prayed, over the last four years, to slip from his mind.

"I refuse to go," I announced to my brother.

"You can't just refuse," Jahan insisted, putting on a brave face. "And I'm going with you, so you don't have to be afraid."

The slip of paper—what it said, and what it left unsaid—was a threat. Why would he summon me? What crime had I committed now? Had I revealed my face, accidentally, to a stranger? Had I, accidentally, spoken out loud in the bazaar? Had I, accidentally, revealed an

ankle or a wrist? Who knew what rules were encircling us like serpents in a pit?

Or could it be that he had finally caught me doing what he had warned me never to do again. As a journalist, to keep my sanity, I had to write about what I saw and heard going on around me. But I had taken extraordinary steps to remain anonymous, undetectable. I filed my stories under a pseudonym, and never directly, with the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi. I faxed them, when the line worked, to the home of a political columnist and friend of Father's. He banked my pay and made sure the desperately needed money reached me without raising suspicion. I also contributed to the publications of RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, through a complex chain of contacts.

As Jahan and I climbed the stairs to Mother's room, I replayed the day, four years ago, I had first met the minister, when he brutally dismissed me from my post at the *Kabul Daily*, and I had come home bruised and bloodied.

We tried to hide our anxiety from Mother, but despite her illness, she had an instinct for trouble. When she pressed me, I told her about the note.

"What have you done to remind him of your presence?"

"Nothing," I said innocently.

She didn't believe me. "Rukhsana, please tell me you haven't written anything recently. It has become too dangerous—you said you would stop."

"I never sign my name. I use a pseudonym," I said quietly.

"Do you think a pseudonym will protect you from someone like him?" she asked.

I heard Jahan shift uncomfortably on his feet behind me—he had reluctantly helped me, as my *mahram*, accompanying me when I needed to meet my sources.

"And your latest subject?" my mother said at last, tears coming to her eyes.

"Zarmina's execution—but, Maadar, I didn't sign it. If this is truly why I am being summoned, I will deny authorship. There were at least thirty thousand people at Ghazi Stadium. I am told there is even video footage. Any one of them could have sent the story."

"But none as reckless as my daughter." She shook her head. "Be very careful," she said, resigned. "They must have found out, somehow."

The house felt ominously quiet as we prepared to leave. While Jahan washed in the bathroom, I held the bedpan for my mother, emptied it in the toilet downstairs, and then washed her. Afterward, she lay in the large bed, a frail figure framed by white sheets. She obediently swallowed her morning medications.

"You're in the wrong profession," Mother said and smiled. "You should've been a nurse."

"I wouldn't have this patience with strangers." I drew back the curtains and opened the window to let in the morning light. She would not let me leave for the ministry with ill feelings between us.

"But you do have it for your mother. I never expected that from you." She sighed loudly. "You were always too spirited, as your grandfather said."

I leaned over and kissed her. "Dr. Hanifa will be here soon."

"By now, you should have married Shaheen, as we'd arranged, and had your own children."

He was my mother's uncle's sister-in-law's son, an only child, and we had known each other most of our lives. We were meant for each other; even from a young age we were told of the future arrangement for our lives. We had met at a wedding when I was six years old and Shaheen was ten. We were expected to bond like two small magnets. We didn't. He was a quiet, solemn child with a square face and a superior air, while I was noisy and mischievous.

Unlike me, he was always neatly dressed and made sure that his clothes remained clean throughout any games we cousins played together. His parents pampered him and he expected the same service whenever he visited our home. His father was a very successful businessman, chairman of an import-export company that traded with Iran, Iraq, Dubai, Pakistan, and India.

"Then I wouldn't be able to care for you, would I?"

I smiled as I left the room, and went to hurry Jahan along. I knocked on the bathroom door. "Save some water for me, okay?"

I looked down at the garden where our rosebushes grew wild. The fallen petals were like wounds on the lawn, which was parched, but water was as precious as life itself, and we had to survive on four buckets a day purchased weekly from a tanker.

Jahan stepped out, trying to smile, and tousled my disheveled hair. "There's enough, if you don't wash your hair."

I washed hurriedly. The bathroom had been half open to the sky for six years. Now, in summer, it was pleasant to feel the warmth of the sun through the opening, but in winter the wind would blow its cold breath through and freeze you while you washed. There was no money, or workmen to pay to repair it. A rocket exploded in our back garden in 1994 at the start of the civil war with the Taliban, the latest bloody chapter in the power struggle among greedy warlords that began when the Russians left in 1987. The rocket made the building shiver, as if with pain, and yet somehow the house stayed upright and only this part of the ceiling was destroyed. My grandparents and I were sheltered in the basement, but our servants, Asif and Sima, who had worked for our family for twenty years, refused to join us because they believed they would be safer in the outbuilding. They stubbornly remained in their home and were, mercifully, instantly killed in the explosion. We still mourned the loss of such good people.

