

A Place in the Road

Written

by

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EST. SHOT

INT. HUMVEE, AFGHANISTAN - DAY

With mountains looming beyond the armored personnel vehicle, five marines in combat gear climb inside, ribbing one man whose face isn't seen.

WES (O.S.)
Ruiz, say hello to Kim.

A WIRY HISPANIC MARINE nervously gripping his rifle between his knees glances up from under his helmet.

RUIZ
Hello, Kim.

The marines laugh at Ruiz's response.

WES (O.S.)
Hey, Petie, you gonna miss me?

Dropping his backpack into the corner, PETE, a massive lance-corporal flips the finger at the unseen marine.

PETE
Short-timer! What a wuss!

HARMOND a black corporal leans into view, making a peace sign with his fingers.

HARMOND
Don't listen to his bullshit, Wes.
Last patrol, baby. You're going
back to the world.

THE BLUR OF A HAND and someone grabs the digital camera, turning it around, to reveal the unseen Marine's face: WES ASHLEY, 26, dark-haired, handsome, with an enormous grin.

WES
That's right, hon. I'm coming home.

Wes grabs the digital camera back from GUNNERY SARGENT BIX, lean and scowling, who motions for the hatch to be sealed.

Turning, Wes hands the camera to a marine standing outside the Humvee.

WES (CONT'D)
Andy, get this video clip off to
Kim so she'll
get it before I get home.

As the marine outside reaches for the camera, the screen goes dark.

INT. BEDROOM - NEBRASKA FARM - DAY

KIM ASHLEY, 25, slender, dark, curly haired, pulls out a disc from a DVD player, grabs her purse and lesson plans and races out the door.

INT. DIRT ROAD - MINUTES LATER

With her lesson plan balanced on the dashboard, Kim keeps glancing at it while driving down a long dusty road.

IN THE DISTANCE, Kim sees a LONE BLACK DOT approaching from the other direction.

A dark sedan nears.

As it closes, Kim slows, watching the car pass.

INSIDE ARE TWO MARINE OFFICERS AND A CHAPLAIN.

WATCHING THE CAR RECEDE IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR, Kim's expression freezes for an instant.

Snapping from the mood, she concentrates on the road ahead.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM - LATER MORNING

With rows of elementary school children listening, squirming and trying to concentrate, Kim is standing at the blackboard, where a blow-up of the Declaration of Independence hangs.

KIM
Can anyone tell me two names that
are on the Declaration of
Independence?

A slight African American girl raises her hand.

KIM (CONT'D)
Yes, Clarissa...

As the student stands to answer, Kim glances toward the window on the side of the classroom.

THE BLACK SEDAN is pulling into the parking lot.

KIM STARES AT THE CAR, watching as it stops. Momentarily, the two officers and the chaplain climb out, starting toward the school building.

CLARISSA (O.S.)
Mrs. Ashley....Mrs. Ashley.

Kim turns.

The students are staring up at her...with the fixed expression children have when trying to comprehend adults.

CLARISSA (CONT'D)
I said, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Kim tries to concentrate on the little girl, but can't stop watching the trio reach the building and step inside. She recovers, turning to Clarissa.

KIM
Very good, Clarissa.

She tries to recollect her lesson. Finding it, she steps back to the blackboard, pointing at the same, barely legible signatures.

KIM (CONT'D)
And for all the famous names, there were many other signers whose names can hardly be seen, who risked their lives to be fathers of our country.

THE RECESS BELL RINGS.

The students arch up, an instant away from bursting out of the room.

KIM (CONT'D)
Read chapter four and answer the quiz. Class dismissed.

A flurry of bodies. In an instant, the classroom is empty except for Kim, leaning back against her desk, staring at the black sedan in the parking lot.

She turns toward the door, waiting for it to open. Stalling for time, she arranges her papers and puts them into her briefcase.

Ready to leave, she stops, listening for any sound in the hallway.

Silence.

With a sense of relief, she picks up her purse and lesson plans and walks to the door.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - SAME TIME

Kim's face presses against the glass, staring down the deserted hallway.

Momentarily, the door opens and she steps into the hallway. A student late for class skids around the corner and races for a classroom, bursting inside...just as the bell rings.

Kim starts down the hallway.

As Kim turns the corner, she stops.

Standing at the bottom of the stairway are the two Marine Corps officers, a MAJOR and a captain, and MR. THURMAN, the fleshy, bald principal.

The Major takes a step toward Kim.

MAJOR
Mrs. Ashley.

DARKNESS

EXT. MILITARY FUNERAL - NEXT DAY

Surrounded by ranks of standing mourners, Kim, her husband's MOTHER AND FATHER, his sister DEBORAH, 28, and LYLE, her former boyfriend and Wes's best friend, sit in front of an open grave with a casket waiting to be lowered, as a MARINE CORPS COLONEL in medal laden dress blues, prepares to hand the folded American flag to Kim.

As she takes the flag and the honor guard prepares to fire, a Marine lieutenant in summer uniform breaks through the mourners and races up to the colonel.

Everyone looks up as the lieutenant cups his hand and whispers into the colonel's ear.

In an instant, the stoic, chiseled-featured officer's face sags.

More than stunned, the colonel looks stupefied.

Rising unsteadily, he turns to the honor guard and makes a slashing motion to the NCO in charge not to fire.

Confused, the marine honor guard lowers their rifles to port arms.

Slowly, the colonel turns around to face the astonished expressions of Kim and Wes's family.

KIM
What's wrong?

The colonel drops his gaze, then corrects himself. He has to look Kim in the eyes.

COLONEL
Ma'am, I have to stop the funeral.

Everyone gasps.

Kim leans forward, her expression almost clawing at the colonel's face.

COLONEL (CONT'D)
They have the wrong man in the casket. That isn't your husband.

Kim faints, falling to the grass beside the casket.

INT. ASHLEY FAMILY FARMHOUSE - LATER DAY

The Marine colonel, the lieutenant, and a Navy pathologist sent from Bethesda Naval Hospital sit tensely facing Kim and her mother and father in-law, sitting beside her on the sofa.

MR. ASHLEY, 51, weathered, with a tan line around his scalp, is trying to understand what he has just heard, as MRS. ASHLEY, 49, grips Kim's hand, while dabbing her eyes with her free hand.

In the shadows of a table lamp, Deborah sits sipping a glass of wine, studying Kim.

MR. ASHLEY
You mean, now they're gonna go have to tell that boy's parents...

The colonel sees where the question is going.

COLONEL
What we told you.

DEBORAH
Excuse me, colonel; it's just really hard to fathom how such a mistake could occur.

The lieutenant looks to the colonel, who nods.

LIEUTENANT

Ma'am, I read the incident report. By the time the recovery team got to the site, it was getting dark. They had to get what they could and get out of there before losing more men.

Deborah isn't satisfied with the answer and the colonel sees her eyes shift to him.

COLONEL

They got hit by an Iranian armored piercing EED, designed for maximum destruction.

Kim starts, looking around as though waking and not knowing where she is.

She stares at the Navy doctor.

KIM

Then where's Wes.

The three military men exchange glances. The colonel knows he's going to have to answer.

COLONEL

Mrs. Ashley, he's registered as presumed dead.

The Navy pathologist coughs, earning a scowl from the colonel.

COLONEL (CONT'D)

I mean, with no DNA found at the point of impact, he's been downgraded to presumed dead.

Trying to lessen the shock, the lieutenant leans forward.

LIEUTENANT

Only two men survived, Mrs. Ashley.

She gets up and looks at the three officers with an unblinking gaze.

KIM

Three!

Turning, she walks down the hallway, goes into her room and closes the door behind her. Silence is palpable.

The three officers rise and turn to Mr. Ashley as Deborah walks over to her mother.

DEBORAH
I can't believe her mother couldn't
come.

MRS. ASHLEY
But she isn't and we are. Go see
how Kim is doing, poor girl.

As Deborah starts down the hall, Mrs. Ashley walks over to accept the condolences of the departing officers.

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

In the darkness, a wedge of light flickers. A hand raps at the door.

DEBORAH (O.S)
Kim, may I come in?

A form shifts in the darkness.

KIM
No, I'd just like to be alone,
Debbie.

DEBORAH
Come on, just to talk.

KIM
I don't want to talk. Please.

A pause, then footsteps move back down the hall.

A BLANKET IS THROWN BACK

The DVD player screen appears with Wes's face frozen the moment when the Gunny Sergeant turned the digital camera around on him.

KIM'S HAND REACHES OUT CARESSING THE SCREEN.

SHE BURSTS INTO TEARS, SOBBING, THEN TUCKS HER HEAD AGAINST THE BLANKET TO MUFFLE THE SOUND. SHE PULLS THE DVD PLAYER up to her face rewinds the disc to the moment the clip began.

INT. HUMVEE, AFGHANISTAN - DAY

With mountains looming beyond the armored personnel vehicle, five marines in combat gear climb inside, ribbing one man whose face isn't seen.

WES (O.S.)
Ruiz, say hello to Kim.

SOBBING WASHES OVER THE VOICES AS THE MEN ARE SHOWN. ABRUPTLY
A BUTTON IS HIT.

DARKNESS

THE SOBBING SUBSIDES, BREAKS LOOSE, THEN FALLS SILENT.

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - NEXT DAY

Holding a bowl of steaming soup, Mrs. Ashley comes in,
finding Kim wearing the same dark clothes from the funeral,
sitting in front of the DVD player with the screen hidden
from view.

MRS. ASHLEY
Kim, you can't stay in here all
day. Come on, dear, eat this soup,
then get dressed. We'll all go for
a ride over to the lake where you
and Wes used to go.

KIM
Betty, I don't want to go anywhere
Wes and I went until he comes back.

Mrs. Ashley starts to protest then steps forward with the
soup.

MRS. ASHLEY
Then at least eat this. You need it
for strength.

Kim motions toward the dresser.

KIM
Please leave it there. I'll eat it
later.

Pained, Mrs. Ashley sets down the soup and leaves the room.

Leaning forward, Kim turns up the volume on the DVD player.

WES (O.S.)
Andy, get this video clip off to
Kim so she'll
get it before I get home.

Closing her eyes, she rests her head against the DVD player.

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - LATER DAY

Without knocking Deborah comes in, shaking her head at seeing Kim sitting on the floor, staring at the DVD screen.

DEBORAH

Kim, I took the weekend off to be here with you.

Kim looks up, not sure how to respond.

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

Please come out of your room and be with us. Dad doesn't know what to do and Mom is crying on the back porch.

Kim turns off the DVD player and gets up, brushing off her skirt.

KIM

I'm sorry.

Deborah sits down on the bed.

DEBORAH

You don't have to be sorry. We're just as hurt as you are.

Kim winces

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

I told you two to wait to get married. But no, you wouldn't listen to me and just had to do it four days before he left. What would you have lost if you had waited?

Kim sets the DVD player down on the dresser then looks at her sister-in-law in the reflection of the mirror.

KIM

Blame me, not Wes. He would have waited. We waited all through college. But when his reserve unit got called up, I knew by getting married I'd be able to hold Wes to me and bring him back.

Kim turns around, extending her hands out as though holding out a measurement.

KIM (CONT'D)

It's like he's at the other end of an invisible thread that only I can feel.

Deborah puts her arms around Kim.

DEBORAH

Oh, Kim, listen to me. That thread's broken. I'm his sister, and I have to accept it.

Kim steps back from the embrace, staring into Deborah's eyes.

KIM

No, it can't break. I'm his wife, and I won't accept it.

She motions toward the door.

KIM (CONT'D)

Tell your folks, I'm okay. I'll be out in a little while.

EXT. PORCH - FOLLOWING DAY

Kim is swinging gently in a tire hanging on a chain from a branch on a tree outside the Ashley farmhouse.

Sitting against the base of the tree is Lyle, staring up at Kim whose shadow is cast over him as she swings back and forth on the tire.

LYLE

Kim, you know if you want to talk or anything, just call. I'll be there. Wes was my best friend.

She looks down at the blonde-haired man with the gentle expression.

KIM

It's like everybody around me is using bad grammar.

LYLE

What do you mean?

Frowning, Kim lowers her feet, slowing the tire.

KIM

Wes's still your best friend, isn't he?

Lyle doesn't catch the nuance.

LYLE
But he's gone.

Almost childishly, Kim covers her ears and starts back toward the house.

KIM
Not gone, missing.

Catching up to her, Lyle firmly but gently pulls her hands down.

LYLE
Kim, there's no one in the whole world I care for more than you, but I gotta hurt you. Wes is dead. Everyone accepts it.

She yanks her hands free.

KIM
Everybody but Wes and me.

Until you're ready to say your best friend is alive, I don't wanna see you again, Lyle Riggins.

Turning, she hurries into the house. Lyle kicks the tire, sending it spinning around on the chain.

EXT. CLASS ROOM - DAYS LATER

With a large map of the world, Kim is using a pointer to show the extent of the British Empire at the time of the War of 1812.

KIM
England was then the most powerful empire in the world...with colonies all over, from China, to India, over to Egypt and all the way up to Afghanistan.

As the pointer moves past Egypt, touching Afghanistan, her voice fades away.

As though in a trance, she stands staring at the map.

THE STUDENTS LOOK AT EACH OTHER confused by the change in their teacher.

Kim doesn't move.

Finally, one brave little girl raises her hand.

LITTLE GIRL
Mrs. Ashley, may I go to the rest
room?

No response from Kim.

The little girl leaves the room, leaving the door ajar.

A gust of wind from the hallway slams the door shut, snapping her from her reverie.

She turns around, startled to see the children looking frightened, staring up at her.

KIM
Sorry, I was trying to remember
something. Where was I?

The students glance at each another. A LITTLE BOY raises his hand.

LITTLE BOY
Afghanistan, Mrs. Ashley.

The door opens and the little girl returns with the principal.

As the little girl returns to her seat, the principal moves over to stand in the corner, drawing everyone's attention.

MR. THURMAN
(making light)
Go on, Mrs. Ashley. It's been a
while since I've observed one of
your classes.

Kim stands sideways to the map, continuing her talk.

KIM
Can anyone tell me the capital of
Afghanistan?

A HISPANIC GIRL raises her hand.

HISPANIC GIRL
Cable.

Several children laugh. Kim silences them with mock seriousness.

KIM
Close, Iselda. It's Kabul.

THE BELL RINGS.

The students grab their books, ready to run but controlling themselves with the principal present.

KIM (CONT'D)
Class dismissed.

As obediently as possible, the children hurry out of the room.

Slowly, the principal walks over to Kim.

MR. THURMAN
Kim, you know how kids are at picking up on the stuff adults are processing. They just absorb it like sponges without being aware of how complex things can be.

KIM
What are you saying, Mr. Thurman?

INT. PSYCHOLOGIST'S OFFICE - DAY

Kim sits on a chair in front of DR. WURLITZER, 45, a trim, blonde-haired woman in a pants suit.

The therapist is making notes on a yellow legal pad while Kim shifts in the chair, uncomfortable.

KIM
I mean, I wouldn't have come if the principal hadn't insisted. I'm not depressed.

DR. WURLITZER
How do you know?

KIM
How do I know? Well, I can tell I'm not depressed. I'm sad, but I'm not depressed.

The therapist leans back, staring at Kim.

DR. WURLITZER
(slightly patronizing)
Mrs. Ashley, one of the most insidious things about depression is that you sometimes don't know you are depressed.

KIM

Then what makes you think you would know?

The therapist flashes a tight smile.

DR. WURLITZER

I'm trained to know these things. That's why I went to school, to become a therapist, so I could help people recognize things about themselves they can't see, but they are still experiencing.

KIM

Fine, but what can I tell you if I don't feel depressed?

The therapist pauses, staring over at her shelves of books and the diplomas hanging above them.

DR. WURLITZER

Are you familiar with the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross?

KIM

No. Should I be?

DR. WURLITZER

No, not really. She's a psychologist who worked with the dying...and discovered that there were five steps in dealing with death.

Kim leans forward, not sure what the woman is trying to say.

KIM

Yes?

DR. WURLITZER

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Kim looks more irritated than confused.

