

## CHAPTER 1

**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 and scratched at bites in their sleep. The young Hazara boy tending the stove grinned 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.

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 Buddha statues sat faceless in their rock niches. As Cassidy slurped off his tea, the hammering took on a jarring under-beat: the sound of boots running down the road. Juliet, 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 face. 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 memory 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 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.’

He sighed, ‘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 Shibar 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. 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 the card players at the back shouted 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 feckin' 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.

## CHAPTER 2

### **County Durham, England. The present. Amber English**

The chapel door banged open and shut, bringing a blast of cold, damp air. Amber glanced round to see who had arrived late to her grandmother Sarah's funeral. A man in a battered old Barbour jacket and wild grey hair squeezed in behind the throng of elderly farmers and neighbours. Amber's father caught sight of him and cursed under his breath.

'Who is he?' Amber whispered.

'Souter - bloody reporter,' Daniel hissed. 'Don't stare.' He dug her in the ribs as if she were still a child, not twenty-three. 'And don't you dare speak to him.'

Amber eyes smarted as she turned to the front. She was feeling emotional enough without her dad being so touchy. She knew her father would rather be anywhere but paying respects to his dead mother; it was Amber and her mum who, coming all the way from London, had shamed him into attending. After the divorce, it was Helen who had continued to bring Amber up on holiday to stay with her gran and help out on the smallholding. The three of them sitting together: how rare was that? Gran - such a family person - would have loved to see it. Amber swallowed tears. She should have made more effort to come north and visit when old Sarah had moved into the care home; now she would never see her beloved gran again.

As they stood for a hymn, Amber blew her nose and took another glance round. The journalist was staring right at her. What was he doing here? There was no story in an old woman's death, except that Sarah had once had a daughter who had gone missing and never returned. Her stomach clenched. Could his coming here be in any way connected to her tragic Auntie Ruth: the blonde girl in the picture on Gran's mantelpiece who had vanished in Afghanistan ten years before Amber was born? '*They think she took her own life,*' her mum had been the one to try and explain. '*No one can be sure, but that's what the police thought.*'

As a girl, Amber had been fascinated and appalled at the idea of the teenager in jeans smiling from behind a curtain of fair hair, going off to a faraway land to kill herself. She had envied Ruth's pretty looks and in early teens had tried to straighten her wavy black hair and dye it blonde. No one had ever properly explained to her what had happened though she had longed to know.

Twenty minutes later they were filing out after the coffin and heading up the steep hillside to the small burial ground. The rain had eased but the wind blew them sideways and the old women who followed clung onto their hats. Amber watched her father take one of the cords and help lower the coffin into the ground, wondering if he felt any regret at the long years he had cut his mother out of his life. She couldn't imagine being that angry with anyone for so long, let alone her lovely gran. She knew it was about him being adopted but not finding out till he was almost grown up. '*Never forgave his parents,*' Helen had told her.

But Amber thought it also had to do with the Ruth tragedy and her dad blaming his parents for something. Beyond the tract of brown heather and dead bracken, the valley below disappeared into mist.

Amber's father raised his voice, 'you're all welcome back at the *Bull's Head* for a drink and a sandwich.'

The nearest pub was half an hour away in St John's Chapel. Most of Sarah's elderly friends paid their respects at the cemetery and left. Back at the pub, a dozen mourners stood in self-conscious huddles, among them Sarah's care workers, neighbour Neil Timpson and the Cleggs who were renting Sarah's smallholding. Daniel knocked back two whiskies and went to speak to the Cleggs.

While her mother turned to Neil, Amber chatted to Dorothy and Sharon from the care home, topping up their wine to get them talking. They reminisced about Sarah's love of game shows on television and her habit of wandering out of the building to chat to people passing the gate.

'She used to call me little Miss Chatterbox,' Amber smiled, 'but she was Olympic standard.'

'We've got her things in the boot of the car,' said Dorothy, 'there wasn't very much.'

'Was there a photo album?' Amber asked, remembering how she used to encourage Sarah to get out family photos so she could gaze at fuzzy instamatic snapshots of the leggy Ruth with her quizzical smile.

'Yes,' Sharon said. 'She often used to look at that.'

'Yeah she did with me too; used to like talking about my Auntie Ruth as a girl. Did she mention her at all?'

The women exchanged glances. 'She got very confused towards the end,' said Sharon. 'Poor old soul thought your aunt was coming back – used to go out and look for her.'

Dorothy said they had to be getting back to the home. Amber went out to help them unload her grandmother's boxes. They seemed apologetic; it was mostly old clothes and a portable television.

'Keep the TV,' Amber told them, 'One of the residents can use it, yeah?'

Sharon gave Amber a hug. Dorothy said, 'I've some paperwork to tie up. Perhaps you or your parents could pop in before you leave?'

Amber nodded. 'I'm gonna stay around for a couple of days anyway.'

