

ROCK THE KASBAH

by

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Bob Dylan

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"Speak of happiness and wine
And seek not the riddle of the universe,
For no one has, nor will,
unveil this mystery through wisdom."

--Pashtun proverb

KABUL

EXT. PASHTUN VILLAGE, SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN - NIGHT

A stray dog scavenges through the sleeping, mud-walled village. A flash of red darts from a dun-colored, earthen hut. A WOMAN in a scarlet burkha runs barefoot through the moonlit village and up into the boulder-strewn hills. She throws nervous glances over her shoulder as she climbs higher into the mountains.

The woman slips into a natural, rock-walled "room" formed by the huge boulders. Her bare feet crunch on a thin layer of mountain snow. She kneels at what looks like a small rock and yanks off a camouflage tarp to reveal a small, black and white TV set and a car battery. Sparks fly as the girl expertly connects the TV to the battery. The set glows, comes to life.

ON B&W TV - A YOUNG MALE AFGHAN CONTESTANT, wearing a white "Saturday Night Fever" suit and black shirt, belts out an Afghan pop tune. The "Afghan Star" logo and pulsating show's theme music comes up. Quick cutting TV shots of the screaming, young Afghan STUDIO AUDIENCE hit by strobes, green lasers and disco-balls; the FOUR older, thoughtful JUDGES; back to the puffy-haired SINGER.

CLOSE - The WOMAN'S eyes glitter behind her scarlet burkha-mesh. Her bare toes tap to the forbidden music.

PULL UP - The girl in the red burkha, a small figure, huddles before the flickering TV set. She is the lone sign of life, high in the dark, forbidding Hindu Kush mountains.

The Afghan pop tune on TV dissolves into ANOTHER WOMAN'S QUAVERY, OFF-KEY VOICE struggling through Maroon 5's "She Will Be Loved".

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. ALGIERS MOTEL/SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA - DAY

Follow the woman's awful singing through the seedy motel's empty pool/patio and through an open motel suite window.

INT. RICHIE VANCE'S ALGIERS MOTEL ROOM/OFFICE - DAY

WE PAN Richie Vance's "Wall Of Fame": framed photos of Richie back in the day with 70's and 80's rock stars: Kim Carnes, Robin Trower, Rick James, Eddie Money...

RICHIE VANCE -- now a hard-lived 52 -- leans back in his desk chair beneath his wall of fame. He nods in time to the dreadful singing, eyes closed. The skinny, teenage girl stands across his desk, finishes with a painful flourish. Richie continues to nod, eyes closed. After a beat --

GIRL

Mr. Vance? I'm, I'm done.

Richie bolts forward.

RICHIE

No. Forgive me. You are just beginning.

GIRL

You liked it?

RICHIE

Liked it?! You made me want to swallow lye. Made me want to pull off all my clothes and dive into a vat of molten glass. Brittany, you made me feel. And that, sweetheart, is priceless. Sure the others might have rhythm or pitch or even a slight connection to the music but you have something much, much more powerful. Do you know what that is honey?

BRITTANY shakes her head, wide-eyed.

RICHIE

(jabbing his finger at her)

You... irritate... me.

Richie stands, walks around to her, sitting on his desk.

RICHIE

A grain of sand gets into the oyster, it irritates the bi-valve and what? A beautiful pearl is made. You, Brittany, are that irritating grain of sand... Celine Dion, Christina Aguilera, Pink. All deeply, profoundly irritating. And all huge stars.

BRITTANY

So, so you'll represent me?

RICHIE
In all markets. Global.

She screams, leaps to her feet, throwing her arms around him in a weepy hug. RONNIE SMILER, Richie's cranky mid-30s, female "assistant", pops her head in at Brittany's shriek. She sees (and knows) the hug and, rolling her eyes, Ronnie returns back to the outer office.

RICHIE'S OUTER OFFICE - LATER DAY

Ronnie reads Billboard magazine at her desk as Richie walks Brittany out.

RICHIE
...For head shots, studio time,
wardrobe, hair extensions--

BRITTANY
I have hair extensions.

RICHIE
Longer, blonder ones.

BRITTANY
So. A thousand dollars?

RICHIE
Twelve hundred. Personal check is
fine. It's all about trust, right
partner? This is exciting... I
gotta run and set up your showcase.

Richie kisses Brittany on the cheek and dives back into his office, slamming the door behind him.

BRITTANY
My showcase?!

INT. RICHIE'S OFFICE

Richie stands in his tiny office, facing the framed photos from his successful past. He stares past them out the window. Ronnie enters and sets Brittany's check on his desk. He doesn't turn around. She stares at his back a moment and leaves. A second later Ronnie returns.

RONNIE
What happened to you?

RICHIE
(without turning)
We got that Navy thing tonight...

RONNIE
Booking look-a-like bands for Bar
Mitzvah gigs. Conning checks from
losers. What happened to that
smile? That Richie Vance smile.
What'd you call it?

RICHIE
Wear the Meredith Brooks outfit
tonight.

RONNIE
Your "winner's smile". That's what
you called it. Look at those shots.
That grin, man. You were--

RICHIE
(wheels to her)
I am! Not were, sweetheart. Am.
This is all rope-a-dope, baby.
Sure, I'm taking some hits. It
looks pretty bad for Richie Vance
from the cheap seats but I am still
in the goddamn game! This isn't
forever. This is... San Diego. For
right now. Life is about seeing the
open door and walking through it.
Okay. Yes. Some asshole changed the
locks but the doors are still
there. I can see 'em. I'll figure
out a way in. I always have, always
will. Hey, maybe it's you. Maybe
you're my key. Maybe it's Ronnie
Smiler-time. Stranger things,
right?... How did I find Madonna?

RONNIE
Richie.

RICHIE
Singing for spare change in front
of the Hamburger Hamlet.

RONNIE
We need to talk. You promised that
after a year I would--

The phone rings.

RICHIE
(pointing to her office)
Door number one?

RONNIE
We need to talk.

The phone rings again. She hustles back to the outer office.

RICHIE
No. We need to rock!

Richie picks up Brittany's check, inspecting it in the light.
Meredith Brooks' "I'm A Bitch" kicks in.

INT. SAN DIEGO HILTON/THIRD FLOOR HALLWAY - NIGHT

Wild, Navy "Tailhook"-like party roars on. MOVE THROUGH hundreds of drunken Navy Pilots and their "dates" -- dancing writhing and grinding in the sweaty hallway -- towards the outside patio. "I'm a Bitch" thunders from the patio.

EXT. HILTON PATIO - NIGHT

Ronnie Smiler, now wearing a black shag wig and Meredith Brooks leatherette jumpsuit, belts out a convincing "Meredith Brooks" cover for the debauched crowd. A blasted CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER, arm looped over Richie's shoulder, sings/screams into Richie's ear:

WARRANT OFFICER
(screaming along)
"I'm a bitch! I'm a lover! I'm a
child! I'm a mother!--"
(to Richie)
God, this shit rocks!

RICHIE
Totally.

WARRANT OFFICER
I love this song!

RICHIE
It rocks.

WARRANT OFFICER
It totally rocks!

He lifts his scotch bottle by the neck.

WARRANT OFFICER
Wa-Hooooooo!!!!

RICHIE
(trying to pull away)
I've gotta go check on the... the
uh, fuse wattage...

WARRANT OFFICER
No, my man, what you gotta do, is
bring this shit to Afghanistan.

RICHIE
Afghanistan. Absolutely. Will do.

WARRANT OFFICER
(yanking Richie close,
touching foreheads)
USO tour. That's me, man. I book
those things. This chick, opening
for Jessica goddamn Simpson and
Shontelle?!

The Navy guy releases Richie, takes a swig of his scotch.

RICHIE
The real Shontelle?

WARRANT OFFICER
Yeah. Hell yeah. In country, dude.
Goddamn beautiful this time of
year. What time of year is it?

RICHIE
May.

WARRANT OFFICER
What?! Kandahar rocks in May. Do
the whole circuit -- Herat, Mazar-e
Sharif, Kunduz, Kabul.

RICHIE
A tour?

WARRANT OFFICER
A hellacious tour!

RICHIE
For money?

The Chief Warrant Officer snaps sober and stone-faced,
straightens to Navy officer attention.

WARRANT OFFICER
(glaring)
How about for your country?
(breaking into a goofy grin)
Hell yeah, homo. For a ton of money. We're at war, dude. The faucet is open!
(screaming to Ronnie/Meredith)
"I'm a sinner. I'm a saint. I do not feel ashamed..."

PUSH IN ON RICHIE as the coin drops.

EXT. TRACT HOUSE/SAN DIEGO - NIGHT

Working class tract house. Through the livingroom window WE SEE Richie's ex-wife, SYLVIA watching "Dancing With The Stars" on the flat screen. MOVE AROUND to the side of the house. Richie stands on tip-toes talking to his nine year-old daughter, DREE through her screened bedroom window.

DREE
Nobody tours Afghanistan.

RICHIE
That's not true.

DREE
Nobody good.

RICHIE
Well, now you're just being ugly.

DREE
Mom says it's a war zone.

RICHIE
Wishful thinking-

DREE
Why are you doing this?!

RICHIE
Sweetheart. Your father is a rock manager. Or was. This is what I'm supposed to do -- tour with my act. A real tour. With real bands. Real roadies, probably. Playing in front of thousands of people... Fine.

(MORE)

RICHIE(cont'd)

Yes. It's slightly out-of-town. But
it's a start.

Dree leans her little forehead against the screen.

RICHIE

I'll bring you back, they have
these cool, little stuffed
elephants with mirrors sewn on
them. Or at least they do in India.
Or maybe a magic carpet--

DREE

Just come home.

Sylvia screams from the living room:

SYLVIA (O.S.)

Hurry up! Anne Coulter's gonna
dance next!

DREE

(rolling her eyes)
I gotta go.

SYLVIA (O.S.)

Dree?!

Dree leans forward and puts her lips against the screen.
Richie strains higher on his toes and offers his cheek to
her. Dree kisses her dad through the screen.

RICHIE

I love you.

DREE

I love you more.

Dree blows him another kiss and runs from her room.

Richie drops down flat-footed, leans back against the wall.
He sighs and walks around to the front of the house. Richie
stands on the dark lawn, watching his daughter and ex-wife
cuddle on the couch in front of the TV.

EXT. AFGHANISTAN FROM 30,000 FEET HIGH - DAY

Snow-covered mountains, brown deserts -- stark, lunar and
very, very alien.

RICHIE (O.S.)
We crash here. We're eating each
other by nightfall.

RICHIE

stares out the Kam Air jet's window.

Richie turns to Ronnie sitting rigidly beside him. The ancient 727 roller-coasters through crazy turbulence. Ronnie robotically shakes her head from side-to-side.

RICHIE
What?

Ronnie doesn't answer, continues shaking her head.

RICHIE
Why are you doing that? You're
starting to freak me out.

RONNIE
(whipping on him, hissing)
Good! You should be freaked out.

RICHIE
Honey?

RONNIE
Look around!

Richie glances at his fellow Kam Air passengers: veiled Iranian women, turbaned Pashtun men, Persian and Afghan "businessmen" in cheap suits and sun-glasses.

RONNIE
(crazed stage whisper)
Even the stewardesses look like
suicide bombers. You know who owns
this airline? A drunken warlord! A
war-lord Richie! This is a goddamn
death trip!

RICHIE
Forgive me. The '85 Bangles tour
was a death trip. Susanna Hoffs
wouldn't even talk to her own--

Ronnie grabs his wrist in a vice-like, terror-grip.

RONNIE
I... want... to... go... home.

RICHIE

And we will. But in triumph.
Yesterday you were a part-time
secretary with a killer voice--
(pulling free of her grip)
Tonight you play in front of two
thousand horny soldiers. Two
thousand! We are on tour now,
babe. On tour. Our door has opened!

RONNIE

In Afghanistan?! And besides, I'm
tired of this tribute shit, Richie.
You promised! I got my own songs to
sing.