I dressed in jeans and a blouse but did not look in a mirror. My

face would be pasty, the color of watery flour, and as soft as dough. It wouldn't have the flush of health and exercise, or the light tan of an afternoon in the sun. I didn't want to look into my eyes—they would be dull, and set in deep purple circles. Like all women I existed only in the house, or else covered with my burka in the street.

We went to say good-bye to Mother, propping her door open so she would not feel trapped.

I leaned over and kissed her. "Now, don't worry, we'll be back soon," I said, stroking her forehead.

"I pray you will." And then a command: "Take Parwaaze too."

"I'm old enough," Jahan protested as he came in to kiss her. "I've been her *mahram* every time she has to go out."

"So, take another *mahram* this time, Parwaaze." Then, to me, "And keep your mouth shut, don't answer back."

"Yes, Maadar," I said meekly.

She didn't have to add that if something happened to us, she would be left all alone in the world. One of us must return.

I buried myself in my burka and Jahan and I crossed our yard, to the gate. It was the same height as our compound walls, twelve feet, to shield us from inquisitive eyes. We had a rambling old house with a stern frontage of pillars. When I was a child, two old poplar trees framed the gate, but Russian soldiers had cut them down for firewood. When Grandfather went out to protest, they merely pointed their guns at him. The Talib might have shot him for protesting. We had long been stripped of our own armed guard, so he could only mourn the loss of the trees and remain furious at the Russians for invading his kingdom.

Our ancient, white-bearded watchman, Abdul, with the resigned air of his age, came out from the guardhouse and ran his one good eye over us as we approached. In most houses, the only defense against intruders was someone like Abdul. He used to live in the old city, four streets south of the Pul-e-Khishti Mosque. His

wife and children did not survive the war with the Talib. Now, he lived in the ruined quarters behind our house.

"Your ankles are showing," he announced, sounding pleased with himself. "Cover them or you'll be beaten." I tugged my burka down as far as it would go.

"I was beaten yesterday by a Talib because I did not pray. What do they expect?" He could afford to be indignant behind our compound walls. "I'm supposed to just stop doing what I'm doing and drop down to pray—five times a day too, as if I have nothing better to do and God has nothing better to do than listen to us? Before they came, I prayed once a day and went to the mosque on Fridays. God doesn't want to be reminded of our presence so often.

"You women are lucky behind your burkas," he continued. "You don't have to grow beards and pray five times a day. I was handsome without this," he said, tugging at his scruffy white beard, "and now what young girl will want to marry this old man?"

"Don't worry—they're out there waiting for you," I told him, as I did each time we received Abdul's daily litany of complaints.

"And, if you're lucky, you'll die happily in their arms," Jahan added.

"Ah, if only I could die that way." He moved toward the smaller side gate but grabbed Jahan's arm. "You too will be beaten by the Talib. Look at your *lungee*!" My brother's turban was perched—illegally—on top of his unruly hair, a show of adolescent defiance. Abdul flattened Jahan's curls and then pressed the turban down to his ears so the hair was completely hidden. He so resembled Father, with his square face, slim, straight nose, and the same gray eyes. His long eyelashes were the envy of women, including his sister. He had Father's height but not his strong build and wide shoulders. "They will cut your hair all off if they see it. And don't forget to pray when you hear the call. Where are you going, may I ask?"

"To see Parwaaze," I said quickly before Jahan could answer.

"Oh, and Dr. Hanifa will be here in a few minutes to see Mother."

He unlocked the small gate beside the larger one to let us out. He followed us to the street, watching until we were out of sight, then he would wait for Dr. Hanifa to arrive.

The summer in Kabul is hot, and when the wind blows down from the mountains it brings with it a harsh brown dust. That morning, though, the sky was a clear indigo and little clouds floated past. Often I would go up to our roof to look out at Paghman Mountain and the Kohi Asamayi and Kohi Sher Darwaza hills. At night the mountain and hills would melt into the arms of the sky, but were forced apart, like lovers, by the harsh light of day. Between the hills, I can just glimpse the northern suburb of Wazir Akbar Khan and the rising mound of Bibi Mahro behind it. Crowning it is the huge abandoned swimming pool, complete with diving boards—but no water—built by the Russians, and nearer home the yellow brick silo they built on the border of Karte Seh, out of imperial charity, that supplied flour to their troops and subsidized our daily naan. It is such a splendid tower, our skyscraper; how the rockets missed it is both a miracle and a mystery. As a child I imagined that if I climbed to the top, I could look to a horizon, beyond the hills and mountains that encircle us.

