

prologue

Afghanistan, 2002

“Do you hear it?” The voice was almost a whisper.

Elsa held her breath, and then she heard it too, a faint rustling of footsteps over twigs and leaves. Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed several shadowy figures darting through the trees, and when she turned, she saw a glint of sunlight reflecting off the barrel of an assault rifle.

There was no denying it—the Taliban had found them.

Oh, Jesus! she thought. *We’ll never escape.*

Elsa knew the Taliban’s ruthless hatred; the death and destruction they wrought was undeniable.

Seized by a sickening wave of fear, she wanted to cry or throw up, but there was no time. She tried to catch Parween’s eye, but her friend was looking back, intent on finding the source of the sound.

“Run!” someone shouted, and suddenly, the chase was on.

But not for Elsa. Her legs were tangled in the fabric of her all-enveloping *burqa*. She struggled to free herself and finally threw off the covering and ran, her plastic shoes barely touching the ground. She’d never run so fast before, and her heart pounded as she swallowed air in great gulps.

She heard heavy panting.

Was it her own?

Her chest tightened, and a scream rose in her throat, but there

was no sound. She couldn't think clearly. She knew only that she didn't want to die there in Afghanistan.

Oh, God, let us make it, she prayed.

Just ahead was a small house, and though unprotected by the walls that surrounded typical Afghani homes, it was their only hope.

If they could reach it in time. But the distance seemed too great and her sprint too slow. Still, she pushed on, her arms pumping wildly.

After what seemed an eternity, Elsa and the others reached the house. She turned and stopped dead in her tracks. A growing sense of panic washed over her.

Parween.

Her eyes swept the horizon, but there was no sign of her friend.

Elsa's throat burned as she tried to catch her breath, and she felt as though her heart would explode in her chest.

She buried her face in her hands.

How had it all gone so wrong? What were they doing here?

What was *she* doing here?

A nurse from Boston in *fucking Afghanistan*, for Christ's sake.

Hot tears stung her eyes. With trembling hands, she tried to wipe them away.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Where *are* you, Parween?"