J. MALCOLM GARCIA

# Carpet Deals

When his former driver, Firash, entered his office, the aid worker glanced up from his desk and the drought report he had been reading, his face wreathed in sweat from an unrelentingly hot summer afternoon, did a double-take, and then collected himself and stood, his look of surprise spreading into a forced smile; he stuck out his right hand, and Firash, with his own tight smile, shook it. Then he bowed, placing his right hand over his heart. The aid worker did the same.

"As-Salaam-Alaikum," Firash said.

"Wa-Alaikum-Salaam," the aid worker replied.

"It's good to see you."

"And you."

The aid worker, an administrator for a Washington-based humanitarian organization he and his colleagues referred to as the agency, pointed to a chair that held a heap of papers ready to topple.

"Give those to me and sit, please."

Firash passed the papers to the aid worker, who set them on the floor by his chair.

"Please," he said again.

"Thank you," Firash said and sat stiffly.

"How is your family?"

"Well. Yours?"

"Well."

Since the aid worker had last seen him, Firash had cut his gray hair so short his scalp showed, and he had allowed his beard to grow down to his chest. Perspiration gathered in the tanned, wrinkled valleys of his forehead, and his blue eyes were clear and mirrored the aid worker's face.

"Your beard, you look like Taliban."

"It is for my security."

"Security?"

"Yes, of course. In Kabul, you never know who you're talking to. Maybe Talib, maybe not."

No one says safety here, the aid worker thought. It's always security. He ran a hand through his hair. He was thirty-three but felt much older. He'd attended college to be a teacher, but a friend pursuing a social work degree encouraged him to switch majors so they would be in the same classes. A job fair his senior year connected him with the agency. He moved to Washington and helped administer farm programs in Iowa, Illinois, and Nebraska. Within five years he was named director of the Midwest region. He anticipated further promotions that he hoped might lead to work within the executive director's office, but in his sixth year the agency sent him to Kabul to organize a new agriculture project funded by the United Nations and World Bank—a temporary assignment, he was told. He studied the Quran and Dari, the language of northern Afghanistan. Five years later he was still in Kabul. He had long since given up understanding the opaque verses of the Quran, although he had memorized a few stanzas, and except for one or two expressions, mastering the guttural sounds of Dari was beyond him.

"There is no need to say anything about the Taliban other than to remind ourselves to be cautious," Firash said.

"Of course."

"How was Seattle? Your home, sir?"

"Yes, it's where I grew up and went to school. It was good, thank you. I got back last week."

"Yes, I know this," Firash said.

The aid worker didn't ask how Firash knew. One of the gardeners may have told him, or one of the women who mop the office floor every morning, the hems of their blue burqas wet with soapy water. All the nationals who worked for the agency seemed related in one way or another, the aid worker thought. Cousins, nieces, it was hard to keep track. Any one of them could have spoken to Firash. He patted sweat from his forehead with a prayer shawl and dabbed dust off his desk. A ceiling fan whirred and clanked above his head, and behind him, through an open window, he heard the sounds of traffic in the still air and the shouts of boys playing soccer in an empty lot where the remains of a mortared bank stood. Concrete blast walls now cordoned off the area, intensifying the warmth from the sun, and the noise of donkeys braying and roosters crowing and the calls to pray mingled into a cacophony that buffeted him with its commotion. Despite his time here, he continued to feel the culture shock of his first days.

"Who drives for you now?" Firash asked.
"Mahmoud."
"You like him?"
"Yes, why not?"
Firash shrugged.
"Better than me?"
"I didn't say that," the aid worker said.

The aid worker met Firash his first day in Kabul, when Firash picked him up at the airport. Over the course of their time together, the aid worker learned that he had survived the Russian occupation, the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal, the five-year Taliban rule, and now the Americans. He told the aid worker stories about Taliban officials whipping him when they suspected he had trimmed his beard, and about a militia leader who would not help his son, injured by a mine and in need of urgent care at a hospital controlled by the commander's militia, unless Firash agreed to let the warlord marry his daughter. Firash agreed. His son survived, and the commander took his daughter that night, but he died two days later in a mortar attack and Firash's daughter returned home, no longer a virgin but legally wed and eligible for a war widow pension. Praise Allah, Firash had told the aid worker. He lived a life in which he learned to fear men in power and use his wits to live one day to the next and trust in God.