RICHIE

And they rock.

RONNIE

My own act. I'm sick of singing
loser stuff nobody even knows
anymore.

RICHIE

I get it. You want to sing your own
loser stuff. Your own stuff.
(off her glare)
We're close, honey. Come on, the
music business today... You know.
Computers... iTunes... Very...
User... friendly... It's called
"management strategy". Tonight,
Kabul. Tomorrow, Mazar-e Sharif,
"Queen of the North" to play for
three thousand--

RONNIE

I'm gonna hurl.

RICHIE

I ever tell you my Stevie Nicks
story?

Ronnie groans, bends over, head between her legs. Richie pats
her back.

RICHIE

I was filling her backstage M&M
bowl. The "Rumours" tour.

Horrible, gagging sounds from Ronnie. Richie winks and shrugs at a bearded, TALIBAN-LOOKING MAN glaring at them across the aisle.

RICHIE

Anyhow, Stevie can't go on. Won't go on. The crowd's screaming her name. Twenty-thousand spring breakers. "Stevie! Stevie". She will not go onstage. Everyone, Christine Perfect McVie even a certain Mister Lindsay Buckingham, tries to get her out there. Nothing. A disaster. I finally can't stand it and run over and grab her by the shoulders, look her in the eye and say, "Miss Stevie. I'm a nobody. Just a stupid fan, a gofer. But there are people out there, kids like me, who have worked and saved all month for this one night. To hear Stevie Nicks sing. To see Stevie Nicks twirl. You owe it to us to get out there!"

Ronnie lifts her head.

RONNIE

What happened?

RICHIE

She punched me in the face. Yeah. Deviated septum. Still got it. Blood everywhere. But Stevie went on and did a helluva gig. Ms. Ronnie Smiler, you are that kind of professional too.

RONNIE

A professional typist. I have never sung before that many--

RICHIE

Hey. How about the you in U.S.A.?

RONNIE

What?

RICHIE

You love your country? Simple question.

RONNIE
Leave me alone.

RICHIE
These are American kids, honey.
Scared, homesick and waiting for
you, even if they don't know it
yet. This is your chance of a
lifetime, sweetheart. Our chance.
To do good. To be good. My job?
Not let you blow it. For us.

Ronnie leans back in her seat, exhausted from stress. Richie
whispers in her ear.

RICHIE
That nice man across the aisle
believes in you.

Ronnie turns. The scary, bearded Afghan man across the aisle
stares daggers at Ronnie. She jerks away.

RONNIE
Oh my god.

RICHIE
No. He's cool. Huge Ronnie Smiler
fan.
(waving at the guy,
pointing to Ronnie)
Not wearing underwear!

RONNIE
(grabbing Richie's hand)
Idiot.

RICHIE
It's only rock and roll, baby.

EXT. KABUL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT - LATE AFTERNOON

Richie and Ronnie descend the jet-ramp stairs, eyeing the
charred, wrecked planes pulled off to one side of the tarmac,
the mortar blast-holes in the runways, the U.S, NATO and
Afghan troops bristling with AK-47s, Kalishnikovs and heavier
ordinances. Ronnie looks back at Richie who gestures to
beautiful snow-capped mountains looming in the distance.

RICHIE
Think Aspen. You know, but, at war.

INT. KABUL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT TERMINAL - LATE AFTERNOON

Chaotic third world, war-zone airport -- porters, passengers, hustlers, soldiers, cab drivers. A hurricane of alien noise circles Richie, Ronnie and an armed, uniformed U.S. Soldier, PRIVATE BARNES. Ronnie does her robotic, head-shaking thing.

PRIVATE BARNES

They probably never made it on the flight.

RICHIE

You mean our luggage was stolen?

PRIVATE BARNES

It has been known to happen.

RICHIE

Well...

(looking around at the
airport insanity)

Is there a lost and found?

Private Barnes bursts out laughing, covers it.

PRIVATE BARNES

Uhm... not in any traditional sense, sir.

RONNIE

Get me out of here Richie. Get me the hell outta here!

RICHIE

Private?

PRIVATE BARNES

We'll proceed to The Mustafa Hotel and get you people squared away. I'll come back at 1900 hours, pick you up and bring you to Camp Phoenix for tonight's show. Don't really want to be making the trip into town in the dark. Even with a Humvee and body armor.

RONNIE

Body armor?!

RICHIE

(taking Ronnie by the arm)

Good plan. Good plan.

(MORE)

(to Ronnie) RICHIE (cont'd)

Hey. Angel. We'll shop here for clothes. Tomorrow. My treat! Great shopping. Hippie chic. These people invented the word "bazaar".

PRIVATE BARNES

Actually sir, there was an assassination attempt on the Afghan President last week. We're in a lock-down mode. Markets, restaurants, tourist spots, anything outside your hotel are suggested off-limits to all westerners: NATO, U.N. personnel, all Non-Government Organizations, til further--

RONNIE

What?! A lockdown what?!

RICHIE

(turning his back to Ronnie)

From now on Private, let's, we'll just keep that kind of stuff on a need-to-know thing. 'Kay?

Richie throws an arm around Ronnie and they follow the Private through the crowded terminal.

INT. ARMY HUMVEE/KABUL - LATE AFTERNOON

Richie and Ronnie sit sandwiched between two very young, very big, very silent, very equipped (interceptor body armor, MICH helmets, M4 carbines, night-vision shades) ARMY SOLDIERS. On full alert, the soldiers stare out their windows at the lunatic Kabul traffic: six hundred thousand cars, tens of thousand bikes, scooters, two-ton man-pulled carts stacked high with goods, donkeys, goat herds and only one set of traffic lights.

Loud Army radio chatter from other patrols, fills the Humvee.

Richie stares out the window at his first glimpse of dusty, war-battered Kabul.

The Humvee stops at a traffic jam.

RICHIE'S POV - A RAGGED, TEN YEAR OLD GIRL - YASMIN

walks through the crowds, glancing over her shoulder.

She looks alot like Richie's daughter, Dree.

RICHIE watches Yasmin.

RICHIE'S POV - Yasmin breaks into a run, sprints through the sidewalk mob, desperately weaving between people. A man gives chase, shoving pedestrians aside. She is getting away. Suddenly another man steps around the corner and grabs the little girl.

RICHIE

Hey!

Yasmin struggles, but the man slams her against the wall.

RICHIE

HEY!

Richie leaps over the soldier and jumps from the Humvee. The soldier grabs at Richie but Richie pulls free, running to the girl. He yanks the man off of her. The man wheels, pulling a pistol. The second man charges over, his gun drawn. Richie throws up his arms. A crowd gathers instantly. The Humvee soldiers wade into the melee, guns up.

MAN 1

(waving his pistol,
screaming in Dari)

Get away! Police! Police!

PRIVATE BARNES

(taking Richie's arm)

They're cops. Kabul police. Come
on. Let's go.

Richie looks down at the scrawny, dirty child pressed against the wall. She looks up at him with hungry eyes. The mob grows, screaming insults, shaking their fists.

PRIVATE BARNES

Now!

U.S. SOLDIER 1

(to mob)

Okay! No problem. No problem.
Salaam aliekum... We're gone...

Richie and the soldiers back slowly, followed by shouting Afghans, to the Humvee.

INT. HUMVEE

The mob surrounds the Humvee. The soldier eases it forward through the crowd.

PRIVATE BARNES
(to Richie)
Very, very uncool, sir.

RONNIE
Are you nuts?!

Richie turns in his seat to look back at Yasmin.

The first cop yanks open her ragged vest, ripping open the burlap bag hanging around the girl's neck. White powder spills to the sidewalk.

RONNIE
See? She's smuggling heroin!

PRIVATE BARNES
It's just flour.

Richie looks at the soldier.

RICHIE
Flour?

The Humvee finally moves into traffic.

PRIVATE BARNES
These folks are hungry. Afghans used to export wheat, they had too much. Now farmers grow poppies instead. For opium. Some by choice. Some because the bad guys make 'em. Taliban loves that opium. That's where the money is. Buys alot of guns.

U.S. SOLDIER 1
But ya can't eat it.

PRIVATE BARNES
So they're hungry.

RICHIE
She's just a kid.

PRIVATE BARNES

Last week Paki patrol shot a ten year-old trying to smuggle flour at the Torkham border.

A white Toyota appears from the sea of traffic, edging near them. The Soldier sitting beside Ronnie pops his window open and pokes his gun barrel outside, waving the car off. The Toyota falls back.

RONNIE

Richie. I'm losing it.

Ronnie digs something out of her jeans pocket and starts to pop it into her mouth. Richie grabs her wrist.

RICHIE

What's that?

RONNIE

Nothing. A Mexican quaalude.

RICHIE

(taking it from her)

Can you please wait til after the gig?

BOOM!!! A nearby explosion and a curl of smoke appears a few blocks over. The radio chatter intensifies. Their Humvee fills with excited Army voices, barked orders: "No targets! No targets! IED! IED!! Roll! Roll!!"

RICHIE

(to Private Barnes)

Everything all--

Private Barnes holds up his hand for silence, listening. Finally...

PRIVATE BARNES

IED puffed a local on Flower Street.

(off Richie's confusion)

Land mine blew up two goats few blocks over. No worries. We're good to go.

Richie breaks the Mexican lude in two, gives Ronnie a half.

RICHIE

(holding the other half)

For the after party.

Ronnie dry-chews the bitter pill. Richie stares out at the insane Kabul traffic.

EXT. MUSTAFA HOTEL/DOWNTOWN KABUL - DUSK

The four-story Mutsafa hotel, built in the '60's looks like a non-descript downtown office building. The Army HUMVEE pulls up to the plate glass-fronted hotel lobby. The soldiers hop out, M4s ready in protective posture. Private Barnes helps Ronnie and Richie and their carry-ons onto the sidewalk. Ronnie drifts to stare through the window into the lobby. Private Barnes takes Richie aside.

PRIVATE BARNES

This hotel's not MOSS compliant -- Minimum Operating Security Standards -- usually our people aren't cleared to stay here but the town's jammed and you'll only be here for the night. Get a room in the back away from the street and all this potential flying glass and stay in it til I get here. See you at 1900 hours.

Barnes jumps back in the Humvee and rumbles into traffic. Richie walks to Ronnie.

RONNIE

I can't feel my lower lip.

RICHIE

Good girl.

He leads her into the hotel.

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL/LOBBY - DUSK

Several heavily tattooed, menacing Blackwater MERCENARIES, wearing Glocks, Berettas and wrap-around Oakley shades (indoors) hover over several beers and a topographic map in the tiny marble and glass "lounge". Two very tan, slick, twenty-three year-olds - JAKE and NICK - younger and dressed like LA club owners -- hang out with the mercs.

RONNIE

(singing Meredith Brooks)

"I'm a bitch. I'm a mother. I'm a child--"

Richie claps his hand over her mouth.

RICHIE
Camp Phoenix. We go on at 8!

Richie pulls a wobbly Ronnie to the check-in desk. A FOURTEEN YEAR OLD AFGHAN BOY in a backwards Yankees hat mans the desk.

BOY
Welcome to the Mustafa boss. You
want to go to bar? Heineken. Vodka?
Fettucine Alfredo?

RICHIE
Maybe later. We're checking in.
Richie Vance.

BOY
"We"?

Richie turns. Ronnie's gone.

RICHIE
Ronnie?

Ronnie cackles from the lounge. Richie walks around the corner. Ronnie sits on one of the mercenary's lap, tracing a dragon tattoo on his huge bicep with her finger.

RONNIE
Bombay Brian just got out of jail
for hanging these Taliban guys
upside down by their feet!

RICHIE
Welcome home.

JAKE
Your girl here was telling us you
were an industry legend, man.

RICHIE
Were?

Nick stands.

JAKE
Jake Weinberg. My partner, Nick
Danelli. Sunny Isles, Florida. Come
on, sit down, regale us with tales
of rock and roll yore.

Richie helps Ronnie out of Bombay Brian's lap.

