

Flowers from Afghanistan

Suzy Parish

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2018

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0044-1

Hardcover Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0116-5

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0042-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

In 2011, my husband, Investigator Chet Williams, set out on assignment to train Afghan nationals in police techniques. His e-mails painted vivid sights and sounds that inspired me to write *Flowers from Afghanistan*. The attack scenes are very close to what my husband experienced. The story of Mac's running shoes is an actual event.

Chet, you were the eyes and ears necessary for this book. You are the one who described starry nights in Afghanistan and made me fall in love with children like Bashir.

I love you, babe, for your sacrifice for your country and your family.

For the lights of my life; my husband Chet, our children; Stacy, Christi, Ashley, and our grandchildren, Simon, Jack, and Cora.

For Jesus Christ, The Light of the World.

1

Huntsville, Alabama-2010

“Little Mac, where are you?”

Giggles came from behind an old sheet draped over our breakfast nook table, a makeshift tent. I pretended to look behind the sofa. “Are you behind the couch?”

More giggles.

“Are you under the coffee table?” I crawled on my belly, looking in the 3-inch space between the coffee table and floor. “Nope. I don’t see you.”

Infectious laughter.

I crawled over to the table, slowly, slowly, calling his name until—“Gotcha!” I threw the sheet back and grabbed him in my arms, tumbling and tickling him until his laughter bounced off the walls.

“I thought I heard my two favorite guys!” Sophie came in from the kitchen, pulling an oven glove off her hand and laying the mitt on the table. The yeasty smell of warm bread breezed in her wake. “I’m having photos made from your going away party. The sergeant’s words about you were very touching. I hadn’t heard stories about a few of those calls you were on. How was the office party today?”

“Good. Chief even came by to wish me luck.”

“Luck. I hope you have more than luck. I’m praying for God’s protection.”

I shook my head. “Don’t start in on me about God-

stuff again.”

Sophie turned away. “Dinner’s ready.”

“I promised the guys I’d bring Little Mac by the barbershop to visit and get a haircut.”

“Wait until tomorrow. You’ll have more time,” Sophie said.

If I’d listened to her, things would be different.

I ignored her request and scooped him off the floor, dressed him in khaki shorts, a blue T-shirt, and red sneakers. My little man was going for a haircut at the same barbershop all my fellow police officers on first shift frequented. “We won’t be long,” I said.

“If you won’t listen to me, then at least take a picture of us before you go. I’ll miss these curls.” She wound her finger around a bit of his strawberry blond bangs and kissed his forehead. Sophie hugged Little Mac into her lap.

He squirmed.

“Hand him his pinwheel. That always settles him down.”

I found my son’s favorite toy on the end table and handed it down to Sophie, trying to center their faces on my phone. “Say, Pumpernickel!” The name of that bread always made Little Mac laugh.

“Pump-a-ni-coo,” he repeated in his squeaky voice. Little Mac’s face spread into another of his infectious grins. The dimple on his left cheek deepened as he spun the pinwheel. The blue blades threw glints of light onto the floor and ceiling. He clutched the plastic toy to his chest like it was a treasure.

I bought it for him when Sophie was still carrying him in her womb. I was amazed it survived two years of his rough play. He graduated to toy cars and building sets, but the pinwheel was still his favorite. I

snapped a picture, a light flashed, illuminating the room. They were frozen in time on my phone. I'd won the argument but wasted precious time. The barbershop was only four blocks away, but it closed in thirty minutes. I scooped Little Mac from Sophie's lap.

"Babe?"

I stopped mid-step at the door.

"Drive careful. It looks like a storm is on its way."

"Will do," I said, blowing Sophie an air kiss. I hurried outside carrying Little Mac, letting the screen door slam behind me. Lightning flashed in the west. I pulled away in a cloud of dust.

Little Mac kicked his feet against the back of my double cab truck seat, in time to his favorite song.

I sang along, though Sophie wouldn't have called it singing. I put on my turn signal and stopped at the red light. When I hit my brake, my cell phone slid across the front seat. I grabbed it, and as I did, a text message flashed. My breath caught. It was the name of a first shift dispatcher who'd sent me on most of my calls. *I thought I'd made it clear when she approached me at my going-away party. I wasn't interested in any relationship outside my marriage.* I fumbled with the button to erase the message.