His instincts for self-preservation had led Firash to quit the agency when U.S. soldiers burned one hundred copies of the Quran in a detention center outside Kabul. Local workers found charred copies among the trash at an incinerator, touching off several days of rioting and protests with demonstrators shouting, "Death to America!" The aid worker had been vacationing in Seattle when the news broke, and his email filled with updates on the violence. His supervisor told him the furor prevented Western staff from leaving the agency compound. Firash, he continued, had stopped coming to work. Only a few nationals had not quit. These goddamn Afghans, the supervisor wrote. We spend all this money on them and they leave us when we need their help!

The aid worker had heard him make similar statements under much less stressful conditions. He had made them himself. All the Western staff had. The farmers who came to the agency never seemed appreciative of the help they received; they only asked for more. More this, more that; it was never enough. The national staff was no different.

When the value of the dollar declined, they demanded raises to make up the difference. It was as if the agency had become an alternative to the failing government in Kabul, from which the farmers and national staff expected support for every aspect of their lives. Their dependency, the aid worker thought, had reduced them to spoiled, sullen children.

He had not always been this cynical. When he first arrived in Kabul, wearing slacks and a white polo shirt with the agency logo embroidered over the breast pocket, he had felt truly important. Maps of Afghanistan sprawled over a table and he leaned in examining each one, imitating the serious looks and the deep-throated voices of his more senior colleagues as they discussed projects and budgets. They never asked the national staff their opinions, except those who had lived in the States, had returned to Kabul after 9/11, and now held positions in government and business.

Through the office windows the aid worker would watch farmers waiting in line for a case worker, the same farmers the projects were intended to help. They also never participated in planning discussions, although their perspective would have provided useful information, given their intimate knowledge of the land. They also might have asked pertinent questions: How would any of these plans work, given a years-long drought, the ravages of which they experienced daily and that appeared to have no end in sight? Where would the water come from? How would it be channeled to the farms? And how would cultivating wheat, maize, barley, and rice be better than growing the poppies that needed little rain and were much more profitable, because of an illicit drug trade that supported the Taliban?

Over time, as he raced with a security escort through Kabul to endless meetings, to stare at countless maps and read dozens of memos, the aid worker realized that his colleagues had the same questions but had learned, as he had, not to ask them. Securing grant money was the end goal—implementing a project to its successful conclusion was secondary. The agency needed to show just enough progress to convince U.N. and World Bank representatives to not just continue their support but increase it. Among other things, this entailed a schizophrenic spending strategy. Use money sparingly at the beginning of a fiscal year and spend lavishly at the end, so not a dime was left. A surplus would mean less funding in the next budget cycle. Like the farmers and the national staff, the aid worker concluded, the agency always wanted more. In time so would he.

"I think Kabul is peaceful again now," Firash said. "Every day people complain that Afghanistan is in the deep shit, every day there is a bombing or a protest, but every day I wake up and my life continues and I am not dead."

"That's good," the aid worker said.

"Yes, inshallah, but I have no job," Firash said.

"I'm sorry, but I understand you quit."

"For my security."

"I understand."

"I worked for you a long time."

"Yes, but you quit."

THE AID WORKER WISHED he could rehire Firash. Mahmoud made him uneasy, but he was certain his supervisor would disapprove. Mahmoud had been pleasant enough when he fetched him at the airport, formal and courteous like every Afghan he'd worked with, including Firash, but he was also agitated, hyped up as if he had drunk too much coffee. After Mahmoud put his duffel bags in the back of the agency van and then hurried around to the passenger side and opened the door for him, the aid worker asked him about Kabul. How were things? Had the city returned to normal after "the incident"? — as his supervisor had instructed him to call the Quran burnings. You don't want to rile people by mentioning Quran and burning in the same sentence, he had warned.

Despite this caution, the question released a passionate response from Mahmoud, and he answered with a simmering animation he could barely contain. Until recently, he said, there were tire fires throughout Kabul, and men marched, shouting, "Jihad against America!" No Westerner could go outside. All the agency people stayed in their offices. They were so scared. Mahmoud laughed, and he turned to the aid worker with a derisive look. I myself denounced America for burning the Quran, he continued. After all this time in Afghanistan, why is it, I wondered, that the Americans still didn't understand Afghan people? Why is it they insult and defile the Holy Book? Why is it there are no jobs except with NGOs? Why is it there is still fighting? Because America doesn't care for Afghan people and abuses us. We had security under the Taliban, and everyone understood the teachings of the Quran. Why is it the Americans do not? What has America done for us?