RICHIE
Maybe later. Big show tonight. My
lady needs her rest.

RONNIE
(over her shoulder)
See you boys at the after party!

Richie guides Ronnie towards the elevator.

RONNIE
God, what nice guys.

INT. RICHIE AND RONNIE'S MUSTAFA HOTEL ROOM - DUSK

Ronnie sleeps in the bed. Richie unpacks and hangs up her clothes from her carry-on. Finished, he walks into the bathroom and unzips his dop kit.

He takes out his red-striped Barbasol shaving cream stash-can and unscrews the false bottom. Richie stuffs all of his cash, his wallet and his passport into the hollow can and re-screws it closed. He sets the can into the mirrored medicine cabinet. Richie checks his watch and leaves the bathroom.

Ronnie sleeps soundly. Richie pulls the cover over her shoulders, hits the light and steps into the hallway.

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL BAR - NIGHT

A sculpture of the four horsemen of the apocalypse protrudes from the bar's back wall. A Russian sniper rifle and Osama Bin Laden bobble-head doll sit behind the counter. Richie finishes a Heineken, flanked at the bar by JAKE and NICK, the young hustlers. Richie looks down at their business card.

RICHIE
(reading the card)
International Ballistics and
Munitions?

NICK
(winks)
I.B.M.

JAKE
We sell bullets to the good guys.
Which is, you know, karmically
correct.

NICK
Three hundred million dollar
munitions contract with the damn
Pentagon, dude.

Richie glances over at a walrus-moustached MERCENARY sitting on the stool behind Nick, struggling to open a bottle of Uzbek vodka.

JAKE
Billions are pouring into this
bitch, Richie, billions. U.S. NATO.
NGO dough. A goddamn cash
waterfall.

NICK
All you gotta do is step in, tilt
your head back and swallow.

JAKE
Porno, dude.

The Mercenary unholsters his Glock and BLAM! -- blasts the top off the vodka bottle. Richie jumps at the shot. Nick and Jake ignore it completely. Another night at the Mustafa.

NICK
Six months ago we're masseuses on
South Beach, now we're the ammo
kings of Kabul! Go figure.

The two knuckleheads clink bottles over Richie's head. Richie stands, opening his mouth to clear the gunshot sound.

RICHIE
Thanks for the beers and the career
advice, boys. Gotta get my girl to
the gig.

JAKE
Rock heavily!

NICK
And without shame!

Roland unlocks the first door. Richie waves goodbye. Roland shuts and locks the door behind him. Jake looks at Nick, raising his beer. Nick clinks and drinks.

INT. RICHIE AND RONNIE'S MUSTAFA HOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Richie opens the door to his dark hotel room.

RICHIE
Rise and shine songbird.
(walking into the bedroom)
Your future is calling.
(looking around at the
empty room)
Ronnie?... Da Do Ron Ron?

Richie walks into the dark bathroom and back out. He stops, returns into the bathroom and hits the light. Written in lipstick on the mirror -- "GUESS I'M NO STEVIE NICKS!"

RICHIE
Oh... no.

Richie runs out into the small room. He flings open the closet -- her clothes are gone. So are her carry-on bags.

RICHIE
No,no,no.

A thought hits. Richie dashes back into the bathroom.

Richie throws open the mirrored medicine cabinet -- his Barbasol stash-can is gone. Richie searches the empty cabinet.

RICHIE
Nooooo!

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL/LOBBY - NIGHT

Richie races into the lobby. NASIM, the night clerk, mans the front desk.

RICHIE
She's gone.

NASIM
Oh my goodness. Is she? Truly? Who?

RICHIE
My girl. Ronnie. My singer!

NASIM
Have you checked under the bed?

RICHIE
What?!

NASIM
Perhaps she heard a loud noise-

Private Barnes enters the lobby.

PRIVATE BARNES
Ready to roll?

RICHIE
Hang on. Just give me a second.

NASIM
Ronnie is gone.

PRIVATE BARNES
Kidnapped?
(into his walkie-talkie)
Big Daddy. Big Daddy. We have a
possible--

Richie reaches over and puts his hand over the mouthpiece.

RICHIE
She left. She wrote a note.

PRIVATE BARNES
(into walkie-talkie)
Check. Check. Stand-by.
(to Richie)
She left a note?

Richie nods.

PRIVATE BARNES
Well. I'm afraid that's a personal
matter.

RICHIE
She took all my money. My wallet.
My, my passport.

Private Barnes looks at Richie.

PRIVATE BARNES
Women.

Barnes starts to leave.

RICHIE
Wait. What about the show?

PRIVATE BARNES
Well, I guess, it must go on. Good
luck, sir.

Private Barnes leaves the hotel.

RICHIE
"Good luck sir?!" I am royally
fucked.

NASIM
Welcome to Afghanistan.

RICHIE
The bar! Those guys. Jake and
what's-his-face. Quickly!

EXT. KABUL/MUSCLE CAR - NIGHT

Richie sits, squeezed between Nick and Jake, in the wind-blown, back seat of a pale green 1966 Olds Toronado convertible. [Three 6 Mafia's "Weed, Blow and Pills" roars from the muscle car.]

A burly Afghan driver, SHIR, drives while another Afghan BODYGUARD rides shotgun -- literally -- cradling a sawn-off, Mossberg 590 pump-action riot shotgun in his lap. They race down the middle of empty Kabul night streets at high speed.

Jake takes a huge hit off a hash joint and passes it to Richie who passes it to Nick who hands it right back to Richie.

RICHIE
You sure he'll be here?

NICK
Everybody winds up in L'Atmosphere.
He'll show.
(shoving the spliff at
Richie)
You're in Kabul. Man up!

Richie sighs, takes a hit. The two Sunny Isle shape-heads nod approvingly. Richie takes another, bigger hit...

JAKE
Surge, brother!

...And exhales a huge cloud.

Richie hands the spliff to Nick.

RICHIE
(screaming over the engine
noise, music)
Nice ride.

JAKE

The "Mannix" car. From the TV show.
Square business. Bought it off
Azam Ghol.

RICHIE

Sounds like something from "Lord of
the Rings".

JAKE

The Dark Lord, dude. Azam butchered
half of southern Afghanistan back
in '01.

NICK

He did throw in the cds with the
car.

Richie looks over at the bodyguard cradling the Mossberg
shotgun.

JAKE

All show. Some of these idiots only
respect full auto.

As if on cue, a cluster of MILITIA, surrounding a burning oil
can, block the middle of the road. They wave their
Kalishnikovs. A small Toyota pick-up, with a flatbed-mounted
50mm machine gun manned by another soldier, idles at the
curb.

Richie, stoned, glances nervously over at Jake who flashes a
"no problem" look. Their bodyguard velcros his shotgun
beneath the dashboard. Shir turns down the music, slows to a
stop.

Two raggedly dressed MILITIA saunter over, weapons up. Shir
gestures to the trio in the back seat and a rapid
conversation in Dari follows. Shir slips the Militia some
money. The man looks at it and throws it back in Shira's lap.

NICK

Uh-oh.

RICHIE

Uh-oh?! What uh-oh?! What is
happening?

NICK

Be cool, Brah.

The Militia gestures at Richie with the barrel of his gun.

MILITIA 1
(in English)
Papers.

JAKE
Oh this is bullshit, Shir.

The driver shrugs.

RICHIE
I... I don't have my... There
aren't any...

NICK
Maybe he means rolling papers.

Jake holds up his zig-zags.

JAKE
Papers?

MILITIA 1
(to Richie)
You! Get out of the car!

Richie looks at Jake, who shrugs. Shira keeps chattering in Dari to the stone-faced Militia. Richie slowly gets to his feet in the back seat.

ALL AT ONCE: Shir punches the gas, the Olds smokes rubber, Jake yanks Richie back by his belt, their bodyguard snatches the Mossberg, blasts holes in both the Toyota's rear tires and the Olds blows past the checkpoint in a hail off bullets!

Richie, Nick and Jake huddle on the rear seat's floor. Jake and Nick stoner-giggle.

RICHIE
Jesus!

NICK
Fools shoot like they dress.

50mm bullets whizz and spark off the street around them.

RICHIE
Jesus!!

NICK
(handing Richie the
spliff)
Welcome to the jungle!

Nick and Jake straighten up in their seat. Richie stays on the floor, hanging on to the joint.

FROM BEHIND OLDS TORONADO

Nick's arm shoots up, giving the Militia the finger as they tear off into the night. [Three 6 Mafia blasts.]

EXT. L'ATMOSPHERE - NIGHT

The Toronado rumbles down a non-descript, residential street to a blast-walled, sand-bagged one-story building. Richie, Jake and Nick step out of the Toronado and stroll towards a guard shack leaning against the building.

JAKE
(to Richie)
"Abduction Alley". Expats walk out of L'Atmo all buzzed, stumblin' around, lookin' for their Land Cruisers and--

NICK
Bam! Next day you're cryin' on CNN with a sword at your neck.

Richie looks around nervously. Several armed GUARDS approach them. A grizzled AFGHAN GUARD holding an AK-47 blocks the outer, metal front door. Nick palms him a \$20. The guard nods them past, unlocking the door.

INT. L'ATMOSPHERE SECURITY ROOM - NIGHT

Nick, Jake and Richie stand in the small ante-room facing the second metal door. Richie looks up at a sign over the door -- "FOREIGN PASSPORT HOLDERS ONLY".

An AK-47-wielding, huge and thickly-bearded AFGHAN guard motions for them to raise their arms. Richie does. The Guard pats him down.

RICHIE
(stoned, to Guard)
Did anyone ever tell you, you look exactly like Rick Rubin?

Nick and Jake pull Berettas from their waistbands, hand them over, then raise their arms.

The Guard pats them down, walks into a sand-bagged "gun room", deposits their pistols into locked numbered boxes and returns with their keys. The gun room brims with checked automatic machine guns, rifles lean against the sandbagged wall like umbrellas. The Guard bangs on the inner metal door. The peep-hole slot slides back. The door swings open into an "art gallery" hung with portraits done by local artists. On the far side of the gallery is yet another metal security door.

Nick bangs on the final door, the eye-slot opens and the battered inner door swings back to reveal -- AN ELEGANT, PARISIAN OUT-DOOR BISTRO flickering with candles and shapely bodies; a chic garden party protected by 20 foot high blast walls and filled with young, good-looking Western journalists, NGO (non-governmental organization) employees, aid workers, contractors, diplomats and the occasional mercenary. It looks like a night club in Ibiza. Richie checks out the Internationals gobbling hors d'oeuvres, guzzling booze beneath the trees.

RICHIE

I saw a little Afghan girl arrested today. For smuggling flour. She was starving.

JAKE

Hey. Go to East St. Louis, you'll see worse.

NICK

We didn't break Kabul, Rich. We're fixing it.

JAKE

And making a few hundred million for the effort.

They fist bump each other.

NICK

Look. This is a tough town. Right? Dirty, scary. Million miles from home. People blowin' up all around us. We work hard, we get to play hard.

JAKE

Dancing on the edge of the volcano, babe!

NICK

Now let's go get your Ronnie back.

Jake and Nick head for the bar.

Richie wanders deeper into the garden, stoned, gazing at the candle-lit tables, at couples dancing, drinking, making out beneath twinkling trees.

Richie drifts around a thick hedge and sees a lapis-colored swimming pool ringed with flickering candles. A shadow glides beneath the surface. A dark-haired BEAUTY emerges from the water -- shiny, curvy and nude. Her name is MERCI. Merci lifts herself out of the pool, facing Richie. Richie stares at her. She smiles, flashing white teeth.

MERCI

I'll have a Tequila Sunrise with
extra lime, please.

Richie swallows, hypnotized by her.

MERCI

Oh.

RICHIE

Oh?

MERCI

You're not a waiter. You're toast.
(off Richie's stoned
confusion)
Burnt. Singed. Fried... High.

The beauty casually slips on a gauzy, white, Indian dress covered in tiny, sewn-on mirrors.

RICHIE

I like your dress.