KIM

But why tell me this? I'm not dying.

DR. WURLITZER
No, but you are dealing with the death of someone very close to you and the steps are the same for someone grieving.

Kim snaps up in her seat.

KIM
Grieving, who's grieving?

DR. WURLITZER
You are?

Kim flashes with anger.

KIM
Oh, just like the depression I don't feel. Now there's the grieving I'm not aware of.

The therapist crosses her arms.

DR. WURLITZER
I can't help you, Mrs. Ashley, unless you let me.

KIM
Help me, what?

DR. WURLITZER
Accept that you have lost someone, your husband.

Getting up, Kim starts toward the door, then snaps around to glare at the therapist.

KIM
You're no better than a palm reader. Mr. Thurman told you what had happened, and you went from there. Well, Doctor, I've got news for you, Wes is neither dead nor dying. He is just missing until he returns.

Uncomfortable with Kim standing above her, the therapist gets up, trying to retain her professional aplomb.

DR. WURLITZER
You're in denial, Mrs. Ashley, the first step to acceptance.

Kim walks up to the therapist.

KIM

No, this is anger, the second step.
And the last one I need to get
through this.

She turns on her heel and leaves. As she closes the office door, the doctor holds out her hand: it is shaking.

INT. MARINE CORPS RESERVE HEADQUARTERS - LATER DAY

In a hanger filled with Marine Corps training equipment and recruiting posters, Kim sits at a desk with the colonel who attended the funeral and later visited the home of Wes's parents.

In summer uniform, the colonel clearly has matters waiting for his attention. He is doing his best to answer Kim's questions, all the while seeing a master sergeant several feet back, motioning to his wrist watch.

COLONEL

All I know from Quantico is what I told your husband's family. The Humvee was hit by an EED in a valley near Dai Chopen, in Zobol Province.

KIM

But the lieutenant said two men survived the attack?

The colonel nods, then not concealing his irritation, opens up a drawer in his desk, leafing through a Marine Corps document. He studies it for a moment then closes the drawer and sits up.

COLONEL

Correct, Lance Corporal Peter Collins.

KIM

Pete!

The colonel looks surprised.

COLONEL

You know him?

KIM

No, I saw him in the video clip my husband sent me that day.

The colonel doesn't want to pursue it.

COLONEL
He was seriously injured and is
recovering in Balboa Naval Hospital
in San Diego.

Kim stares at the drawer.

KIM
May I look at that document?

COLONEL
No, it's classified.

She leans forward, imploring him.

KIM
Please, if it has anything about
Wes.

The colonel's expression softens.

COLONEL
Mrs. Ashley, believe me, I admire
you. You have the true spirit of a
Marine wife, but I can't show you
that document. There are things
there about war you don't want to
know.

She sits up.

KIM
I have to know if it's about Wes.

COLONEL
Not from me. Listen, all I will
tell you is that EED's create a
tremendous explosion inside an
enclosed area, like a Humvee.
Marines have been vaporized.

Kim pauses, trying to make sense of the term.

KIM
Vaporized?

The colonel nods just as Kim visualizes the meaning.

She gets up.

KIM (CONT'D)
But no one else was, were they?
That Navy doctor said they found
everyone's DNA but Wes's.

The colonel stands, nodding to the sergeant that he is coming.

COLONEL

He could have been sitting on top of the point of impact, Mrs. Ashley, do I have to make it any clearer.

KIM

But how could Wes disappear without leaving a trace?

The colonel looks taxed.

COLONEL

There's a one in a million chance he was riding on top and got blown away from the Humvee, and got captured....but that's doubtful.

KIM

Why?

COLONEL

The Taliban would have been using him for PR by now, or demanding a ransom.

KIM

But didn't three soldiers disappear for a couple of years?

COLONEL

Only one, they found the other two right away, their bodies. I know it's very hard, Mrs. Ashley. You're not the only Marine widow in Grand Island.

No sooner has he spoken than he regrets his words. Kim bites her lip, not allowing herself to cry.

COLONEL (CONT'D)

I'm sorry; each loss is impossible and irreplaceable. But believe me; you've gotta put it behind you.

Nodding, he starts away. Stopping, he turns around and removes a key from his pocket and locks the drawer.

KIM

You didn't have to do that, Colonel. I wouldn't have looked.

COLONEL
I believe you, Mrs. Ashley. I'm
sorry I have to give a talk at the
VFW. If you'll excuse me.

He starts away.

KIM
But what about the other survivor,
what about him?

The colonel shakes his head, pausing, deciding whether to
walk away or come back. He comes back.

COLONEL
You would have made a great woman
Marine, Mrs. Ashley. You never give
up. His name is Gunner Sergeant
Bix. He's a DI at MCRD.

She stares, not getting the lingo.

COLONEL (CONT'D)
Drill instructor at Marine Corps
Recruit Depot in San Diego.

KIM
How come he wasn't hurt?

The colonel glances at Kim.

COLONEL
That makes twenty questions, Mrs.
Ashley....because he wasn't in the
vehicle. And I wouldn't write
either of them. I'm sure they want
to put the whole thing behind them.

As she starts to question him, the colonel practically jogs
over to the waiting sergeant.

INT. SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION - DAY

Kim comes in the door as AN OLDER FEMALE SECRETARY IS
ENTERING ATTENDANCE RECORDS INTO A COMPUTER. She looks up.

OLDER SECRETARY
Oh, hello, Mrs. Ashley, I'm
terribly sorry I couldn't attend
the funeral. My brother had a
stroke and I had to drive to
Lincoln.

KIM
No problem, Margaret. It wasn't my
husband anyway.

The secretary looks stunned, then recovers.

OLDER SECRETARY
Yes, I heard, but I meant....I'm
sorry about the news.

KIM
There is no news. But I have to
take two days leave of absence.

The secretary gets up to reach under the counter for a form.

OLDER SECRETARY
Here, you have to fill this out.

KIM
I don't have time. I need a
substitute right now and for
tomorrow.

OLDER SECRETARY
But you didn't call in sick. What
will I tell Mr. Thurman?

Kim starts back toward the door.

KIM
Family emergency. I'll be back for
classes on Thursday.

She leaves the secretary speechless.

EXT. PARKING LOT - GRAND ISLAND AIRPORT - DAY

With an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, Kim, clad in a
white blouse and beige slacks, starts into the main building.

INT. BALBOA NAVAL HOSPITAL SAN DIEGO - LATER DAY

Kim emerges from a cab at the entrance and stops at the
security guard's booth. A YOUNG MARINE SENTRY IN DRESS BLUES
steps out.

KIM
I'd like to see a friend of my
brother who's a patient here.

The marine points toward a building just inside the gate.

SENTRY

You'll have to get a pass at the Security Office, ma'am.

Giving her a sharp salute as she turns and starts toward the security office.

INT. TRAUMA INJURY WARD - MINUTES LATER

A NAVY CORPSMAN escorts Kim down the facing rows of beds in which wounded marines are in bandages with slings and pulleys holding plastered arms and legs in the air.

At one bed, parents are visiting a son. At another, two teenage girls are writing on a marine's cast.

At the last bed, a doctor is using his stethoscope to listen to the chest of a young marine whose head is bandaged.

Stopping at the edge of one bed, the corpsman points out A GAUNT YOUNG MARINE wearing earphones. A sheet is rigged on a metal frame, concealing his right leg from view.

Kim can't believe that the ashen-faced marine is the same muscular young man seen in the Humvee clip.

Seeing the marine can't hear her, Kim turns to the corpsman.

KIM

What's he here for?

The corpsman gives Kim a wake-up-and-smell-the-coffee look, then realizes he is dealing with a civilian.

CORPSMAN

Loss of his right leg for one.
Bruised liver, blurred vision and tinnitus. That's why he's wearing the earphones. Only way to stop the ringing. He's not too responsive.
Excuse me.

As he starts back down the ward, Kim approaches Pete. His eyes are closed and he is rocking his head slowly back and forth.

She gently touches his shoulders. He looks up, annoyed at being interrupted.

PETE

I don't want to write any letters, thanks, lady.

Kim steps closer to the bed.

KIM
I'm Wes's wife.

Pete can't hear her. He just stares at her.

Opening her wallet, Kim withdraws her wallet and opens it, holding up

A PHOTOGRAPH OF WES AND HER AT THEIR WEDDING.

PETE JOLTS. He struggles to sit up, sliding the earphones off. As he does, he reaches up, rubbing his ears.

PETE
You're Wes's...wife?

Kim nods, motioning to the chair. When he doesn't respond, she sits down, drawing the chair closer to the bed.

KIM
How are you doin, Pete?

Pete stares at Kim....his eyes registering pain and rage. He could scream, yell or say nothing. Instead, he nods.

PETE
The orthopedic guys say that I'll be able to drive, dance, swim, and even play touch football, anything except scratch where it always itches.

He nods down toward the makeshift tent over his leg.

PETE (CONT'D)
That's the worst, when it starts throbbing in the middle of the night, and there's nothing there. The doc calls it phantom limb pains, but it ain't the pain that's the phantom.

Throwing his hands against his ears, he grimaces bites his lip then lowers his eyes.

PETE (CONT'D)
Look, I'm sorry, Mrs. Ashley. They told me what happened after I came to. Wes was my main man. He always covered for me. I'm gonna miss him. Shit, I'm gonna miss all of them.

Kim sees the young man is in pain, doing all he can not to put the earphones back on. She leans forward, touching his arm.

KIM

Pete, he really cared about you. He wrote me about all the jokes you played.

PETE

Yeah, anything for a laugh. No more joking now.

Kim pauses, seeing a marine being pushed past in a wheelchair.

KIM

I'm sorry I made you take off your earphones, but when they told me you were here, I had to come. I'll go in a second. I just have to know, what happened.

Pete gapes at Kim.

PETE

What happened? We got blown up.

She drops her head.

KIM

I know. But what happened to Wes? They didn't find any sign of him. Nothing, not a trace.

Now Pete sees Kim's pain and he leans over, gripping her wrist.

PETE

Mrs. Ashley, I don't know what happened. I don't even remember the patrol. I just remember them cutting me out of the wreckage with the Jaws of Life.

Kim strains not to ask what she needs to know, but fails.

KIM

But where was Wes?

Pete bites his lip.

PETE

Mrs. Ashley, I don't even know
where I was.

Gripping his head, he struggles not to put the earphones back
on.

PETE (CONT'D)

God dammed ringin' won't stop.

Leaning over, Kim takes the earphones from where they have
slid down along Pete's pillow and she slides them on.

KIM

When you're better, Pete, I'll send
you the clip Wes sent me that day.

As he nods, she kisses him on the forehead and leaves.

Watching her walk away, Pete pinches the bridge of his nose
to stop his eyes from moistening up, then abruptly, he throws
his hands over the earphones, pressing them hard against his
head.

EXT. HEADQUARTERS, MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT - EVENING

Kim walks into the Administration Office where a HISPANIC
FIRST LIEUTENANT is dictating a report to a young marine PFC.

At the counter, A BLACK FEMALE CORPORAL is working at a
computer as Kim enters.

The female marine pauses and looks up as Kim stops at the
counter.

BLACK FEMALE MARINE

Yes, ma'am.

KIM

I'm trying to find Sergeant Bix.
He's a Drill Instructor.

BLACK FEMALE MARINE

Sorry, ma'am, we're not allowed to give out personal
information on staff.

KIM

Look, it's essential I see him. He
was with my husband in Afghanistan,
when they were attacked.

My husband's presumed dead, but I know....look, I have to talk to Sergeant Bix.

BLACK FEMALE MARINE

Sorry, ma'am, orders.

Having heard the exchange, the lieutenant approaches.

FIRST LIEUTENANT

It's all right, Corporal. Get someone to take her over to Gunny Bix's platoon. 174. I'll take responsibility.

Nodding, the corporal punches up information on her computer.

Kim stares at the lieutenant.

KIM

Thank you, lieutenant.

FIRST LIEUTENANT

You're welcome, ma'am. I did a tour in Afghanistan. I hope you find out what you want.

EXT. MARINE CORPS RECRUIT DEPOT - NIGHTFALL

Drill Instructors are shouting out commands as they take recruit platoons through close order drill on the massive parade ground.

Following a PFC, Kim stops to stare at the formations: advanced training platoons in cadence, new recruit platoons out of step.

As a platoon marches past her, she gazes sadly at the faces of the young marines.

The PFC turns back to see Kim watching the formation.

PFC

This way, ma'am.

EXT. PLATOON 174 AREA - MINUTES LATER

The PFC leaves Kim at the entrance of a lighted Quonset hut. Inside, A WIRY STAFF SERGEANT, DRILL INSTRUCTOR WEARING A SMOKY THE BEAR HAT is preparing to call out his platoon.

Heading for the doorway, he is startled to see Kim.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR
Ma'am, this area is off-limits to
all civilians.

KIM
The officer of the day said I could
see Gunnery Sergeant Bix. He was
with my husband in Afghanistan.

The DI's stance softens.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR
Your husband go through MCRD?

Kim nods.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
What's his name?

KIM
Wes Ashley. He's missing in action.

He pats her arm.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR
He'll make it. Ma'am, I'm sorry,
but I have to take the platoon to
chow.

KIM
May I talk to Sgt. Bix? He was with
my husband when he went missing.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR
Gunny Bix is on liberty.

KIM
But I came all the way from
Nebraska. I have to find him.

The Drill Instructor flashes her a conspiratorial look.

DRILL INSTRUCTOR
You didn't hear this from me, but
if I needed to find Bix in a hurry,
I'd try the Shamrock bar downtown.

INT. SAN DIEGO BAR - LATER NIGHT

In her white blouse, Kim walks into the dimly lighted bar,
glancing around at two young men drinking at a booth.

She approaches their table.

KIM
Sergeant Bix?

About to laugh off the question, both men see the seriousness in Kim's face, and shake their heads.

She turns.

Sitting down the bar in front of a large mirror reflecting the room behind him, GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX, 34, grim faced, with cropped salt & pepper hair, is nursing a whiskey with a beer chaser.

Sensing movement behind him, he looks up in the mirror, his face holding on Kim. He swivels around as she moves toward him.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX

I know you...even if you were only three inches tall on Wes's wall locker.

KIM
I had to find you.

Standing, he motions to the bartender.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX

What'll you have?

KIM
Ah, nothing...well, just a Coke,
thanks.

He turns to the bartender.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
Coke, Randy.

Taking his whiskey shot and beer, he nods toward an empty booth.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
Come on, we can talk over there.

INT. BAR - MINUTES LATER

Kim sips her Coke while the sergeant broods over his whiskey. It is clear they are stalled from talking. The sergeant seems like he is having a private argument with himself, mumbling to himself, then looking up at Kim.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
I hate talking to families. They
want to know all this stuff I don't
know.

KIM
Just tell me about that last
patrol.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
Last patrol all right. Wes was
short. He had three days left
before going back to Kuwait and
flying home.

The sergeant takes a sip of his beer.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
I should have sent someone else,
but we were short handed.....
Besides, Wes was lording it over
the other men that he was going
home.

The sergeant shifts in the booth.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
It didn't sit well with me. I
wanted to see Wes sweat one more
time, so I assigned him instead of
Baines.

Leaning back, the sergeant stares up at the darkened ceiling.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
All morning, Wes kept grinning at
me, like he wanted to show me he
was protected, nothing could keep
him from getting back to his wife.

KIM
To me.

The sergeant knocks back the whiskey and holds up the empty
shot, motioning to the bartender for another.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
And just when we were ready to roll
out, Wes took out that dammed
little camera of his and started
filming us like we were in some
documentary.

The sergeant falls silent.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)

They were all my boys. Only one left, Pete up on the hill, but he don't want to see me. Hell, he don't even want to see his own folks.

Kim puts her hands on the table.

KIM

The Marine Corps says they can't find anything of Wes, not even his DNA.

Sitting up, the sergeant turns his beer bottle around.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX

Lady, I'll put it to you like it was up there. There wasn't much to pick up on that road. Wes is gone. Let it go. It was fast. I can tell you one thing. He was thinking of you when he died.