The agency director, Mahmoud went on, asked him to bring food for the staff and he refused, because it was too dangerous to be seen entering the compound, but really, even if it had been safe, he would not have helped them. His duty was to Allah first, not the infidel, although he understood the agency staff had not burned the Quran. Still, they were all Westerners to him, just as Afghans were all Afghans to them. He had heard U.S. soldiers call Afghans fucking hajis. No one separates the good from the bad. Why should he?

"I am sorry for this," Mahmoud told the aid worker.

"But you still work for us," the aid worker said.

"Yes, of course. Your American president Obama apologized for burning our Holy Book, and I need my job."

Mahmoud shook a smoke from a pack on the dashboard and offered one to the aid worker. He refused and stared out the windshield at the tumult of cars on the road and the rush of bodies on the crowded sidewalks navigating among the glut of vendors, their wares strewn across blankets on the ground, the bearded men and burqa-clad women resembling Biblical figures, and he felt stunned as he always did when he returned to Afghanistan. Just twenty-four hours earlier he had been in Seattle. It felt much longer.

Mahmoud continued driving in silence, except when he cursed a driver who cut in front of him. The aid worker rocked in his seat with the stop-and-go traffic. The summer heat pressed down, and the aid worker thought of the farmers who would line up outside the agency when he arrived, to plead with him to let them join the agency's agriculture program. *Mister, please*! The thought exhausted him. He could envision the year-end report on his desk, "*Giving the Afghan People the Means to Achieve Their Own Aspirations*": The Good Book, as he and his colleagues dubbed it, filled with page after page of data listing the numbers of families assisted with "soil nutrients" (fertilizer), "crop initiators" (seed), and "agricultural enhancement aids" (hoes, shovels, rakes, mules). Then there was the "additional assistance" category—that included everything from distribution of clothes to bus tokens and food for starving families, unable to yield even a sprout from the dry soil.

Some services had no heading other than miscellaneous. Collected into this statistical rabbit hole were the "internally displaced" people ("someone who is forced to flee his or her home but who remains within his or her country's borders": Section 10, Page 220, Paragraph 4),

people who had no farms, no homes, no anything, and nowhere to go, and who had turned the agency courtyard into a homeless encampment; the aid worker anticipated that, when he reached his office, he would walk past these men, women, and children, as he had every day before he left, and they would reach out to him, their thin arms stretched upward, palms exposed, a grimace of silent pleading on their faces. They were no longer anything but lives disrupted by the circumstances that had led to and followed 9/11, reducing them to supplicants of the post-Taliban order, just as they'd had been supplicants in the post-Russian order and in the post–civil war order. Farmers who raised a good crop received more assistance the following year whether they needed it or not, because the agency was reliant on them for "positive statistical outcomes" to offset the internally displaced and other bad numbers.

However, it remained a constant battle to tabulate positive data. Those families whose crops failed were discharged from the program and categorized as "unfavorable statistical outcomes"; they joined the families encamped in the courtyard. They were no longer eligible for the agriculture program but still in need. When Mahmoud pulled into the agency, they swarmed the van. Wading through the throng, the aid worker, his head barely above the outstretched hands, pushed his way toward his office like a drowning man struggling toward shore.

"Ayan has been asking about you," Firash said. "You know, the carpet merchant."

"I know."

"He asked if you're back."

"You saw him?"

"Yes. He asked if you had his money."

The aid worker nodded and then looked toward the open door of his office as one of the gardeners knocked, another man following closely behind him. The aid worker recognized the gardener but did not know his name. The man beside him was quite thin, and his clothes were stained and dirt-smeared.

"What's up?" he said.

"Sir, this man wants to thank you," the gardener explained. "His son got a job with the tailor you recommended."