MERCI

I bet. Sparkly, huh?

Richie nods. Merci sits at the edge of the pool, pulls up her dress, dangling her bare feet and legs in the water. She pats the tile beside her.

MERCI

Come on Captain Trips.

Richie nods, sits beside her, plunging his feet -- shoes and all -- into the pool. Merci laughs. Richie sits, his legs up to the knee in the water.

MERCI

I'm Merci. With an "i".

RICHIE

Yes.

Merci smiles. She digs a silver, palm-size pipe from her purse, crumbles some hash into the bowl and lights it. Merci takes a deep hit and hands the glowing pipe to Richie who takes a lung full. They simultaneously exhale.

RICHIE

Can you sing?

MERCI

Nope. But I can fuck you like a Mouseketeer on crack.

Richie blinks. Merci takes another hit, passing the pipe to Richie.

RICHIE

You can?

Richie takes a drag. Merci leans over, holding his hand in hers.

MERCI

Sweets, I can do things to you that are illegal in every civilized nation in the world. I will leave you broken and drooling and speaking in tongues like a hillbilly snake handler.

Richie coughs a hash cloud.

RICHIE

When?

MERCI

How much money do you have?

RICHIE

In the world?

MERCI

Maybe later... No. In your pocket.

RICHIE

Nothing.

MERCI

No cash, cards, checks? Nothing?

RICHIE

Uh. No. I, I was robbed.

Merçi stands. She leans against Richie, her bare legs, wet and tan, press the side of Richie's face. Merçi takes Richie's hand and rests it on the curve of her ass.

MERCI

I'm in a rented double-wide in Sherpur. Right next to the old British Cemetery. Ask anybody.

Merçi kneels down, lifts his chin and kisses him, long and sweet on the lips.

MERCI

It's Miss Merçi's 401K retirement tour. One week only. You do not wanna miss it.

Merçi sways past the pool, her mirrored dress dancing with candle-light.

RICHIE

(holding up his wrist)

I got a Swatch!

Merçi stops, returns to Richie. She takes his wrist in her hand, inspecting the watch.

MERCI

Hmmm. Keith Haring 1987.

RICHIE

Bought it off of John Cougar Mellencamp... Well, his bass player.

Merçi looks Richie in the eye, deciding. She unbuckles the watch strap and takes it off his wrist.

MERCI

What's your name?

RICHIE

Richie Vance.

Merci straps the Swatch on her wrist.

MERCI
Buckle up, Cowboy.

Merci helps Richie to his feet and takes his hand, leading him back to the garden tables, towards the entrance.

HOLD ON - NICK AND JAKE tucked away at a corner table, in deep conversation with... Bombay Brian.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. KABUL MOSQUE MINARET - DAWN

A Muezzin sings out the pre-sunrise Adhan, the Muslim morning call to prayer. It echoes over the grey, waking city.

EXT. SHERPUR (KABUL SUBURB) - DAWN

MOVE past the garish, massive narcotechteure mansions of the Afghan drug/war lords (multi-colored, multi-story marble monstrosities) to an incongruous tan, double-wide trailer parked in an empty lot.

The morning prayers continue as WE PUSH INTO the trailer's open, glass-jalousied window.

INT. MERCI'S BEDROOM - DAWN

WE MOVE ACROSS the clothes-strewn, party-trashed room, past the ornate two-hose hookah, to Merci's king-size bed.

Richie lies spread-eagled, hands and arms tied by scarves to the four poster bed. He wears a towel diaper, a blonde "Marilyn" wig and red lipstick smeared, clown-like, across his mouth. Richie's eyes pop open.

Richie blinks, trying to focus. He closes his eyes as the first awful memory hits. Richie looks over at his left hand, bound to the bed post. Then his right. Down at his tied feet.

RICHIE
Ideal.

Richie tries to get up, trapped, struggling against the scarf-ties. He hears the shower going and Merci singing, Lady Gaga's "Lovegame".

MERCI (OS)
(singing in shower)
"Let's have some fun, this beat is
sick/ I wanna take a ride on your
disco stick..."

A knock at the door. Richie freezes.

MAN (O.S.)
Miss Merci?

RICHIE
(very official)
She's... I believe she's in the
shower. Come back later.

Private Barnes peers into the bedroom, cash in hand. Seeing
Richie, he quickly tucks the money in his pocket.

PRIVATE BARNES
Mr. Vance?

RICHIE
Private Barnes.

PRIVATE BARNES
I... I like what you've done with
your hair.

RICHIE
That's kind of you to say.

PRIVATE BARNES
Well. Enjoy the rest of your stay.

The Private leaves the room.

RICHIE
(calling after him)
Hey?

Private Barnes returns. Richie wriggles his bound wrist.

RICHIE
A little help?

PRIVATE BARNES
Sure. Sure.

RICHIE
Appreciate it.

Barnes comes over and unties Richie's hands.

RICHIE
Great. Thanks.

PRIVATE BARNES
Hey. No problem. Well. Have a good one.

RICHIE
Likewise.

Private Barnes, nods, struggles to control his smile and leaves. Richie leans over and unties his feet. Private Barnes explodes with off screen laughter.

EXT. MERCI'S TRAILER - MORNING

Richie leaves Merci's trailer. A CROWD OF MEN, Merci's clients: soldiers, contractors, NGOs, loiter around the stairs to her trailer. Richie parts them and reaches the street. He looks around, absolutely lost.

Richie heads down the block, walking past the British Cemetery. A couple scrawny dogs starts to follow him. He turns a corner. Several young BOYS see him and race over, screaming at once:

BOY 1
Maps! Kabul Map! You lost? You need guide, Mister?

BOY 2
Hashish. Hashish. Yes? Balkh marijuana, Mister. Afghan finger?

RICHIE
No. No. I'm --

BOY 3
Paper? Newspaper? Five dollars?!

RICHIE
Five dollars?

Faintly, in the distance, the disco hit, "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" plays. Richie, now surrounded by hungry boys and dogs turns as the song gets louder. A white 1992 Toyota Corolla blaring "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" pulls up. Richie leaps in front of the cab. The driver, RIZA, a handsome Pashtun with a sculpted mane of black hair and kohl-rimmed eyes, bops to his disco.

RICHIE

Taxi?!

RIZA

Yes. Yes. Of course.

Richie digs into his pocket, realizes he has no money and gives the tallest kid his Ace pocket comb.

RICHIE

(to Riza)

Can you wait for a second?

The kids scream for more as Richie leans into the taxi window.

RIZA

(in Dari)

Enough! Get away! Leave the man.

(to Richie)

Yes. Yes. Of course. I am yours.

Richie jogs back to Merci's trailer. He shoves past the U.S. soldiers and contractors lining the stairs to her door.

RICHIE

Pardon me... Coming through...

Excuse me...

Richie opens her door without knocking.

INT. MERCI'S BEDROOM

Merci sits on the bed, wrapped in a towel, brushing her wet hair while a small, balding man kneels, cradling one of her bare feet in his hands.

RICHIE

Uh. Sorry. Listen. Could you lend me a twenty? I'll cash a check back at the hotel--

MERCI

I'm sorry. Me pay you?

RICHIE

Loan. Loan me--

MERCI

Get out of here.

Richie nods, waves at the little kneeling man.

RICHIE
Right. Carry on.

Richie backs out of the door.

MERCI
(to the man)
You believe that?

LITTLE MAN
(eyes on her feet)
I would use volcanic pumice to--

The door opens again and Richie pops in.

RICHIE
(to the kneeling man)
Have you ever tried the "tiny
dancer"?

LITTLE MAN
What?
(to Merci)
Who the hell is this--

Richie leans over and whispers in the little man's ear. The man's eyes widen, looks at Richie.

RICHIE
(nodding sagely)
Tiny... dancer.

The little man looks up at Merci, who shrugs.

RICHIE
Cost you fifty extra.

LITTLE MAN
Both feet?

Richie glances at Merci who arches her eyebrow.

RICHIE
Sixty.

The little man quickly stands and digs out the cash, hands it to Richie, who takes a twenty and sets the rest on Merci's night table.

RICHIE
(to Merci)
Tread lightly.

Richie leaves. Merci stares after him, a smile crossing her face.

INT. RIZA'S TAXI - MORNING

Richie gets back in Riza's taxi, taking in the decor for the first time: the entire interior of his van is decoupaged with magazine tear-out photos of designer Tom Ford: Tom smouldering, winking, shirtless, on the cat-walk, at Hollywood parties -- a wall-to-wall, Tom Ford shrine. Disco blasts.

RICHIE

So, you speak--

RIZA

Yes. Yes. Of course. American. The international language of love.

RICHIE

I thought that was French.

RIZA

No! Come on. Who sings the disco?

RICHIE

We do. I guess. The good stuff, anyhow.

RIZA

Bionic Boogie. Diana Ross. Sylvester. The Tramps. Lipps Incorporated. Madonna--

RICHIE

An old friend.

Riza swerves, screeching onto the curb. Richie slams into the front seat, bouncing back.

RIZA

(turning, eyes filling,
voice trembling)

You...you...have met her?

Richie picks himself off the floor.

EXT. MUSTAFA HOTEL - MORNING

Riza pulls up to the hotel. Madonna's "Papa Don't Preach" plays in the Riza's cab.

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL/LOBBY - MORNING

Richie strides across the empty lobby.

NASIM (O.S.)
Mr. Richie!

Richie turns.

NASIM
(rushing over)
Any luck? You find your Ronnie?
Your... belongings?

RICHIE
Not yet.

NASIM
Terrible business. Terrible.

RICHIE
Yes. Well--

NASIM
May I ask, and believe me, I hate
to intrude, but how many nights
will we have the pleasure of your
company? It seems we have a Samsung
group from Korea. They will of
course, prepay.

RICHIE
I understand. Can I use your phone?
You can... put it on my bill.

NASIM
(handing Richie his cell)
Of course. Of course.

Nasim steps away for privacy. Richie dials.

SYLVIA (O.S.)
(on phone)
Hello?

RICHIE
Syl. Don't hang up! Please! Syl?

SYLVIA (O.S.)
(on phone)
Yeah. What?

RICHIE
You heard from Ronnie?

SYLVIA (O.S.)
Ronnie? Yeah. Absolutely. We're
just sitting down to tea. Why would
you ask me that?! Why would I ever
talk to that manatee?!
(to Dree)
It's your idiot father. No. You
can't--

RICHIE
Dree!

DREE (O.S.)
(away from phone)
I love you Daddy!

RICHIE
I love you--

SYLVIA (O.S.)
I'm hanging up now.

RICHIE
Syl! Wait. Please. I'm in a real
jam. I'm stuck in Kabul and, and
Ronnie left and took my passport
and money and plane ticket. I need
you to wire me a few hundred
dollars.

SYLVIA (O.S.)
Jeez. Sure.

RICHIE
Oh God, hon' thanks--

SYLVIA (O.S.)
The second you pay me the two
months of child support you owe me
you PATHETIC PIECE OF SHIT!!

Click. The phone goes dead. Richie glances over at Nasim.
They look at each other a moment.

RICHIE
I need a shower.

NASIM
Of course, sir.

Richie heads for the stairs. Nasim watches him.

INT. RICHIE AND RONNIE'S MUSTAFA HOTEL ROOM - MORNING

Richie steps in his darkened hotel room. He drops his blazer on the chair and heads into the bedroom. Richie hits the light. Bombay Brian, tattooed, massive, wearing a black flak jacket and no shirt, sits on the bed.

RICHIE

AHHHHH!

Richie steps back.

RICHIE

Jesus Christ!

BOMBAY BRIAN

You smell like pussy.

RICHIE

Like pussy? Or like a pussy?

BOMBAY BRIAN

Your girl's gone. I put her on a C-130 transport to Dubai last night.

RICHIE

Why?!

BOMBAY BRIAN

Cause she asked me to.

RICHIE

Because she asked you to?

BOMBAY BRIAN

And she paid me a grand.

RICHIE

My grand!