The light turned green.

I hit the gas. How did she have the guts to text—
Out of the corner of my eye, a flash.

The loud bang of two vehicles colliding reverberated in my head, then grinding metal on metal. Airbags deployed.

I coughed and blinked to clear my eyes of the white cloud that filled the truck.

Smoke? Are we on fire? No, it's powder from air bags.

The truck stopped spinning. I tore myself from the seatbelt, grabbed my pocket knife and cut Little Mac free from his car seat harness. "Hold on, son!"

Red lights flashed. No siren. No traffic sounds. Only the fear-filled bass of my heart and my own ragged breaths. It seemed to take forever to reach the ambulance. I tucked Little Mac's small body against my chest. Focus. A few more feet. I ran until I threatened to push my lungs and legs past their limit of endurance. I handed my two-year-old son off to the waiting paramedic and jumped in the back of the ambulance with them.

Later all I could recall was his hand, so tiny, grasping my sleeve as if he were trying to do his part, too.

2

Huntsville, Alabama-2011

Sophie hovered around me like those moths that fling themselves against the lights in ball fields. "I still don't understand how you can leave for Afghanistan. It's only been a year since..."

I continued to sort my equipment into piles to pack. Socks, underwear, T-shirts. A plastic bag held my body building supplements.

Sophie paced around my gear in the living room, her hands fluttering, clenching and unclenching.

When I was a boy, I'd pick up those little moths, thinking I could save them. Instead, handling them rubbed the powder off their wings until they could no longer fly. I had to get away before I did the same thing to Sophie. "It'll pay off the medical bills. Contract work as a police trainer is not the same as being military."

Her face crumpled.

I dropped the pile of T-shirts I was packing and drew her into my arms, carefully so I wouldn't rub off the imaginary powder. I cradled her face in my hands, made her look at me. "We can do this."

She was not buying it. She wrenched out of my arms. Redness crept up her neck, colored her cheeks. Who was I kidding? Sophie was no fragile moth. She was an iron butterfly.

"Is that all you have to say? We can do this?"

Where is the 'we' Mac? Because all I see right now is the 'you.' You signed up for this mission. You know what I'm doing? I'm packing our little boy's things and cleaning a room that will never be used by him again."

I could make order out of my clothes, but I had no answer for Sophie. Shame kept my gaze from seeking hers. I continued to pack. I was aware of Sophie's voice in the background, but I wasn't focused on what she was saying. In my head, I saw Little Mac's curly hair covered in blood.

"Mac? Did you hear what I said?"

I shook my head to erase the image of Little Mac in my arms, his warmth pressed against my chest. "What?"

"I'd like to escape, too. You aren't the only one struggling. I'll never watch Little Mac play baseball, never see him go to prom. Now I don't have dreams. I barely sleep."

I twisted my face away, turned toward the wall so she wouldn't see I was in torment. If there really was a hell, I was already there. I wasn't escaping. I was serving a self-imposed sentence for killing our son.

Sophie's foot brushed against my backpack, and it toppled over. The bright blue fins of the pinwheel protruded from the side pocket. "You're taking Little Mac's pinwheel?"

"It helps me feel close to him."

She didn't have an answer for that. She took a deep breath, and her shoulders relaxed. Was she finally accepting my departure?

When I picked up my running shoes, her forehead wrinkled in frustration.

She changed the subject. "Where are your boots?"

"My boots?"

“You know, the ones they issued you?”

“Oh, I don’t get those until I hit Arkansas. It’s where we’ll do our initial training, and our gear will be issued.”

Her face clouded for a moment, and then a thoughtful look replaced frustration.

“What?” I asked.

She smiled and shook her head. Her blond hair swung across her face, and she flipped it away. She leaned over and hugged me. I guessed the cloudburst was over for the time being.

“I’m not mad, but it’ll be lonely here. I know you feel you need to go, and I’ll be happy once those bills are paid. Maybe then we can heal.” She studied me intently, eyes full of hope. She twined her fingers through my red hair. It’d taken months to grow out, and I looked more like a surfer dude than an investigator. Sophie’s finger twirled a bit of hair at my temple.