Kim strains forward.

KIM

How do you know?

The sergeant puts his muscular tanned hands on the table inches across from Kim's hands.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX

Because he had your photo taped on the front of his helmet, like you were some guardian angel or something...gonna guide him home.

Kim is moved, then tenses.

KIM

Wait, I thought you said he had it on his locker.

The sergeant waits for the bartender to set the whiskey shot on the table and take the empty.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX

He took it off the last week, for luck, he said.

They both settle into mirroring silence. Kim wants to say something but is struggling. He watches her.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
Yeah? I can see something's on your
mind.

KIM
I just don't understand. The
colonel in Grand Island said you
weren't in the vehicle.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
Right, and you don't think that
doesn't keep me awake every night.

He runs his finger around the rim of the shot glass.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
(more to himself)
Shit, in Iraq, our battalion got a
lecture on Islam, and all that
stuff about Mektub, it is written
and all that. But after what
happened, I believe it now. It
wasn't written for me that day.

The sergeant peers into the darkened corner of the bar.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
Go figure. I had to take a leak,
and told the driver to stop. As I
ran over to the side of the road,
Petie had to be the clown, and tell
the driver to drive on, like they
were leaving me behind.

The sergeant grimaces.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
Just as I zipped up and turned, the
Humvee hit the EED.

Shaking his head, he closes his eyes.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX (CONT'D)
My ears bled for two days. As the
smoke cleared, I could see Taliban
sliding down the slope.

Kim bites her lip.

KIM
So you left him?

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
There was nothing to leave, believe
me.

KIM
But that boy up there in the
hospital, he survived.

The sergeant makes a grudging smile.

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
It's a miracle. Besides, he was
trapped inside the wreckage, that's
what saved him. Those rag heads
probably took one look and all that
blood and gore splattered over Pete
and figured he was dead. Believe
me, Mrs. Ashley, if I had gone up
that road, I'd be dead now...so I
went to get help.

KIM
Then what?

GUNNERY SERGEANT BIX
When we got back, well, I let the
relief platoon clean up the mess. I
couldn't. They were my boys. It was
like I lost six sons in one
instant.

Kim reaches over and grasps the Sergeant's hand.

KIM
Thank you.

Not wanting to break down, she takes her purse and hurries
toward the door.

THE SERGEANT'S HAUNTED EYES hold on her until she is gone.

EXT. OMAHA AIRPORT PARKING LOT - NIGHT

Kim pays the parking attendant and drives away.

INT. ASHLEY FAMILY HOME - LATER NIGHT

Mr. and Mrs. Ashley are watching television when Kim opens
the door and comes in.

KIM
I had to go to California. Good
night.

She continues down the hallway and goes into her room, closing the door.

MR. ASHLEY
I feel like there's a stranger
living with us.

MRS. ASHLEY
Yes, dear. Do you think I should go
try and talk to her?

He ponders her question then shakes his head.

MR. ASHLEY
I don't think talk will help. But I
don't know what will.

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - LATER NIGHT

Holding a magnifying glass over the screen on the DVD player, Kim is trying to see the object at the bottom of Wes's helmet. It remains blurred. In frustration, she stops the disc and falls on the bed, pulling the quilt over her.

INT. SCHOOL PHOTOGRAPHY SHOP - LATER DAY

Kim watches the clip on the DVD player with MR. WINSTON, the chubby, middle-aged photography teacher. As the clip goes dark, he ejects the disc and motions Kim toward a dark room.

INT. DARKROOM - MINUTES LATER

Mr. Winston connects the DVD player to the enlarger then starts fast-forwarding the video to the moment when WES'S HELMET COMES INTO VIEW.

Mr. Winston freezes the clip, then enlarges the image...LARGER AND LARGER, UNTIL THE FACE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HELMET IS REVEALED.

With a look of surprise, Mr. Winston turns to Kim.

MR. WINSON
Why, it's you, Mrs. Ashley.

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - LATER DAY

As Kim finishes signing a leave of absence request, the principal appears relieved.

Walking around the desk, he puts his arm around Kim and guides her toward the door.

MR. THURMAN

Don't worry, Kim. We'll get Mrs. Vale to substitute for your classes. You just take care of yourself. When everything is settled, you can return and teach.

As she steps into the corridor, she turns to say something when the principal's phone rings. Motioning he has to take the call, he closes the door, leaving her alone in the corridor.

She starts down the hallway. Coming around the corner, two little girls in her class see her, stop, almost trembling, then dart away.

She stops, looking as though she could come undone.

THE BELL rings.

Doors open and students flood into the corridor.

KIM

(to herself)

Saved by the bell.

She walks away through waves of passing children.

INT. TOWN LIBRARY - NEXT DAY

MONTAGE

KIM READING UP ON JAPANESE SOLDIERS FOUND LIVING IN THE PHILIPPINE JUNGLE DECADES AFTER THE END OF WORLD WAR II.

KIM READING UP ON PRISONERS OF WAR WHO STAYED FOR YEARS IN ENEMY TERRITORY.

KIM TAKING A STACK OF BOOKS FROM THE REFERENCE SECTION.

KIM COPYING REFERENCES OFF A WEBSITE ON A LIBRARY COMPUTER.

KIM READING A GOOGLE ARTICLE ABOUT SOLDIERS KIDNAPPED BY INSURGENTS IN IRAQ.

INT. MY SPACE CLIP

Clad in orange and kneeling on a floor, surrounded by masked insurgents brandishing Kalashnikovs, A FRIGHTENED AMERICAN MAN reads a statement.

AMERICAN MAN

American invaders must leave Iraq immediately.

As he finishes, one of the insurgent draws a dagger and steps forward, to yank the American's hair back and...

INT. LIBRARY COMPUTER AREA - SAME TIME

Averting her face from seeing the hostage's throat slit, Kim gags and gets up, startling the readers, as she runs toward the rest room.

INT. LIBRARY READING AREA - LATER DAY

Kim is looking at a sprawling, unfolded map of Afghanistan, when a shadow comes up behind her.

LYLE (O.S.)

Hey, Kim, so this is your hide out.

She looks up to see Lyle standing behind her.

KIM

Hi, Lyle, how'd you know I was here?

LYLE

One of things about a small town is you don't have to go too far to find someone.

He sees his remark didn't answer Kim's question.

LYLE(CONT'D)

Wes's mom told me you've been down here every day till closing. Wanna take a break and go to Omaha for a boat show?

She smiles then shakes her head.

KIM

Thanks Lyle, but I still have lots of reading to do.

Irritation is replaced by anger on his face.

LYLE

Still trying to find out what happened?

She looks stung.

KIM

Oh, I know what happened. I just don't know what happened...to Wes.

Holding up his palms in a gesture of acceptance, he starts backing up.

LYLE

Well, you know where to find me if
you ever wanna get together, you
know, just to talk or something

With a soft smile, she turns back to her book.

INT. ASHLEY FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

A somber dinner. Kim eats with Wes's parents. Mr. Ashley passes a platter of roast beef to Kim, who takes a piece, then passes the platter on to Mrs. Ashley.

In the background, THE TELEVISIPM is broadcasting the local news. THE BURNED FUSELAGE OF A SMALL PLANE APPEARS IN A SCORCHED WHEAT FIELD.

TV ACCOUNCER (O.S.)

A private plane crashed near Beaver
City, killing the pilot and two
passengers. Authorities suspect
mechanical failure.

THE SCREEN SHIFTS, A MIDDLE-AGED MAN is addressing a civic group.

TV ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Dr. Harley Vogelman, an Omaha
pediatrician, is seeking teachers,
nurses, and health care volunteers
to work at his orphanage in
Southern Afghanistan.

Angrily, Mr. Ashley stalks over to the TV and switches it off.

MR. ASHLEY

I never want to hear the word
Afghanistan in this house again!

He glances over, noticing that Kim is mumbling to herself.

MR. ASHLEY (CONT'D)

What, Kim?

She looks up at Wes's father.

KIM

Nothing. I was just remembering
something.

Mr. and Mrs. Ashley share glances.

MR. ASHLEY

We need to talk soon, Kim. You need to tell us your plans, what you want to do about staying here now that....well, you know.

KIM

I will, Mr. Ashley. I will.

EXT. FED-EX KINKO'S WINDOW - NEXT MORNING

Inside, Kim stands feeding a copy of her birth certificate into a fax machine.

INT. CAR - NEXT DAY

The window down, Kim drives past wheat fields bordering a highway. Glancing down, she stares at THE GOLD WEDDING RING on her hand on the steering wheel.

Lifting her hand, she puts it next to her lips and uses her teeth to slide off the ring.

INT. AFGHAN ORPHANAGE VOLUNTEER AGENCY, OMAHA - LATER DAY

THE FRECKLE-FACED HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR reads over the application Kim has filled out. Putting them down, he looks up at Kim.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR

You saved us a lot of time by sending your C.V., Ms. Ashley. Homeland Security is verifying your background information. Not even a moving violation, though. As for your teaching references, they are impressive.

She smiles modestly.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR (CONT'D)

You realize there is no compensation for the six month contract, aside from room and board, medical and dental benefits, and of course, round-trip airfare.

KIM

I know. I read the information on your web site.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
Dr. Vogelmann has arranged for every
volunteer to receive one hundred
thousand dollars accidental death
insurance.

KIM
I want my mother to be the
beneficiary.

The director makes a note.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
You can give all that information
to the secretary after your
physical exam, Ms. Ashley. It is
imperative that you understand the
risks.

He pauses to clear his throat.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
This isn't like most volunteer
teaching in third-world countries,
where the greatest risk is disease.
You are going to a war zone.

KIM
I don't mean to be flippant, sir,
but I am well aware of that.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
Dr. Vogelmann insists that I ask
each person why he or she wants to
volunteer. We don't want any
adventurers, mercenaries, or
zealots out to spread the word of
God. We simply want dedicated
nurses, teachers and health care
workers to help these abandoned
children.

With great seriousness, Kim nods.

KIM
I understand, sir.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
Then I need to hear directly from
you your reason for volunteering.

Kim glances down at her purse, the clasp ajar. The silver
glint of the disc appears inside.

KIM
It isn't fair that the men and women in uniform should be the only ones to risk their lives over there. Teachers should, too.

Pleased with her response, the human resource director glances down at the form.

HUMAN RESOURCE DIRECTOR
Very good. Oh, you forgot to check your marital status.

Kim glances up.

KIM
Single.

INT. ASHLEY FAMILY HOUSE - LATER AT NIGHT

Finishing writing a letter on the white linen cloth on the dining room table, Kim picks up a suitcase and a backpack and leaves the darkened house.

INT. ROAD - MINUTES LATER

Lyle is waiting beside his darkened car as Kim appears, moving away from the glow of the white house in the night.

He steps forward to take her suitcase.

LYLE
You better never tell Wes's folks that I did this.

INT. LYLE'S CAR - LATER NIGHT

On the highway to Omaha, with the dash lights providing the only illumination, Lyle keeps glancing over at Kim.

LYLE (CONT'D)
You want some music?

KIM
No thanks, but go ahead if you like.

He waits as the headlights from an approaching semi-truck sweep over him, then he looks over.

LYLE
Guess you need closure, huh?

For a second, Kim doesn't respond.

KIM
Lyle, Wes, isn't a door.

He nods apologetically.

LYLE
Right, right, I mean....when
everything's right, do you
think....

She turns to him.

KIM
...think what?

He grips the steering wheel.

LYLE
Well, you know, the way things were
before you met Wes...if we could,
you know, just start seeing each
other again?

KIM
You can't ask me that now.

Lyle glances over at Kim.

LYLE
Come on, Kim, would you be doing
this if it were me?

She doesn't reply.

Lyle waits for a response. Finally, the growing silence is too much for him.

LYLE (CONT'D)
Then just tell me, why Wes?

Leaning forward, Kim stares into the night beyond the range of the racing headlights.

KIM
Because it was him, because it was
me.

INT. MATS GLOBAL MASTER CARGO JET - NEXT DAY

Staring out the porthole the Nebraska air base receding far below, Kim leans back in her seat.

The enormous cargo area is divided into two sections:

In front, are seated a company of American rangers in camouflage uniforms.

In back, Kim sits with two dozen NGO volunteers and five Blackwater contractors.

Two seats over from Kim is CARL HAINES, 41, a rugged-looking man clad in khakis.

From the way he keeps glancing over at Kim, he is eager to talk.

CARL
You a nurse?

Kim weighs whether to get into a conversation.

KIM
No, just a teacher.

CARL
Good luck. Those kids are raised to hate us.

Again, she decides how to respond.

KIM
Us?

CARL
Anyone not Moslem.

KIM
You've been there before?

Carl cracks his knuckles.

CARL
Two tours with SEAL 6 in Iraq. But I made squat. I got out but couldn't make ends meet in Butte, so I hooked up with Blackwater. Now I'm gonna pull in some big bucks.

She studies the man's hardened features.

KIM
What'll you do?

He grins.

CARL
Whatever they tell me, mostly guard American executives.

You gonna be in Kabul? Maybe we can get together at our compound for a drink.

She smiles, but leans back against the seat.

KIM

Sorry, I'm posted to Kandahar.

He whistles.

CARL

Wild West, huh? Well, good luck down there. If I were you, I'd get me a small pistol - a .32 Beretta or something to carry...just in case.

KIM

Thanks, but I don't think the children will hurt me.

He laughs loudly.

CARL

Everybody over there can hurt you, lady. Take my word for it, don't ever turn your back on those rag heads, or you'll regret it.

Wanting to end the conversation, Kim reaches into her backpack and removes the DVD player. Turning it on, she leans back, watching the clip with Les.

Almost mimicking her, Carl opens his briefcase and removes a similar device, searching through a stack of DVDs.

CARL (CONT'D)

You wanna trade movies? I got a copy of Dark Knight?

KIM

No thanks. I've got all I want.

Seeing she is watching a movie, he leans over, trying to see it.

CARL

What are you watching?

Making sure he can't see she wedges the DVD player on her lap.

KIM
Just a home movie.

With a bored expression, he leans back and slides in a disc.

INT. CARGO JET - LATER DAY

With her seat row companion asleep with an open copy of Soldier of Fortune magazine on his lap, Kim stares out the window at the cloud formations far below.

EXT. CARGO JET - NIGHT

Beyond the flashing red wing lights, Kim's face appears beyond a lighted porthole, staring out at the night as the Air Force plane moves through a moonless sky.

INT. MATS CARGO JET - NEXT MORNING

The seat belt sign on, Kim peers out the window. Abruptly, the jet banks sharply and starts going into a steep dive.

Frightened, she looks over at her companion, who is grinning.

CARL
Don't sweat it. They gotta come in
hot to avoid rockets.

Kim grips the arm rests, waiting for the plane to level off.

Carl leans over.

CARL (CONT'D)
You're in the food chain now,
honey.

As the plane levels off to land, she closes her eyes and begins whispering to herself.

Thinking that she is praying, Carl shifts back to his seat.

Opening her eyes, Kim looks up at the vast beige landscape below the wing.

Leaning over, she touches her finger against the glass.

KIM
Wes.

INT. MATS CARGO JET - MINUTE LATER

A flurry of activity as the soldiers march off the plane. Grabbing his things, Carl extends his hand.

CARL
You ever get lonely in Kandahar;
give me a ring at the Blackwater
compound. I can come down for a
visit. Carl Haines.

Kim smiles, shaking his hand.

KIM
You never know.

As he leaves, A SWEATING OBESE MAN IN HIS FORTIES stands up
in the next row, motioning to an AIR FORCE CREWMAN.

OBESE MAN
What about us?

THE CREWMAN approaches.

AIR FORCE CREWMAN

We'll take off for Kandahar as soon as we get off-load.

The obese man shakes his head.

OBESE MAN
How about lunch?

AIR FORCE CREWMAN

Those soldiers ate up everything we had on board. Sorry.

He starts up the aisle.

The obese man reaches into his pocket and takes out two
granola bars.

OBESE MAN
Thank God I brought these, want
one?

