

VEILED FREEDOM

By Jeanette Windle

Prologue

KABUL

November 13, 2001

“Land of the free and the home of the brave.”

The radio’s static-spattered fanfare filtered through the compound wall. Beyond its shattered gate, a trio of small boys kicked a bundle of knotted rags around the dirt courtyard. Had they any idea those foreign harmonies were paying homage to their country’s latest invaders?

Or liberators, if the rumors and the pirated satellite television broadcasts were true.

Scrambling the final meters to the top of the hill, he stood against a chill wind that tugged at his light wool vest and baggy tunic and trousers. Bracing himself, he made a slow, stunned revolution.

From this windswept knoll, war’s demolition stretched as far as his eye could see. Bombs and rockets had left only heaps of mud-brick hovels and compound walls. The front of an apartment complex was sheared off, exposing the cement cubicles of living quarters. The collapse of an office building left its floors layered like a stack of *naan* bread. Rubble and broken pavement turned the streets into obstacle courses.

But it wasn’t the devastation that held him spellbound. So it was all true—the foreign newscasts, the exultant summons that had brought him back, his father’s dream. Kabul was free!

The proof was in the dancing crowds below. After five long years of silence, Hindi pop and Persian ballads drifted up the hillside. Atop a bombed-out bus, a group of young men gyrated wildly. Even a handful of women in blue *burqas* swayed to the rhythms as they bravely crossed the street with no male escort in sight.

Nor was blue the only color making a comeback against winter’s brown. To his far right, a yellow wing fluttered skyward. There was an orange one. A red. Scrambling on top a broken-down tank, two boys tossed aloft a blotch of green and purple.

Kites had returned to the skies above Kabul.

Another tank moved slowly down the boulevard. Behind it came a parade of pickups and army jeeps, machine guns mounted in their beds. A staccato rat-tat-tat momentarily drowned out the music. But the gunfire was celebratory. The dancing mobs were not shrinking back but tossing flowers and confetti, screaming their elation above the noise.

He shouted with them, the fierceness of his response catching him by surprise. He’d hardly thought of this place in long years, the warm, fertile plains of Pakistan far more a home now than this barren wasteland. Yet joy welled up to squeeze his chest, the watering of his eyes no longer from wind and dust.

“Land of the free and the home of the brave.” Down the hillside behind him, the radio blasted a Dari-language commentary. But the words of that foreign music still played in his mind. The sacred anthem his American instructors had taught their small English-language students in the Pakistani refugee camps.

As they’d taught of their homeland, America. A land where brave and honorable warriors guarded peace-loving and welcoming citizens who lived freely among great cities of shining towers and immense wealth. A land of wheat and rice and fruit trees,

grape arbors and herds of livestock that offered to all an abundance of food. The very paradise the Quran promised to the faithful.

And Afghanistan? Land of his birth, his home? Brave, yes. No one had ever questioned the courage of the Afghan tribes. Not the Americans and Russians who were history's most recent invaders. Nor in turn the British, Mongols, Persians, Arabs, all the way back to Alexander the Great, whose armies were the first to learn that Afghanistan could be taken with enough weapons and spilled blood but never held.

But free?

He blinked away the sudden blurring of his vision. When had Afghanistan ever truly known freedom? Not under all those centuries of alternating occupations. Certainly not when the *mujahedeen* had finally brought the Soviet empire to its knees because then they—and the Taliban after them—had turned on each other. The rockets of their warring factions had rained down on Kabul in such destruction that his family was driven at last to exile.

"Have faith," his father had whispered into his ear. "Someday Afghanistan will be like America. A land of freedom as well as courage. Someday we will go home."

Even then he'd known the difference between wishes and painful reality. And yet, unbelievably, there it was below him. Today the liberators' anthem, his father's dream had come true at last for his own country.

Yes, *his* country.

His people.

His home.

He'd missed dawn's first call to prayer. Now he stripped his vest to spread it over the dirt. Prostrating himself, rising sun at his back, he began the daily *salat*: "*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*. In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful."