BOMBAY BRIAN

Hey. She begged you to let her play her own songs. You kept her doin' that cover shit. Creative suicide.

Bombay Brian stands.

RICHIE

Excuse me Mr. Bombay but A) It's called a "management strategy" and 2) How 'bout you get me back my passport and wallet?

BOMBAY BRIAN

How 'bout I punch your heart out?

RICHIE

What? Why? What does that even mean?

Bombay Brian brushes past Richie...

BOMBAY BRIAN

It means you lose, sister.

And heads out the door.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Take a shower, Puss.

Door slams.

INT. RICHIE'S HOTEL ROOM//SHOWER - MORNING

The shower pours down on Richie's head. His forehead leans against the tile wall. He sobs, singing "Can't Find My Way Home":

RICHIE

"But I'm near the end and I just ain't got the time/ And I'm wasted and I can't find my way home..."

EXT. U.S. EMBASSY/KABUL - DAY

Two massive U.S. ARMY GUARDS escort Richie past the embassy sand-bags and guard stations to the street. Riza's Toyota idles at the curb. ["Boogie Oogie oogie" plays from inside.]

INT. RIZA'S TAXI - DAY

Richie slides in.

RICHIE

Two weeks to get a passport!

RIZA
Hey, Boss. How about lunch? You
like Mexican?

RICHIE
Could you turn down the "Boogie
Oogie" a sec?

Richie holds his face in his hands. He mumbles something.

RIZA
Sorry boss?

RICHIE
(looking up)
Mexican. But not food. Tequila.

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL BAR

Richie and Riza sit at the bar. Riza sips his black tea, Richie tosses back another tequila and refills his shot glass. TOLO TV news plays soundlessly on the bar TV.

RICHIE
Madonna? Please. How 'bout Donna?
Donna Elaine Beckerman. Grosse
Pointe, Michigan. I gave her the
name Madonna.

RIZA
You are a famous man.

RICHIE
(shrugs)
Found her singing outside--

RIZA
Yes. The Hamburger Hamlet.

RICHIE
Right. On Sunset..
(tugging on his earlobe)
Legendary ears.

Richie glances up at the TV.

ON TV - The YOUNG AFGHAN CONTESTANT, still wearing his white "Saturday Night Fever" suit and black shirt, soundlessly belts out an Afghan pop tune. Quick cutting TV shots of the screaming, young Afghan STUDIO AUDIENCE hit by strobes, green lasers and disco-balls; the FOUR older, thoughtful JUDGES; back to the puffy-haired SINGER.

RIZA
Ah. Tonight is "Afghan Star". On
TV. He is the favorite. Hazara.

RICHIE
"Afghan Star"?

The Tolo TV newscaster recaps from his desk while footage of
the singing competition plays on a screen behind him.

RIZA
Big TV show. Like your "American
Idol". Big competition for our
singers. Huge TV show in my
country. The entire Afghanistan
watches and votes. Usually for
their own people: Tajik for Tajik,
Hazara for Hazara, Pashtun for
Pashtun.

RICHIE
For money?

RIZA
Oh yes, of course. The winner gets
\$5,000 American and a record deal!

Richie pours another tequila shot, eyes on the screen.

RICHIE
I dig the suit. Retro.

The metal door flings open and Jake and Nick storm in. They
lift Richie from his seat.

JAKE
(to Riza)
Take us to Street 1 Dehmazang. Next
door to the Pizza Brazil.

Riza looks to Richie.

RICHIE
Sure. Whatever. Hey, watch the
mescal, pal.

Jake throws his arms over Richie's shoulder.

JAKE
No worries, Rich.

NICK
You just stepped into the cash
waterfall.

EXT. I.B.M. OFFICE - DAY

Run-down Kabul warehouse. Riza's cab sits outside.

INT. I.B.M. OFFICE

"House Of Pain" by LAX echoes in the warehouse/office. Richie sits in a chair. Jake fades back, throwing a pass (over Richie's head) to Nick, cutting across the middle of the huge room. Jake hurls the shrink-wrapped brick of hundred dollar bills like a football. Nick catches it in stride and spikes the "football" in the end-zone. The cash bursts from the cellophane, spilling across the cement floor.

NICK
Yes!!!

JAKE
(to Richie)
It took me three months to get that
cash to spiral.

Six-foot high pyramids of shrink-wrapped cash sit against the rear warehouse wall. Crates of ammunition tower above Jake's desk.

Nick bends down and scoops up a handful of hundreds.

NICK
(dropping it in Richie's
lap)
Here.

RICHIE
What's that for?

Nick and Jake sit on the edge of their desk facing Richie.

NICK
Richie, we like you.

JAKE
You're our lansman and you're in
trouble.

RICHIE
This is like ten thousand dollars.

NICK
Not enough?

He puts another handful of cash in Richie's lap.

RICHIE
What do you guys want?

NICK
What we need, is some of that
Richie Vance magic.

JAKE
We're tied up here in Kabul. Some
DOD big-shot from D.C. flew in and
needs us to hold his hand...

NICK
But we have a shipment due in
Patkia--

JAKE
Today. A few hours south. We'll
send along some security for show.

NICK
Sweet Pashtun village. The good
guys. They bought a few thousand
rounds.

JAKE
We need somebody we can trust. You
drive down, do the meet and greet
with the buyer, get paid, see the
sights, and be back at L'Atmo for
cocktails tonight. A tourist trip.

NICK
FYI: the U.S. Embassy can, if
pushed, issue what's called, a
"limited-validity" passport. Right
the hell now. Have it your hand
tonight. It's only good for one
year but it'll get you home. We'll
make it happen.

Richie looks down at the money.

NICK
And then there's Merci.

JAKE
The hooker with an ass of gold.

Richie looks up at them.

RICHIE
It's safe?

NICK
Safe as milk.

EXT. SOUTH AFGHANISTAN - DAY

A full-blown gun battle rages. Richie rides shotgun beside Bombay Brian. He hangs on for dear life, banging around inside a Blackwater Mamba armored personnel carrier. Three Taliban Toyotas machine-gun their A.Y.Y. convoy (two Blackwater Mambas, Riza's taxi and a semi-truck).

RICHIE
There! He's speeding up. He's
coming too close. Shoot! Get him!

Bombay Brian drives the lead Mamba, barking orders on his headset and firing his AK-47 out the window at the bandits. TWO OTHER BLACKWATER MERCS man each Mamba -- one in the back seat with an AK-47, another fires a roof-mounted belt-feed machine gun.

BOMBAY BRIAN
(into mouthpiece)
On your left. Your left! Baba Lou!
Heads up! ONCOMING!

The rear Blackwater Mamba, trailing behind the cargo truck and Riza's van, fires a machine gun burst, blasting one of the attacking Taliban Toyotas. It swerves into the desert, rolling several times.

RICHIE
Speed up! No, no, slow down! Veer
over to--

BOMBAY BRIAN
Shut up or I'll kill you!

INT. RIZA'S TAXI - SAME TIME

Riza drives, staying tight behind Brian's vehicle. Riza ducks as bullets whizz and ping against his taxi. Harold Melvin and The Bluenotes "The Love I Lost" plays in his cab.

INT. BOMBAY BRIAN'S SUV - DAY

Brian fires a burst out the window.

BOMBAY BRIAN
(to Richie)
Grab the wheel!

RICHIE
What?!

Brian looks at Richie.

RICHIE
I know. I know, you'll punch my
heart out.

Richie leans over and grabs the steering wheel. Brian drops the AK-47 and pulls an RPG from behind their bench seat.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Stay on the goddam road.

Brian leans out the window. The bad guy Toyota pulls ahead, rips a burst of machine gun fire that spiderwebs the SUV's windshield. Richie fights for control.

BOMBAY BRIAN
(to Richie)
Straight. Straight asshole!

RICHIE
I can't see!

Bombay Brian hangs precariously outside the window and fires the rocket. It streaks true, blasting the Toyota to hell.

The remaining Taliban truck peels off, leaving a dust cloud as it heads north through the desert.

Bombay Brian slides back into the car, retakes the wheel.

BOMBAY BRIAN
(into headset)
Anybody hit? Baba? Get It On John?
Y'all cool?... Okay. Nice work
boys. See you in Shatowri.

Bombay Brian slides the RPG back behind the seat.

RICHIE
Stop the car.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Kiss my ass.

Richie opens the door to the moving SUV.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Hey!

Brian stops the Mamba. The convoy stops behind him.

BOMBAY BRIAN
What?

RICHIE
I did not sign on for this. This is
not the deal. Nope. Safe as milk --
deal. Raging gun battle -- no deal.

Richie gets out of the Mamba. The rest of the convoy idles on
the solitary road. Richie walks back to Riza's van.

RICHIE
And I do not like your tone of
voice.

Richie slides back the door.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Without us you won't make it five
clicks.

Richie gets in Riza's taxi.

RICHIE
Oh really?... What's a click?

BOMBAY BRIAN
Shatowri, the village we're going
to, is just over that hill. I
strongly suggest you get back in
the goddam Mambo--

Richie sees something over Bombay Brian's shoulder. Brian
turns, follows Richie's eyes towards the horizon.

RICHIE AND BOMBAY BRIAN'S POV

Silhouetted along a rocky ridgetop, a line of TWENTY
HORSEMEN.

RIZA
Mangal.

The sound of a machine gun being racked, clips being slapped into AK-47s. Brian wheels on his team.

BOMBAY BRIAN

This is our guy. Everybody. This is
a friendly. Be cool. Stand down!

The MANGAL PASHTUN HORSEMEN -- bearded, turbaned, flowing multi-colored robes, daggers and guns tucked into their waistbands -- gallop down the steep hill towards the convoy. Mangal Chief of the Shatowri village, TARIQ KHAN, leads them. They are from another time.

Richie hops out of the taxi.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Where you goin'?

RICHIE

To close this deal.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Hey!

Richie ignores him, walks towards the charging tribesman. He waves.

INT. RIZA'S CAB

Riza watches, shaking his head.

RIZA

Oh no, boss.

Riza gets out of his cab.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Richie waves amiably. The horsemen thunder around him, swallowing Richie in a cloud of dust.

RICHIE

Hey. Fellas.

(coughing)

Richie Vance. Talent manager. San
Diego, California. How's it going?

The horses wheel and rear around him. Tariq Khan, tall in the saddle, black bearded, blue eyes flashing, moves his horse close to Richie. Richie backs away.

TARIQ
Salaam aliekum. ("Peace be upon
you".)

Richie nods, smiles vaguely.

RICHIE
Back at you, babe.

RIZA (O.S.)
Wa aliekum salaam wa rahmatu
Allah." ("And to you, peace
together with Allah's mercy".)

Richie turns. Riza steps beside him, amidst the stomping
horses.

TARIQ
(in Pashto)
I am Tariq Khan, Chief of the
Shatowri village. You are Pashtun?

Riza nods.

TARIQ
You are with these people?

RIZA
(in Pashto)
This is my friend. Mister Richie.
From America. We come from Kabul.
They bring you what you have asked
for.

Tariq nods, rides past them.

A TARP

yanks back to reveal green plastic cases stencilled in white:
Danger! 5.56 X 45mm M995 AP Munitions. A Pashtun dagger
slashes through the box top.

WIDER - TARIQ rips open the case, reveals loose AK-47 rounds.

Tariq turns to Richie and nods. A wolfish Mangal warrior
shoves past Richie, stares down at the bullets and smiles.
This is NIZAR, Tariq's younger brother.

NIZAR
(in Pashto)
Good. Now pay these CIA and we can
go home.

RICHIE

Right? Bullets? That's what you ordered?... We're all good?

TARIQ

(to Riza)

Tell the American. We have a deal.

RIZA

(to Richie)

He's cool.

The Pashtun MEN begin off-loading the ammo crates. Tariq hops off the truck, Richie and Riza behind him. The Pashtun stack the cases onto horse-drawn carts.

Bombay Brian and his Blackwater troops (decked out in Hawaiian shirts, fatigues or all in black with skull patches) lean against their Mambas, smoking, watching the transaction. They exchange cold looks with the Pashtun.