“You won’t get all this cut off, will you? I love your hair long.”

“No. Contractors aren’t held to the same standards as active military.”

Sophie’s hands moved to my shoulders. She leaned against me as if she were trying to hold on to us as a couple, as if she were savoring the moment. Instead of comforting me, the action made me nervous.

“You know I wouldn’t go unless I had no other choice.” My heart beat rapidly. Was I convincing Sophie? Did she suspect I was responsible for Little Mac’s death? I had to get away where I could sort the nightmare in my head. That was why I chose Afghanistan. I couldn’t think of any place more unlike Huntsville’s rolling green mountains and parks full of

families.

Sophie shook my shoulders. “Mac? Did you hear what I just said? Hand me your running shoes. They’ll have to do.”

I handed her my shoes and went back to work, stuffing items in my duffle bag.

A few minutes later Sophie returned with a mysterious smile on her lips. She dropped the shoes in my lap.

I’d learned when Sophie got an idea in her head it was best to comply, forget the argument, and file the questions.

I should have paid more attention to those running shoes.

3

Kandahar, Afghanistan-2011

My running shoes were white when I left Huntsville. I looked down, studied them. Tan against the plywood floor of the tent. I doubted they'd ever look the same again. I was no longer the same man who spoke vows to Sophie. I felt as filthy inside as my shoes looked. During the day Afghanistan took me away from the pain of causing Little Mac's death. Nights were different. At night every black thought shrieked in my dreams.

A knock at my tent door made me jump. I hadn't been in camp very long, and any unexpected noise made me jittery.

Travis, another of the police trainers, pushed his way into my room. From my seat on my gorilla box locker, his lanky runner's frame loomed over me.

"Hey, I noticed you're using that thing for a chair."

"Yeah, well, the room was advertised as unfurnished."

Travis chuckled. "Come on." He led me down the hallway into a small area we used as a snack room. It was sparsely furnished with a shelf, coffeepot, and college dorm fridge.

Another of the instructors at the camp, one new to me, poured himself a mug of black coffee. The scorched odor of day old coffee overtook the small

area. "What are you two up to?" He shook his head as if he were correcting unruly students.

"Shelf building detail. You up for it?" Travis asked.

"What? Did you destroy yours again?"

Travis ignored the remark and nudged me toward the coffee-drinking dude. "Mac, this is Glenn Thurman. He's an instructor at camp, but his unofficial position is procurement, at least in this tent."

I stuck out my hand, and Glenn's engulfed it. Broad shouldered and square all over, he gripped like a vise. I tried not to let on, but it felt as if he was breaking my fingers. It was a challenge. I looked him in the eyes and didn't break contact. "Nice to meet you."

"Glenn's the old man around camp. Thirty-eight," Travis said.

Glenn grimaced. He released my hand and brushed shaggy brown hair out of his eyes. The haircut made him look younger than his years. But he appeared to be a guy who'd gotten into one too many fist fights with life and lost. "So, we have shelves to build?"

"Yep," I said.

Glenn swigged his coffee then winced. "Burned my tongue. Always do that." He sauntered down the narrow, dark hallway, balancing his coffee mug. He stopped at the room across the hall from mine and shoved the door open. Glenn sat his cup down on a vintage keyhole desk. The top had swirls of chestnut stain, and it was decorated with bronze drawer pulls. He turned to us. "Wipe your feet."

Travis obediently backed up and wiped his feet on a small mat.

What kind of pull did this Glenn guy have around

here?

The room was the same size as mine, but the similarity ended there. I bent down and ran my hand across a handmade, red and gold wool rug, framed in red diamond shapes. "This is incredible. Feels like velvet."

Glenn was on his belly, dragging boards from under the cot.

"Where'd you get all this?" I asked.

The dense carpet muffled Glenn's voice. He felt around under the bedframe. "This is my home. I don't have a wife to go back to like you guys, so I make the best of where I am." He straightened and pulled more two-by-fours from under the bed. "Travis and I go on scouting missions to the dump. Occasionally, we come up with excellent finds."

"The rug?"