The memorized Arabic prayers were rote, but when he finished, he whispered his own passionate plea against the ground, "Please let it be true this time. My father's dream. His prayers. Let my people know freedom as well as courage."

Standing up, he shook out his vest. Beyond shattered towers of the city's business center and compounds of the poor lay a quiet, green oasis. The Wazir Akbar Khan district, home to Kabul's upper class. Its high walls, spacious villas, and paved streets looked hardly touched by war.

His sandaled feet slipped and twisted in his haste down the hillside. At street level, his old neighborhood proved less untouched than he'd thought. The walls were scarred by rocket blasts, sidewalks broken, poplar trees lining these streets in his memory now only stumps.

He headed toward the largest compound on the street, its two-story villa built around an inner courtyard. A brightly patterned *jinga* truck indicated the others had already arrived. The property differed so little from childhood memory he might have stepped back a decade. Even the peacock blue house and compound walls showed fresh paint. The Taliban officials who'd commandeered his home had at least cared for their stolen lodging. Or perhaps it had been his family's faithful *chowkidar* who'd stayed when his employers fled.

Music and cheerful voices drifted over walls along with a hot, oily aroma that brought water to his mouth. Frying *boulani* pastries. He quickened his steps. He'd be home in time for the midday meal.

At first he thought this gunfire too was celebratory, but when the unmistakable explosion of a rocket-propelled grenade shook the ground, he broke into a run. A mound of rubble offered cover as he reached the final T-junction.

His mind reeled. Surely he'd seen this victory convoy from the hilltop. But why were they firing on his home?

Even as he crouched in bewildered horror, the distinctive rat-tat-tat of a Kalashnikov rifle crackled back from a second-story window. Down the street a fighter rose from behind a jeep, an RPG launcher raised to his shoulder. A single blast. Then a limp shape slid forward over the windowsill and toppled from view.

The action unfroze his muscles, and he sprinted toward his home. A shout, the whine of a bullet overhead told him he'd been spotted. Apple trees edging the property wall offered hand and foot holds.

His feet touched brick, then ground on the other side. The acidity of gunfire and explosives burned his nostrils as he raced forward. He stumbled across the first limp shape facedown on the lawn. Turning the body over, he fruitlessly tried to stem a red sea spreading across white robes. Their faithful caretaker would never again tend these gardens or paint these walls.

An explosion rocked him as he raced around the side of the villa. Just inside the main entrance, the painted wooden frame of the jinga truck was burning. Behind it, the blast had blown the metal gates from their hinges. Invaders poured through the breach.

But he only had eyes for another huddled shape on the mosaic tiles of the courtyard and a third sprawled across marbled front steps. The second-story gunman had fallen across a grape arbor. Through tears of smoke fumes and grief, he noticed the Kalashnikov rifle dropped from a dangling, bloodied hand.

Before he could snatch it up, a boot kicked the AK-47 out of reach. Another smashed his face into the grass. Hot metal ground into his temple. He closed his eyes. *Allah, let it be quick!*

"Don't shoot! We need live prisoners. Here, you, get up!"

As the gun barrel dropped away, he struggled to his knees. Except for the poorly accented Dari and a shoulder patch of red, white, and blue, the flat wool cap, dark beard, hard, gray gaze, tattered scarf over camouflage flak jacket could have been as Afghan as the *mujahid* whose weapon was still leveled at his head. He knew immediately who this tall, powerfully built foreigner was. For weeks Pakistani news had been covering the American elite warriors fighting alongside the mujahedeen Northern Alliance.

Our liberators! His mouth twisted with bitter pain.

"Where are your commanders? Mullah Mohammed Omar? Osama bin Laden?" The American must have taken his blank stare for incomprehension because he turned to his companion, shifting to English. "Ask him: where are the Taliban who had their headquarters here? And if any of these—" a nod took in the sprawled bodies—"are bin Laden or Mohammed Omar. Tell him he just might save his own neck if he cooperates."

"There are no Taliban here!" he said in English. He pushed himself to his feet and wiped a sleeve to clear dampness from his face and eyes. It came away with a scarlet that wasn't his own. "This is a private home! And you have just murdered my family! Why? The fighting was over. You were supposed to bring peace."

