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Opening extract from

If You Were Me

Written by

Sam Hepburn

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2 Palmer Street
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www.doublecluck.com

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ALIYA

Kabul, Afghanistan

As I jumped off the bus that night and waved goodbye to Salma the tips of the mountains circling the city were already blurring grey against the crimson sky. Salma pressed her nose to the window and waved back. But her eyes weren't on me or the sunset. They were darting across the square, following two men on a motorbike whose ragged black turban tails snapped and fluttered in the wind as they circled the fringes of the crowd. The bus rumbled away across the cobbles, spluttering puffs of exhaust into the haze of sizzling meat drifting from the brightly lit food stalls. I'd never come home this late before and I ducked into a doorway, wishing with all my heart that when I looked up I'd see my brother,

Behrouz, biting into a hot *bolani*, sucking the peppery sauce from his fingers and pushing towards me through the crush. I knew he wouldn't be there. Behrouz didn't come to meet me from the bus any more, and it was a long time since he'd wandered through the market buying food.

I peered around the edge of the wall, chewing my cuff and gazing at the mass of jostling, elbowing, shouting people. I spotted a gap and started to run, startling a cart-load of pigeons, who blinked at me through the slats of their wooden coops, squeezed myself between rickety stalls piled high with melons, fabrics, oranges, purple aubergines and bundles of mint, and dodged the swinging carcass of a freshly gutted sheep. By the time I reached the labyrinth of narrow streets that zigzagged up to our house, the sun had disappeared behind the dye works, trailing slashes of pink and orange along the jagged edges of the rooftops. I ran faster. All around me the alleys of the old town were filling with shadows and the sounds of dusk: the last echoes of the call to prayer, wheels rumbling on crusted mud, dogs barking, generators wheezing, and a radio blaring so loudly I didn't hear our phone ringing until I'd unlocked the door. The minute I picked it up it stopped.

There was just enough light to see my little sister sprawled on the rug, wagging her finger at the dolls she'd propped against the wall. I shook off my backpack, scooped her up and tugged her messy plaits.

'What are you playing, Mina?'

'School. I'm the teacher.'

'Where's Mor?'

'Sleeping.'

I know I shouldn't have felt annoyed but I did. Our generator had been broken for weeks, so I put Mina down and lit the kerosene lamps before I pushed open the door of my mother's bedroom. The curtains were drawn and she lay curled on her *toshak* with a quilt pulled up to her chin. She'd been like this for over a year, sleeping in the day, trying to blot out the world. And it was getting worse. Her glazed, puffy eyes blinked up at me through the gloom.

'Where were you, Aliya?'

'I told you this morning, Mor. A professor came from the university to judge our projects. He gave me and Salma a commendation.'

I longed for her to stroke my face, the way she used to, or smile at me with that look that said she was proud, but her hands stayed bunched beneath the quilt and her mouth grew slack. Mina trotted in, dragging a doll by its matted pink hair. 'I'm hungry, Aliya.'

I didn't want to cook. I wanted to revise for my exam but we had to eat. So I hung a lamp on the hook above the stove, propped my English book against the pans and tried to study while I stirred rice and chopped vegetables. It was hopeless. Mina was restless and wanted me to play with her. It was no wonder, stuck on her own all day while my mother slept. In the end I made a game of it, reading out

sentences and getting her to repeat them while she unrolled the red plastic *dastarkhan* on the floor and skipped back and forth, spreading it with bowls of pickles and yoghurt and little piles of naan and arranging the cushions around the edge.

I was tasting the soup and listening out for Behrouz when light swept through the shutters. I looked up. A motorbike growled to a stop outside. Boots scuffed the grit. A second of silence, then the steady thump of a hammer nailing something to our door. My heart stopped beating. The lamplight seemed to flicker and dim as a sheet of paper slid on to the mat. I pulled Mina away and crept over to pick it up. Sick inside, I stared down at the crossed swords of the Taliban stamped at the top. My hand was shaking so much I could hardly read the scratchy blue scrawl that began *Asalaamu Aleikum*, 'Peace be upon you' – but there was no peace in the message.

Behrouz Sahar will be executed. Let this be a warning to all those who work with our enemies.

'No!' Choking back a scream, I ran to the window and peered through the crack in the shutters. Three men swathed in black darkened the shadows across the street; two paced slowly, watching our house, while the third leant casually against the bumper of an old pickup, murmuring into his phone. This couldn't be happening. Not to Behrouz. After my father died he'd got a job with the British army, but only because we needed money, and he wasn't a fighter, he was an interpreter. And anyway the

war was over, the foreign troops were pulling out. What did it matter who'd worked for them?

I pushed my wrist to my mouth and tried to imagine what it was like inside the heads of these evil men, what they thought about while they waited to kill, what they dreamt about when they slept. My mother shuffled towards me and tugged the letter from my fingers. Her eyes skimmed the words, her jaw stiffened and her head began to twitch with panic. 'Are they out there?' she whispered.

'It's all right, Mor.' I ducked away from the window and reached for the phone. 'I'll warn him.'

'Tell him to get away. As far from Kabul as he can.'