"No, not that. That was a birthday gift to me. Top-of-the-line. Made by the locals." A twitchy, sad smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

I couldn't tell if he was proud of his bounty or wished he had a wife back in the States.

He motioned to me. "Grab that hammer and nails."

The construction crew had a new member. We walked barely three feet across the hall and into my room.

Glenn grunted disapprovingly when he saw the gorilla box and my books and other items piled on the floor. Embarrassment made heat creep up my neck. Back home, Sophie made fun of me for being compulsively organized. She wouldn't recognize the mess I was living in now.

"Hey, watch it. You daydreaming? I need help

here," Glenn said.

His voice made me jump. It resounded like rusted hinges on an ancient barn door. I stepped back as a board sailed near my head, narrowly missed my chin. Either the caffeine kicked in, or Glenn savored the challenge of making a desk out of all this chaos. Flinging boards here, nails there, he handed me a two-by-four. "We've got to get you up to speed. Be right back." A few seconds later, he was back with a short handsaw. "Travis, hold the end of this board across the gorilla box. We're making a man's desk."

I marked off lines with a tape measure and Glenn made the first cut.

Travis steadied the board as the metal teeth of the saw bit into soft pine.

An hour later, we stood back and admired our work.

"You might have the nicest room in the tent." Travis ran his hand across the plywood desk. "Wanna trade?"

Glenn gathered his tools. He stepped back with satisfaction in his eyes. "Not bad, only he needs a chair, and I know where we can get one."

"Where?" Travis asked.

"I took a jog around camp today and noticed three broken computer chairs on the trash pile. With a little luck, we may be able to get one good one from the parts," Glenn said.

The sun sank behind the cold mountains of the lower Hindu Kush to the west of camp.

I remembered a small flashlight I kept in my gorilla box. I dug it out and flicked the switch. On, off, on. "I'm game if you two are."

4

"Watch it," Travis said.

I jumped.

"There are camel spiders out here, man. They're as big as my hand."

"Do they bite?"

"Heck yeah. They can near take your finger off." He squinted into the dark. "And don't think you can outrun them. Ten miles per hour, top speed. The things are like gazelles on crack."

"I'll be careful."

Travis needed a vacation.

I swept the flashlight side to side as we picked our way in darkness down the wide gravel path that surrounded the camp. The night air was shredded by jets flying so low I felt as if I could reach up and touch them. I shivered from excitement rather than the coolness of the desert air, which was welcome, compared to the sizzling high that day: one hundred fourteen.

Sitting at a desk and standing behind lecterns all day left my legs eager to stretch out on a walk. I squinted, taking in the scenery, and trying to remember the way in case Glenn decided to pull another trash run. There wasn't much in the way of landmarks, just rows and rows of cement walls engulfed in darkness. They closed in on me until my gaze found the night sky.

Travis plowed into my back.

“Hey.” Travis bounced off. “Watch where you’re going.”

I didn’t reply. I was too busy taking in the expanse of a night sky that opened before me. I tipped my head back, like a parched man under a spigot. The sky was blue-black, flecked with silver. Like the lapis lazuli stones indigenous to the region. The moon was so bright I could see the crags on its face. I didn’t want to leave the spot. The scene drew me in like a sleeping bag on a frosty night.

Travis followed my gaze. “I remember the first time I saw the night sky here. I did the same thing. Just stared. Back home, city lights obscure the stars.”

I didn’t answer. My mind was back at another night, black as this. Only there were no stars to give hope.

“Here it is. Come on,” Glenn called impatiently from five yards ahead.

I reluctantly moved forward.

He was backlit by the orange glow of the burn pit, an area enclosed on three sides by twenty-foot-high blackened cement walls. It burned day and night, smoke constantly spiraling up from embers. The wreckage was piled next to the pit, waiting to be thrown in. Small pockets of flame eerily threw shadows on the soot-covered walls.

I instinctively covered my nose as acrid smoke blew in my face.

Travis sneezed.

Glenn was already dismantling a chair. “No sense in carrying back more than we need. Pull off the good parts and leave the rest.” He pulled a pair of pliers from the cotton laundry sack and tossed the tool high in the air in an arc toward me. “Heads up.”