Tailor? the aid worker thought. He looked at the man, who grinned at him. Tailor? He frowned, thinking. Oh . . . wait. Wait a minute. Yes, yes—yes, the tailor. Christ, that was before he left for Seattle. He re-

membered now. He had taken a jacket to a tailor in the Shar-e-Naw shopping district to have the zipper repaired. The tailor spoke a little English and told him that he had so much business he needed to hire an apprentice. He was an older man and did not want to be in his shop every day but instead at home, playing with his grandchildren. The aid worker mentioned him to a case worker responsible for the families living in the courtyard. Maybe she had a client who could help the tailor. She said she'd ask around. He had not expected anything to come of it.

"Really?" he said. "That's good, isn't it? I mean, tell him congratulations."

"This man wants to know if you can help him with money for food," the gardener said, looking down.

"To hold the family over until his son gets paid? Yes, I understand."

Firash cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, sir, but an apprentice won't earn more than two, maybe five U.S. dollars a month," he said. "I was an apprentice at one time. To a cobbler."

"So, he's going to need money — today and tomorrow until whenever — is what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir."

"It doesn't matter his son has a job."

"Maybe a little. He is only a boy. When he is older and has his own tailor shop, then he can help his family."

The aid worker strummed his fingers against his desk and didn't look up for what seemed a long time.

"Of course," he said finally. "What happened to our food pantry? Don't we have anything?"

"No, we are waiting for a bread delivery," the gardener said, still looking down.

The aid worker opened a drawer and took out a small metal box that held petty cash. A few Afghan coins and bills. He took two dollars' worth and handed them to the gardener, who gave them to the man.

"Tašakor," they both said and bowed.

"You're welcome," the aid worker said.

He watched them leave. An internship. A successful outcome. He jotted it down in a notebook. Firash sat quietly as he wrote. The aid worker finished put down his pen and leaned back and faced the ceiling, rolling the stiffness from his neck.

"OK, where were we? What were you saying? About Ayan?"

"I saw him in the bazaar. I said I'd not seen you."

"And now you have."

"What do we do?"

"We?"

Firash stared at him.

"We," he said again. "I work for you. He will hold me responsible. You left owing him money. If he thinks you're not here, he will say I have to pay him."

"Worked for me," the aid worker reminded him. "You worked for me. You left."

"My family."

"He won't harm your family. You just tell him you don't work at the agency."

"He won't care. This is about my security, sir. I have to answer to this man."

The aid worker spun around in his chair and stared out the office window, annoyed. Why does everything have to be so complicated, he wondered. He noticed Mahmoud washing the van, his agency polo shirt wet and hanging off his body, small rainbows shimmering around the wet bumpers. When he stopped for lunch, Mahmoud would put on a salwaar kameez and sit with the other national staff, who would also have changed into their traditional clothes, beneath trees near the cafeteria where the aid worker and his colleagues ate. It occurred to him that, when the national staff was off duty, they understood they were nothing more or nothing less than the farmers, dependent on this job provided by Westerners. They were not colleagues of their employers, but like them reliant on the needs of Afghans more desperate than them. He wondered what Mahmoud and the other nationals talked about. Had they found the fear Westerners felt during the riots amusing? Empowering? Maybe. Probably. He wasn't going to ask.

"What do we do about Ayan?" Firash asked again.

"Why do we have to do anything?" the aid worker said, resting his chin on the steepled tips of his fingers.

"I have to answer to him," Firash said again.

"No, you don't."

THE DAY BEFORE he left Kabul for Seattle, the aid worker had asked Firash to take him to Ayan, who had sold him carpets since he'd first

arrived in Kabul. He got them for no more than one hundred, sometimes two hundred dollars apiece, and sold them for much more than that in Seattle. He had room in two spare duffel bags for six or so five-by-seven carpets, depending on their size and how tightly he could fold them. If, as usual, they sold for no less than twelve hundred dollars each, he'd make more money than he had on any previous trip home.

Firash pulled up in the agency van outside his office, and the aid worker got out, eyes adjusting to the bright sunlight, hands up waving away a glut of flies converging around the open window of the passenger door. He and Firash greeted one another—As-Salaam-Alaikum, Firash said, Wa-Alaikum-Salaam, the aid worker replied—in the monotone voices and expressionless smiles of men who had fallen into a habit of addressing one another the same way morning after morning no matter their mood.