BOMBAY BRIAN

(to Richie)

We done, Champ?

RICHIE

Everything except the money.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Then I guess I'm the closer.

RICHIE

(to Tariq)

So. Tariq. Sir. I'm under the impression there's a, a balance due here. If you'd like--

Tariq holds up his hand for silence.

TARIQ

(to Richie in Pashto)

I offer you malmastai. You have come far. You and your Pashtun friend are welcome in my house for the night. The others, the soldiers, will be fed but must wait outside our walls.

NIZAR

(in Pashto)

NO! These are not men! These are animals!

(MORE)

NIZAR(cont'd)

They stink of alcohol and whores.
They kill our people. They are
unfit to be near us.

TARIQ

(in Pashto)

Silence brother! They have made an
honorable deal. They are our
guests.

(to Richie)

Come. We will finish our business
over tea. Ma sha Allah. ("This is
Allah's will.")

Tariq leaps onto his horse.

RICHIE

(to Riza)

Wait. What. Is he stiffing me?

The Blackwater team come alive. The Pashtuns stare down from
their horses. A tense scene.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Where's Hajii goin'?

RIZA

(to Richie)

Tariq Kahn wants to pay you over
tea at his home.

RICHIE

Tea?

RIZA

And then dinner. He's invited us to
spend the night. This is an
incredible honor Mr. Richie.

RICHIE

Really?

RIZA

VVIP.

RICHIE

What happens if I say no?

RIZA

He will be honor-bound to hunt you
down and kill you and then hunt
down and kill all of your family.

(MORE)

RIZA(cont'd)

There is a saying, "A Pashtun waited a hundred years, then took his revenge. It was quick work."

Bombay Brian looks up at his man on the Mamba roof, leaning against the belt-driven machine gun. Tariq follows his eyes.

BOMBAY BRIAN

He ain't hunting, if he ain't breathing.

Richie waves and smiles at Tariq.

RICHIE

Done!

(to Riza)

Tell Tariq thanks. We are honored. And hungry.

(to Bombay Brian)

Thanks. Safe trip home!

BOMBAY BRIAN

First you lose your girl. Now you're gonna lose your head.

(to Blackwater guys)

Mount up!

(to Richie)

You're running out of shit to lose.

The Blackwater team (plus Jake and Nick's truck) u-turns, returning north to Kabul.

RICHIE

(to Riza)

You don't have to do this.

RIZA

"Ain't no stopping us now./We're on the move..."

Richie sighs heavily, gets into the taxi. Riza dances to the driver's side and gets behind the wheel.

RIZA

(singing)

"Ain't no stopping us now./ We got the groove..."

Tariq wheels his horse and the Pashtun head for the horizon.

EXT. SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN - LATE AFTERNOON

Riza's taxi putters across the vastness. "Ain't No Stopping Us Now" plays faintly from the cab.

EXT. SHATOWRI PASHTUN VILLAGE - DUSK

Riza and Richie follow Tariq and his men into the mud-walled, primitive village. A crowd of villagers -- some pale-skinned blondes, red-heads with deep blue and sea-green eyes -- follows them down the baked-mud path.

RIZA

Pashtun are often called
"Alexander's children". It is said
we are direct descendants of
Alexander the Great.

RICHIE

Now how cool is that?

The women do their chores -- sweeping, baking, banging dusty rugs with sticks -- outside their small dun-clored, mud homes. They are barefoot, silver chain ankle bracelets, wearing purple, blue, green or red, floor-length burkhas. One woman in a scarlet burkha, the woman WE SAW earlier, watches Richie, her emerald eyes glint behind the mesh veil. Richie smiles at her, looks back right into the furious glare of Nizar. Richie nods at Nizar.

RICHIE

Great...burkha....

Riza takes Richie's arm and leads him away from the hostile Nizar.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. OUTDOOR DEIRA (MEETING PLACE) - NIGHT

Wild and furious Pashtun music plays. A ring of PASHTUN MEN whirl like dervishes, dancing the ancient Attan. They juggle loaded Kalishnikov rifles like batons, flinging them high into the air and catching them.

Riza, Richie and large circle of Shatowri MEN sit on ornate carpets outside Tariq's large, mud-walled fortress-home, enjoying the feast.

RICHIE

Do you think these guys have
representation?

A large fire burns in the center. Richie and Riza sit at a honored spot beside Tariq. Women (always in burkhas in public) serve mutton, raisins, lentils, rice, chunks of freshly-baked nan bread and glasses of mint tea. The woman in the scarlet burkha refills Richie's tea. He searches her veil. Their eyes meet.

RICHIE

Thank you.

The woman nods slightly and moves into the darkness beyond the fire. The Attan ends with the dancers firing their weapons into the sky. Everyone applauds. Richie claps a thanks to the musicians: a *dhol* (drums), *tablas* (percussion) and the stringed madolin-like, *rubab*. Richie gets up and crosses (in his socks) to the players.

Richie gestures to the *rubab* player, asking if he can try. The man smiles, offering up his instrument. Richie tinkers with it for a minute, trying chords and then turns to Tariq. He begins playing the unforgettable, anthemic opening chords to Deep Purple's "Smoke On The Water".

RICHIE

(singing/playing)

"Smoke on the wa-a-a-a-ter and fire
in the sky. Smoke on the water and
fire in the sky..."

Richie windmills out the chords. The *dhol* and *tabla* players kick in, jamming. Richie nods encouragement.

RICHIE

(singing)

"We all came out to Montreux, on
the Lake Geneva shoreline..."

The ring of men begin to clap along.

RICHIE

"To make records with a mobile. We
didn't have much time..."

Nizar jumps to his feet and storms off. Tariq claps along. The woman in scarlet, stands behind the circle of elders, listening. Richie plays and sings to her.

RICHIE
"Smoke on the wa-ter. A fire in the
sky. Smoke on the w-a-a-ter...."

The entire feast claps along. Richie finishes to applause. He bows, returns the instrument with thanks and rejoins Riza and Tariq.

TARIQ
(in Pashtu)
"Smoke on The Water"? I do not know
what the song means but it was a
joy to hear.

Riza translates.

RICHIE
Nobody knows what it means. But
thanks. And thank you for this
magnificent feast. Incredible food
and way too much!

Richie translates to Tariq. Riza turns to Richie.

RIZA
You know this is only for us.

RICHIE
What is?

RIZA
This feast. This food. These
villagers never eat like this. They
might get meat once a month.

Richie looks past the circle of feasting elders -- small children and women watch from the shadows.

RIZA
They are hungry in Shatowri.

EXT. TARIQ'S HOME - NIGHT

Richie and Riza serve their food to a line of villagers. A small boy holds up his plate.

RICHIE
Come on shorty, you can handle a
little more.

Richie adds more to his heaping plate. The boy smiles.

INT. TARIQ'S HOME - LATER NIGHT

Richie and Riza sit cross-legged on the floor with Tariq. Glasses of tea and a clay chillum (filled with tobacco) are passed around. A fire crackles in the center of the large, vaulted mud-walled room. Tariq sets a leather pouch in front of Richie and nods for him to open it. Richie unties the string and peers inside. Tariq takes the bag and dumps the silver and lapis jewelry onto the carpet.

TARIQ

(in Pashto)

Everything we have, all the wealth of my village, for what? To buy more bullets. More guns. We are surrounded by enemies -- the mujahideen warlords, the Taliban, my Pashtun brothers. They come to take our valley. They want us to grow the poppy.

Riza translates to Richie.

TARIQ

Twenty five years of killing. I am tired of war and I cannot afford peace.

Riza translates. Richie listens. Tariq sighs heavily. He looks up at Richie through the tobacco smoke. A smile creases his face, his blue eyes dance.

TARIQ

We always hoped the Americans would send help. And see, Al-hamdulillah, tonight they have sent us Richie Vance.

Riza translates. Tariq smiles, shrugs.

RICHIE

Not what you were expecting, huh?

TARIQ

(in Pashto)

Allah helps the innocent.

Tariq's smile fades as he stares into the fire.

INT. TARIQ'S HOME - LATE NIGHT

Richie sleeps on the main room's mud floor alongside Riza. The fire is now glowing embers. Richie gets up quietly and steps outside.

EXT. TARIQ'S HOME - LATE NIGHT

The sky is a sugar bowl of stars. All is quiet. Richie walks away from the house, stumbling a bit in the darkness. A wild dog barks somewhere in the valley. Richie climbs into the boulders behind the village and takes a leak.

He finishes, starts to head back but stops, hearing something. A faint voice. Acoustic guitar playing. A woman's voice sings. The song is barely audible, but beautiful and very familiar. Richie follows it deeper into the dark, rock-strewn hills.

Richie stops to listen. He can now make out a woman's voice beautifully singing (and playing) Cat Steven's ballad "Trouble". The voice comes from the towering boulders above him. Richie follows it.

The mouth of the open-roofed "cave" WE SAW earlier, glows with flickering candle light. Her voice echoes in the stone.

WOMAN (O.S.)

(singing)

"Trouble. Oh trouble set me free/I
have seen your face/ And it's too
much, too much for me..."

Richie creeps silently deeper, peering around a boulder. A scarlet burkha sits neatly folded on the rock floor. Richie steps further inside.

RICHIE'S POV - A 17 YEAR OLD GIRL

sits cross-legged, her back to US. She strums a battered Yamaha guitar. Long black hair falls, shining, down her back. She wears a lapis-blue cotton shirt over cotton pants. A candle's flame dances at her bare feet. She sings, in unaccented English, in a pure, haunting, smokey voice.

WOMAN

(singing)

"Trouble. Oh trouble can't you see/
You're eating my heart away/And
there's nothing much left of me..."

RICHIE listens. This is the most perfect sound he has ever heard: a middle-eastern Dusty Springfield. Forget the sleaze, the hustle, the con of the music "business"; this is the music. In a cave, in the desert wilds of southern Afghanistan, Richie Vance hears the sound again and it takes his breath away.

Richie's eyes fill. He steps closer, drawn to her song. His foot dislodges rock. The girl wheels with a startled gasp. And she is beautiful: emerald eyes, ivory skin. Heart-breakingly, Ava Gardner-beautiful. Now it is Richie's turn to gasp. The girl clutches her guitar in one hand. She sees Richie glance at it. She kicks over the candle, plunging the cave into blackness.

RICHIE

Wait!

The girl brushes past him like wind blowing from the cave. Richie watches her fly through the boulders, guitar in hand, down towards the sleeping village.

Richie turns back to the cave.

Richie's Zippo flame flickers light off the boulders. He sees the camouflage tarp and carefully lifts it off revealing the tiny TV, car battery and a stack of glossy fan magazines in Dari -- all with "Afghan Star" contestants on their covers. Richie hears the girl's beautiful "Trouble" echoing like a dream in his head. He stares down at the jury-rigged TV set, at the worn Afghan Star magazines. Richie's mouth opens as an idea, no, the idea hits.

RICHIE

Jesus.

Richie bolts from the cave.

INT. TARIQ'S HOME - NIGHT

Riza snores on his floor mat. Richie shakes him awake and clamps a hand over Riza's mouth.

EXT. TARIQ'S FORTRESS-HOME - NIGHT

Richie and Riza whisper in the moonlit, packed-earth village street.

RICHIE

How many Pashtuns are there?

RIZA

Richie, you are having a terrible dream. I think--

RICHIE

How many? A number.

RIZA

Maybe... twenty million in Afghanistan. Another thirty million in Pakistan.

RICHIE

Fifty million! And, and on this Afghan Star show, they always vote, you know, the people vote for each group. Tajik for Tajik...

RIZA

Sadly for my country, yes. Usually they do.

RICHIE

The winner gets a record contract?

RIZA

And five thousand U.S--

RICHIE

Fifty million loyal and incredibly motivated CD buyers. We are talking Eagles Greatest Hits numbers!

RIZA

We are?