I made a grab for it, but it spiraled over my head and plowed into a mound of rags.

A high-pitched squeal of something in torment erupted from the pile.

Three of us who endured daily explosions jumped at the sound of innocence.

For a moment, I hesitated. My brain was whirring. Years of training kicked in. I stuck my flashlight between my teeth and moved toward the sound, dreading what I would find. I swept the filthy mound with my foot, probing for whatever had made that cry. Ashes coiled up reducing the effectiveness of the flashlight. On the fourth search, my foot bumped a mass, about the size of a loaf of bread, and as soft. A shiver ran up my back, but I steeled myself. Working in law enforcement for seven years taught me to stuff my feelings down. I gently pulled aside filthy rags.

Next to my boot, curled in a ball, was a black and gray mottled puppy. His littermates lay close beside him, but they hadn't fared as well. At least their suffering was over.

I gently probed the puppy with my hand, and it wiggled. Its pink tongue protruded over white baby teeth. The animal's chest heaved in and out with great effort.

Travis called low behind me. "What is it?" He didn't approach, but hung back.

I bent down and gathered the animal in my arms. "Glenn, hand me that bag."

Glenn moved hesitantly forward, all bravado went out of his walk. He handed me the olive-green bag.

I swaddled the animal in it like an infant. I cradled him against my chest and walked him back toward the gravel path.

The still-frightened wheeze of his breath echoed against the night air.

Travis finally seemed to make up his mind about the situation. He moved closer and lifted the cloth now swaddled in my arms. He did a sharp, ragged intake when he saw fur. "Oh." Travis wiped sweat from his face in apparent relief. "I was afraid it was a baby."

I ran my hand across the ashy fur. "How did this puppy get here?"

Glenn gathered his tools. "Locals. Dogfighting's a huge sport over here. In litters, only the best are kept for fighting. Runts are usually left to die or are killed." He continued to sift the ashes for chair parts. "Afghanistan's a harsh place, for man and beast." Glenn gathered as many pieces as he could hold. "Travis, get the rest. Make sure we don't leave anything behind." He turned to me. "Come on. Let's go put your chair together."

I was more than ready to leave that place. I handed my flashlight to Travis and followed the weaving glow that guided our steps. I could feel the drumming of the puppy's heart beating against the palm of my hand. Down inside me, stirrings of hope flickered like the light against those cement walls. Life could spring from ashes. I lowered my mouth next to the grimy ears and spoke soothingly, quietly so the guys couldn't hear me, "You'll grow up big and strong." I paused to think for a moment. "Phoenix."

We burst into my room and dumped chair parts on the floor in a heap.

"I need a chair base." Glenn sat on the plywood flooring and held out his hand.

Travis fished chair parts aside and laid them out like instruments to a surgeon. "Here." Travis handed

Glenn a chrome base.

"It's missing a wheel."

"Wait." I set the puppy down on the floor and dug through the pile of dirty parts. "I know I saw a loose one a minute ago." My hand closed around a smooth, plastic wheel. "Here it is." I handed it over to Glenn, and as I bent low, the puppy slipped beside me and licked my face. My mouth drew up into an involuntary grin. I waved him off, got up, and filled a plastic bowl with water.

He gingerly lapped until the bowl was empty, then waddled over. Just getting him hydrated seemed to make a huge difference. His belly began to swell out.

Glenn sat cross-legged, the chair base in his lap. He mumbled at me as he held a screw in the corner of his mouth. "So, what brings you to this godforsaken country?"

"He gets straight to the point, doesn't he?" I glanced over Glenn's head at Travis.

Glenn grunted. "People come here as contractors for three reasons. Financial trouble, hiding from a predicament in their life, or they're idealists, think they'll change the world." He paused. "So, which one is it for you?"

I studied the dark creases in Glenn's face. "I've got some bills to pay, and I wanted to be part of something bigger. I'm not so sure this country is forsaken."

"Idealist!" Glenn looked smug. "An idealist who also sees the opportunity to get ahead. Now, are you quite sure you're not also hiding?"

I tried to hold it at bay, but a shiver ran up my spine. I pulled back.

The room was uncomfortably empty of conversation.