

# Cruel Messenger by Timothy W. Ayers

## Prologue

Mahmood rose early from his thin floor mattress and breathed out a cloud of warm, moist air into the cold Afghanistan morning. He knew the work ahead of him and had made peace with himself over it. Yet doubts, guilt, and sadness consumed his soul.

On this beautiful day, under the bright blue sky of his homeland, he had purged his soul of his sinful thoughts. Soon he would step through the gates of paradise. Instead of intensely desiring a single slender, pretty infidel virgin, he would be in paradise with seventy-two who shared his faith.

So his faith promised, but his heart screamed in anger.

Mahmood removed a package from its hiding place, the first time he had touched it since the day he picked it up from a messenger of Sabawoon Habibi, leader of the local Taliban. He unrolled the chador from around the thick package and re-rolled it around the note he'd struggled to write last night.

He unwrapped the front page of a local newspaper underneath the cloth, the last barrier between him and the explosives that would bring his death. He had not touched the vest since the day he had picked it up.

As he strapped the explosive vest across his chest and placed his perahan tunban tunic over it, his mind went over and over his instructions regarding the group of college-aged American missionaries from Co-Exist, for which he had worked as translator and guide these last three months. He pushed his way through Jalalabad on that brisk morning and finally arrived at the compound for the Americans. The Taliban guards who had kept the Americans alive and safe, as agreed by Sabawoon Habibi to Rev. Amin, ignored him, as usual. As with previous groups, no one had questioned how Rev. Amin was able to forge a deal with the Taliban to provide for the safety of the Co-Exist groups, even though war and guns filled his country. Instead, the foolish American politicians, leaders, and pastors who supported his ministry thanked him for the protection that allowed them to work freely in the countryside around Jalalabad, constructing homes, digging wells, and teaching the male children.

Mahmood entered the gates of the American compound, and the twenty missionaries due to leave later that afternoon rushed into the courtyard to welcome him one last time. He had befriended each...even Gloria Beck. When she neared, his skin tingled, his words became stiff, and her presence clouded his mind.

To them, he was their friend who had taught them Afghan culture and tutored them in the Pashto language. In their eyes, he had helped them accomplish their mission to show both Christians and Muslims how they could work together to meet the needs of the poor and weak.

As required by the Taliban, Gloria and all of the young females wore a chador wrapped around their heads, and their clothing appropriately covered their skin. But their adherence to each of the restrictions meant nothing. Today they would discover why Rev. Amin was able to forge a deal with the terrorists, what his end of the bargain entailed.

He knew what he had to do, but his overwhelming desire to protect Gloria from it had driven him to adjust the instructions given to him.

He dared to brush a hand against the fabric wrapped around her head. "Gloria, I noticed your chador was fraying, and I picked up another for you at the market in town." He handed her the gift.

She smiled under her veil. He couldn't see it on her mouth, but her eyes expressed it.

"I thank you deeply. I will treasure this, and my time here, the rest of my life," she responded in Pashto.

"I must also return to you your phone. It must have fallen out of your pocket while we worked yesterday. I picked it up, but I forgot it was in my tunic when we returned." His smile dimmed at the thought of the video he had recorded on the phone to explain his actions to her, but she seemed not to notice.

"Oh, thank you! I looked all over for it last night. Now I will be able to watch movies during the long flight." She laughed, and it sounded like music to Mahmood, a music forbidden on many levels, but it momentarily made him happy.

"Go and place the chador in your room and join us again before our last meal together."

Gloria trotted the one hundred yards to her dwelling. As the door closed behind

Gloria, Mahmood, believing she would be safe, ripped open his tunic and cried the prayer, “Allahu Akbar!”

\* \* \*

Right before the door clicked behind her, Gloria thought she heard Mahmood call out to her. She opened the door halfway when a bright light exploded outside.

Fire ate the air. An intense shock wave pounded against the door. It knocked her back inside with such intensity that she hit the floor, the last thing she remembered before blacking out.

When she roused, she peered out the door at the smoking devastation. Dead, her friends were all dead. Except her.

One thought filled her. Her dear, sweet Mahmood had been a terrorist—someone who viewed her people only as infidels who deserved death. Someone who hated her people enough to kill himself in order to accomplish it.