I had no sense of the limitless world beyond until I went to Delhi. I wondered often what it must be like to stand in a desert, or by the sea, and see great distances stretching beyond my imagination. I sometimes blamed these natural fortifications for our misfortunes. They should have sealed us off from the world, made us into a Shangri-La nestled within their folds, but instead they seemed to welcome in a thousand invaders. We cannot even view the length and breadth of our city for the hills that divide us.

Jahan and I followed the winding pathway through the bomb-

damaged roads toward Parwaaze's house—only two streets away. Apart from the sparrows that nested in the eaves of our house, there weren't any other birds to be seen. Over the years, we had chopped down our trees for firewood and they had fled to more hospitable habitations. It was an obstacle course of deep craters and ruts from tanks and armored carriers that had churned up the landscape around our homes. We passed our neighbors' houses, some partial ruins like ours, others reduced to rubble. Parwaaze's house had lost its entire right side; a balcony hung from it like a dislocated jaw and the front walls bled red dust from bullet holes. The green tiles along the front were all broken into shards. His windows were patched with plastic sheets or plywood. Like our house, it had once risen proudly to two floors but now crouched humbly with its many wounds.

His watchman, as old as Abdul, peered through a narrow slat and opened the small gate, but I waited by the entrance while Jahan went in. I didn't want to meet my female relatives in Parwaaze's house and listen to the familiar litany of complaints about the sapping boredom of their incarceration. Jahan came out with Parwaaze, who was rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Parwaaze was my mother's nephew and, at nineteen, five years younger than me but three years older than Jahan. At one time, he had the spirit of an adventurer and a dreamer; I think that if I had told him the story of Icarus he would have attached wings to his back and tried to fly over the mountains. But now, his shoulders drooped and he wore a permanent frown. He and his family had survived the war, but without their spirit intact. His clear gray eyes were now watchful and suspicious. Despite all this, he was still my handsomest cousin. His beard was thin, and there was a slight dent in his nose, as if it had been broken and badly set, and he was always immaculate in his dress.

"Where are we going?" he asked. I told him about Zorak

Wahidi's summons. Parwaaze grimaced. "I wish I wasn't here but was far away. I don't want to be anywhere near him—Jahan is your *mahram*."

"Maadar said you have to come with us," I insisted.

He sighed. "Okay, I will, though I doubt we'll be much protection for you. He's not going to shoot anyone, is he?"

"I hope not. No, it's only a meeting."

"Never ever look at their faces," he said to Jahan. "Don't even let them be aware of you. Otherwise, they'll grab you and . . . I've heard stories . . ." We all had heard stories about the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice.

"I know that," Jahan said with adolescent arrogance.

"At least they won't know I'm looking at them," I said, plucking at my burka in the heat.

"Why does Wahidi want to see you anyway?" Parwaaze said, trying to tease me gently. "Is this about your running around and writing secret newspaper stories?"

But all I could muster up in response was a shrug. "Maybe—I just don't know," I said, the fear in my voice finally registering on his face.

"Rukhsana, Rukhsana, then don't go there. You may not return."

"I have to, otherwise he'll send his police to find me."

As we left, we saw our cousin Qubad ambling up toward us. Qubad lived near Parwaaze and spent most of his waking hours with him. They were inseparable, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Qubad was shorter than Parwaaze, and much fatter. He still remained well fed despite these harsh times, or they could be natural rolls that sustained him, like a camel, through the lean periods of our lives. His solemn face belied his sense of humor.

Friends since childhood, Qubad planned a career in mechanical engineering, Parwaaze in electronics. Parwaaze's father had a successful business in neighboring Shar-e-Now, selling televi-

sions, stereos, CDs, audiotapes, and computers. I bought my tapes there when I was in school and, as family, I had a discount. Four years ago, the religious police invaded his store with their machine guns, and smashed all the television sets and stereos, broke every CD, unwound the cassettes and VHS tapes and burned them. Parwaaze's family watched this destruction of their livelihood helplessly. There was nothing they could do. It was the new law.

Qubad's father had owned the only Ford dealership in the city, and business began to evaporate in the late '90s until it finally collapsed. No one could afford cars anymore—the only wealth coming into the country was invisible in the national ledgers: profits from enormous poppy crops cultivated at the command of the warlords.