Kim shakes her head, smiling.

OBESE MAN (CONT'D)
I saw you at the meeting in Omaha.
I'm Terry Oakim.

KIM
Kim Ashley.

The obese man looks around.

OBESE MAN

What a way to get out of Dodge. I always worry when I start to regret something before it's started.

The airman comes back, motioning for the passengers to take their seats.

KIM

Excuse me; are we going to take off like we landed?

The airman grins.

AIR FORCE CREWMAN

Steeper. They'd rather hit us taking off than comin' in. But don't worry, they can't aim for shit.

Kim drops back in her seat, showing the signs of the long flight.

EXT. KANDAHAR AIR BASE- LATE AFTERNOON

The C-5 Globemaster comes down sharply and makes a bumpy landing, the wheels burning smoke as the engines go into reverse thrust and the enormous cargo plane slows on the tarmac.

EXT. MILITARY CONTROL AREA - MINUTES LATER

Her face etched with fatigue, Kim waits with the volunteers for the orphanage as an American major and an Afghan customs official check a roster against the passports of the arriving volunteers.

The hawk-faced Afghan leers at Kim, easily the youngest woman among the group of civilians. She notices the look attractive women know too well.

She glances away as the major signs the roster and motions for the volunteers to follow him to the baggage area.

INT. SUV - LATER DAY

In a caravan of four vehicles moving along the Ring Road of Kandahar.

KIM stares out the window:

Everywhere bearded men in turbans, rifles slung over their shoulders, trod along the dusty road, crammed with trucks, military vehicles and donkey carts.

Here and there, a veiled figure in a burka flits through the street scene.

In the seat behind Kim, the obese teacher begins snoring loudly. The Afghan driver mutters to the armed escort. Both men laugh.

EXT. GATE ORPHANAGE COMPOUND - LATER DAY

Stopping at the guard post, the driver waits as two armed Afghan militia men move alongside the car, staring in at the new volunteers, giving them an insect-under-glass inspection.

On her side of the SUV, the man gawks at Kim's face. She doesn't turn away. Instead, she smiles.

As though she had spit at him, he veers away, yelling for the driver to move on.

OBESE MAN

They think all Western women are
whores...that they've come to
corrupt their women.

Kim closes her eyes, for a moment's respite. Instead, the SUV lurches forward and she snaps awake.

EXT. CONFERENCE ROOM - LATER DAY

MRS. DECKER, 58, the no-nonsense director at the orphanage has been showing an orientation film to the new arrivals.

ON THE SCREEN APPEAR photographs of right and wrong ways for Westerners to behave in Afghanistan.

A large red X is over the bad behavior:

Showing a man pointing with his index finger.

The correct poster shows the man using his entire hand to indicate.

A red X is over a woman walking down the street without a veil.

The correct picture is the same woman veiled.

A large red X is over a man eating with his left hand in a restaurant.

The correct picture shows the same man eating with his right.

OBESE TEACHER

(loud whisper)

I don't care if I have to eat with
my toes. I'm starving.

The film ends. The director motions for an Afghan assistant to open the curtains.

The fading afternoon light reveals several volunteers slumped down in their seats, napping.

Shaking her head, the director claps her hands, waking the sleepers.

MRS. DECKER

I know how exhausting the flight is, but you have to pay attention. It's not only your safety that's at stake, but the reputation of your country. Every one of you is an ambassador at large.

Seeing the glazed over eyes of her audience, the director finishes up.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

I wish I could let you have a few days to get acclimatized, but we are short-handed. I need all of you ready for indoctrination: nurses at the clinic, health care workers in the dorms, and teachers in the classrooms.

She glances over at the obese man who just arrived.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

Mr. Oakim.... you'll be leaving for Dai Chopen in the morning.

Hearing the name of the valley where Wes went missing, Kim starts and raises her hand.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

I haven't had time to get all your names memorized yet. You're...

KIM

Kim Ashley.

The director nods.

KIM (CONT'D)

Do they need another volunteer to go along with Mr. Oakim, you know to help teach.

The director is puzzled at the request. She glances at the obese, middle-aged man then back at the attractive young woman. Something isn't right.

MRS. DECKER

No, you're needed here. Besides, no NGO women are allowed in Zohar Province. It's dangerous enough for men, but a woman, no way.

The director walks over to Kim.

MRS. DECKER

When they faxed over your applications, I thought you were much too young to be coming here.

She scans the faces of the other volunteers, in their fifties and early sixties.

MRS. DECKER

Everyone else here had a career and is retired or close to it. But you're just starting out as a teacher. Why did you want to come?

Kim senses everyone in the room is watching her.

KIM

Women soldiers are fighting and dying here.

She pauses, to glance outside at a raggedly-dressed group of children following a veiled Afghan woman.

KIM (CONT'D)

I just wanted to make a difference, a little one, but a difference.

The director gives Kim one last glance then walks back to the front of the room.

MRS. DECKER

You can go to your quarters now. Each of you will be living with a volunteer who's been here long enough to help bring you up to speed and get settled. Thank you for making this commitment.

Get some rest. We start fresh in the morning.

The obese teacher raises his hand.

 OBESE TEACHER
Where do we eat?

A few people chuckle. The director is matter-of-fact.

 MRS. DECKER
The mess hall opens for dinner at six, but I suggest you get settled in your quarters first.

EXT. CONFERENCE HALL - MINUTES LATER

As the new volunteers filter outside behind the director, a bearded Afghan in his 40's is waiting. He wears no turban and his tortoise shell glasses give his face an intellectual cast.

 MRS. DECKER
Folks, this is Ali. He is your driver and translator. He studied engineering at the University of Chattanooga. Ali knows everything about Afghanistan you need to know.

Ali blushes, shaking his head.

 ALI
Oh, no, Ma'am. I know little.

The director permits herself a smile.

 MRS. DECKER
Ali is your life-line in Kandahar. Do not leave the compound without him. And never ever leave the compound at night.

Pausing, she scans the volunteers' faces, emphasizing her words.

 MRS. DECKER
Ali can take you into the souk on days off, but do whatever he says. Kandahar may look like a great place for buying rugs and gold jewelry, but it's filled with Taliban sympathizers.

She motions them to follow her. As they start off, Kim glances back.

Ali is staring at her with a concerned expression.

EXT. COMPOUND APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

As Mrs. Decker continues down the corridor with other volunteers, Kim sets her bags down in front of SARAH ESTRIN, 58, a chain-smoking pediatrician.

Taking one of Kim's bags, Sarah motions for her to follow.

SARAH

You've got to leave the mosquito gadget on all night, or they'll eat you alive. Where you from?

KIM

Grand Island, Nebraska. You?

The doctor glances back.

SARAH

Beverly Hills via Tel Aviv.

Sarah opens a door and steps into a sparse bedroom, with a single bed, table, chair and lamp. On the far wall is a barred window.

SARAH (CONT'D)

I got sick of treating RKWA.

KIM

What's that?

SARAH

Rich Kids with Attitude. My husband, son and I moved to Israel ten years ago.

Sarah sees Kim glance up at the bars.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Don't worry, that's not to keep you in, but to keep the bad guys out.

Sarah casts a look around the room.

SARAH (CONT'D)

What else? Linen's clean. There's a second set and towels in the closet. And don't drink the water or you'll be one of my patients.

Kim opens the closet and leaps back as a lizard scurries along the shelf.

SARAH (CONT'D)

They're harmless. Only thing you wanna watch for is scorpions. Just keep the ends of your blanket pulled up at night so they don't climb up and sting you in the face.

Kim shudders, then studies the grainy-featured woman.

KIM

How long have you been here?

SARAH

This is my second visit to the Middle Ages....fourteen months.

Kim looks startled.

KIM

But they said six months was the limit.

Sarah grins and takes a drag of her cigarette then looks at the burning ember.

SARAH

I only came back because this is the only country left where I can still smoke where I want. You don't mind, do you?

Hearing the emphatic tone, Kim grins.

KIM

No, but what about your husband, doesn't he mind you being here?

Sarah steps to the window, slides back the glass and flips the cigarette outside, then turns.

SARAH

I wish he could. He died of an aneurysm three years ago...six months later my son was killed by Hezbollah in Lebanon.

As though Kim had asked another question, Sarah looks at her.

SARAH (CONT'D)

What's left for me besides caring for the children nobody wants?

She starts out of the bedroom.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 You'll probably want to take a
 shower before dinner. Don't worry
 about the water being brown, it's
 just mineral deposits.

She leaves, closing the door behind her.

Kim takes a look around the room, as though not believing
 where she is.

KIM
 (to herself)
 Now what?

She sits down and begins unpacking her suitcase.

INT. DARKENED BEDROOM - NIGHT

A rapping at the door. In the faint light from the compound,
 Kim lies sleeping fully dressed.

Resting on the chair beside the bed is the DVD player, with
 the frozen image of Wes's face on the screen.

The door opens and Sarah peeks in from the lighted hallway.

SARAH
 Kim...Kim.

Kim starts, unsure where she is.

SARAH (CONT'D)
 Look, the jet lag zaps everyone
 when they get here, but you gotta
 get up now or you'll be falling
 asleep in class. Come on, I brought
 you some dinner from the mess hall.

Groggy, Kim starts to get up.

Sarah stares at the face on the DVD screen. Remembering she
 left the DVD on, Kim turns back to turn it off.

KIM
 Oh...my brother and his buddies.

SARAH
 Marines?

Kim nods. The older woman studies Kim.

SARAH (CONT'D)
Don't tell the director if he's
here in Afghanistan. She'll send
you right home. No in-country
military ties.

Kim smiles and puts the DVD player back into her bag.

KIM
Oh, no, he's home safe now back in
San Diego.

She starts for the door.

KIM (CONT'D)
I'm famished.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Twenty-five children, swirling, laughing, rough-housing, all
with large luminous eyes and wearing a patchwork of different
color clothes are ignoring the admonishments of an Afghan
woman instructor.

The door opens and Mrs. Decker enters, followed by Kim,
carrying a roster, note books and pencils.

Seeing the stern director, the children return to their
places behind their desks.

Kim stops, staring at the display of innocence before her.
Each child shimmers with beauty and curiosity.

MRS. DECKER
One of the previous volunteers said
it was more like breaking horses.

Kim grins.

KIM
I'll be all right. How much English
do they know?

MRS. DECKER
Six weeks...but I'm afraid you have
your work cut out for you.

Mrs. Decker turns toward the students.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)
Good morning, children.

All the children respond with a distorted echo of her
greeting.

Mrs. Decker pats Kim on the arm.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)
Good luck, Ms. Ashley.

INT. CLASSROOM - LATER DAY

With a chalk drawing of an ocean, a sailboat, the sun, and drifting birds, along with a spouting whale on the black board, Kim walks from desk to desk, pausing to glance down at the progress each child is making.

MONTAGE

DIFFERENT DRAWINGS OF THE SCENE ON THE BLACKBOARD.

ALTHOUGH EACH DEPICTION IS DIFFERENT,

ALL CONTAIN MAGIC AND VITALITY,

SOME WITH THE BIRDS LARGER THAN THE SAILBOAT,

OTHERS WITH THE WHALE SAILING THROUGH THE AIR,

ONE WITH THE SUN MAKING A BIG SMILE.

KIM (O.S.)
Very good, children.

A LOUD THUMP SOUNDS IN THE DISTANCE, FOLLOWED BY A RUMBLE.

A SIREN CUTS THROUGH THE AIR.

IN THE CLASSROOM,

In an instant, the children get up to form in line, then look at Kim, as though waiting for orders.

She is confused. The door opens, and A MIDDLE AGED MALE TEACHER motions for her to follow.

MIDDLE AGED MALE TEACHER

Rocket attack! Get them in the shelter, hurry!

Seeing the teacher turn to lead his students past, Kim motions for her children to follow.

INT. SHELTER - MINUTES LATER

Scores of teachers and staff are crammed into the shelter. Kim looks over at Sarah, wearing a white lab coat.

SARAH
Relax this is nothing. I've spent
nights in smaller ones than this in
Ashkelon.

MOMENTARILY, ANOTHER ALARM SOUNDS.

At the entrance, an Afghani staff member opens the door and
motions for everyone to leave.

KIM
That's it?

Sarah shrugs.

SARAH
Hey, false alarms I can handle. See
you later.

Sarah moves through the children and leaves the shelter.

EXT. CLASS ROOM - MINUTES LATER

As Kim leads the children back to class, Ali appears on the
porch. Seeing her, he smiles.

ALI
Morning, teacher.

KIM
Good morning, Ali.

Stepping aside, Kim motions for the children to continue on
to the classroom.

KIM (CONT'D)
What was that noise before the
siren?

ALI
Nothing to worry about. The IED
went off by the airport.

KIM
Was anyone hurt?

Ali shrugs, mumbling to himself in Pashto.

KIM (CONT'D)
What?

ALI
Someone is always hurt.

Kim studies the scholarly-looking translator.

KIM

Ali, tell me something. Are we far
from the valley where that
teacher's going, Dai Chopen?

Ali's expression tightens.

ALI

Why do you ask about Dai Chopen?

Kim senses he is bothered by her question.

KIM

Oh nothing. I just read about it in
the newspapers.

Ali's face becomes a frown.

ALI

Dai Chopen very bad place.

KIM

Well, I'd better get to class. See
you.

She walks on to the school house, with Ali following her with
his eyes.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

Scores of Afghan staff members eat at long tables alongside
the Western volunteers.

Kim is sitting alone across the room from the obese teacher
and two other male volunteers.

Abruptly, he jumps up, gagging, clawing at his throat.

Around him everyone stares in surprise, not knowing what is
happening, much less, what to do.

Kim stands, watching the teacher's face turn blue.

Seeing no one moving to help him, she races around the table
and grabs the obese man around the waist, gripping him in a
Heimlich maneuver.

For a second, she can't clasp her hands. Then with all her
might, she thrusts upward against his diaphragm.

AN ENORMOUS SLAB OF UNCHEWED BEEF SHOOTS OUT OF HIS MOUTH AND HITS AGAINST THE WALL.

Kim releases the teacher, as he bends over, gasping, trying to catch his breath.

Kim stares down at the man's sweating face, as he continues gasping for breath.

KIM

You okay now?

The man nods, trying to stand, then gripping the wall, he staggers a few feet and thuds to the floor.

The door opens and Sarah runs in, pushing through the gawking Afghanis.

She drops to the floor, takes one look at the unconscious teacher and begins CPR.

INT. PATIO AREA - NEXT DAY

With a desert wind blowing dust across the ground, causing the assembled volunteers to cover their eyes, the director stands under an awning talking about the deceased teacher.

A few feet behind her is Ali.

MRS. DECKER

Terry Oakim wasn't here long enough for anyone to get to know him. But he came. He could be drawing retirement now and sitting around doing nothing, but he came to the orphanage. That says a lot about him, all I need to know anyway.

A MALE HEALTH WORKER raises his hand.

MALE HEALTH WORKER

Mrs. Decker, I don't understand why they didn't spot any coronary blockage when he got his physical. We all had to do a treadmill test.

The director nods.

MRS. DECKER

I know, but Terry came to us laterally from the State Department. He had a physical a year ago and they found nothing.

KIM

Ma'am, does that mean you'll need another teacher to send to Dai Chopen now?

Mrs. Decker does a slow burn, while Ali stares at the young woman, trying to read her.

MRS. DECKER

Are you writing something for Lonely Planet, like Touring Afghanistan at War?

Kim looks embarrassed; she shakes her head, looking down.

KIM

No, I just wanted to get a chance to see the country.

MRS. DECKER

See the country! This is not the Lake Country, Ms. Ashley. You're here to help the children learn to read and write in English so they can be placed out of this cauldron. Do you understand that?

Kim nods. Realizing she has lost her temper, the director exhales.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, Ms. Ashley. It's been a long day for weeks.

She glances at the other volunteers.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

Look, the children heard what happened. They're too jumpy to pay attention. I know some of you need things from the market. I've asked Ali to take you to the souk. I'll see you all later.

In ones and twos, the volunteers walk away.

As Kim starts to leave, the director approaches her.

