

## CHAPTER ONE

### November 1976, Bamiyan, Afghanistan

#### Cassidy

He woke to the smell of wood smoke and the sound of someone stoking up the stove. Packed around him on the teahouse floor, cocooned in sleeping bags, were his passengers. They snored, sighed, scratched at bites in their sleep. The young Hazara boy tending the stove grinned at him and pointed at the teapot on top. Cassidy nodded, his temples thumping from last night's cheap brandy.

'Thanks bonny lad.'

Yesterday's drive up from Kabul had been tortuous, the dirt tracks already icy in the shade; he had only just held it on that hairpin bend. Marcus had made a big fuss, ordering everyone off the bus and making them push. Typical bloody Posh Boy trying to undermine him with the group. Marcus: there was something about his co-driver that nagged his aching head, but he couldn't think what.

Cassidy took his tea outside, trying to shake off a feeling of foreboding. Too many things had gone wrong on this trip. He just wanted everyone to have a good time. The sooner they got down to India, warm sunshine and cheap whisky the better. Then maybe they'd recapture the fun they'd had earlier in the trip - and make up some of the lost time.

The freezing air stung his cheeks and made his eyes stream. Someone was already at work, hammering. The sound bounced off the cliffs behind where the massive carved Buddhas sat faceless and redundant in their rock niches. Cassidy slurped off his tea and fumbled for cigarette and matches.

The hammering changed rhythm, a lower under-beat jarring against the rock behind. It took Cassidy a few moments to work out what it was. The sound of boots running down the road. Juliet, hippy skirt flying and arms waving, came tearing out of the half dark.

'Gone,' she panted. 'They've gone - no sign - have you seen them?'

'Gone? Who?'

'Marcus and Ruth.' She skidded to a halt, dust rising between them. 'They're not at the other *chaikhana*, I've checked.'

Cassidy felt his teeth clench. 'Well, they can't have gone far at this time in the morning.'

'They've left their foam mattresses.'

'There you are then - gone for a stroll.'

'But taken their sleeping bags.' Juliet grabbed his arm. 'We need to start looking - I'm worried about Ruth - you know what a state she's been in. What if she's-?'

'What?' Cassidy felt alarm; it wasn't like Juliet to get panicky.

'Something's happened.'

'No it hasn't.'

'How do you know?' She fixed him with troubled brown eyes. 'We shouldn't have argued with them like that.'

'Like what?'

‘Last night, remember? You telling him what a waste of space he was and me accusing them of stealing.’

Cassidy rubbed a hand over his thumping temples. He had only a vague recollection of the Londoners teaching the Germans the words to *American Pie* while he drank the last of his Turkish brandy. And Devon and Kurt had been discussing recipes for hash brownies like a couple of old housewives, but he didn’t even remember Marcus being there.

‘Where did we have this argument?’

‘Over in their *chaikhana*.’

Now it was coming back to him: Marcus and Ruth splitting off from the group and kipping in a different tea shop. He had a hazy recollection of lamplight on a wooden table and two hands; Marcus’ thick and calloused fingers entwined with Ruth’s pink slim ones.

‘Then I stormed out,’ Juliet reminded. ‘Me and my big mouth, I shouldn’t have said those things. Was Ruth okay?’

Cassidy had an image of Ruth: blonde hair falling into her eyes, her face pale and anxious. ‘She was all right,’ he said.

‘So they never said anything about taking off? Cos you must’ve been the last person to see them.’

Despite the cold, Cassidy felt his back prickle with sweat. He remembered now: the money on the table.

‘They never said. But you know Marcus – he takes off when it suits him.’

Juliet sighed and gave a helpless shrug. He swung an arm about her shoulders. ‘They don’t deserve your worry – not after the way they’ve treated you. Would it be the end of the world if they didn’t come back?’

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘No, course not.’

‘Help me look for them, Cass.’

He liked it when she called him that. ‘Aye, come on, we’ll check out the bus first.’

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The morning was spent in fruitless searching. They asked around the *cay* shops and open-fronted stalls. Owners beckoned them to sit on carpeted verandas and take tea. German Kurt, who could speak Dari, talked to the boys left in charge of the merchants’ ponies and carts. The horses stood patiently in their shafts, heads dipping into sacks of feed. No, there had been no blond-haired foreigners asking for lifts. Some of the Australians climbed around the honeycomb of caves that had once been cells for the Buddhist monks, but found nobody.

Cassidy, despite liver salts and gallons of tea, was feeling increasingly unwell, his stomach cramping with anxiety. He drove the bus further up the valley but there was no sign of them.

‘Perhaps they’ve gone on to the lakes at Band-e Amir,’ he suggested to Juliet.

‘But how?’

‘Marcus would find a way.’

‘Can we go up there?’