As children, we had led nervous, claustrophobic lives, playing in our gardens first amid the Russian occupation and then the civil war. I had grown up with these boys and we were still alive, but not without great loss. Qubad's father had been killed in cross fire in 1996 and so had many other relatives—fathers, mothers, and children. Our sleepless nights were punctuated by gunfire and the whine of rockets.

And with the onset of the civil war with the Taliban, Parwaaze's and Qubad's studies at Kabul University came to a halt. Young men like them who had known only war now filled the cities and the countryside, idling away their lives. The unemployment rate was above 60 percent, thus replacing their ambition with bitterness and frustration. At times, I feared they had lost the will to live. It made them all the more vulnerable to the Taliban's recruiters—I shuddered to think of my other male cousins joining their ranks.

"Where are you all g-going?" Qubad asked us.

"To be shot," Parwaaze said dourly. "Rukhsana is in trouble. The minister for the propagation of virtue and prevention of vice has summoned her but she doesn't know why."

"I'm g-going home," said Qubad, turning on his heel.

But Parwaaze grabbed him by the tail of his stained and rumpled *shalwar*, the long shirt that reached his knees. "No, no, you're coming too."

"What for? I d-don't want to be sh-shot."

"Her *maadar* said we both have to accompany her," Parwaaze lied.

We walked cautiously to the Karte Seh circle with its four wide roads leading to the compass points, pockmarked and scarred by rockets fired by both the Talibs and the Northern Alliance. The Russians entered Afghanistan in 1979 to support President Najibullah's Communist government. In the war between the Russians and the mujahedeen, our freedom fighters, we were armed by the United States. In 1987, the Russians retreated, and when General Dostum, President Najibullah's main ally, defected to form a Northern Alliance based in Mazar-e-Sharif, Najibullah resigned. Then war broke out between the Northern Alliance and various warlords, all looking to fill the power vacuum. The Taliban, an Islamist army of religious warriors recruited by Mullah Omar from the disaffected students in the madrassas, became a third player in the war in 1994. From their base in Kandahar, backed by the Pakistan army, they gradually moved north to fight the Northern Alliance. In 1996, the Talib conquered Kabul, and the Northern Alliance retreated to Mazar-e-Sharif.

Now the only color left in the city was that of the blooming roses growing wild in the gardens we passed. Afghan roses are the plumpest, sweetest-smelling roses in the world, and I breathed in their fragrance to calm my nerves. At the circle, there was a wide expanse of park to the south, along with a line of shops: bakeries,

vegetable carts, fruit shops, a restaurant (The Paradise), a car repair shop, and a pharmacy.

"It's a long walk," I said to the others. The ministry was in the city center, just north of the river and opposite the Afghan Central Bank. "We'll take a taxi."

Qubad took the entire front seat, so the three of us squeezed into the back of the ancient Toyota. We slowly bounced along the broken Asamayi Road, twisting and turning to avoid the biggest craters and chunks of fallen masonry. The road threaded the pass between the Asamayi and Sher Darwaza hills, washed green and pale purple, that divided the city in two. I sweated in my burka—from the heat and from anxiety. Would I return home or be arrested? I prayed silently that my cousins and Jahan would be safe, whatever Wahidi wanted with me. I stared out the window—not even the stumps of the great trees that once lined Asamayi Road as far as the eye could see remained. I avoided looking at the Kabul Zoo as we passed it; its grounds were neglected and overgrown, and many of the large animals were dead, sport for the brave Talib fighters.

There was little traffic, with very few cars and mostly bicycles, buses, handcarts and donkey carts, and camel trains carrying bales of cotton and sacks of grain and, probably, opium. A long line of goats obediently followed their herdsman to their eventual slaughter. Dust blew into the car, smothering us. Qubad tried to roll up the window but it wouldn't budge.

"You should r-repair your w-windows," he complained to the driver.

"What are you," the driver said, laughing, "an emir? This is good Kabuli dust. Gives us our special color and smell."

I laughed with the others, enjoying this glimpse of our lost humor. He heard me and turned just as he avoided a deep hole. "Sister, as much as I love the sound of your laugh, you must be

silent. I must not hear your voice. If you were alone I wouldn't even have taken you. Three days ago, I picked up a lady to take her to the old city and some religious police stopped me. They pulled her out and beat her legs with their cables and then pulled me out and beat me for traveling with a single woman who was not my wife or a relation."

We stayed silent after that.

"Where do you want me to drop you?" the driver asked.