MRS. DECKER

I'm sorry for blowing up. The same thing happened two months ago.

A woman from Florida wanted to dress up in a burka and go out in the city to see how the Afghan women are treated. Sheer madness.

She pauses, wanting to make sure her words sink in.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

If they had caught her, she would have been stoned to death for mocking the culture. They may have cars and electricity here, but if you look at the daggers on the men's belts and the furnace in their eyes when they see a Western woman, it's the same as it's been for hundreds of years. Try to stay focused on your job, Ms. Ashley, and you'll be fine.

KIM

Sorry.

The director waves off the apology.

MRS. DECKER

I can't blame you for wanting to see the land. It is one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world, but it belongs to the war now, and we belong to the orphans. Enjoy the souk.

She walks away. Kim turns to see Ali, leading three volunteers to the row of SUVs.

Waving to get his attention, she motions she'll be right back, then runs to her housing area.

INT. SUV - MINUTES LATER

Ali sits at the wheel of the idling vehicle. One volunteer sits up front in the passenger seat, and four others are in back.

ONE BEARDED MAN looks irritated.

BEARDED MAN

I hate waiting for people.

Ali turns, grinning.

ALI
Then we will not wait any longer,
Mr. Herbert.

Putting on his seat belt, Ali starts driving toward the gate.

EMERGING FROM THE STAFF QUARTERS WITH A BACKPACK OVER HER
SHOULDERS IS KIM.

Seeing the SUV leaving, she runs toward it.

AN AUDIBLE SIGH from the bearded man.

BEARDED MAN
Always someone out of step.

Ali grins, then as he watches Kim running to the SUV, his
grin fades.

ALI
Maybe many steps.

EXT. KANDAHAR SOUK AREA - LATER DAY

Ali pulls into a parking lot guarded by Afghan militia toting
submachine guns.

Other Westerns can be seen filtering past the busy market
stalls.

INT. SUV - SAME TIME

Ali turns off the engine.

ALI
This is the best guarded souk in
Kandahar. But two things, don't
step out of sight of the main
street, and don't even think about
buying hash.

He pauses, grinning at the four older people then at Kim.

ALI (CONT'D)
Afghan prisons make the Turkish
prison in Midnight Express resemble
a spa. An hour and a half is good,
yes?

The volunteers nod and open the doors to get out.

Sitting in the last row, Kim waits for the other passengers
to get out. When they have started away, Kim moves up toward
Ali.

KIM
How much would you want to drive me
to Dai Chopen?

For a second, Ali looks angry, then his expression softens.

ALI
Enough for my wife to live the rest
of her life without me...

Kim looks puzzled, not getting his point.

Ali sees she doesn't understand his remark.

ALI (CONT'D)
...because if I took you there, she
would be a widow.

He leans over the back of the seat.

ALI (CONT'D)
Believe me, teacher. Iraq is bad,
but Afghanistan is worse because
there, it is Sunni against Shiite
against Kurd. Here, every town,
every valley, every village has a
different tribal leader, and each
makes his own laws.

He pauses, not comfortable with what he is going to say.

ALI (CONT'D)
But in all of them the Western
woman is a snake that must be cut
in half before it poisons Afghan
women. Do you see why I can't take
you?

She nods and starts to get out. He climbs out of the driver's
side the same time as she does.

ALI (CONT'D)
Why do you care about Dai Chopen?

KIM
I don't. I just want to go there.

ALI
But it is nowhere, in the middle of
nothing. No one is there!

Ali looks perplexed.

KIM

I heard about it from a friend. He said it was very beautiful.

Ali tilts his head.

ALI

Beautiful? Is the moon beautiful? From far away, yes, but up close, no. It is cold and empty.

He motions toward the other volunteers wandering into the souk.

ALI (CONT'D)

Listen to Ali, Ms. Ashley. Buy a magic carpet, or a mirror owned by a Russian princess, but quit trying to go to Dai Chopen. The only thing there is your death.

Rebuffed, Kim walks off to the souk. As she catches up with the others, Ali starts following at a slow pace, just enough to keep the volunteers in sight, without their feeling shadowed.

EXT. SOUK - LATER DAY

Loosely mingling with the other volunteers, Kim stops to finger a silk scarf under the watchful eye of the merchant.

Several yards away, Ali has stopped to talk with an Afghan military officer.

At the moment, one of the woman volunteers holds up a gold chain, motioning to Ali to come help her.

Excusing himself from his friend, he starts toward the woman trying to barter with the goldsmith.

As Kim starts past an alley, SOMEONE WHISTLES LOUDLY.

She stops, staring down the tunnel-like space of the alley,

SEEING AN ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER idling, with a Canadian flag fluttering on the radio antenna.

Manning a heavy caliber machine gun on the roof, a parachute regiment sergeant, wearing a red beret, is waving at a YOUNG CANADIAN PRIVATE, hurriedly trying to buy a curved dagger.

Glancing back at the volunteers, Kim sees that Ali is busy translating for the woman.

Quickly, she starts down the alley toward the soldier.

Paying for the knife, he grabs it in his hand and starts loping back to the APC.

Kim runs as fast as she can to catch him.

Hearing someone running, he whirls around, then stops, seeing the good-looking young woman approaching.

KIM

Are you going toward Dai Chopen by any chance?

Surprised by the request, he shakes his head.

CANADIAN PRIVATE

No, only up to Qalat.

He sees the disappointment on Kim's face.

CANADIAN PRIVATE (CONT'D)

But there's a checkpoint there. You might be able to hitch a ride with the Americans dug in at Sayagz just down the valley from Chopen.

Kim stops beside him.

KIM

I'm a journalist. I missed the rendezvous with my camera team. They already left for Dai Chopen.

The Canadian looks perplexed.

CANADIAN PRIVATE

Why they wanna go there, nothing but Taliban.

KIM

We're doing a story on the American marines who were killed there. Could I get a ride?

As she points at the APC, the Canadian's eyes widen.

CANADIAN PRIVATE

You gotta be kidding. We can't go riding civilians around like a taxi cab.

Kim gives him an imploring look.

KIM
Please, it'll mean my job if I
don't get there in time.

Shaking his head, he motions for her to follow him.

CANADIAN PRIVATE
You better ask my sergeant, and I
wanna see his face when you do.

They walk down the alley.

EXT. ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER - MOMENTS LATER

THE RUGGED, RED-HAIRED SERGEANT WITH A LONG HANDLE-BAR
MOUSTACHE, does a double-take seeing Kim walking beside the
private.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
Watkins, what the hell?

The private raises his hands and opens the side hatch to get
in.

CANADIAN PRIVATE
She's a journalist, Sarge. She
missed her ride and has to get to
Dai Chopen.

The sergeant gapes at the private.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
Well, isn't that too bad.

He looks down at Kim.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT (CONT'D)
How long you been in-country, miss?

KIM
Not too long, a day.

The sergeant nods, feigning excessive politeness.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
That's what I thought. Miss, I got
news for you. This country is at
war. And if I were you, I'd get
down to the American check-point
about a mile down that road, and
have them run you up north.

The charade over, the sergeant drops the kindly look and
glares at Kim.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT (CONT'D)
Because I sure as hell won't.

Kim walks up to the side of the APC and looks straight up at the sergeant.

KIM
I don't have time. If you won't give me a ride, I'll hitch a ride with those Afghan truck drivers. I'm sure they'll stop.

She starts down the street.

The sergeant smashes his fist against the vehicle.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
Are you barmy? They'll slit your throat before you close the door. Get back here. I'm only taking you as far as Qalat.

Smiling, Kim comes back.

KIM
That's fine.

The sergeant motions for her to open her backpack.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
I need to see you don't have any weapons.

She opens the bag and holds up the DVD player.

KIM
Just this.

The sergeant peers through the turret.

RED-HAIRED SERGANT
Heads up down there. A woman journalist is getting in. Watch your language, and if one of you opens his mouth about her later, I'll sell you to the Taliban.

The sergeant motions for Kim to go around to the hatch on the side. As she gets in, he turns around, making sure no Western military officers are observing him. He adjusts the radio around his neck and begins giving orders.

The armored personnel carrier rolls forward down the highway.

EXT. SOUK - MOMENTS LATER

With the volunteers waiting in one spot, Ali returns from searching for Kim. ONE MALE VOLUNTEER looks nervously around.

MALE VOLUNTEER
She can't just have disappeared.

With a worried look, Ali takes out his cell phone and punches in a number.

INT. ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER - MINUTES LATER

With a constant loud growling of the engine and the rough bumping along the highway, Kim sits between two young Canadian paratroopers while facing four more on the other bench.

ALL THE PARATROOPERS SEEM TOO YOUNG TO BE IN CAMOUFLAGE UNIFORMS AND CLUTCHING WEAPONS.

Shyly, they grin at Kim as she tries to keep her balance on the bumpy bench.

She glances up, seeing the sergeant's legs and torso jutting down in the turret.

KIM
Is it always so noisy?

The soldiers laugh. ONE TALL BLONDE-HAIRED BOY grins at her.

BLONDE-HAIRED BOY
We get used to it. How come your people didn't send a guy?

KIM
I told my editor it wasn't fair the men get to have all the fun.

More laughter.

Glancing down, the sergeant sees the men joking with Kim. For an instant, it appears he is going to remove his earphones and come down.

His expression softens and he stares ahead down the road.

INT. APC - LATER DAY

A HUSKY PARATROOPER WITH THE HIGH-CHEEK BONES OF AN INDIAN, hands Kim a photograph.

She takes it, staring at A PLUMP DARK-HAIRED GIRL POSING IN FRONT OF A SNOW-COVERED FIELD.

INDIAN PARATROOPER
She writes me every day.

A SLENDER PARATROOPER nudges Kim.

SLENDER PARATROOPER
Trouble is, Wally doesn't know how to read.

Everyone laughs. Kim hesitates, sensing that the remark was mean. Then seeing the Indian shake his head good-naturedly she smiles, too.

KIM
Don't listen to them. All you have to do is look at that picture to know everything you need to know.

The Indian smiles. For a moment, the paratroopers are silent, each withdrawing inside a private thought.

THE APC BEGINS TO SLOW.

Bending, the sergeant glances at his men.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
Soon as we clear the checkpoint, Bishop, you relieve the driver, and Hinkle, you come up and man the .50.

The APC slows almost to a complete stop, with the engine dropping to a thick idle. The sergeant rises half-way out of the turret.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
How's the road ahead?

MAN (O.S.)
(more mocking than harsh)
What do you guys care, you got that fifty up there?

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
We got an American woman journalist below. I just want to know the area's clear to Qalat.

The sergeant bends down.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT (CONT'D)
Open the hatch, Castle.

The blonde-haired paratrooper swings the hatch open, flooding the interior with sunlight.

AN ASIAN-AMERICAN LIEUTENANT wearing a 10th Mountain Division patch gives Kim the once-over.

ASIAN-AMERICAN LIEUTENANT
See your press pass, ma'am?

She fumbles in her purse, then looks up.

KIM
I must have left it at the compound.

ASIAN-AMERICAN LIEUTENANT
What newspaper are you with?

Her face goes blank for an instant.

KIM
Ah, Omaha World-Herald.

ASIAN-AMERICAN LIEUTENANT
You doin' an article on Coalition troops?

Thinking he is being helpful, the young Canadian private from the souk leans forward.

CANADIAN PRIVATE
She just needed a ride, lieutenant.

The lieutenant steps back, motioning for Kim to get out.

ASIAN-AMERICAN LIEUTENANT
Come on, we gotta square this away with battalion.

Kim turns with a wistful expression, staring at the young paratroopers inside the shadowy APC.

KIM
Take good care of yourselves.

All mutter a response.

As one paratrooper leans out to pull the hatch closed, Kim looks up at the red-haired sergeant.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT
I don't know who you are, or what
you're up to, lady, but you're
lucky you're not going any further.

INT. SANDBAGGED BUNKER - CHECKPOINT - LATER DAY

Curious Afghan soldiers peer inside the slits in the wall,
staring at Kim, sitting on an ammunition crate under the
watchful eye of a haggard, irritable American soldier.

KIM
Where'd he go with my backpack?

The man shrugs.

KIM (CONT'D)
Come on, he said not to talk to me,
but you can answer my question.

HAGGARD SOLDIER
Ask the guy from the embassy when
he gets here.

KIM
Embassy, are they involved?

A grin leaks from the man's mouth.

HAGGARD SOLDIER
Everybody's involved over here.

Kim drops her head.

INT. BUNKER - LATER DAY

Kim gets up. The soldier motions for her to sit still.

KIM
I have to go to the bathroom.

HAGGARD SOLDIER
We don't have one. Just hold it.

Muttering "Just hold it," Kim goes to sit back down.

IN THE DISTANCE, a helicopter rotor sounds...then grows
closer and closer, until the loud flapping settles nearby.

The rotor slows and stops.

Momentarily, people approach speaking English. They fall
silent.

A burly man enters the bunker.

RAY TYLER, 37, is clad in khakis, covered with dust. A HK MP 5 submachine gun is swung over his shoulder and a Glock pistol dangles from a shoulder holster inside his jacket.

In his hand he clutches Kim's backpack.

KIM
May I please have that?

Ray swings it out to her.

KIM (CONT'D)
I'd like to leave if I may.

RAY
(unbridled sarcasm)
Where to, with all of Disneyland to choose from?

KIM
I'm supposed to meet my camera team.

Ray hoots.

RAY
Look, Ms. Ashley, you can bullshit some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you can't bullshit me any of the time. So quit this Lois Lane stuff. I downloaded more about you than you know about yourself.

Stunned, she stares at him.

KIM
Who are you?

RAY
That's the caterpillar's line to Alice. I'm an Agricultural Specialist with the embassy.

She stares at the submachine gun.

KIM
What do you grow with that?

RAY

It's a new insecticide. The locusts are big here. Come on, you're out of here.

He grabs her arm and starts marching her toward the door of the bunker. She yanks her arm free.

KIM

I can walk on my own, thank you. And I'm not going anywhere until I know where we're going?

RAY

Not where you were trying to reach. You'd never get there in one piece. We're talking you back to Kandahar. They can deal with you.

EXT. BUNKER - MOMENTS LATER

With Kim leading the way, Ray follows her toward a landing strip where a camouflaged Chinook helicopter with US insignias is sitting on the tarmac, its rotor slowly turning.

Inside the cockpit, a helmeted pilot and co-pilot are checking the controls.

Kim glances back.

KIM

This helicopter wasn't sent just for me, is it?

Ray shakes his head.

RAY

No, we're picking up Elvis on the way back. Come on, move it.

FROM THE SIDE AN ARMY RANGER captain comes running over to Ray.

RANGER CAPTAIN

You're going to KAB?

RAY

You want a lift?

The ranger shakes his head, looking back toward the road, where a camouflage Humvee is parked. Several men are standing around it.

RANGER CAPTAIN
We got a Coalition KIA. Can you
take the Frog back?

For an instant, Ray looks like he will hit the Ranger captain. Instead, he holds himself back.

RAY
Don't you ever call him that again,
Captain, or I'll have you guarding
gooney bird nests on Guam. He's a
French soldier who died fighting
the same enemy as we are. Get him
on the plane.

Chagrined, the captain hurries back to the Humvee. Two men pick up a stretcher and start toward the helicopter.

RAY (CONT'D)
We got another passenger.

INT. CHINOOK HELICOPTER - LATER DAY

With a door gunner pointing a .50 machine gun down at the passing countryside, Kim sits strapped in beside Ray, whose submachine gun is tucked under his legs beside Kim's backpack.

Wind whips in the open hatch, playing with the corner of a camouflaged tarp wrapped tightly around a body.

A water-proofed bag containing documents is clamped to the tarp. Every few seconds the wind tugs at a corner of the tarp pulling it a little looser.

A BLACK CREW CHIEF comes into view, keeping his balance while walking toward Kim and Ray with two cups of coffee in Styrofoam cups.

He hands them the coffee.

CREW CHIEF
Sorry, ma'am, we don't have any
cream or sugar.