'Excuse me!' A man moved out of the shelter of the pub wall, grinding a cigarette under his walking boot. The man in the Barbour. 'Can I have a word?'

'Leave the lass alone,' Dorothy scolded, 'it's her grandmother's funeral.'

'Souter,' the man said, ignoring Dorothy's remark and stretching out his hand. 'I'm just here to offer my condolences.'

'Sniffing for a story, you mean,' Dorothy said. 'The old girl's dead, for goodness sake. Let her rest in peace.' She turned to Amber. 'You don't have to speak to this man; he only wants to rake up the past.'

'Charming as ever Dorothy. Let me help with those,' Souter said, piling up and lifting the boxes.

Amber nodded. 'It's okay,' she assured Dorothy. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

Souter followed as Amber unlocked the hire car she and her mother had driven up from Durham station.

'Sorry about your grandmother,' the journalist said. 'Makes you think doesn't it? That a life can be packed into four boxes after all those years. How old was she? 88, 89?'

As Amber stacked them in the boot she tried to place the man's accent: not local.

'Thanks, but why are you interested in my gran?' she asked, locking the car.

'Just paying my respects.'

'You're a reporter, right? Bet you're itching to have a look through those boxes.'

Souter's putty smoker's face broke into a grin. 'Very sharp.'

'What you expecting to find?'

'Not much after all this time.'

Amber eyed him. 'Is this to do with my auntie disappearing? Cos if you want info on all that, you've come to the wrong person. I've been kept in the dark for years.'

Souter considered her, and then nodded towards the public bar. 'Let me buy you a drink. I promise not to grill you about your family. I really was fond of your grandmother. And maybe I can tell you a thing or two – if you'd like to know?'

Amber's insides twisted; the absent Ruth had hung like a spectre over her growing up. 'Yeah, I really would.'

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The low-ceilinged bar, with its horse brasses and copper warming pans glinting on dark-panelled walls, was almost deserted. Two youths in paint-splattered overalls, who were playing pool at the other end, stopped to eye the newcomer with her tall athletic figure and large blue eyes.

‘I’ll have a pint of cider, thanks,’ Amber told Souter. Choosing a table by the window, she kicked off the high heels she had borrowed from her mum and sank back.

‘Spill the beans then,’ she said with a tired smile, pulling back her long wavy hair.

‘I covered Ruth’s story from the beginning – came up from London and never got away again – this place can do that to you. Got friendly with your grandparents. I think they hoped I might be able to uncover something that others had missed.’

‘And did you?’ Amber could not keep the eagerness out of her voice.

The reporter shrugged. ‘Not much.’ He gave Amber a shrewd look. ‘I noticed you talked of your aunt “disappearing”. Does that mean you don’t believe your aunt killed herself?’

She shrugged. ‘Don’t have an opinion. My dad only spoke about it when he was drunk – said he thought some guy had murdered her – the one she went off with. Used to give me nightmares thinking about that.’

Souter nodded. ‘Sarah didn’t believe it was suicide either. She didn’t believe Ruth died at all.’

Amber felt her stomach flutter. ‘What would make her think that?’

‘Call it a mother’s intuition, but she never gave up thinking she would walk back through her kitchen door, never.’

Amber felt her hopes deflate. A hunch was hardly grounds for a case against the suicide verdict or her father’s wilder accusations of murder.

She took a sip of the sweet cider and asked, ‘and what d’ you think?’

‘I probably lost a bit of perspective too,’ he admitted. ‘I went out to try and find her.’

Amber spluttered over her drink. ‘*You* did? Wow, to Afghanistan?’

‘Yes, after your grandmother and father returned none the wiser. Did your father not tell you that? No, I suppose he wouldn’t. He resented me for it – muscling in on private family grief as he saw it. Not that he had much contact with his parents by then – he was away at sea a lot – and his relationship with his old man was worse than putrid.’

‘Did you find anything about Auntie Ruth?’

Souter shook his head. 'Not a trace. That's what made it worse – there was no body to bury, no way of saying goodbye and drawing a line under things.'

'Were the Afghans the problem - maybe hiding something – like my aunt being murdered?'

Souter gave a snort of indignation. 'Your father's idea? He thought everyone was to blame. It suited him to dismiss them as bumbling or untrustworthy foreigners. But the fact is the Afghans couldn't have been more helpful and kind. They treated your grandmother with respect and went to great trouble to take her to the area in the mountains where Ruth and the missing man were last thought to have been.' He took a swig of beer and wiped his lips on the back of his hand. 'But we drew a blank. All the police could go on were suicide notes left in their backpacks in Kabul. They were only discovered weeks later, when the alarm was raised. Ruth was supposed to be going to help at a mission orphanage in India, but never turned up.'

Amber had a sudden thought. 'What else was found in the backpack? What about her clothes and stuff? Did she keep a diary?'