"Just here at Pastunistan Square," Parwaaze said, not wanting to frighten the man by telling him we had been summoned to the very heart of the religious police headquarters.

Here the city was still a wasteland. In its four-year rule the Talib had done nothing to rebuild or replace what they helped destroy. The city, as fragile as any human, was gaunt with sickness; its blackened ribs jutted out at odd angles, craters of sores pitted its skin, and girders lay twisted like broken bones in the streets. Its gangrenous breath smelled of explosives, smoke, and despair. Even mosques were not spared the savagery, their skulls explosively opened to the sky. The Kabul River was a trickle of water pulsing through a muddy artery clogged with garbage. Across the river, the pale blue dome of the Timur Shah tomb was, somehow, unscathed. The tomb seemed obscene in its beauty, rising above the broken mud-brick homes and shops that had once crowded around it for protection. Rising out of those humble ruins were lines of carts selling vegetables, fruits, meat, and clothes. People clotted around them, as emaciated as the city, emerging out of the rubble to purchase a potato, a peach, a chicken leg, a sliver of meat, a bowl of rice, some dry naan.

The taxi stopped on the curve of the road leading to Pastunistan Square and we hesitantly climbed out. The two-story Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice building stood behind crumbling walls scarred with bullet and shell holes, aloof,

in an island of traffic, deceptively humble. The windows were shuttered. Farther down the road were the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Finance, and other government offices, their windows open for the light. We could see the walls of the president's palace from the square. Pedestrians jostled us and we headed reluctantly toward the entrance. Many whom we passed were missing hands, missing legs, and had a wild look of disorder in their eyes. There were children on crutches, jerking around like puppets, all play drained from their faces, and holding out their skinny hands for alms.

I walked a few steps behind my brother, who held our summons as protection against the whims of the police who padded along the streets like predators, armed with their canes and guns, watching us for the slightest infraction. They would strike out, as quick as snakes, to punish the transgressor of any one of their laws.

But it was the quiet that I found most disturbing, and which filled me with unease. This was once a city of music; we hummed and sang Sufi, Farsi, ghazals, qawwali, and Bollywood songs. Melodies, seducing us to enter and listen, flowed out of every shop and followed us from street to street. Now the shiny intestines of cassettes fluttered in the breeze, knotted around posts and trailing along footpaths, ripped out to teach us how fragile music was. Guns were the only culture left in the country; they were the only music, the only poetry, the only writings, the only art that nourished the children. We had been an exuberant people, loquacious, generous with our smiles and laughter, we had been gossipers and raconteurs, but now we spoke in whispers, afraid to be overheard. Suspicion soiled our daily lives. We had become a city of informers and spies. A soot of despair had settled on our souls and we could not scrub it off.

We stopped outside the ministry. "All ready?" I said bravely, but I trembled as we entered the compound. I was grateful for my

three escorts. Jahan held my elbow to steady my footsteps. I could not glance at him, my burka denying me even such a simple gesture. I turned my head to peer at him through my bars.

"It'll be all right," he whispered. Two Talibs stepped in our way and quickly took the summons that Jahan held out. They were not Afghans but Arabs, either Saudis or Yemenis, surly men with dark, heavy beards. They had hooded eyes, like drowsy beasts, that awakened when they saw Jahan. I suddenly wished he had not accompanied me.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Then their eyes lingered over Parwaaze and Qubad. All three looked down. Finally, they examined me in my burka and, despite the masking mesh, I looked down too, as frightened as the boys. Satisfied that we were summoned by the minister himself, they escorted us through the building and into the rear courtyard.

Taliban edicts, tattered and frayed but still menacing in their message, were reproduced in large notices pinned to the walls:

WOMEN SHOULD ONLY BE SEEN
IN THE HOME AND IN THE GRAVE

We were only reproductive beasts to them, like goats, or chickens, or cows, fed and watered to await our slaughter should we break free. Our role was defined only by our womb and not by our thoughts and feelings. All in the name of God. How does a woman believe in God when the conduits of his messages are only men?

I straightened my back in mute defiance. I was determined not to be afraid.

In the courtyard, five men stood along the wall in the shade. I wasn't the lone one summoned here and was

momentarily relieved. I recognized Yasir, my old editor from the *Kabul Daily*, among them. He was a small, burly man, Napoleonic at times with his reporters. We had our differences, but he could be kind too. Now he wore the mandatory full beard. The others must have been reporters from the Dari and Pashtu newspapers. They looked like they wanted to be there as much as we did. A sense of panic broke over me afresh—why was I being rounded up with reporters? Yasir glanced in my direction—I was the only woman there—and I could tell he knew it was me under the burka. His presence made me feel slightly better. He lifted his small finger in cautious greeting. I would have liked to have talked to him—surely he knew more than I did. He could have told me stories about the regime that I could not hear under my burka. As if he read my mind, Yasir made his way to my side. "*Salaam aleikum*, *Waleikum salaam*." We quickly exchanged formal greetings, Jahan next to me.