"Your home? With a house full of armed combatants?" The American's boot nudged the Kalashnikov rifle now fallen to the grass. "You were firing on our troops."

“They were defending our home. They weren’t soldiers. Just my father and brothers and our caretaker and his sons.”

“You lie!” A blow rocked his head back as the mujahedeen translator snapped in rapid Dari. “You speak to me! I will translate!”

“I am not lying!” He spat out blood with his defiant English. “This has been my family’s home for generations. Any neighbor can tell you. Yes, the Taliban stole it from us, but they have been gone for days. We only came back from Pakistan this very day.”

He threw a desperate glance around. The last pretense of fighting was over, the mujahedeen drifting off except for those making a neat, terrible heap like laundry sacks near the broken gate. Wailing rose from a huddle of *burqas* and small children being herded out into the street. Were his mother and sister among them? Or had caution left them behind in Pakistan?

Then his gaze fell on a face he knew. A *mujahid* in full battle fatigues instead of the mismatched outfits of the others. The *mujahid* turned and stared at him indifferently.

Yes, it was he. Older, gray streaking beard and hair. But it was the family friend who’d supplied his father’s business with imported goods. Who’d been in this home countless times before their exile. Who’d brought him and his siblings small gifts and strange foreign sweets.

“Ask him. He will tell you who I am. He knows my family. He bought and sold for my father when I was a child.”

“Who? The *muj* commander?” For the first time he saw a crack in the American’s disbelief.

The family friend walked over. His cold, measuring appraisal held no recognition as the translator intercepted him for a brief conversation. Then, unbelievably, he swung around and marched up the marble steps into the villa.

The translator spread out his hands to the American. “The commander says he knows neither this youth nor his family. And it is well known that all in this house have served the Taliban.”

“No, it isn’t true! Maybe he does not recognize me. I was only a child when we left. But he knows this house and my family. Please, I must speak to him myself.”

Another foreign warrior emerged from the villa, clipped yellow hair and icy blue eyes shouting his nationality louder than curt English. “All clear. Body count’s six male combatants. Minimal damage except the gate. This one’s the only survivor minus a handful of female dependants and kids. From what the muj told us, I expected more bodies on the ground. They must have been tipped off.”

“Maybe. Or the muj were fed some bad intel.” The foreign soldiers moved away, and he missed the rest of their low-voice exchange.

Then the yellow-haired American waved a hand. “We followed the rules of engagement. They were armed and shooting.”

“A handful of AK-47s. The kid’s right—that’s practically home protection around here. And the prisoner; he’s no combatant. I saw him come over that wall. Should I turn him loose?”

“You know better than that. The interrogators are screaming for live ones up at Bagram. Besides, you’ve no idea what else he might know. If he’s just in the wrong place at the wrong time, they’ll sort it out and let him go.”

A radio on the yellow-haired American's belt sputtered to life. "Willie? Phil? Either of you available? We've got brass touching down at the airport. They need an escort to the embassy."

"Okay, we're out. The muj will finish here and deliver the prisoner. They've got a load of Arab fighters and al-Qaeda types heading to Bagram this afternoon."

The translator snapped his fingers, and a knot of mujahedeen stepped forward to take his place. The translator hurried after the yellow-haired American, now marching toward the gate.

But the other foreign warrior hesitated. "Be there in a minute."

He braced himself as the first American walked over. He didn't allow himself to imagine sympathy in the foreigner's gray eyes.

"Look, I've got no choice but to send you up to Bagram with the other battlefield detainees. But if you aren't al-Qaeda or Taliban, you've got nothing to be afraid of. We don't shoot prisoners. And the muj commander's a stand-up guy. If there's been an intel error, he'll make things right.

"I can at least report that you arrived after the fighting was over and never raised a weapon. If I can find something to write on." The American dug through the interior pockets of his flak jacket and pulled out an envelope, removing a folded note paper, then what looked like a snapshot of a yellow-haired young female surrounded by too many children to be her own.