KIM
Black's fine.

The black crew chief breaks into a grin.

CREW CHIEF
You won't get any argument out of
me on that.

Shifting back, his foot bumps against the body. Recalling where he is, he moves away.

Sipping the coffee, Kim leans back against the bulkhead. Ray glances over, studying the woman's face.

RAY

Who else knows why you're here?

Kim sips her coffee without bothering to open her eyes.

KIM

Just you.

RAY

'Fraid the cat's out of the bag now, and you let it out.

Kim opens her eyes, staring at Ray.

KIM

What's gonna happen to me?

RAY

Whatever it is, consider yourself blessed. If you'd made it past that check point, who knows where you'd be by now.

She stares at the body on the floor, watching the corner of the tarp flapping, almost revealing a portion of the dead soldier's face.

KIM

Maybe I'd be where I belong.

He scoffs.

RAY

Belong? No women belong here. They should throw them all out and let us fight it out with the Taliban to the last man standing.

KIM

What about the Afghan women and children? Are you gonna throw them out, too, or do they have to stay, getting killed by both sides? Kinda sad, don't you think?

He starts to reply then falls silent.

THE HELICOPTER banks to starboard, catching a strong wind, which yanks at the loose flap, pulling it free from around the head.

THE MAN'S SHAVED SCALP AND TANNED FOREHEAD CAN BE SEEN.

Kim begins unstrapping herself.

RAY
What are you doing?

Not answering, Kim unbuckles herself and goes forward, just as the helicopter banks again.

Losing her balance, she starts sliding toward the open hatch where the helmeted gunner is busy scanning the landscape.

With only a second before she will slide past him, she grabs onto the only object tied down: the body.

Gripping the dead man's boots, she secures the flapping corner of the tarp, then with lurching movements makes it back to her seat and buckles herself in.

Ray shakes his head in disbelief.

RAY (CONT'D)
You crazy? If you had fallen out,
you'd be just like him right now.
You afraid to see his face?

KIM
I wanted to...protect his dignity.

Ray mutters the word.

RAY
Dignity? Think it matters to him?

KIM
Maybe not, not now, but it matters
to me.

He glances around the helicopter interior.

KIM (CONT'D)
What's wrong?

RAY
I just wanted to make sure this
isn't reality TV.

He leans back, closing his eyes.

Kim slides out her backpack, opening it and peering inside. THE DVD PLAYER is inside. She slides it back under his seat.

EXT. LANDING PAD - KANDAHAR AIRPORT - LATER DAY

As the rotor slows, a French marine parachute regiment honor guard waits as a small military band plays a dirge.

As the rotor stops, the band marches out, followed by the honor guard and four men carrying a metal casket.

INT. HELICOPTER - SAME TIME

Kim, Ray and the crew chief stand at attention as the members of the honor guard lower the body into the casket, drape the French tricolor across the top, then slide it onto the shoulders of four men.

In precision, they march across the tarmac toward a hanger.

Leaning down, Ray swings his submachine gun over his shoulder and hands Kim her backpack.

RAY

The crew chief will take you over to where your people are waiting. You're one for the books, miss.

She stares at the weathered American.

KIM

I can guess which books, abnormal psych, huh? I hope your time here is safe.

RAY

See him?

He points toward the casket being carried into the hanger.

RAY (CONT'D)

He's safe now. Everybody else here is at risk. This is real-world stuff, no commercial breaks, no time-outs, no, 'I wanna go home.'

He gives her a withering look.

RAY (CONT'D)

You're in some dream, Lady. I hope you make it home before you wake up.

Ray motions for the crew chief to take her away. The airman jumps to the tarmac then reaches up to help Kim down.

Not wanting a helping hand, she jumps and lands, wobbles, then falls on her butt.

Getting up, she sees Ray shaking his head.

RAY (CONT'D)
Pride cometh before a fall.

Tapping her arm, the crew chief motions her toward the row of buildings.

EXT. SIDE OF BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Not concealing his anger, Ali stands beside the orphanage SUV, watching Kim approach with the crew chief.

When they reach him, the crew chief nods toward Kim.

CREW CHIEF
She's your responsibility now.

ALI
Thank you, sir.

Opening the back door, he motions for Kim to get in then slams the door and climbs in front.

INT. SUV - SAME TIME

Ali turns around in his seat to raze Kim with disdain.

ALI
I knew you didn't come to teach.

Kim gives him a defensive look.

KIM
What do you mean?

Turning, Ali turns and starts the engine, looking up at Kim in the rear-view mirror.

ALI
You have hungry eyes no children
can feed.

He pulls away.

EXT. ORPHANAGE COMPOUND ENTRANCE - SUNSET

The SUV pulls up. Recognizing Ali, the two guards toss a quick glance at Kim then wave the SUV forward.

EXT. ADMINISTRATION BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Holding the passenger door open, Kim gets out gripping her backpack and starting toward her quarters.

ALI

Where are you going?

Kim turns.

KIM

I'd like to take a shower if that's all right with you.

ALI

Shower later. The director wants you to see the doctor while she is at the embassy.

Kim shrugs off the remark.

KIM

There's nothing wrong with me. I didn't get hurt.

ALI

Not that kind of doctor. Come. He is waiting.

INT. PSYCHIATRIC EVALUATION OFFICE - NIGHTFALL

Kim sits across from DR. SULLIVAN, 58, a lanky, gray-haired English psychiatrist, making notes on a legal pad.

Listening in the corner is DR. KHUSHBOO, a young female Afghan resident in a white lab coat.

DR. SULLIVAN

(Oxbridge accent)

Didn't you tell anyone you were coming to Afghanistan?

Kim looks irritated.

KIM

Do you think I'm crazy for trying to find my husband?

He tilts his head.

DR. SULLIVAN

Mrs. Ashley, no one says you are "crazy." I'm just trying to do an evaluation for your director. Did you tell your parents about your mission?

She doesn't want to grin but can't help herself.

KIM

It wasn't a mission. I just decided to come.

She looks up to see the psychiatrist still waiting for his question to be answered.

KIM (CONT'D)

I didn't tell Wes's parents because they would have tried to stop me, and I couldn't let them.

The psychiatrist nods.

DR. SULLIVAN

I meant your parents, your mother and father.

Kim drops her head, staring at a crack in the tile floor.

KIM

My mother has enough trouble with her blood pressure and....her drinking.

The doctor makes a notation.

DR. SULLIVAN

And your father?

KIM

I haven't seen my father since he walked out on my mother

She shakes her head, falling silent momentarily.

DR. SULLIVAN

Walked out?

KIM

Disappeared is more like it. It's a cliché, the husband who goes out for a pack of cigarettes and never comes back.

Except he just said he was going to work one morning and never came back.

The doctor glances at the resident to see if she is following. From her intent expression, she is.

DR. SULLIVAN
Maybe he was hurt. Did she check the hospitals?

KIM
She told me she checked everywhere from the morgue to the drunk tank, then she telephoned the bank and knew he was really gone.

Kim falls silent again. The psychiatrist leans back, waiting for her to continue.

KIM (CONT'D)
He'd cleared out the savings account. Oh, he'd left us enough to live on until mom got a job, but he took everything else.

The psychiatrist makes a note.

DR. SULLIVAN
How old were you?

KIM
Six.

The doctor and the resident exchange glances.

DR. SULLIVAN
Did you ever see him again?

KIM
Only in my dreams for a while, then he left there, too.

She gazes across the room.

KIM (CONT'D)
Like a great big hole opened up and swallowed him, and I gotta find that hole.

The psychiatrist puts down his pen, studying Kim.

DR. SULLIVAN
Who?

Kim looks flustered.

KIM
Ah...my...

She fumbles for the answer then falls silent.

DR. SULLIVAN
Two of the most important people in
your life simply vanish. One you
were too young to search for. The
other, well, he brought you here.

Kim drops her head.

KIM
And I didn't find him either.

The phone rings.

DR. SULLIVAN
Excuse me for a moment.

He answers the phone then swivels around.

Glancing over, Kim sees the lovely young Afghan woman staring
at her.

The woman nods, a deep reassuring nod.

After a moment, the psychiatrist hangs up.

DR. SULLIVAN
That was the director. She is ready
to see you. I'm all finished here
anyway. You can go, Mrs. Ashley.

Kim stands.

KIM
Am I crazy, doctor, I mean without
knowing it?

The psychiatrist smiles softly.

DR. SULLIVAN
No, you can put your mind at rest.
You are not psychotic. You are
simply working through a process,
but in the wrong place.

KIM
But this is where it happened. This
is where he disappeared.

The doctor nods understandingly.

DR. SULLIVAN
I wish you peace, Mrs. Ashley.

As Kim walks out of the office, the psychiatrist turns to the resident.

DR. SULLIVAN
What do you think, Dr. Khushboo?

The resident approaches.

KHUSHBOO
(marked accent)
It is very hard to tell from one session, doctor, but I would say classic denial maintained through hysteric acting-out.

DR. SULLIVAN
Yes, she's doing a very brave job of keeping her husband alive. But she'll get help at home.

Dr. Khushboo looks at the psychiatrist.

KHUSHBOO
Home?

DR. SULLIVAN
She doesn't know it, but she's being flown out to the United States tonight. You can't have her wandering around the countryside.

He falls silent for a moment.

DR. SULLIVAN (CONT'D)
She'd end up disappearing like her father and her husband.

INT. DINING HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Kim walks in and sees the director drinking tea by herself at a long table.

KIM
Your assistant said you were here.

Mrs. Decker studies Kim.

MRS. DECKER

I can't afford personalities here, you know that. The children are too traumatized. They're all that matter. I can't have some romantic egotist acting out a doomed love story.

KIM

Doomed love story! How dare you. Wes is my husband. I have to try and find him. Nobody else will.

The director glares at Kim.

MRS. DECKER

So you lied your way here using our orphanage.

KIM

I only told one lie, that I was single.

MRS. DECKER

If you'd have written widow, they'd have checked and never sent you.

KIM

But that would have been a lie, too. I'm not a widow. Wes is presumed....

MRS. DECKER

Dead! Why can't you say the word? Accept it. This country is one long death, day in, day out.

She pauses momentarily, staring at Kim.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

That's why the children are the only ones who matter. They have to be kept alive, held above the blood bath. Thousands of children are orphaned and need love and support, and you come here looking for your husband. You're like all sentimentalists, selfish.

KIM

You're right. They're wonderful. I loved teaching them that day.....I wish I could have forgotten why I came.

The director takes a last sip of her tea then stands.

MRS. DECKER

But you can't. That's why you're being sent home tomorrow. I want you to have all your things packed tonight. Ali will be coming by very early in the morning to take you to the airport.

Kim looks as though she could break down. For an instant, Mrs. Decker almost walks over to console her, then checks herself.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

I'm sorry your quest ended without finding what you wanted.

The director nods toward the door.

MRS. DECKER (CONT'D)

Leave your classroom keys and food card with Dr. Estrin.

Nodding, Kim walks out of the mess hall.

As she leaves, the director drops her head. For a moment, she is motionless. When she looks up, her eyes are moist. With a brusque gesture, she rubs the tears away and gets up.

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - LATER NIGHT

Kim packs her suitcase while Sarah smokes a cigarette whose ashes she cups in her hand.

SARAH

You might want to contact Guinness Book of Records to see if anyone has been deported faster than you.

Kim manages a grim grin.

KIM

Very funny.

SARAH

I'm sorry, Kim, but you have to admit it is all rather dramatic. You had everyone in a tizzy wondering where you were. Now I have to wait for another roommate. What if she doesn't like smoking and is some American health nut? I'm doomed.

Someone raps on the door.

Sarah leaves to open the door. Momentarily, voices whisper.

SARAH (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Someone to see you.

Kim puts down her clothes and walks down the hallway.

Dressed in a pale blue burka with the veil undone is Khushboo, the young resident physician.

Kim looks surprised to see her.

Sarah doesn't like the look of things. She lights a cigarette off the butt and walks into the kitchen.

SARAH (CONT'D)
I don't want to hear this.

Khushboo steps inside, closing the door.

KHUSHBOO
I must talk to you alone.

Kim glances into the kitchen, where Sarah is preparing to make tea.

KIM
But we are alone.

Khushboo shakes her head.

KHUSHBOO
More alone.

Kim motions her toward her bedroom. The resident follows, glancing back as though someone might be watching.

INT. BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

As Kim closes the door, Khushboo glances at the half-packed suitcase.

KHUSHBOO
They are coming to take you to the airport tonight.

KIM
No, in the morning.

Khushboo grabs Kim's wrist.

KHUSHBOO
Tonight, I know. Listen, if you
want to find your husband, I can
help you.

Kim is startled.

KIM
How?

Khushboo steps closer to Kim.

KHUSHBOO
A wounded American marine is being
held by tribal leaders not far from
where you were trying to go.

Kim is stunned.

KIM
Dai Chopen?

The resident nods.

KIM (CONT'D)
How badly is he wounded?

EXT. HALLWAY - SAME TIME

Pressing her head against the door, Sarah listens to the conversation.

KHUSHBOO (O.S.)
I only know they want to use him to
keep the Americans from destroying
the poppy crop.

KIM (O.S.)
They're not Taliban?

INT. KIM'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

The resident shakes her head.

KHUSHBOO
I will take you there tonight, but
you must never tell anyone I helped
you.

Impulsively, Kim hugs the woman.

KIM

I promise, but why? I mean, I'm sorry to ask....but you don't know me.

The resident nods.

KHUSHBOO

No, but I know what you feel. My husband was in the army. I had no news of him for weeks. It was terrible.

Noticing the bars on the window, she pauses, then glances back at Kim.

KHUSHBOO (CONT'D)

Then I learned he was killed. The not knowing was worse than the news. Come, you must change. We must hurry if you want to get there before morning.

She opens up her bag and removes a pale blue burka. Taking out a jar of henna, she hands it to Kim.

KHUSHBOO (CONT'D)

Put this on your hands to make them brown.

KIM

What about my face?

KHUSHBOO

They won't see your face. I will wait outside.

She opens the door. Sarah is gone.

Kim pauses, staring at the Afghan clothing. She begins putting it on as Khushboo closes the front door behind her.

Sarah steps back into the doorway.

SARAH

I overheard everything. You can't go with her.

KIM

Why not? It's my only chance. They'll never let me back in this country.

SARAH

It could be a trap. Khushboo's only been here a week.

Kim continues putting on the Afghan clothing.

KIM

I'm sure they checked her background.

Sarah takes a drag of her cigarette then blows out the smoke.

SARAH

The way they checked you? Listen, it's too dangerous. Even if he is your husband, what will you do when you find him?

KIM

Finding him alive will be enough. We'll work it out.

Sarah shakes her head.

SARAH

(derisively)

'We'll work it out.' It's not a crossword puzzle. It's your life.

She grabs Kim's arm.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You're crazy if you go.

Kim yanks her arm free.

KIM

I'll be a lot crazier if I don't.

Sarah steps back.

SARAH

Your funeral, American Miss.

Kim jabs an index finger at the doctor.

KIM

You told me your son was killed in the war...but if they never had found him, what if you knew in your heart he was alive, somewhere in Lebanon, would you go look for him?

Sarah covers her eyes then lowers them.

SARAH

Yes, but...

Kim motions for her not to speak.

KIM

Yes is everything. There is no but.

KHUSHBOO EXT. COMPOUND AREA - LATER NIGHT

Several Afghan women in burkas emerge from working in the mess hall. As they start toward the gate, two more women in burkas move from the housing area, following in step behind them.

Ahead, a group of Afghan militia is watching a soccer match on a television with broken reception.

Among the men watching the game is Ali.

Each time the screen shows the players running down field, the image breaks up, causing the soldiers to curse the television.

As Ali steps forward to adjust the controls, the women stop at the gate, moving forward, one by one, as the guard motions them forward.

EXT. GATE - SAME TIME

POV KIM

Inside the veil, watching the militia man glance at her then motion her forward. She moves off the base, watching as all the women but one continue into the night.

The woman in the pale blue burka motions to the right.