"Why are we here?" I whispered.

"He's going to make an announcement and no doubt threaten us." He spoke quietly too, staring straight ahead like a ventriloquist's dummy. "He's called all the press on the government list, or what's left of us, and that includes you."

"But I don't work for the *KD* anymore."

"The list doesn't know that. You still get government press releases at the office."

"My summons came to the house."

"Maybe one came to the office too. Have you been writing articles?"

"No, I haven't. How can I as a woman?"

"Knowing you, a lot," he said drily. "There have been stories in the foreign press on the bad treatment of women under this regime. There are very few women journalists in the country to report on that. In fact, I know of only . . ." He lifted his index finger, and then pointed it at me.

"And they think it's me?" I said indignantly, desperate to convince Yasir. "I swear I haven't written a word since I was forced to resign."

Except that, of course, I had. With Jahan a reluctant *mahram*, I would—if not go where I wished and mingle in the bazaars to hear the gossip—follow up on the whispered stories that were passed from one to another. I could speak only to women and spoke to the men through my brother. It felt as if I was in a foreign land with a translator interpreting my questions and giving me the answers. Through these channels I interviewed Ayesha, a pretty woman a few years younger than me. She told me, "I had been walking on Chicken Street with my father when the religious police stopped me. At first, I didn't know why. I didn't know nail polish was banned; no one told me, it wasn't written anywhere. They dragged me and my father to the police station, placed my hand on a table, and with a hatchet chopped off the tip of my little finger. I screamed with pain and shock. I didn't know they would do that. And then they beat my father, as he is responsible for my behavior. See what's left of that finger?" The wound had healed and the remaining fingers were cleaned of any nail polish. I dragged Jahan to interview Frozan: "We're from Jalalabad and we fled here to escape the fighting, abandoning our home. The other day, I was passing a shop and I saw our family clock for sale in the window. I went in and told the owner that it was our clock and that he should return it. Just then, a religious policeman came in and beat me for being out without my *mahram* and then beat the shopkeeper for talking to me." I also found lighter, and defiant, stories of how we survived. A woman named Zahra told me, "We love watching smuggled tapes of Bollywood films on our television and we'd spend hours just doing that, as there was nothing else to do. One day our neighbor reported us to the religious police and they raided us. They picked up our television, threw it out of

the window, and warned us not to do that again. We lived three stories up. So we moved out of that flat and into another, bought a new television, and watched our movies. We learned to keep the volume low so our neighbors wouldn't hear us."

I wrote whatever I could and I signed them all with my pseudonym. Despite what Yasir believed, I wasn't the only woman sending out scraps of news to foreign publications. There were others out there and we were a small tribe of rebellious scribes in hiding.

And under this regime, no one knew on whose side anyone was and Yasir could be tempting me to boast. Our press was putty in this regime's hands.

"I am sure there's nothing to worry about." Yasir's voice was bland in disbelief. He lowered his voice further. "But you know, print one wrong word and they beat you or imprison you."

Then he turned fractionally to me for the first time and spoke quickly. "I am sorry that I didn't defend you the day Wahidi came into the office. If I had, he would have shot me. We're not brave."

"Shot you! I thought he'd shoot me." I shivered—I was younger then, unafraid and ignorant of the nature of such men and their misshapen beliefs. "When did Wahidi become the minister?"

"Two days ago," he said, looking ahead again. "After you saw him in Kabul in ninety-six, he returned to Kandahar to serve Mullah Omar on the ruling council for two years. I heard the mullah did nothing without consulting Wahidi. Wahidi was then made governor of Kandahar province and served for another two years before the mullah sent him to Pakistan."

"Why Pakistan?"

"To be his representative in talks. He gave Wahidi the post because three or four months ago, someone attempted to assassinate him. They blew up his house, with his wife and two of his children, but he wasn't home."

"I never heard about that. So even the Talib ministers aren't safe."

I wasn't that surprised, as the Taliban's cruel regime had massacred thousands of our people, creating an army of enemies.

"You still haven't," he whispered harshly. "We can't publish such stories. He returned from Pakistan a month ago, and we don't know how the talks went because nothing was announced. The mullah doesn't like Kabul at all. He believes we are a decadent people and prefers to rule from Kandahar. So now he sends us Wahidi to keep us in line." He took a breath. "I hear he is as pious as the mullah."