Richie begins pacing circles in the dusty street, muttering to himself. Riza yawns. Richie steps back to Riza.

RICHIE

I saw a girl. Just now. I heard her sing. A Pashtun girl.

RIZA

Impossible.

RICHIE

No. The girl in the red burkha. We saw her today.

RIZA

Pashtun women cannot, they are forbidden to sing.

RICHIE

Well this chick didn't get the memo. This girl is... I have got to find her. Riza, Richie Vance is all about one thing.

(tugging on his ears)

My ears. And signing. Okay two things. My ears and signing. I hear. I close. Simple.

RIZA

A Pashtun girl? From this village? They will kill her and then, right away, they will kill us. With big, sharp rocks. That is simple.

RICHIE

This is fate, man. This. Me. Here. I mean, here?! Think about how random and crazy that is. Unless. Unless there is a reason. Her voice. This TV show. I am supposed to be here. This will work... I'll talk. You translate.

RIZA

(shrugging)

We die.

EXT. SHATOWRI VILLAGE DEIRA (MEETING PLACE) - DAY

Two dozen bearded Pashtun ELDERS (*mashran*) and grey beards (*speengiri*), with Tariq, the village Chief, in the center, sit in a circle for a *maraka*, a village court or council. The rest of the village, over a hundred people, gathers around, murmuring in anticipation. Outside the circle stands the girl in her scarlet burkha, watching with the other women and children of the village.

Richie and Riza sit on the opposite side of the circle, facing Tariq.

Tariq stands. Everyone is silent. His voice echoes off the village's mud walls.

TARIQ

(in subtitled Pashtun)

My people. Welcome. This is not a formal *maraka* because we have guests, outsiders present. Friends but not of our *plarina*.

(MORE)

TARIQ(cont'd)

The traditional laws of Narkh will
not be observed today.

(pointing to Richie)

This man, an American, has come
here to speak of something of great
importance to our village. He is a
serious man. A man of good
business. We must hear his
thoughts.

Tariq gestures to Richie. He stands, Riza rising alongside
him.

RICHIE

I believe it was our late poet,
John Lennon who once said, "Come
together. Over me."

Richie looks at Riza, waiting for the translation. Riza
swallows hard and translates. The white bearded elders stare
at Richie like statues.

RICHIE

I think John's point was that music
has the power to heal us. To bring
us together. Make us one.

Riza translates. Tariq nods.

RICHIE

I have spent my entire life
searching for a voice. A sound. A,
a music so true and pure that the
hairs on the back of my neck go up.
And stay up. Well, and people, this
is totally blowing my mind, I heard
it here. Right here in Shatowri.

Riza just stares at Richie.

RICHIE

(to Riza)

Well?

Riza takes a deep breath and translates. The circle of elders
looks at each other.

The girl in her red burkha shifts nervously, looks down.

RICHIE

I heard an angel. No. Not an angel.
A woman with the voice of an angel,
right here in the caves above your
village.

Riza translates. A slight rustle amongst the villager.

RICHIE

I notice you folks aren't cable or
satellite subscribers but my guess
is you've still heard about the
"Afghan Star" TV show out of Kabul.

Riza translates. A few younger heads nod.

RICHIE

Big, big hit. Mega. Right? Singers
from all over the country perform
on TV and all of Afghanistan votes
on who is the best. Here's the
deal. I already know who is the
best. I heard her sing last night.

The red burkha girl stares at Richie, emerald eyes flashing
behind the mesh.

RICHIE

I know she will win. I am asking
that you allow me take... that
woman, right there--

(pointing at the woman in
red)

If she is willing, to Kabul, and
let her sing on national TV.

Tariq's head follows Richie's hand, to the girl in red and
then curious, back to Richie and Riza.

RICHIE

I am asking you to allow this woman
to bring glory to her family. Her
village. Her Pashtun people! I am
asking you to let us all come
together over her!

Silence. Riza shakes his head.

RIZA

I would rather not.

RICHIE

What? Tell them.

RIZA

Please, my friend. This is a very big mistake. A final mistake. I know. I am Pashtun.

RICHIE

And I am Richie Vance. I got 'em. Trust me.

Riza gulps and translates. The village explodes -- screaming, fist-shaking, furious. Tariq leaps to his feet, bellowing, veins jumping from his neck. Riza steps back at the fury.

RICHIE

What?

RIZA

She is Tariq's daughter!!

RICHIE

Get out. Really? He must be very proud--

Tariq screams wildly in Pashtu. Riza translates simultaneously.

RIZA

(translating
simultaneously)

That is my Salima. My oldest daughter! You! You have insulted me! You have insulted my home. If my daughter were to sing in public she would bring eternal shame and disgrace to her family. To me. She would dishonor our name. She, of course, would be killed instantly and I would be forced to wander the earth, homeless; a lost and humiliated man.

RICHIE

So. That would be a "no"?

CUT TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN - NIGHT

The taxi's lights are all that is visible chugging across the wasteland.

INT. TAXI

Riza drives. Richie stares straight ahead. The rear doors are missing. The taxi's roof pounded low. Finally.

RICHIE
My bad.... Hey, they didn't kill
us.

Riza gives Richie a dark look.

RICHIE
All right. Yes. You told me so.
Happy?

A banging from the back of the car.

RIZA
Great. A flat tire. Oh, we are
cursed.

RICHIE
Stop. It's a tire. I'm sure you
know how to change it.

Riza pulls over to the dark shoulder.

EXT. TAXI - NIGHT

They leave the headlights on. Riza and Richie walk around to the trunk.

RICHIE
You know what your problem is?
Refined carbs. All that fried nan
bread and rice. Just a solid lump
in your colon. Affects your energy--

Riza pops the trunk -- A DARK HOODED FIGURE leaps out swinging a tire iron.

RICHIE
(stumbling back)
Jesus! A ninja!

Both men back away. The figure, wearing a scarlet burkha, clutches the tire iron, crouches defensively.

RICHIE
Salima?

SALIMA
(in perfect English)
The Mullahs tell us that music
takes you to heaven. They say
"verily God is beautiful and loves
beauty."

RICHIE
Okay.

Salima drops the tire iron.

SALIMA
Allah gave me this voice. This is
his gift. I must honor him with my
music. I must celebrate my God with
my singing. I must go to Kabul.

RICHIE
Great. Noble. Really. And hey, you
are preaching to the choir here.
But Salima. Your family. Your
father... He will kill me.

SALIMA
Then it is Allah's will and we
shall die together.

RICHIE
No, no, no, no, no. I don't want to
die. Riza tell her.

RIZA
Once a Pashtun woman has decided a
thing, it is forever.

RICHIE
What?! No. Salima. Please let me
take you back and--

Salima turns and begin walking through the night desert
alone.

RICHIE
Wait! No. Salima!

Richie chases after her, catching up to her. They face each
other in the darkness.

SALIMA
Our part is already written. Since
the moment you heard me sing. Since
you found me in the cave.
(MORE)

SALIMA(cont'd)

Since we were put here on this earth. Everything in our lives has led us to this time, this place. Richie Vance, our story is already written, and now, we shall play our parts. We must. There is no choice. It is God's will.

Richie stares at her. The two of them, the failed, middle-aged rock manager and the Pashtun teenager in her dusty burkha, face each other in the middle of the star-lit, Afghan wilderness.

RICHIE

Okay.... But I want twenty percent.

INT. RIZA'S TAXI - NIGHT

Riza drives. Richie sits shotgun. Salima, chatty as a teenager, sits, still in her burkha in the back seat.

SALIMA

He was in our village for two years. 2001 and 2002. U.S. Special Forces. Lieutenant Alan Kyle from Lake Placid, New York. USA.

RICHIE

And he taught you English?

SALIMA

Yes. And to read. In secret.

RICHIE

And to sing?

SALIMA

No. That is from Allah.

RICHIE

But this Kyle taught you Cat Stevens?

Salima digs out a ragged Yusuf Islam song-book from her bag.

SALIMA

Yusuf Islam! I love his music. He was once called the other. You know of him?

RICHIE

Know him? I gave him his name.

SALIMA

He is a devout Muslim. A true believer. I will sing no other western songs but Yusuf Islam.

RICHIE

Fine. Guy's got a deep catalog.

RIZA

If you sing at all.

RICHIE

What does that mean?

RIZA

A Pashtun woman? Singing on TV. The Mullahs will condemn her. They will--

SALIMA

They will issue a Fatwa. Order the faithful to kill me. I do not fear them. Ma sha Allah.

They drive in silence. Richie lost in thought.

INT. TAXI - LATER NIGHT

Riza drives. Richie reads the Prince Namor comic. Salima sleeps in the dark back seat. Riza checks the rearview to make sure she is out. He glances over at Richie.

RIZA

May I speak?

RICHIE

Sure.

RIZA

You are a smart man, boss and I feel, a good man.

RICHIE

But.

RIZA

But Salima is in danger. Because of you.

RICHIE

I know. I'll protect her. I will--

RIZA

Where will she even stay? The Mustafa will not allow her to sleep in the hotel. I have one bed. One room. If I bring an unmarried Pashtun girl in my building, my neighbors would tear us apart for the sin.

Richie sits, thinks.

RICHIE

Do you know where the old British cemetery is?

EXT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER - DAWN

A line of SOLDIERS/CLIENTS loiter outside Merci's trailer.

MERCI (O.S.)

No way! I got a business to run, dude!

INT. MERCI'S TRAILER/LIVING ROOM - DAWN

Salima sits on the couch in the neat living room in her burkha, staring at the black velvet painting on the far wall.

MERCI (O.S.)

I ain't no nanny!

Salima glances towards the bedroom.

INT. MERCI'S BEDROOM

Richie and Merci face each other over the unmade bed.

RICHIE

Damn right, you're not a nanny and you're not a whore either!

MERCI

'Course I am. What the hell else am I?

RICHIE

My partner. Be my partner. You'll make more with me and Salima than if you nailed every soldier in "Enduring Freedom".

(MORE)

RICHIE(cont'd)
Salima can sing. Trust me, I know.
She really can sing.

MERCI
And I can screw. We each have our
marketable skills--

RICHIE
Listen to her sing. That's all.
Just listen... Salima? Honey? Could
you come in here for a sec?

Salima shyly enters the bedroom.

RICHIE (CONT'D)
Would you sing for Miss Merci?

SALIMA
Sing?

RICHIE
Yeah. Anything. Any song.

MERCI
This isn't the point Richie. I'm a
world class hooker, not a --

SALIMA (O.S.)
(singing)
"Miles from nowhere/ I guess I'll
take my time/ Oh yeah, to reach
there..."

Merci looks at Richie, who arches his eyebrow.

SALIMA
(singing)
"Look up at the mountain/I have to
climb/ Oh yeah, to reach there/
Lord my body has been a good
friend/But I won't need it when I
reach the end..."

EXT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER - DAWN

Merci pops her head out of the trailer. All the men look up
eagerly.

MERCI

Some good news and some bad news.
Good news is, none of you boys is
gonna leave here with a vicious
STD. Bad news? Merci's pulling an
early retirement. Hangin' up my hot
pants. I suggest you try the
Chinese whorehouses off Chicken
street. Siempre Avanti, fellas!

She slams the door closed behind her.

INT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER

Merci stands, hands on her hip, facing Richie.

MERCI

60/40.

RICHIE

80/20. Non-negotiable.

Merci glances over at Salima.

MERCI

What's she look like under there?

RICHIE

You mean, naked? Jesus. I've never-

MERCI

Her face. She pretty?

RICHIE

She's a ten.

MERCI

70/30. You pay room and board and
all out-of-pocket.

RICHIE

Done

MERCI

And I get a taste of any merch
money.

RICHIE

And I get a taste of...?

MERCI

The back of my hand, you're not
careful.

(to Salima)

Darlin'. Lucky Charms or Count
Chocula?

Salima follows Merci into the kitchen. Richie watches them
and smiles.