Souter flashed a look. 'Ever thought of becoming an investigative journalist?' he grunted. 'There was a diary; didn't tell a great deal. She wasn't much of a writer. And there were two rolls of film. The police had them developed. Nearly broke your grandmother's heart – seeing her daughter in drunken poses with all these bearded hippy types, smoking goodness knows what. Up till then Sarah thought *Rainbow Tours* was some sort of church group doing the religious sites through the Middle East. Old John told her to destroy the photos.'

'And did she?' Amber's blue eyes were wide with curiosity.

'No.'

'I've never seen them. Are they in Gran's boxes? Is that what you're after?'

Souter gave an impatient sigh. 'I'm not after anything. I know as much as we're ever likely to know. I admit it did cross my mind to do a small piece about the funeral, just to acknowledge your grandmother's love for her daughter and how she never gave up hope. But to be honest, no one's interested any more in what happened to a couple of hippies over three decades ago. It's ancient history. Dorothy's right; your grandmother should rest in peace.'

Amber felt a fresh wave of grief that her gran was gone and that she would never again get a hug of welcome at her cottage door. She gulped at her drink; Souter had nearly finished his.

'Can I buy you one now?' she asked, wanting to keep him there talking. He shook his head. 'Did Grandma ever say anything about me? I used to love coming up here and helping out with the hens and stuff.'

‘Yes. She was very fond of you – and your mother. Your visits were the highlight of the year after your grandfather died. I think it made her feel a bit closer to your father too. At least she could hear news of him from you.’ Souter drained his glass.

‘Yeah, I tried to get him to visit – he only lives in Berwick – but you can’t tell Dad what to do.’

Souter grunted and reached for his coat.

‘So,’ Amber asked quickly, ‘how do y’ know those photos of Ruth’s weren’t destroyed?’

Souter glanced at the door and lowered his voice. ‘Because I’ve got them.’

Amber stared at him. ‘Oh my God, how - ?’

‘Sarah gave them to me for safekeeping – ages ago when there was first talk of her going into the home. I think she worried that Daniel would throw them out. Your father’s way of dealing with the whole thing was to pretend it had never happened – wipe out all the painful traces – least that’s the way I see it.’

From his musty-smelling Barbour, Souter pulled out a battered brown envelope. ‘Sarah would have wanted you to have these.’

Amber gawped at the package that lay between them on the table. ‘That’s them?’

The reporter nodded. ‘Not just the photos, the diary too.’

Amber felt her insides somersault. Here were the last links to her mysterious aunt and the fatal bus trip she took so long ago. What would it tell her?

‘Sarah was right,’ Souter said, zipping up his coat, ‘you’re a lovely girl. I’m glad to have met you at last. But better get going before your dad finds you consorting with the enemy.’

‘Why are you the enemy?’ Amber asked, reluctant to see the man go when she had so many questions.

Souter shrugged. ‘For befriending Sarah and taking your father’s place? I dunno.’

Amber stood too, clutching the envelope and grabbing her shoes. ‘But I want to know more. Did anyone go back to Afghanistan again? Did Gran?’

‘She wanted to, but after the Russians invaded in 1980 it was impossible. And your grandfather got cancer, so she had to look after him. Old John hadn’t been well for a long time – but I think the shock of it all finally ruined his health.’

Amber walked outside with him in her stocking feet. ‘What about the articles you wrote at the time – do you have copies I can read?’

Souter pulled out his cigarettes and offered one. Amber shook her head and Souter put his back to the wind and lit up. ‘Yes, I’ve copies.

I'll send them to you. Give me your address.' He tore off part of the cigarette packet and got Amber to write it down with a pencil stub from his pocket. He must have sensed her eagerness and frustration – perhaps it mirrored his own from years before – because he put a hand on her arm.

'If you really want to find out more about the trip Ruth went on, I could probably put you in touch with Cassidy.'

'Cassidy? Who's he?'

'Your dad really hasn't told you anything has he?' Souter's look was pitying. 'Cassidy was the bus driver. I reckon he might talk to you if we can find him.'

Just then, someone rapped hard on the pub window. Amber saw her father's flushed face mouthing angrily.

'Time I went,' Souter said, hunching into his weathered jacket. He thrust a grubby creased business card at Amber. 'You can get me on this number. Ring in a couple of days and I'll see if I can run Cassidy to ground.'

'Cool,' Amber smiled, 'and thanks so much.'

Souter nodded and turned into the gale. Amber watched him being buffeted towards the car park. Something made her shout after the journalist.

'Hey, what's Cassidy's take on it all?'

Souter turned and shouted against the wind. 'It's a long story – but he thought that one of the other women on the trip knew more than she ever let on.'

'What woman?' Amber called.

Daniel banged again at the window and beckoned her inside. Amber just caught Souter's reply.

'Juliet – Juliet Forbes!'