EXT. HILLSIDE - LATER NIGHT

Kim follows Khushboo down the hill, then stops to shift her backpack from one shoulder to the other.

KHUSHBOO

Why did you bring that? They'll just take it where we're going.

Kim glances down at the backpack.

KIM

I brought it all this way. I'm not leaving it now.

Khushboo's head shakes under the veil, then she continues into the darkness.

KIM (CONT'D)
Where are we going?

KHUSHBOO
Wait.

EXT. TWO LANE HIGHWAY - LATER NIGHT

With jets taking off from the airport in the distance, Khushboo and Kim stand alongside the deserted road.

KIM
Are you sure someone's coming?

KHUSHBOO
Someone will come.

EXT. ROADSIDE - LATER NIGHT

With no more planes taking off from the air base, the night is silent, with only the chirping of crickets.

Khushboo stands staring into the distance, seemingly lost in thought, while Kim paces back and forth.

KIM
How much longer?

KHUSHBOO
Westerners are so impatient.
Imagine you are waiting in
eternity. There is nothing else but
waiting.

Two headlights rise from the night. Tensing, Khushboo squints at the lights. After a moment, she turns, smiling.

KHUSHBOO (CONT'D)
You see.

A SPATTERING OPEN BED TRUCK PULLS UP, WITH LOUD BLEATING COMING FROM THE BACK. At the wheel is a wizened Afghan wearing a black turban.

Kim starts to reach for the passenger door when Khushboo blocks her arm.

KHUSHBOO (CONT'D)
Women must ride in back.

Khushboo climbs up on the railing and reaches down for Kim's backpack. She hands it up, then boosts herself up.

Leaning over the railing, she finds the bed filled with sheep.

KIM
Ride with them?

Khushboo nods somberly.

KHUSHBOO
And they have to ride with us.

Kim swings her leg over the railing. As she drops to the floor, the sheep press back, bleating nervously.

Standing above her, Khushboo mutters something in Pashto.

KIM
What?

KHUSHBOO
An Afghan proverb....be a sheep and
the wolf shall appear.

Kim glances up at Khushboo.

KIM
But I'm not a wolf.

KHUSHBOO
No, you're not.

Striking the top of the cab for the driver to go, Khushboo drops to the bed of the truck.

As the truck lurches away, Kim grabs the railing then glances back at the lights of Kandahar.

EXT. BED OF TRUCK - LATER NIGHT

With Khushboo resting her head on her forearm on the roof of the truck, Kim watches as the lone truck move up a darkened highway.

Abruptly, the driver turns off his headlights and lets the truck coast.

IN THE DISTANCE, the chop-chop of a helicopter is heard, crossing the night, its one red eye, like that of a giant insect searching prey.

As it disappears behind a range of foothills, the driver turns the lights back on and continues driving.

Kim looks down at Khushboo, who has been watching her.

KIM
I hope I don't get you into trouble.

KHUSHBOO
Mektub. It is written what will happen. I can not change it.

Kim looks surprised.

KIM
But you're a doctor.

KHUSHBOO
So?

KIM
But you believe in science, not superstition.

Khushboo stands, lifting her burka and letting the wind swirl through her black hair.

KHUSHBOO
Can I not believe in both...science and destiny?

Kim stares at the young woman.

KIM
What about free will?

Khushboo holds out her hands in the night, opening and closing them.

KHUSHBOO
That is free will, but all the while we are being carried forward toward our fate, our kismet.

KIM
And you can't change that?

The young doctor shakes her head.

KHUSHBOO
No more than these sheep can stop the butcher's knife.

KIM
But what if I stopped the truck and
got out, that would change my
destiny.

Khushboo smiles, her teeth almost glowing in the moonlight.

KHUSHBOO
No, that would have been meant to
be, too.

Kim looks perplexed.

KIM
Then everything is foretold.

The doctor nods.

KIM (CONT'D)
How can I change it?

KHUSHBOO
You can't. You submit, which is
what Islam means in Arabic,
submission.

Kim stares out at the dark silhouette of a mountain range
along the horizon.

KIM
So it is meant for me to be here.

The doctor smiles.

KHUSHBOO
Yes.

KIM
What if I had not come to
Afghanistan?

Khushboo shrugs, turning back to watch the deserted road
behind them.

KHUSHBOO
But you did. You are here and that
is everything.

Kim shakes her head.

KIM
I don't understand.

KHUSHBOO

You don't have to. You are being carried on the hand of God. You will not fall unless he drops you.

Kim leans over the roof of the truck, watching the headlights scoop out the darkness.

EXT. TRUCK BED - LATER NIGHT

Both Kim and Khushboo are sitting on the truck bed, their heads on their arms, trying to rest, while the bleating sheep press back away from them.

THE DRIVER strikes his hand against the cab, waking Khushboo. Rising, she peers ahead then rouses Kim.

KHUSHBOO

Quickly get up! Say nothing.

Half groggy, Kim gets up, then starts seeing a BLAZE OF KLIEG LIGHTS AHEAD.

CONCRETE BLOCKS NARROW TO A CONTROL POINT, WHERE ARMED AMERICAN SOLDIERS AND AFGHAN MILITIA WAIT.

A MIRROR IS ALIGNED ON THE ROAD SURFACE TO REFLECT THE UNDERSIDES OF CARS AND TRUCKS.

ON A KNOLL, A MACHINE GUN EMPLACEMENT OVERLOOKS THE CHECKPOINT.

BEYOND THE BARBED WIRE BARRIER, TWO TANKS FACE THE ROAD, THEIR CANNONS LEVELED AT THE CHECKPOINT.

EXT. TRUCK BED - SAME TIME

As the truck stops, an Afghan militia holds up a flashlight on the driver's face, checking his documents.

Alongside the truck, TWO AMERICAN SOLDIERS, A CORPORAL AND A PFC check to make sure weapons aren't tucked under the frame.

Reaching the back, both men boost themselves up and spot the two Afghan women.

The corporal laughs.

CORPORAL

These crazy fucks. They treat their women like shit. Look at those two bitches back here. Shit, I'd have them both riding up front with me.

The private stares at the veiled figures.

PRIVATE

But you can't tell what they look
like with that shit on.

The corporal comes alongside the slats until he is only a few feet from the women.

CORPORAL

Who cares? They come with their own
bags over their heads. Who gives a
shit what they look like? They're
all sisters upside down.

The corporal jumps down, followed by the PFC.

By the driver's side, the Afghan militia man hands back the documents to the driver then gives a signal to the guard shack.

The metal barrier swings back.

The truck rolls forward.

The two veiled figures stare down at the two American soldiers.

KIM

Did you hear what he said?

She glances over at Khushboo, whose stance is rigid, her head turned away from the checkpoint.

EXT. MOUNTAIN ROAD - LATER NIGHT

The trunk's gears grind as the driver downshifts to take a steep, winding grade.

EXT. PLATEAU - LATER NIGHT

The truck pulls to the side of the road, the engine idling as Khushboo helps Kim over the railing. They both drop to the road.

Without a word from the driver, the truck pulls away.

Kim looks around. Not one light. Not one sign of civilization.

KIM

(to herself)

I always wanted to know what
nowhere looked like.

She walks into the middle of the road, watching the amber lights of the truck's taillights dissolve into the darkness.

KIM (CONT'D)
How long do we have to wait now?

KHUSHBOO
Not long at all.

A flashlight beam pokes from the roadside ahead.

Momentarily, a clattering of hooves as a stooped Afghan man emerges from the dark leading two burros with wooden saddles.

KIM
How'd he know we were coming?

Khushboo lifts her finger and traces it against the sky as though writing with a pen.

KIM (CONT'D)
It was written.

Khushboo nods.

KHUSHBOO
See everything like that and you will understand.

The old man turns the donkeys around for Kim and Khushboo to climb on.

KIM
I'm glad I learned how to ride in school.

She climbs up on the donkey, which brays. Getting on to her donkey, Khushboo nods to the old man.

He grips both tie ropes and leads them toward a narrow path rising up from the roadside.

As they start up the slope, Kim grips to the wooden saddle.

KIM (CONT'D)
How much farther?

KHUSHBOO
Not far now. Not far.

EXT. HILLTOP - LATER NIGHT

The old man and the two women on donkeys are framed by the moonlight against the horizon.

EXT. PRECIPICE - LATER NIGHT

As the donkey gingerly walks over a bridge suspended with ropes above a chasm, Kim peers into the yawning abyss below her then immediately looks away.

EXT. DARKEND VILLAGE - LATER LIGHT

A clump of houses are wedged against a cliff. Nothing moves. Not a sound.

Then a flashlight beam parts from the night as the old man emerges, leading the donkeys.

EXT. DARKENED VILLAGE - SAME TIME

Kim glances over at the shuttered windows. Not a sign of life anywhere.

KIM

Where are we?

Not getting an answer, Kim glances back at Khushboo just as the Afghan woman motions for the old man to stop.

Beckoning for Kim to come, she starts up the street to a house at the end of a cul de sac.

Sliding off the donkey, Kim follows.

Reaching the house, Khushboo stamps her shoes on the porch, then turns as Kim comes up beside her.

KIM (CONT'D)

Is this where he is?

Khushboo nods.

She opens the door and motions for Kim to step inside.

INT. DARKENED HOUSE - SAME MOMENT

Unable to see, Kim stops in the darkness.

KIM

Khushboo?

A flashlight comes on, catching Kim's face in its beam.

She averts her gaze from the bright light.

Several lanterns come on, revealing several bearded, turbaned men holding Kalashnikovs aimed at Kim.

Stunned, Kim whirls around to Khushboo as the woman slaps her hard across the mouth.

Kim staggers back.

KHUSHBOO

There! American marines killed my husband at Shimwar. Now I avenge his death with yours.

Turning, she walks out of the house. As Kim tries to leave, a man knocks her back, then bolts the door.

Rubbing her bleeding lip, she looks up at the encirclement of glaring faces.

KIM

Please....

A TALL MAN IN HIS SIXTIES strides forward and yanks up one of Kim's dyed hands.

He shouts something in Pashto and the others laugh. Dropping her hand, he motions to a young man cradling his submachine gun on a strap over his shoulder.

The young man comes forward, grabbing Kim by the wrist and dragging her across the floor.

Laughing and shouting insults at Kim in Pashto, the young man watches Kim try to get up, only to be knocked down.

Releasing her hand, the young man grabs her hair and pulls her screaming to a trapdoor in the corner of the room.

Lifting it, he grabs Kim's backpack and pushes Kim inside the cellar.

The man kicks the trapdoor shut and comes back, boasting to the older men in Pashto how he took care of the infidel.

INT. DARKENED GRAIN CELLAR - LATER NIGHT

DARKNESS

SOBBING

Kim moves along a wall, her clothes rubbing against the rock.

Tapping, feeling for a window, any opening, anything leading out to the world, finding none.

Dropping to her knees, she covers her face with her hands.

KIM
You stupid, stupid fool, coming
here, when everyone told you not
to....

She pounds the floor with her hands.

KIM (CONT'D)
...and you still came.

She breaks down, falling on the floor and drawing herself
into a fetal position.

KIM (CONT'D)
Wes, Wes. Forgive me. I'm sorry.
Forgive me.

Abruptly, she rises up on her knees.

KIM (CONT'D)
(screaming)
Let me out!

No response from upstairs. Trying to find her way back to the
trap door, she leaps up, striking her hand against the wood.

She falls against the floor. Again, she gets up and leaps up,
hitting the ceiling, trying to knock the trap door open.

But she hits solid wood and falls back to the floor, crying
out in pain.

Pulling her sweater up over her head, she withdraws into a
double darkness then rolls over on her side, motionless.

EXT. CELLAR - MORNING

The trap door is yanked back and a wooden ladder thrust down.
Wide awake against the far wall, Kim gets up.

Two middle aged Taliban climb down backwards, one clutching
an orange cloth under his arm.

Reaching the basement, one man tosses the cloth at Kim,
motioning for her to wrap it around her.

Seeing her hesitate, one Taliban pulls a dagger from his
waistband and jerks it at the cloth then at her shoulder.

Kim complies.

As she wraps the orange cloth around her, the men motion for
her to go up the ladder.

INT. SITTING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

POV MAN HOLDING DIGITAL CAMERA

Several white bearded tribal leaders in turbans, a sprinkling of younger men with dark beards, and three fair-skinned Al-Qaida members are standing around the barren room as Kim rises up from the basement.

THE LENS closes on her. Seeing the camera aimed at her, she freezes in fear.

Someone shouts behind her, pushing her forward.

She jerks forward, emerging in the room.

INT. SITTING ROOM - SAME TIME

Holding the camera to his eye and focusing on Kim, a fourth Al Qaeda member moves forward as the other Al Qaeda members step forward, knocking Kim to her knees and pinning her arms behind her back.

While two men hold her arms, a third unwraps a black banner inscribed with white lettered citations from the Koran, and hangs it on the far wall.

Motioning for the tribal leaders to move out of the way, the cameraman peers into the lens.

POV CAMERA MAN

With the orange cloth wrapped around her shoulders, Kim sits kneeling on the floor, while behind her the three Al Qaeda appear with the lower portion of their faces covered.

THE TALL MAN IN THE CENTER pulls a scroll from his vest and begins reading in Arabic.

INT. ROOM - SAME TIME

Kim drops her head: she knows what is happening: she saw it enacted on video at the Grand Island Library.

With determination, she looks back up at the camera.

KIM

I love you, Wes, no matter what.

A foot kicks her. The tall man steps forward, looking down at Kim.

TALL MAN

I talk. You no.

He steps back, finishing the reading of his document.

Sliding the document back in his vest, he approaches Kim, yanking her hair back.

TALL MAN (CONT'D)

Now talk.

He steps back and the cameraman moves forward.

CAMERAMAN

(Northern England accent)

You say America and all Coalition soldiers must leave Afghanistan now.

Kim shakes her head.

KIM

No!

The stocky man behind her comes over, lifts up his robe and pulls out a pistol.

STOCKY MAN

You say American kill innocents!
You say now!

Again, Kim shakes her head.

Pulling the pistol, the man cocks it and aims it at Kim's face.

Looking at the black hole in the barrel, Kim closes her eyes.

KIM

Our father who art in heaven...

Realizing she is praying, the man knocks her sideways with a back hand.

Thrusting his pistol into his belt, he looks at the cameraman.

STOCKY MAN

(in Saudi Arabic)

Erase it and start again. Matoog knows how to make them talk.

Nodding, the lean Al Qaeda man pulls out a shiny dagger from a sheath.

The Afghan elders stare unflinchingly at Kim as though watching a sheep about to be slaughtered.

Coming up to Kim, he holds the dagger against her throat.

THIN AL QAEDA MAN
 (heavy accent)
 Woman, say America killers go now,
 or die.

The cameraman steps forward, aiming the camera at Kim.

She stares at THE DARK LENS WITH HER TINY REFLECTION ON IT.

KIM
 Forgive me, everyone, for coming
 here.

The man turns back to the tall man for the signal to cut Kim's throat.

A TRUCK STOPS IN FRONT.

Two young Afghanis look out the window and run to open the door.

INTO THE ROOM STRIDES MATOOG AL-SHARI, A TALL, SLENDER MAN IN HIS FORTIES, WITH A SALT & PEPPER BEARD AND TINTED GLASSES.

THE SENIOR AL QAEDA MEMBER immediately begins bowing and making salutations in rudimentary but fluent Pashto.

The tribal leaders mutter their own greetings.

Turning, the Senior Al Qaeda commander glances down at Kim then at the setting.

He motions to the thin man.

MATOOG
 (in Pashto)
 Army?

He shakes his head.

THIN AL QAEDA MAN
 (in Pashto)
 No, a teacher in Kandahar. She came
 because she thought her husband was
 a prisoner here.

MATOOG
 (In Pashto)
 Did she confess?

Almost embarrassed, the thin Al Qaeda man shakes his head.

THIN AL QAEDA MAN
(in Pashto)
She showed no fear when I told her
she would die.

Nodding, Matoog walks in front of Kim.