Turning out of the compound, Firash drove toward Chicken Street, where Westerners converged to buy souvenirs in Shar-e-Naw and where dozens of merchants, Ayan included, had stalls. They navigated through a Rubik's Cube mix of cars, trucks, and mule-drawn carts. A traffic light blinked red, but drivers ignored it and the intersection clotted with angry men beeping furiously; women in burqas holding the hands of their children took the opportunity to cross the street, hurriedly weaving in and out among cars; the beeping thickened the air with so much noise that the din and the stifling day felt like a physical thing bearing down on everyone; and the aid worker sank in his seat, closing his eyes until the weight lifted.

At Chicken Street, Firash parked in a lot beneath the open sore of an office building shattered by a suicide bomber, waving away five boys who offered to wash the van's windows. Getting out, the aid worker followed Firash past smoking kabob grills and small restaurants that catered to the fast-food tastes of Westerners by selling hamburgers and chicken burgers and french fries, and the boys chased after the aid worker with their hands out, but he continued walking, ignoring their pleas until they fell behind and looked for other Westerners to target.

Meandering down an alley, Firash and the aid worker turned a corner into a narrow street that led into a courtyard surrounded by four three-story buildings. Heavy wood doors on the balconies of each floor opened into rooms filled with multicolored carpets, many of which hung from racks. Still more stood in columned stacks reaching so high they blocked the illumination of bare bulbs suspended from

the ceiling. Firash and the aid worker entered Ayan's shop on the second floor of the building facing them. Ayan, a short, thin man with a full gray beard, sat in a corner on small pile of rugs. A teapot warmed on a hotplate, only one coil red with warmth. Ayan grinned and stood, arms widespread.

"Hello, my friend," he said to the aid worker.

They embraced, and then they stepped back and bowed, placing their right hands over their hearts.

"It's good to see you again," the aid worker said.

"Yes, it has been a long time."

"Not too long."

"Please sit," Ayan urged and waved a hand to where he had been sitting.

"No, thank you. I want to look."

"Of course. Just looking, it costs nothing to look. Some green tea for you?"

"No, thank you."

"Whatever you like, it's yours, you know this. For you, don't worry. You are a good customer. You know I'll give you a good price."

The aid worker was already thinking how much he should offer, how high he should go. On his first trip to Kabul, Ayan had sold him a red carpet with a large, quartered octagon displayed in columns and framed within a gold border. When he returned to Seattle on vacation, he asked the owner of a carpet store, Floor Coverings International Rug Gallery on First Avenue, to assess its value. The owner, a slender, elderly man with a thick head of uncombed, graying red hair, carried it into a back room, laid it out on a wood table and peered at it through a magnifying glass. Without looking up, he asked the aid worker where he had bought it and how much he had paid for it.

"Afghanistan. Kabul. One hundred fifty. He wanted two hundred, but I talked him down."

"Dollars?"

"Yes."

The store owner blinked and removed his glasses and pinched his eyes.

"I could sell this for at least a thousand dollars. More probably. Maybe fifteen hundred."

"Fifteen hundred?"

"Likely. I charge ten percent commission."

"I didn't come here to sell it. I just wanted it appraised."

"Really? Then why have it appraised? For the insurance?"

"A thousand?"

"Fifteen hundred probably."

A week later, he sold it for eighteen hundred dollars and gave the aid worker a check for one thousand six hundred and twenty dollars.

"I'll be returning to Afghanistan," the aid worker told him as he put the check in his wallet. "I'll be gone nine months before my next vacation."

"I'll be here," the owner said.

Ayan poured the aid worker a cup of green tea as he had the previous times he visited, and the aid worker set it down as he always did and ignored the tea to examine carpets. He chose one that Ayan told him was a fine piece from Herat, one of the best, and then he showed him other Herat carpets. The aid worker sorted through them. A blue carpet with triangular patterns caught his attention. He hefted it and liked its weight. The thicker and heavier a carpet, the better its quality and the less susceptible to crushing, the Seattle dealer had told him. He noticed several other rugs of similar design with green tassels. He picked three. Then he considered carpets from Bamyan and Mazar-i-Sharif. Nothing was marked with a tag. Ayan tossed out prices as if on a whim, and the aid worker, unable to contain his enthusiasm, set aside twelve carpets, twice as many as he had intended to buy. Ayan produced a dust-covered calculator from beside the hotplate and punched in numbers.

"Twenty-five hundred for everything," he told the aid worker.