A tiny, olive-colored volume fell into the American's palm. Western script read *New Testament*. "I wondered what I was supposed to do with this." Taking out a pen, he scribbled inside the cover. "Here. I've explained what I witnessed and given my contact info if Bagram needs confirmation. It might at least make a difference in where you end up. If you're telling the truth." The foreign soldier dared to offer a smile with the book.

Fury and hate rose in an acid flood to his throat. With a scream of rage, he struck at the outstretched hand. "You think this makes up for murdering my family? once again stealing our home? You call this freedom? How are you any better than the Taliban or the Russians?"

A rifle butt slammed him again to his knees. The blow scattered not only the olive-colored volume but the envelope and its other contents. The folded note fell into a sticky puddle, white rapidly soaking to scarlet.

The American made no attempt to retrieve it but scooped up the envelope, snapshot, and book. Above the dark beard, his mouth was hard and grim as he tucked the small volume into the prisoner's vest. "I really am sorry." Then he too headed toward the gate.

The foreigner was hardly out of sight when a bearded figure in battle fatigues emerged from the villa's columned entryway, an honor guard of mujahedeen at his heels. The one-time family friend strolled over. This time his survey was no longer indifferent or unrecognizing. But nothing in the unpleasantness of that smile, the merciless black eyes above it renewed hope.

"So you are the offspring of—" His father's name splashed in spittle across his feet. "You've grown tall since you abandoned your people. And now you think you can simply return to claim this place?" The mujahedeen commander pulled free the American's offering. Its pages drifted in shreds to the grass. Then a rifle butt slammed into the prisoner. No one called for it to stop.

He closed his eyes, his body curved in supplication, forehead touching the ground. But this time he didn't bother to pray. His father had been wrong. The dream was over.

It would take far more than dreams, a few impassioned prayers to Allah, before his homeland could ever be called land of the free and home of the brave.

“So who’s the blonde chick? Picking them a little young, hey, Willie?”

The two Americans had commandeered one of the convoy’s pickups and a jeep for the airport run along with a volunteer posse of mujahedeen. Their translator was at the wheel of the jeep. Willie, the only name by which their local allies knew the twenty-two-year-old Special Forces sergeant, and his companion clambered in behind to brace themselves behind the roll bar.

Willie glanced down at the retrieved correspondence still clutched in his hand. The girl who’d drawn his teammate’s suggestive leer did indeed look very young, a pack of preschoolers crowded around her. “Nah, just some kid Sunday school teacher who pulled my name out of a hat. Like we don’t have enough to do looking for bin Laden and taking out Taliban, we’ve got to answer fan mail.”

“Why do you think I don’t bother picking mine up?” As the jeep engine roared to life, his companion plucked away the photo for a clinical scrutiny. “Though maybe I should. Cute kid. How about I take this one off your hands? The way things are shaping up over here, she’ll be old enough to date before we rotate home. So what’s she got to say?”

Willie didn’t bother explaining. But the accompanying note had been brief enough he had no problem recalling its contents:

Dear Sergeant Willie:

My Sunday school class picked your name to pray for. We’re so fortunate to be living here safe in the land of the free and home of the brave, and we’re so proud of how you all are fighting to bring freedom to the people over there. I’m enclosing a class picture and a New Testament if you don’t have one already. Someday when the fighting’s over, I’d like to go to Afghanistan to help make the kind of difference you are. But since I’m only fifteen, I guess I’ll stick to praying and writing for now. Anyway, we’re praying for you to be safe and that you’ll win this war soon so Afghanistan can be as free as we are.

The jeep jolted out onto the street. Willie turned his long body to run a swift appraisal over the rest of their convoy. The mujahedeen volunteers were still scrambling on board as the pickups moved into line behind the jeep. They didn’t look like men who’d reached the finale of a brutal military campaign. They were laughing as they jostled playfully for a position at the mounted machine guns, flower garlands from the morning’s victory parade draped across bandoliers, wrapped around rifle barrels, even tucked behind ears.

But Willie had witnessed these local allies charging suicidally into enemy entrenchments, even with American bombs crashing down all around them. If he was so sick of this war after a few weeks, what had it been like for them to live decades, for many an entire lifetime, of unrelenting fighting and death? Simply to have survived in this country required courage and fortitude seldom required of Willie’s own compatriots.