They thought he’d been like them, wanting to help the people of the world. Instead, he left this earth and took them with him. She pulled her knees up to her chest and bawled. How deceived she and her friends had been!

## Chapter 1

*Three months later*

“Your dad stopped by with Orval Miller last night,” Mom said as I plopped down in a chair next to her bed at the Baptist Senior Home in the North Hills of Pittsburgh.

If her mind was drifting through memories from other times and other places, this would be a long morning. In spite of the fact that Dad had been dead for three years, I held my tongue. In my daily visits over the last year, I’d learned not to try bringing her back from jaunts into her alternate universe. In time I learned, like many loved ones of Alzheimer’s patients, that it was better to sit, listen, and love. More difficult, but better for everyone.

At least this time she hadn’t drifted all the way off. Dad’s old friend, Orval, was elderly, but still very much alive. “It’s always good to see Orval.” I allowed my own mind to wallow in the past for a moment. Mom’s stroke had been the last in a series of bad events that started with my father’s cruel battle with cancer. It beat him, at least what was left of the bigger-than-life person everyone but my family called the Reverend Doctor Joshua Cameron. Then the strain of his death left Mom with a stroke, followed rapidly by oncoming Alzheimer’s.

My devotion to Mom was a little greater than my younger brother’s. Zach kept Mom’s finances straight and paid out the medical bills. My job was to sit and listen to Mom’s stories. And, oh, did she have some great stories to tell.

“So how did the visit with Dad and Mr. Miller go?” I asked.

“Your dad looks better than ever. Heaven must really agree with him. He’s put back on all the weight he lost when he was sick. Best of all, he says they let him preach as long as he wants.” She gave a quick clap and her eyes flashed with a momentary twinkle of joy.

“That should make Dad happy. He never was much for watching the clock when it came to preaching.” It wasn’t the first time she said Dad had visited. He rarely came with a friend though, especially a living friend. “What did Mr. Miller have to say?” I asked.

“Well, Zach—”

“I’m Jude, Mom. I’m the oldest of your two boys. Zach is the younger brother

with the bald head. I'm the older one, who's a detective." I needed to keep that straight. She already thought most of my gifts to her were from some guy in Germany named George. Interesting, since none of us knew of any history of a gentleman named George in her real life.

"Well, sometimes I get a little confused, and since you don't visit much it's hard to remember you sometimes," Mom said playfully, with her well remembered crooked smile.

"Mom, I'm here every day."

It was nice to see a hint of the woman that used to play games with my brother and me in the back pew of church during the long Sunday evening services. Like I said, Dad never was one for clock-watching once he took the pulpit.

"What did Mr. Miller have to say?" I asked again.

"How did you know he was here?" Mom said it as if she was genuinely surprised that I knew of the visit. She was drifting again but quickly got back on track. "But it is funny that you should ask, because Deacon Miller wanted to talk to you. I told him you weren't here, and that seemed to bother him." She stopped in mid-thought to point to her bed stand. "Could you hand me the Ensure, dear?"

Mom took a sip. "You know, they are so good to me here at the school."

I shook my head. Her shifts between her alternate realities were giving me whiplash. So, now we were in the days when she had been the president of the school board. It probably made her time at the home more pleasant to think she was back in a period when she was vital to both her family and her community.

She took another sip. "Whenever I want one of these drinks, I just knock on the door to the restaurant and yell—"

I finished the story with her and we both said together "—Yoo-hoo!" This was probably the hundredth time I'd heard the tale.

Mom giggled at our little joke. I prodded her back on topic. "What did Mr. Miller say?"

"Like I was saying before you interrupted me, he wanted to talk to you. Once he saw you weren't here, he was a little distressed. So I offered to give you a message. He said, 'two-fifteen,' then he grabbed your dad's arm and off they went down the hall."

Story finished, she laid back on her bed.

I spread my arms in front of me. “I have no idea what he could mean by that. You know what, Mom, I’ll swing by his office today and ask him.” If I left soon, I would still have time to visit him before my shift started at noon.

Mom’s eyes started to close. “Yes, do that. He seemed so upset.” She paused, and her eyes closed completely. A moment later, they snapped open. “And please tell him thank you for visiting your dad.” Mom closed her eyes again, and a peaceful look crossed her face.

It was nap time, and that was my cue to go.