"Too much."

"Usually, I sell these for three hundred and fifty, four hundred dollars each. But for you I'm giving a special price."

"I'll take two more for that price."

"Which two?"

The aid worker pointed at a red carpet with elongated human and animal figures and a gold carpet of similar design. He and Ayan haggled, interjecting questions about the well-being of each other's families, until they agreed upon a price of twenty-eight hundred dollars and shook hands. The aid worker took out his wallet and counted fifteen hundred dollars. He'd have to return to the agency for the difference.

"It's a fair price," Ayan said.

"I'm not saying it isn't. I just didn't bring that much with me."

"We agreed."

"We did. I just need to get the rest of what I owe. You have too many good carpets and I bought more than I anticipated."

"No problem, my friend."

"No, no problem, thank you."

"Take the carpets and come back."

"I'd rather come back and get them."

Ayan shook his head.

"Does not the Holy Book say, And if someone is in hardship, then let there be postponement until a time of ease?"

"I'm not in hardship. I have the money. Just not with me."

"My friend, take them and come back."

The aid worker knew Ayan wanted to complete the sale, worried perhaps he would change his mind and not return. No worry there. He wanted the carpets, but traffic would be hell. Might take an hour or more to go back, get his money, return and then go back again. It would be simpler to take them now, so he could pack them tonight. He could come by in the morning on his way to the airport. No problem.

"OK," he agreed. "I'll pay the rest tomorrow morning."

Ayan wrote *thirteen hundred owed* in a notebook beside the day's date. The aid worker signed his name.

"Tomorrow," the aid worker said.

"Yes, tomorrow, inshallah."

"Inshallah," the aid worker said.

The next morning, running late and worried he'd miss his flight, the aid worker did not stop at Ayan's shop. At the airport, he told Firash to tell Ayan he'd pay him when he returned in three weeks. He considered giving Firash the money to give Ayan but decided against it. The agency paid Firash just fifty dollars a day. To receive an envelope with thirteen hundred dollars might risk temptation. If Firash were to disappear, the aid worker would still owe Ayan and be out twenty-six hundred dollars. No, Ayan could wait.

When he reached Seattle, he received an email from Firash who said Ayan was very upset and wanted an additional one hundred dollars for the delay. Cursing, the aid worker deleted the message without answering. Greedy bastard. The next day he drove to Floor Coverings International Rug Gallery and delivered the carpets. Within a week, the owner of a Silicon Valley tech startup bought them online, and the

aid worker collected a check for fifteen thousand dollars after commission. Fifteen grand. He stumbled outside in a daze. He had not expected that much. On the walk home, he started to run and skip, spinning in circles and shouting into the air, drawing confused and annoyed glances from the people he passed. He shouted, I made fifteen thousand dollars! pumping his arms as if he was rooting for a favorite sports team. At home, he took the few dollars in his wallet and threw them in the air. Fifteen goddamn grand! His yearly salary was thirty-thousand. Jesus! He couldn't stop laughing.

The following morning, he deposited the check, withholding thirteen hundred dollars for Ayan. Napping in the afternoon, he stayed up late and took long walks, relishing the cool air, the absence of traffic, and the ability to talk to people without a translator. He raised his arms and felt soft breezes lift his shirt and he squeezed his fingers, clutching the empty spaces around him.

Before he went to bed, he compulsively counted the money he had put aside for Ayan, stuffing the bills back in an envelope afterward, putting it in a pocket of his duffel bag. They were new and crisp, and he felt their newness each time he counted them, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together until he felt a growing resentment that he owed Ayan anything. He hated that he had made fifteen thousand dollars *minus* thirteen hundred dollars. That left him with thirteen thousand, seven hundred dollars. Not bad, but not as good as fifteen thousand. The aid worker stewed. Ayan had already made a profit with the money he had paid him. No Afghan would offer that much for carpets, and with the fear of violence there weren't that many Westerners left who would give him that kind of money, either. The bastard had scored like a bandit. To pay him an additional thirteen hundred dollars was nothing less than allowing Ayan to take advantage. He regretted he had not sent Firash in alone, certain he would have gotten a better deal.