Freedom was another matter.

Catching Willie's eye, a fighter barely into his teens raised a flower-festooned AK-47 from the next pickup. "Is it not glorious? We have won! We are free!"

Willie had divested himself of sentimentality before he'd ever made it through basic training. So it had to be the cold winter breeze that stung his eyes, dust gritting in his teeth that made him swallow. Willie had never doubted the value of his current mission. Nor even its ultimate success. Serving his country was a privilege, spreading freedom an honor worth these last difficult weeks.

But not even his rigorous training had prepared him for the brutality and ugliness of combat. The ragged chunks of flesh and bone that had once been human beings. Even worse, the screams from broken bodies that still held life. Too many of them his own comrades.

Yet scarcely two months since plane-shaped missiles had slammed into the heart of his own homeland, the people of Afghanistan were taking to these very streets to celebrate their liberation. Even now his countrymen were touching down to raise the flag over Kabul's long-abandoned U.S. embassy compound. Okay, so everything hadn't run as smoothly as their mission training. Maybe there'd been mistakes. Maybe even today. But at least those raucous dancing mobs with their music and kites, the battle-wearied fighters in the pickups behind him finally had a chance for real freedom.

A chance he'd helped to give them.

You can tell your kids their prayers have been answered, Willie composed a mental reply to that bright smiling young face. *It's all over but the mopping up.*

The thought prompted him to lean forward, tapping the driver on the shoulder. "You're heading back over here after the embassy run, right? Do me a favor and check on that kid for me. Make sure whoever's hauling them up to Bagram delivers him in one piece. Some of the muj are a little trigger-happy."

The translator turned his head after he maneuvered between rubble heap and a pothole. "I am sure the commander will have given orders for anything you have asked. He is very happy with you."

"Happy?"

"But of course! Because of the property you have secured for him. The finest residence in the Wazir Akbar Khan. The commander has desired it for his own possession since before the Taliban. And now because of your weapons, it is his at last. We will move our headquarters here this very day."

Willie went rigid in furious comprehension.

"Hey, easy, man!" The blond soldier's arm was an iron-hard barrier, his voice low and warning. "Back off. It's not his doing."

Willie's grip tightened to white knuckles on his M4 assault rifle. "We've been had!"

"Hey, it's not the first time, and around here it sure won't be the last. Are you that naive? This is war. *Their* war. We're only advisors, remember? And that doesn't include refereeing property disputes."

That his teammate was right didn't temper Willie's mood. The crinkle of paper reminded him his fist wasn't empty. The envelope was a crumpled mess, and only now did he notice the rusty smudge blurring what had been a return address. He wouldn't be answering this fan mail. Which was just as well.

Willie tossed the wad of paper over the side of the jeep, the adrenaline rush of this morning's victory draining to intense weariness, his earlier elation as acrid in his mouth as the smoke rising from a burning truck just inside the wrecked gates. It was going to

take a whole lot more than wishes and a few kids' prayers before Afghanistan could ever be called land of the free and home of the brave.

Chapter One

BAGHLAN PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN

Present Day

A day from the past.

No, a day for the future.

The farmer stood proud, tall as he shuffled down the crowd-lined drive. A switch in his hand urged forward the mule pulling a cart piled high with huge, swollen tubers. They looked like nothing edible, but their tough, brown hide held sweetness beyond the sucrose to be squeezed from their pulp. The firstfruits of Baghlan's revitalized sugar beet industry.

In a long-forgotten past, when the irrigated fields stretching to high, snow-capped mountains were not known best for landmines and opium, the farmer had worked his family's sugar beet crop. He'd earned his bride price stirring huge vats of syrup in the sugar factory, Afghanistan's only refinery and pride of the Baghlan community. Until the Soviets came and Baghlan became a war zone. For a generation of fighting, the sugar factory had been an abandoned shell.

But now past had become future.

The massive concrete structure gleamed with fresh paint, the conveyor belt shiny and unruined, smokestacks once more breathing life. By the throngs packing both sides of the drive, the entire province had turned out to celebrate the factory's reopening. In front of the main entrance was a dais, destination of farmer and cart.