MATOOG
(American-English accent)
Fifteen other invaders have sat
were you sit, and every one of
those soldiers, mercenaries and
commandos talked. Why not you?

Doing her best not to tremble, Kim looks up at him.

KIM
How many of them did you let live
afterward?

He doesn't reply.

The tribal leaders begin mumbling, momentarily drawing the Al
Qaeda commander's attention.

Awkwardly turning, she looks at the tribal leaders.

KIM (CONT'D)
I didn't come here for America. I
came here to find my husband.

Matoog steps in front of her, blocking her view of the
elders.

MATOOG
They don't understand you. All they
know is that you are one more
Western whore.

KIM
Where'd you learn English so well?

He is startled by her brazenness.

MATOOG
Silence, woman! I ask the
questions.

He motions for the thin Al Qaeda man to hand him the dagger.
As he takes it, the tribal leaders lean forward, waiting.

MATOOG (CONT'D)

I will only ask you once. Will you denounce America and its puppet allies?

He lifts the blade.

KIM

I will if you promise to tell me where my husband is.

Put off by the request, he lowers the dagger, not getting what she means.

MATOOG

Where he is?

KIM

My husband, in the film, like in that camera.

She points toward the cameraman waiting to film the execution.

Matoog turns around, not understanding what she is getting at.

MATOOG

What are you playing at?

KIM

It's in my bag they took. I'll show you. Please. Just tell me where he is, and then I'll say anything you want.

He pauses, balancing the knife on his hand.

MATOOG

And if I refuse?

Kim throws her head back and lets out an eerie laugh.

Holding her index fingernail against her throat, she drags her nail across her throat, drawing blood.

KIM

Then cut along the dotted line.

The tribal leaders jump up, agitated and talking excitedly in Pashto.

Seeing the pandemonium, Matoog issues orders to the tall Al Qaeda agent, then he grabs Kim by the arm and thrusts her toward the stairway.

INT. UPSTAIRS GRAIN STORAGE ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Matoog throws Kim to the floor. Seeing the blood dripping down her neck, he takes the dagger and slices off a strip of burlap from a USA Food Relief sack and throws it to her.

MATOOG
Stop the bleeding.

KIM
So you can finish it later?

He raises his hand to hit her, but she doesn't cower. Instead, she dabs at her wound.

MATOOG
I see in you everything I hate
about American woman.

KIM
I don't see anything in you.

He tilts his head, not sure if she is being sarcastic or not.

The door opens, and the thin Al Qaeda man hurries in, holding out Kim's backpack.

Matoog reaches in and removes the DVD player, glancing over at Kim.

He starts to open it, then pauses, handing it to his assistant.

MATOOG
(in Arabic)
Go into the hall and turn it on. I
don't want to die like Masood.

Without questioning the order, the man takes the DVD player and goes into the hallway, closing the door.

KIM
What's he doing?

MATOOG
Seeing if there is a bomb inside.
Your government would give anything
to kill me...

KIM
...not if it meant sacrificing me.

He scoffs at her statement.

The door opens and the thin man returns, holding up the DVD player, which is showing the clip of Wes filming the men in his Humvee.

Seeing the marines, the thin man starts making insults in Arabic then spits on the screen.

Kim winces then stares at him.

KIM (CONT'D)
You're not spitting on them, you
lobotomized eunuch.

Hearing the venom in her voice, the thin man gestures to Matoog, wanting to know what she said.

Matoog shrugs off the question and takes the DVD player.

He stares at the scene as it ends, then rewinds and watches it from the start.

AS THE MOUNTAINS COME INTO VIEW ABOVE THE HUMVEE,

MATOOG'S FINGER HITS STOP.

He turns toward Kim.

MATOOG
What do you want to know?

KIM
Where that is, where they are.

Matoog hits starts, staring at the scene again, then he glances over at Kim.

MATOOG
You do not know?

She shakes her head.

KIM
That's why I came to Afghanistan,
to find the place where they were
blown up.

A jolt of recognition. Understanding, he looks back at the clip with curiosity more than confusion.

He motions to the thin man.

MATOOG
(in Saudi Arabic)
Get Waleed.

As the man hurries out, Kim studies Matoog's features.

KIM
You're not Afghan either.

He casts her a look of disdain.

MATOOG
No, but I am here in the jihad
against the infidel.

Having seen the video, Matoog lowers the DVD player. Kim reaches out.

KIM
May I please look at it?

He hesitates then relinquishes the player to her.

Taking it in both hands, she stares down at the screen with an expression of profound peace.

Staring at Kim's face, Matoog's loses the mask of confidence it wore moments before.

Turning, he walks out into the corridor.

MATOOG
(in Saudi Arabic)
Said, tell them I'll bring the
woman down in a minute. And bring
me some tea.

INT. UPSTAIRS ROOM - LATER DAY

A YOUNG TALIBAN, no more than 18 or 19, with large brown eyes and animated motions, hurries into the room, making a slight bow to Matoog.

Matoog begins speaking to him in rapid Saudi Arabic.

Spinning around, the young man grabs the DVD player out of Kim's hand.

Running the film back, he watches the clip from the beginning.

The moment the mountains come into view, he begins laughing like an excited child.

Stopping the video, he hands the DVD player back to the Al Qaeda commander, then throws his hands up like bursting confetti.

KIM
What is it?

Matoog looks down at Kim.

MATOOG
He knows where they went.

Starting, Kim gets up.

KIM
Where?

The Taliban commander turns toward the younger man and begins talking slowly, calmly, gesturing toward Kim.

The young man's face softens as he listens.

KIM (CONT'D)
He was there, wasn't he?

The Taliban commander nods.

As though memorizing the boy's features, she steps closer, staring at him.

Seeing her scrutiny, the young man fires off a stream of Arabic.

MATOOG
He wants to know why you look at him so.

KIM
He set off the explosion, didn't he?

Matoog doesn't reply.

KIM (CONT'D)
Ask him; was anyone alive after the explosion?

Matoog asks the young man a question in Arabic. The young man turns to stare back just as intently at Kim.

MATOOG

Which man is your husband?

Stepping between the two Taliban, Kim motions for the young man to start the clip.

WHEN WES'S FACE APPEARS, she touches the screen.

KIM

There he is.

The young man doesn't need a translation. He simply nods.

KIM (CONT'D)

Ask him if he was alive after the explosion?

Catching himself obeying Kim's orders, Matoog glares at her.

MATOOG

Why should I do this for you?

KIM

You studied in America. You don't have to tell me where, but I know you have; and I know somewhere, sometime, somewhere in America you were lost or confused, or needed help or directions, and some American helped you. So do it for me now, here with you.

The Taliban commander shakes his head.

MATOOG

You are a pagan romantic.

KIM

I'm anything you say I am, but please ask him.

The Taliban commander glares at Kim.

MATOOG

Why should I not kill you now?

KIM

At the orientation they told us in Islam, a guest may ask for hospitality and protection. An unbroken code, I was told. I am a guest in this house. I'm asking you to protect me now and help me find my husband.

With a gentle smile, Matoog nods.

MATOOG

You are right about a guest seeking protection, but you...you are my enemy. I owe you nothing but death.

Turning to the two Al Qaeda men, he issues an order in Arabic. Instantly, they grab Kim and drag her toward the door.

She screams.

EXT. SITTING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Kicking and screaming, Kim is dragged downstairs and pulled out to the center of the floor.

Again, the orange cloth is flung at her. This time she grabs it and shreds it in half.

Getting to her feet, she yanks off her sweater, exposing her bra.

With one jerk of her hand, she pulls it off, letting both breasts fall loose.

Pandemonium, the older tribal leaders cover their eyes in shame, while the young men pretend to look away, but secretly ogle Kim.

The three Al Qaeda men turn to Matoog, not knowing what to do.

The cameraman lowers the digital camera, not wanting to show Kim's exposed body.

Careful to keep their hands raised to shield them from sight of Kim, two elderly tribal leaders approach the Taliban leader. All three begin an intense conversation.

Hearing them, Matoog angrily shakes his head. But the two elders won't be dismissed. They keep repeating the same word and motioning back toward Kim without looking at her.

Kim drops her hand to her belt, ready to yank it off and pull off the rest of her clothes.

Abruptly, the Taliban commander throws his hands in the air and utters something in Pashto.

Turning, one of the elders yells to the youngest Afghan in the room.

In an instant, the boy races out the door.

Matoog walks over to Kim, careful to keep his eyes on her face.

MATOOG

Their weakness is superstition. It is against the Koran to kill a majnuna.

KIM

A what?

MATOOG

A crazy person.

Kim glances around, seeing everyone staring at her.

KIM

Take a picture, why don't you?

She winks at one old man and shakes her breasts.

KIM (CONT'D)

Don't stroke out, grand dad.

Matoog is bristling.

MATOOG

I know you are acting, but they think you are crazy. If you are, it is only for coming here. But the Mullah Salam will decide if you are crazy.

KIM

Who?

MATOOG

A seer. Now cover yourself. If you have no shame for yourself, think of your family.

KIM

At least I've got one, you bastard.

She sits on the floor, making no effort to cover her breasts.

INT. SITTING ROOM - MINUTES LATER

As the elders huddle on one side of the room and the Al Qaeda members on the other, the door opens and the small boy enters sideways, leading in a stooped, aged man wearing a black robe over his frail body.

Everyone begins mumbling salutations to the MULLAH as the boy leads him across the room the elders.

Kim stares at the mullah then turns to the Al Qaeda commander.

KIM
He's blind.

MATOOG
He doesn't need eyes to see.

After talking with the mullah, a white bearded elder leads the mullah over to Kim.

Stopping in front of her, the elder steps back.

The old man's wrinkled stick of an arm extends out, hovering over Kim's head. Lowering it, he touches the crown of her head.

She leans back, staring up in fear.

BLIND MULLAH
(in Pashto)
Who speaks her tongue?

MATOOG
(in Pashto)
I do holiness.

BLIND MULLAH
(in Pashto)
Ask her what was before the
beginning of beginnings?

Matoog turns to Kim.

MATOOG
He wants to know...

Instantly, Kim grabs the Mullah's hand and thrusts it against her breasts.

As though scalded, the old man stumbles backward, falling to the floor. In an instant, the elders race forward to help him up.

Shaking, the old man crawls backward from where Kim touched him.

BLIND MULLAH
Ash Shaytan! Ash Shaytan!

Hearing the words, the elders step back as though Kim were a basket of cobras and begin shouting angrily at Matoog.

INT. SMALL WHITE PICKUP TRUCK - NIGHT

With the thin Al Qaeda and the young explosives expert leaning back against the cab, clutching Kalashnikovs and watching Kim's every move, she sits shivering under her torn sweater,

watching the pickup wind up a steep road into the mountains.

EXT. SMALL PICKUP TRUCK - LATER NIGHT

The truck stops, and the passenger door opens as Matoog gets out, motioning for Kim to get down.

Awkwardly, she steps down to the dirt road.

KIM
Where am I?

MATOOG
Where you came to find.

KIM
You can't leave me here like this.

Matoog scoffs.

MATOOG
The blind mullah said you are Satan disguised as a woman. If you are Satan, you will fly away. If not, you will die here.

He gets back in the truck and orders the driver to leave.

Kim runs up to the window.

KIM
Please don't take the DVD player. I beg you.

As the driver puts the car into gear, Matoog stares through the glass at her. She presses her hand against the window.

KIM (CONT'D)
Please, I beg you. It's all I have of him.

Rolling down the window, Matoog lifts up the DVD player, letting her think he is going to give it to her.

Abruptly, he ejects the disc and tosses it out the window. As it sails over her head, she whirls around to catch the silver disk before it goes over the edge of the road.

As the truck pulls away, Kim runs after it.

KIM (CONT'D)

Wait! Where did it happen? Where is he?

Her voice echoes through the deserted canyons as the truck continues.

Soon the two headlights are two white threads in the night - then are gone.

Clutching her arms around her, she begins walking back and forth.

KIM (CONT'D)

Wes, help me, please. Tell me where you are? I'm scared. Wes, can you hear me?

She stops, listening to the night. Hearing a rushing noise, she walks over to the side of the road and glances down.

FAR BELOW, APPEARS A RAGING TORRENT, the breaking water casting silver flashes into the night.

Turning, she sees a hillock not far ahead.

As she starts up the slope, she hears a howling in the distance.

Turning, Kim stares down road overlooking toward a distant valley where a few lights flicker, no larger than candles.

IN A BLUR OF GREY MOVEMENT, a pack of wolves dash across the road and disappear into the tree line.

Frightened, Kim runs up the hill, stumbles and falls to her knees, then gets up and hurries on.

Reaching the crest, Kim curls up, putting her hands between her legs, clutching the DVD next to her.

IN THE DEEP DISTANCE, a helicopter rotor cuts through the night. Kim watches as a red star flare bursts above the valley and slowly settles down on a swaying parachute.

A ragged burst of automatic fire then the night is silent.

She closes her eyes and tries to sleep.

EXT. HILLOCK - DAWN

Waking up cramped, Kim stares down at the dirt road.

Seeing something, she stuffs the shiny DVD into her waist and starts down the slippery slope.

Reaching the road where the truck dropped her off, Kim sees a slight indentation in the surface.

Scattered alongside the road above the stream are strips of shrapnel, part of a camouflaged crumpled fender, and a strip of thick tire.

KIM (CONT'D)

Here...it was here.

She drops to her knees, running her hand inside the depression in the road. Lifting her head, she stares up the steep canyon.

Kim (CONT'D)

Wes, can you hear me?

Only her echo answers.

Getting up, she steps to the rim, staring down at the rushing mountain stream.

Her eyes catch sight of a something curved and beige among the gray pebbles beside the stream.

She starts down the slope, gripping the boulders, trying not to fall, making her way toward turtle-shaped object.

Reaching it, she sees it is a helmet with a bullet hole in back.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Kim bites her lip then picks it up and peers inside.

HER SMILING FACE stares out from the photograph taped inside.

Bursting into tears, she drops to the ground, clutching the helmet on her lap.

KIM (CONT'D)

Oh, baby.

EXT. STREAM BANK - LATER MORNING

Having filled the helmet with wild flowers picked along the bank, Kim finishes stuffing grass in the bullet hole, then steps to the water's edge and sets the helmet down on the surface.

For a moment, she stands motionless staring at the helmet, then she releases it, watching the rippling water carry it off downstream.

Running back up toward the road, she scales a boulder and stands watching the helmet float away in the morning light.

Turning, Kim walks back up to the road and stops beside the indentation in the road.

Taking the DVD from her waist, she kneels down and digs a hole at the base of point of impact.

Sliding the DVD into the hole, she covers it with dirt and leans back. Her lip trembling, she stares at the hole in the road. Taking a deep breath, she leans over and pats the dirt.

KIM

Good-bye, Wes. I know you're gone now.

Rising to her feet, she starts down the road.

EXT. DIRT ROAD - LATER MORNING

With the valley spread out before her, Kim comes around a bend as an American marine patrol in a line of three Humvees appears.

Seeing her, the vehicles brake to a stop. Rifles rise. The machine gunner on top of the first armored personnel carrier cocks his weapon, ready to fire.

Seeing the fear in their eyes, she lifts her hands over her head and starts walking slowly toward them.

KIM (CONT'D)

I'm American. My name is Kim Ashley. I'm from Grand Island, Nebraska.

EXT. LEAD HUMVEE - SAME TIME

A YOUNG SECOND LIEUTENANT thrusts his way up through the turret beside the GUNNER.

GUNNER

What do you want to do, sir?

Watching Kim approach, he shrugs.

SECOND LIEUTENANT

She's no Afghani. But what the hell's she doin' up here? Call the CP down in the valley. Tell them there's an American broad wandering around like she's on a hike in Yosemite. Let them handle it.

EXT. ROADSIDE - MOMENTS LATER

As the Humvees move past, Kim looks up at the young gunner on top of each vehicle.

KIM

(whispering)

You're all someone's Wes.

Thinking she is talking to herself, the Marines just give her a wary stare.

The Humvees drive on as Kim continues down the long road, not bothering to wipe the dusty tears from her cheeks.

THE END