The aid worker had been home for ten days when news broke about the Quran burnings. His return trip delayed, he deposited the money he had put aside for Ayan. Better than having it around the house, he reasoned. Three weeks later, after his supervisor gave him the all-clear, he rebooked his flight. The day before he was to leave, he packed his bags and drove to the bank to withdraw Ayan's money. Ten people stood ahead of him. He waited, shifting from one foot to the other and checking his phone for messages. He wondered what

the holdup was. There were tellers in every window. He tugged at his collar, his shirt feeling a little snug. It was his last day in Seattle. He shouldn't have to waste his time standing in line for Ayan. He checked the time. Five minutes had passed. Felt a lot longer. Ridiculous. He tapped his left foot against the floor. The woman in front of him looked at him curiously. Screw this, he said to her, and left, each step he took echoing on the shined tile floor. He pushed the glass door open to the sidewalk and raised his head to the clear sky, the tension in his body easing when he stopped thinking of Ayan.

"I DON'T THINK there's any reason for you to speak with Ayan," the aid worker told Firash.

"If I see him, I must."

"No."

"I gave him your message that you'd pay. You haven't paid. He will hold me responsible."

"I don't think so."

"He doesn't know you're back."

"Exactly. Let him keep waiting."

"He'll tire of waiting."

The ceiling fan whirred above their heads. The shouts of the gardeners interrupted the clanking sound, and families in the courtyard stood as if they had been called; they formed into loose lines, only to fold in among themselves when they realized that whatever it was that had caused them to rise held no purpose, and they sat again, waving their hands at flies.

"I don't think your plan will work," Firash said.

"You don't know my plan. Listen. I can't hire you back as my driver, because then I'd have to answer to my supervisor."

The aid worker leaned toward Firash.

"However, you can still earn money."

Firash frowned.

"How?"

"By working for me, not the agency."

Firash blinked but did not speak.

"I'd like you to buy carpets for me."

The aid worker watched Firash. Firash cleared his throat.

"Buy carpets, sir?"

"They see me, prices go up. You alone would get a better deal. Take

pictures with your phone, show me what you find, I pick what I like, and then you go back and buy them."

"How would I buy them?"

"I'll give you the money. You would earn five percent of everything you buy."

Firash scowled.

"OK, ten."

"Maybe twenty, sir."

The aid worker smiled.

"Maybe fifteen if you get great deals. The better the price, the higher the percentage. And you don't speak with Ayan. You don't buy carpets from him. I'm finished with Ayan."

"Yes," Firash said, "I understand this . . . but if I see him?"

"You're Afghan. He won't expect you to have money. What can he do? He can't get nothing from nothing. Forget Ayan. Start today. Come back with some pictures when you can."

"I'd rather work for the agency."

"You're working for me."

"It is not the same."

"It's a job."

"And if you don't want to pay me like you don't want to pay Ayan?"

"This is very different."

Firash crossed his arms and looked off to one side. Dogs barked, and the fading, fading afternoon sun had turned the sky orange. Shifting in his chair, Firash looked at the aid worker. The aid worker stared back at him.

"Twenty percent," Firash said.

The aid worker sighed. Sweat glossed his forehead. He leaned back and cracked his knuckles and ran numbers through his head.

"Very well," he said finally, "twenty it is."

"Inshallah."

"Inshallah."

The aid worker stood and stuck out his hand, and Firash bowed and left without shaking it. He might tell Ayan I'm back, the aid worker thought, watching him go. He probably will. For his security. Whatever. If Ayan stormed into his office, the aid worker would renegotiate what he owed, perhaps squeeze another carpet out of the situation. Or, he might just deny knowing him. Keep a straight face. You have

me confused with someone else, sorry. Have Ayan escorted out. He imagined his fury, the curses that would spew from his mouth. Another angry Afghan, get in line. The aid worker would file a report.

He looked outside toward the families in the courtyard. At the next staff meeting, he'd mention the kid with the apprenticeship. Good news everyone will want to hear. They'll clap. They'll feel good. They should about something—a positive outcome was a positive outcome. And fifteen grand was a tidy sum. A lot tidier than thirteen thousand, seven hundred. He sat and returned to the report he had been reading before Firash interrupted. He thumbed through its pages, flapping his sweat-stained shirt against his chest. Today, tomorrow, next week, at some point, Firash would return, the aid worker was certain, and Ayan, too. Each in their own turn, each with their own need. It didn't matter who came first. He'd deal.