The token harvest followed on the stately tread of regional dignitaries making their way toward the dais. Students, neat in blue tunics, offered pink and white and red roses to the distinguished arrivals. Among them the farmer spotted his grandson. No smile, only the flicker of a glance, a further straightening of posture, conveyed his pride. Too many sons and brothers and kinsmen had died in the war years. But for his remaining grandson, this day presaged a very different future.

On the dais, the factory manager stood at a microphone. Behind him, chairs held the mayor, regional governor, officials arrived from Kabul for the inauguration ceremony. "The government has pledged purchase of all sugar beet. Our foreign partners pledge equipment to any farmer who will replace current crops. So why plant seed that produces harvests only of violence? On this day, I entreat you to choose the seed of peace, of a future for our community and our children."

The procession had now reached the dais. But it wasn't the dignitaries' arrival that broke off the factory manager's speech. The roar of a helicopter passing low overhead drew every eye upward. Circling around, the Soviet-made Mi-8 Hind hovered down until skids touched pavement. Crowds scattered back, first from the wind of its landing, then as the rotors shut down, to open passage.

The government minister who stepped out was followed by foreigners, the allies who'd funded the refinery project designed to entice Baghlan farmers from opium poppies to sugar beet. The newcomers leisurely moved through the parted crowd. The minister paused to speak to his foreign associates, then turned back toward the helicopter.

The explosion blasted through the factory, blowing out every window and door. A fireball erupting from the open entrance enveloped the dais. A panicked swerve of the mule placed the heavy cart between farmer and blast, saving his life but burying him in

splinters of wood and beet. He could not breathe nor see nor hear. Only when the screams began did he realize he was still alive.

Pushing through the debris, he staggered to his feet. Shrapnel had ripped through the crowd where the fireball had not reached, and what lay between dais and shattered cart was a broken, bleeding chaos. Those uninjured enough to rise were scattering in panic. The farmer ran too but in the opposite direction. Ignoring moans and beseeching hands, he scrambled through the rubble. Then with a cry of anguish he dropped to his knees.

The school uniform was still blue and clean, a single white rose fallen from an outflung hand. The farmer cradled the limp form, his wails rising to join the communal lament. For his grandson, for so many others, the future this day had promised would never come.

KABUL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

“Oh, excuse me. I am *so* sorry.”

Steve Wilson barely avoided treading on heels as the file of deplaned passengers ground to a sudden halt. A glance down the line identified the obstruction. In pausing to look around, a female passenger had knocked a briefcase flying.

The young woman was tall enough—five foot seven by Steve’s calculation—to look down on her victim and attractive enough that the balding, overweight Western businessman waved away her apology. Platinum blonde hair spilled in a fine, straight curtain across her face as she scrambled for the briefcase. A T-shirt and jeans did nothing to disguise the tautly muscled, if definitely female, physique of a Scandinavian Olympic skier. Though that accent was 100 percent American.

Steve had already noted the woman several rows ahead of him on the plane. With only a handful of female passengers, all discreetly draped in head shawl or full-body *chador*, her bright head had been hard to miss, face glued to the window as the Ariana Airlines 727 descended through rugged, brown foothills into the arid mountain basin that was Kabul.

Now as she handed the briefcase back, Steve caught his first clear glimpse of her features. It was a transparently open face, hazel eyes wide and interested under startlingly dark lashes and eyebrows. The candid interplay of eagerness, apprehension, and dismay as she turned again to take in her surroundings roused in Steve nothing but irritation. *Wipe that look off your face or Afghanistan will do it for you.*

As the line moved forward, Steve stepped out of it to make his own survey. Next to a small, dingy terminal only one runway was in service. Down the runway, a red-and-white-striped concrete barrier cordoned off hangers and prefabricated buildings housing ISAF, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force. Dust gusted across the runway, filling Steve’s nostrils, narrowing his gaze even behind wraparound sunglasses. He’d forgotten the choking, muddy taste of that dust.

The taste of Afghanistan.