"No one could be—" I stopped when I saw the Land Cruiser race into the courtyard in front of us. "Oh god."

In the back lay a man and a woman, their arms and legs bound. The woman wore her burka; the man had a sack over his head. Two Talibs, along with two police officers who had guns, stood above them. The vehicle stopped, the Talibs jumped down and pushed their prisoners out onto the ground as if they were sacks of grain. When they fell we heard their muffled cries.

The minister for the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice, Zorak Wahidi, the man who had summoned us here, stepped out of the passenger seat and walked slowly back to the fallen couple. I felt a shudder of recognition. His beard was whiter since I'd last seen him four years ago. There was a stoop to his shoulders, as if a thousand dead souls pressed down on him. He wore a black *shalwar*, a black *lungee*, and new black sandals. He also carried a pistol. He looked down at the prisoners and then across to us. I wanted to shield Jahan from what was about to happen but he had moved to stand between Parwaaze and Qubad and watched with the fascination of any teenager. He had never witnessed an execution before—Mother had forbidden him to accompany me and Parwaaze last November when Zarmina was executed. "Look away, look away," I whispered, but he didn't hear me. Wahidi pointed the pistol down toward the man and shot him in the head. The man

appeared to rise briefly before falling back. Wahidi moved to the crying woman and shot her in the head too. The shots sounded flat and harmless in the empty space surrounding us. He walked toward us holding his pistol, as casually as a man crossing a drawing room to greet his guests. The two Talibs and the policemen followed him. He turned to give them an order, and then turned back to us.

"Do you know why they were executed?" We remained silent. I felt his eyes penetrating my veil, trying to remember the face he could not see. He angrily answered his own question. "They were traitors to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They were committing adultery, which is against our laws, and they deserved to die. We will not tolerate such vices. The press too"—he paused and surveyed us, noting each one present, focusing again on me—"are responsible for projecting in the foreign media a very bad image of our legitimate government." He paced in front of us and shouted, his face snarling in fury. "From here on out, you will write exactly what I tell you." The men took out their notebooks like obedient schoolboys. I hadn't brought one.

"The ruling council of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and I, have decided to show the world that we're a fair and just people. To that end, our government has decided to promote cricket in Afghanistan. We have applied to the International Cricket Council for membership."

Like the others, I raised my head in surprise.

"We wait to hear from them on this. The Pakistan Cricket Board will support our application. Cricket will show all those against us that we too can be sportsmen. As our young men have much time to spare, we wish to occupy them to prevent any vices. We banned cricket because it was a legacy of the evil British. But we studied all sports and cricket is modest in its clothing. The uniform covers the player from his neck to his feet and covers his head

as well. Therefore, we will encourage the sport, strictly according to Islamic rules of dress, and we will hold a tournament in three weeks. We will welcome an official from the International Cricket Council to observe the matches and know that we are genuine in our interest in promoting the sport, openly and fairly. The tournament is open to all Afghans and we will send the winning team to Pakistan to perfect their playing skills. They will return to teach other young men to play this sport. Women, of course, will not be permitted to play." He ended the announcement and dismissed us.

"What do you think?" I asked Yasir.

"I write what they tell me, and I do not think. But let's see how many Afghans turn up for the matches when they read about this. A free pass to leave the country—I wonder how many will return. Are you going to write this up?"

"Yasir—I don't write anymore."

When I moved to leave with the others, the two policemen grabbed me. Jahan tried to stop them, but one Talib hit him in the stomach with his gun butt. Yasir moved to help, but the second Talib pointed his gun at Yasir's chest. I struggled, trying to get a last glimpse of Jahan, but the men dragged me out of the courtyard and into a small, bare room and forced me to kneel. They pressed their gun barrels down on my shoulders so I could not move. We waited in oppressive silence. Finally, I sensed someone entering the room. I couldn't see through the mesh and tried to lift my head, but a hand pressed it back down to supplication. I smelled perfume, a cloying, sweet odor. I glimpsed dusty feet slyly circling me, and then he and his cologne walked out the door. Minutes later, Wahidi walked into the room in his black sandals. I heard the rustle of a paper, and he held a newspaper before my eyes. The English headline read "Taliban Execute Mother of Five Children." It was my story and I felt my heart miss a beat, then another. This was why I had been summoned here and he was about to kill me. But