She stood over me while I hit the buttons, twisting her hands and making soft keening noises in her throat. The line was dead. Not a crackle or an echo. I knew then that the men outside had cut the cable. I looked up at her and slowly shook my head. The letter fell from her fingers. She dropped on to a cushion, sinking deeper into the fog of misery that had swamped her since the day my father was killed by a Taliban bomb. I missed him too. The grief was like a rip inside me that refused to mend. But I could never tell her how much it hurt. How could I, without worsening her pain?

My eyes drifted across the photos hanging on the wall – my father getting his medical degree from the University of London, my parents smiling on their wedding day, our whole family at a picnic by the river. They lingered on the

picture of Behrouz receiving a medal from his old boss, Colonel Clarke. He'd won it for dragging three injured British soldiers to safety in an ambush. He hadn't even been armed, and the newspapers had called him a hero, even in Britain. Was that why the Taliban had put his name on their death list? To make their own sickening headlines out of what he'd done?

I had to get out of the house. I had to find a phone that worked and warn Behrouz. I focused my mind on the layout of the rooms, picturing every door and exit. There was nothing at the back, just a carved wooden window that hung out over the sheer drop down the hillside. The roof was no good either: the taller buildings on either side cut off any hope of escape across the rooftops. The only way out was through the alley at the front, where the Taliban death squad was watching and waiting.

Mina climbed into my lap, twisting her fingers through my hair and nestling her head against my neck. I held her close for a long time and stared at the shuttered windows, feeling as trapped and helpless as the caged pigeons in the market.

Mina raised her head and looked at me. I'd heard it too. A tapping and scratching. Not much of a sound but clear enough in the silence. I lifted her off my lap and crept into the bedroom. The tapping came again. I closed the door behind me and slipped round to the window. Crouching low, I drew back the edge of the curtain. A gnarled finger

scraped across the glass. I looked closer. It was a twig. Someone hissed my name. Was I was going mad? I heard it again. I couldn't stand it. I reached up and unhooked the latch, snatching my hand away as the window swung open, letting in a waft of night noises, benzine and wood smoke.

'Aliya!'

I eased my head over the sill and looked down into a face. It was all I could do not to burst out laughing. It was Behrouz, grinning up at me. The laughter died when I realized how he'd got there.

Like a lot of buildings in the older parts of Kabul, our house was built of mud bricks layered between rounded wooden beams, which jutted through the wall at the back like the prongs of a wide-toothed comb. When Behrouz was a kid, he used to get bullied by a boy called Tariq Shandana, whose father owned the bakery three doors down. One time Tariq dared Behrouz to crawl across the beams between our buildings and threatened to tell everyone that he was a coward if he didn't do it. There were wide, uneven gaps between the beams, the drop to the rooftops below was fifteen, maybe twenty metres in places, and there was absolutely nothing to stop Behrouz from falling off. I remember Tariq and his gang laughing and jeering from his balcony while I hung out of our window, scared nearly to death as I watched Behrouz make the crossing. He was grey in the face and trembling when I stretched out my hands to pull him back inside. But Tariq Shandana never called him a coward again.

Behrouz tossed the stick into the darkness, hooked his fingers over the sill and scrambled through the window. The wood creaked under his weight. I grabbed his arms, toppling backwards as he fell on top of me in a sweaty tangle of rope.

'You're crazy. You can't be here,' I whispered. 'They're outside. Three of them.'

He jumped up, slipping off the coils of rope and the canvas bag slung across his chest. 'I know. I've come to get you.'

'Don't worry about us. Get out of Kabul. We'll be all right.'

He looked at me, hesitating. 'No. No, you won't.'

'What do you mean?'

'Women, kids. The Taliban don't care. I've got until midnight to give myself up. If I don't, they're going to kill one of you, all of you, I . . . I don't know. Here.' He held out his phone.

I saw the words 'the blood of your family will be on your hands'; I didn't even try to read the rest. My eyes were locked on the time at the bottom of the screen: 23.02. I fought to steady my voice. 'What can we do?'

'Get out the way I came in.' He saw me flinch and gave me a little smile. 'Don't worry, Aliya. I'll make it safe. I've got a plan.'

It was hard to smile back, even though 'I've got a plan' was a joke between us, the thing we always said when the other was in trouble.

'What plan?' I whispered.

Instead of answering, he unzipped his bag and with a flourish pulled out a wide khaki belt and two narrow strips of canvas fitted with spring clips at each end.

I turned them in my fingers. 'What are these?'

'Captain Merrick's army belt and the straps off the spare tyre in his jeep.'

He hauled on the rope he'd left hanging out of the window. As he tied the end of it around the casement he caught me staring at the blue dye coming off on his hands and the frayed patches where the fibres had worn away.

'Don't worry, sis. It'll work. It has to.'

Sis. That was something else he'd got from the foreign soldiers. I slipped through the door and beckoned to my mother. I tried to keep the mounting panic from my face and whispered, 'Mor, Behrouz is here.'

Mina looked up, her eyes widening in wonder. I clamped my hand over her mouth and glanced towards the shutters. 'You mustn't make a sound. You promise.'

She nodded solemnly and darted through the door. My mother followed her into the bedroom, pressing her knuckles to her thin cheeks as she watched Behrouz sweep Mina off her feet.

'You're going on an adventure,' he whispered. 'Like the children in stories.' He put her down and looked up. 'You too, Mor-jan.'

She leant against the door, breathing hard. 'What is this madness, Behrouz? They're going to kill you.'