Cassidy sighed. ‘Not in this bus, it’s too risky this time of year – we’d probably get stuck. I’ve got all the others to think about. We really should be down the Shebar Pass before its dark.’

She didn't argue. He knew she was feeling guilty about last night's row, but what else could he do? He had a trip to run and over twenty other passengers to look after. Back at Bamiyan they found Devon and the Australians playing a hybrid game of football with some local boys, their shrieks and calls ringing around in the clear air. It took him a further hour to gather up all his passengers, dragging them out of teashops and from sunny spots under the golden poplars.

'Listen guys,' Cassidy said as they grouped around the dusty bus. 'My guess is they've headed on to the Lakes. The point is: do we hang around here a bit longer or go back to Kabul and wait? I've only got a week's visa for the bus, so time's limited.'

Arguments broke out.

'Not here, it's too cold.'

'But we can't just leave them.'

'They should've said where they were going.'

'Bet we'll find them back in Kabul.'

'We're already two weeks behind schedule, let's go!'

'But Ruth's only twenty, we shouldn't go without her.'

'They're both adults.'

Juliet suddenly piped up. 'Let Cassidy decide, he's in charge.' She turned to him. 'Tell us what we should do.'

Before he could answer, Kurt came running up the street with a youth dressed in *shalwar kameez* and a faded pinstriped jacket.

'Listen, listen!' said the German.

The boy had seen a foreign couple boarding a truck just before dawn, at the call to prayer. He pointed back through the village and the mountains beyond.

'Up, up!' said the youth.

'To Band-e Amir?' Juliet asked. He nodded.

'What sort of truck?'

The boy swivelled and pointed at the sheep grazing under the trees.

'Struth!' an Australian snorted. 'They'll stink. Have to hose 'em down before we let 'em back on the bus.'

'Do you think it's them?' Juliet said.

'Who else is mad enough to take off that early in a sheep truck?' asked Cassidy.

'Yea, the guy's a loony,' said one of the Londoners.

Kurt asked the boy to describe the couple, and then translated. 'The woman was dressed in jeans and coat and a pink woollen hat.'

'Yes, pink,' the boy nodded in understanding. 'Lady pink.'

A group of children were gathering quickly around the bus, laughing at the older boy's attempt at English.

'The boy says the man had a red beard and was dressed like a Pashtun,' said Kurt, 'except he wore a veil like a woman.'

Cassidy grunted, 'His *keffiyeh*; that's our Lawrence of Arabia all right.' He turned to the local boy and fished out a ten Afghani note from his jeans. 'If they come back this way, tell them we've gone to Kabul. We'll wait till Wednesday then we'll have to push on to Pakistan. They can catch us up in Lahore.'

Kurt translated for Cassidy; the youth nodded and smiled. The other children giggled and pushed against him.

Cassidy herded his group back on board. There was a hasty shoving of rolled up mattresses between the seats, ducking under strings of overhead washing and a

noisy settling down. The Liverpoolians had their routine argument about window or aisle, while the Londoners settled at the back table for cards.

Maggie, the Irish nurse, pushed past to rummage through the box of cassette tapes. Juliet and Kurt were the last to mount the steps.

'They'll be all right,' Cassidy said. 'Some people just aren't suited to group tours – that's their choice.'

Juliet gave him a tired smile and offered him a squashed toffee from her pocket. He took the sweet, hoping she'd sit down at the front, but someone shouted from the back that it was her turn to deal. Kurt followed like her shadow.

Cassidy revved up the engine. Maggie slammed in a cassette and plonked into the front seat beside Devon. 'Well at least we won't have to put up with Marcus and his feekin' poetry,' she said. 'Rustum this, and Rumi that.'

Devon gave a soft chuckle. 'Hey man, I liked his poetry.'

Cassidy swung the bus into a three-point turn, juddering over the rutted road.

'And Ruth,' Maggie said, 'well, she gave me the creeps - all that screaming in the desert.'

'I think Ruth's kinda cute.'

'Mad as a fish, you mean.'

Electric piano burst from the cassette deck as the bus jolted forward. Picking up speed, they bumped across the plateau towards the swirling green waters of the gorge, raising clouds of dust to the thump of Steely Dan. Shadows were already creeping across the valley and the tension returned to Cassidy's shoulders at the thought of the hairpin descent.

A fragment of memory from the night before surfaced like a shard of glass. '*Dare to die, Cassidy!*'

Marcus, his bearded face mocking in the lamplight, had leaned towards him and whispered, 'Dare to die, Cassidy! That's the meaning of life.'

And Cassidy had thrust the money at him and shouted, 'Fuck off and die then!'

Cassidy's hands were clammy as he gripped the wheel. The pair of them were gone. He'd got what he wanted, hadn't he? He tried to rid his head of Marcus's taunting voice and Ruth's frightened pinched face. But they haunted him all the way back to Kabul.