I also knew he had no proof I had written it—it was filed under my pseudonym. *He is only trying to frighten you*, I told myself, and tried to stay calm. I did not speak; thankfully I wasn't expected to. He crushed the paper deliberately into a small ball and dropped it on the floor. Then he lowered a pistol to my line of vision, and I smelled cigarette smoke. Through the mesh, I saw his finger around the trigger, the gun like a natural extension of his hand. Its black barrel was worn gray, the butt chipped along the edges. His finger curled and uncurled as if it had a mind of its own and was thinking over the decision. The finger was surprisingly long, almost delicate, and manicured. Then the hand lifted the gun out of my small window of vision; it was somewhere above my head. I shut my eyes and waited. I tried prayers, but I couldn't form the words or sentences that would accompany me into the next life. I opened my eyes when the cigarette's smoke stung my nostrils. The cigarette lay on the floor, a serpent of smoke curling up. The ball of paper began to burn. He let it come to a small flame then crushed it with his sandal. He lowered to squat in front of me, his eyes almost level with mine. I shut mine tight and yet I felt his eyes piercing the mesh, as if searching the contours of my face. Then, with a decisive grunt, he stood up. The police lifted the gun barrels off my shoulders and followed him out.

I remained kneeling, waiting to open my eyes until I heard no further movement. The door was partially open and I was free to leave. Involuntarily, I laughed in relief. I struggled to stand, my foot caught in the edge of the burka, and I fell. I stood up, swaying, and moved to the door. I stepped out into an empty corridor. To my left, men were loading the executed couple into the back of an old Land Cruiser. For once, I was thankful for the burka. I had wet myself. My legs were rubbery and I leaned against the wall for strength. I moved cautiously out of the building, back into sunlight. Yasir was waiting by the entrance, while Jahan, Parwaaze,

and Qubad were sitting on the low wall across the street, along the river. They jumped up and hurried over when they saw me. I was more concerned for the abuse Jahan had suffered, and though he walked carefully, he appeared to be all right. He lifted his arms to embrace me but dropped them quickly in embarrassment, looking around to see if such an intimate gesture was noticed by the religious police. When Yasir saw my companions, he said, "Be careful," and hurried away.

"Are you okay?" they chorused.

"Yes. Jahan, are you all right?"

"Just a stomachache. It'll pass."

"We didn't think we'd see you again," Parwaaze said, leading us away, our feet leaden on the broken pavement. "Did they hurt you?" he asked me, checking back over his shoulder.

"No, and they didn't say a word."

"Then why did they take you inside? What did they want?"

"I don't know. Wahidi came into the room, smoked a cigarette, and left." I didn't mention the gun barrels on my shoulders, the article, or the pistol. I was frightened and I didn't want to frighten them more.

"I didn't want you to see . . . that," I said to Jahan.

He was almost in tears, as he was remembering the impact of the bullets. "I didn't want to watch, but it was so sudden and I couldn't move my eyes, I couldn't even shut them."

"It's better to cry for them than just look away." I looked at the other two. They too had moist eyes, flickering with horror at what they had witnessed, and their faces were a shade paler. "Are you both okay?" I asked them, wishing I could take back everything they had seen.

"Another execution. How many more will I see before I can get out of this country?" Parwaaze asked aloud.

"Rukhsana, next time we'll be carrying out your c-corpse,"

Qubad said. "You must leave Kabul. Go to Shaheen, he's waiting for you in America. He was lucky to get out."

"I can't—there's just no way. I'm not going to leave Maadar while . . ." I didn't want Mother to die. Somehow, I had to survive and see my mother through her illness, and then escape. I prayed hard. *Please let me make it safely through Maadar's death and I will leave an instant later. Please protect me until then—just a little more time before I join my betrothed.*

"Let's get out of here," Jahan said.

We hurried toward home. My shoulders still burned from the gun barrels and I felt Wahidi's breath on my face. Why had he called me? Was he setting a trap to see if I'd report today's executions and write about the cricket announcement? If he was certain I'd written those other stories, I wouldn't be walking home. I'd be in prison.

In my preocupation, I wasn't listening to the boys until Parwaaze's excited voice broke through my thoughts.

" . . . in three weeks and the winning team will go to Pakistan," he said. "We get out if we win that match . . . go to Australia . . . America . . . to university . . . finish our studies . . . work . . . wasting our lives here . . ."

"Then we'll have to come back here to teach the others," Jahan said.

"I'll keep going and going," Parwaaze said.

"But we have one small p-problem with that brilliant idea," Qubad said.

"We don't know how to play cricket," Parwaaze admitted, crestfallen.

"We don't," Jahan said. "But Rukhsana does."