EXT. KABUL GOLF COURSE - AFTERNOON

Jake and Nick stand very nervously at the 9th fairway
watching the traditionally-robed, terrifying Pashtun warlord,
AZAM GHOL, prepare his tee shot. The Kabul fairways and
"greens" are dirt and sand, the clubhouse a bullet-scarred,
cinderblock bunker. Several armed MILITIA flank Azam.

NICK

(clearing his throat)

...Yeah, so, so I pick up this
bitch at the Talibar, turns out she
works for the goddamn New York
Times! She gets me loaded and you
know, talking, and then she goes
and writes this bullshit article...

JAKE

Now there's all this heat. My dad's
totally freaking out. Congressional
hearings. All kinds of shit.

Azam steps away from his tee.

AZAM

Which explains your great rush to
leave our country.

(nodding to the two white
vans parked at the
clubhouse)

My men counted. All the ammunition
is in the vans as you promised.

Azam nods to one of his men, who rolls out a Tumi suitcase.
Jake kneels and unzips it -- the case is packed with seran-
wrapped bricks of pure Afghan heroin. An AK-47 suddenly
appears at Jake's forehead.

WIDER - NIZAR KHAN

Tariq Khan's younger brother, holds the rifle at Jake's face.

Another of Ghol's men holds a .357 to the back of Nick's head. Nizar slowly squeezes the trigger. Click. Jake pisses himself. Literally.

JAKE
What the hell, dude?!

AZAM
Our Mangal brother, Nizar, told us this morning that the bullets you sold his people are worthless.

Jake gulps, licking his suddenly very dry lips.

JAKE
Now. Wait. Listen. We just hired a new quality control--

AZAM
How about the ammunition you just sold to me?! Sold to Azam Ghol!! It too is worthless?!

Azam whips a Walther P99 pistol from his golf bag and aims at Nick's forehead.

NICK
WAIT! SHIT!! NOOOO!!!
(turning to Jake)
IT WAS HIM!! He did it! Him!!

JAKE
What?! Me?! No! I'm a Rolfer!

NIZAR
There was another American.

Azam looks down at Nick and Jake.

NICK
We don't know his name. We never met him before--

JAKE
Richie Vance. He's staying at the Mustafa!

NICK
Grow some balls, dude.

AZAM
CIA?

NICK
USO. He's a loser rock promoter.

Azam absorbs this information.

AZAM

You have been very naughty boys. I must punish you.

JAKE

Hey. I pissed myself. In front of the guys. You know how embarrassing that is? That's punishment enough--

AZAM

(to bodyguard)

Cut off their little fingers.

JAKE

What?!

BODYGUARD

All four of them?

AZAM

No. Fool. One each.

The militia bodyguards drag the wailing Jake and Nick away into one of the white van.

Azam returns to his tee shot, Nizar beside him.

AZAM

Your brother Tariq is a stubborn fool. He grows grapes that die on the vine instead of poppies that will pay for Pashtun freedom. From his American master, he buys bullets that do not fire. He kisses the ring of those who would kill us. Your people need a new Chief. With my help you will take back your village by the gun. You, Nizar, shall be Chief. You will be.

NIZAR

Insha'Allah.

AZAM

Jazak Allah Khair. ("May Allah reward you.") Does Tariq know his bullets are useless?

NIZAR

He asked me to check them but I have not told him anything.

AZAM

Good. Smart, little brother.

NIZAR

What about the other American? He
sold the bullets to my brother.

AZAM

(shrugging)

We find him. We kill him.

Azam turns and crushes the ball. It slices off the fairway.

EXT. KABUL WEDDING HALL/AFGHANSTAR CONTEST - DAY

Modern four story building ringed with curled razor-wire and guarded by AK-47 armed, uniformed SOLDIERS and bomb-sniffing dogs. The AFGHANSTAR name and logo hang from the building. Crowds of FANS gather hours early outside the chain-link fence, waving tickets and signs with their favorite contestant.

INT. RIZA'S CAB - DAY

Riza honks, pulls through the fans to the Wedding Hall checkpoint. Richie and Salima, still in her scarlet burkha, sit in the back seat. Riza pulls up to the checkpoint.

SALIMA

Richie?

RICHIE

Yes.

SALIMA

Nothing.

Richie looks down. Salima worries her thumb with her index finger.

RICHIE

Scared is okay. Scared is normal.
Sting still throws up before a
show.

(looking at Salima in her
burkha)

But, you know, give me a heads up
if you're gonna--

SALIMA
I am not going to be sick.

Salima looks out at the pre-show mob scene, the guards and dogs...

SALIMA
(almost to herself)
I have never been outside of my
village before.

Richie looks over at her. The GUARD suddenly pokes his machine gun into Riza's window.

GUARD
(in Dari)
Where are you going?

RIZA
(in Dari)
I am driving Mr. Richie Vance,
talent manager from America. This
is his client Salima Khan. Mr.
Daoud Sididi, the Afghan Star host
is expecting us.

RICHIE
We're on the list.

RIZA
(over his shoulder to
Richie)
There is no list.

Richie leans forward and stuffs tightly-rolled twenties into the AK-47's gun barrel. The Guard pockets the cash without acknowledging it.

The Guard looks Richie and Salima over.

GUARD
(in English)
Step out of the car and open your
trunk, please.

RICHIE
(to Riza)
There's always a list.

INT. WEDDING HALL/MAIN BALLROOM - DAY

Pre-show chaos. AFGHAN TECHNICIANS snake cable, set up folding chairs, hang lights, hammer the stage together. Loud Afghan pop music blares and cuts off as they test the sound system. Richie and Salima face the young producer/host DAOUD SIDIDI in the center of the hurricane.

DAOUD

There is nothing I can do. Nothing.
There are rules. Maybe not in my
country but on my show--

TECHNICIAN

Daoud! Playback and computers need
a separate generator. The city
power surges are killing us.

DAOUD

(to Tech)

Call Tolo. They have extras. But
fast!

(to Richie)

This is the third round of the
competition. The judges have voted
in the final twelve contestants. I
can't just--

RICHIE

The people haven't voted yet.

DAOUD

No. That happens after tonight's
round.

RICHIE

Perfect. Listen to Salima sing. If
you love her voice, give her a, a
producorial third round bye, a one-
time pass. You can do that. Let
Salima sing tonight for the people
to vote--

DAOUD

Mr. Vance--

RICHIE

Richie.

DAOUD

Richie. I appreciate your passion.
But--

RICHIE

My passion? I'm nothing. I'm a cheap hustler from San Diego. This is about Salima. You know what will happen to a Pashtun girl if she sings on TV. You know what her family will do. Her father. It's already done. Just by leaving her village, by coming here. It is done. Hey, I've managed singers back in LA, big names, who get stage fright before a gig but not because an entire people wants them dead! Salima knows all of this and still, here she is, standing in front of you, asking for a chance.

DAOUD

Look. If the Ulema doesn't shut us down. If the Ministry of Information doesn't throw me in jail. There will be another season. Mr. Vance, call me tomorrow.

Daoud starts to leave. Richie blocks him.

RICHIE

There is no tomorrow. Not for you. Or Salima. Not for your country. If you let a Pashtun woman sing on national TV, if you let the people of Afghanistan see her courage, hear her beautiful voice--

DAOUD

Stop! Please. Do not lecture me about my country. About courage. Never. Not you. You people talk and talk. Have been talking for far too long. I know courage. We have more death threats here than singers.

Daoud stares at Richie, turns to Salima.

DAOUD

I am sorry. Please. Come back for the next competition. In six months.

Daoud turns, already chatting with a technician, walking down the crowded hallway. Richie starts after him, stops, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

SALIMA

(sings)

"I would have given you all of my
heart/but there's someone who's
torn it apart..."

Daoud stops, turns.

SALIMA

(sings)

"And he's taken almost all that
I've got/ but if you want, I'll try
to love again/ baby I'll try to
love again but I know.../ The first
cut is the deepest, baby I know the
first cut is the deepest..."

The bustling hallway quiets. Workers stop, turning to Salima to listen. Daoud walks back to her. Richie looks at Salima, taken again by the achingly pure voice.

SALIMA

(singing out)

"Cause when it comes to being lucky
he's cursed/ when it comes to
lovin' me he's worst/ but when it
comes to being loved he's first/
that's how I know..."

Daoud takes Salima's hand, rushing through the live TV craziness with her (Richie at their heels), down a hallway, dodging techs carrying stage sets, boom mics etc... to the judges' "green" room. ("AFGHAN STAR JUDGES" on the door.) Daoud knocks and enters.

INT. GREEN ROOM - DAY

The door blows open. The FOUR Afghan Star judges (three MEN and a WOMAN) smoke, get made-up, chat on cell phones etc... in the crowded green room. Daoud rushes in with Salima and Richie.

DAOUD

(to Judges)

There has been a change!

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. SALIMA'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

Richie paces nervously. The bathroom door opens and Merci emerges holding a brush and a make-up kit. She turns to the door. Salima appears behind her dressed in a new, silver traditional Afghan dress and emerald head scarf. She has tasteful made-up. Her eyes shine electric green. Salima is dazzling. FLASH. Merci takes a photo of Salima with her digital camera.

Richie drops to one knee, head down, a knight kneeling before his Queen. Salima laughs, pulls him to his feet.

INT. CONTESTANTS' GREEN ROOM - NIGHT

All the male contestants huddle, buzz and chat together on one side of the room beneath the TV ceiling-mounted monitor. Richie, Merci and Salima stand in the far corner. Salima glances over at the boys.

RICHIE
(to Salima)
Ignore them. Irrelevant. Their
keyboard kid has your music?

SALIMA
Yes. He played it beautifully.

RICHIE
Good. Good. All right. When you're
done? Big James Brown finish. Song
ends, I run out and drape a shawl
over your shoulders like a cape and
lead you offstage. You shrug off
the shawl and run back to the mic,
fall into a full knee-drop, keep
singing. Killer.

MERCI
Ignore him. You be you. You look
like a lady. You sing like an
angel. You're enough.

The Afghan Star techno-disco theme comes on. All eyes watch the TV monitor.

ON TV - DAOUD

now in his shiny MC suit, bounds out onstage.

DAOUD
Welcome to all you fans of Afghan
Star!

Screams! Lights strobe and sweep the packed ballroom. The fans cheer wildly. Music pounds.

DAOUD
Tonight. A special, never before
seen Afghan Star event. Our final
twelve is now a final thirteen!

RICHIE AND SALIMA

look at each other.

Salima smiles nervously, glances across at the boys. A few glare at her.

DAOUD
Our judges have just heard a voice
so special they have included this
singer into the competition! Our
beautiful Pashtun sister, Salima
Khan!!!

The audience screams on cue.

A MALE CONTESTANT wanders past Salima to the water fountain.

CONTESTANT 1
(in dari)
"Beautiful sister", you wear the
hijab and do not dance. Do not
move. Or you will die.

Salima backs away from the boy.

RICHIE
What? What'd that twerp say?

SALIMA
Nothing.

Salima turns and sits in a chair in the corner. Richie eyes the contestant.

INT. AFGHAN STAR BALLROOM SHOW - NIGHT

Contestant 1 (the twerp) sings his Afghan techno-pop song in a swirl of disco ball light. The studio audience claps along.

STAGE WINGS - SALIMA, RICHIE AND MERCI

watch from the wings.

SALIMA
He's very good.

RICHIE
Yeah. Hazara good. You're Pashtun
honey and that's a whole different
kind of scary.

Merci takes Salima's hand. Salima turns, nervously watches
her competition finish his song. The audience cheers, holds
up signs with his name GHULAM KAZMI

Daoud rushes onstage, gesturing to the singer.

DOAUD
A big hand for Hazara Town's own,
GHULAM KAZMI. Remember you can text
for your favorite right after the
show. You decide which three go on
to the next round. You decide!

The audience roars.

DAOUD
And now our final singer. The one
who broke all the rules and who
knows, might just break your hearts
-- from Shatowri in Patkia --
SALIMA KHAN!!!

The audience screams. Lights strobe.

SALIMA

squeezes Merci's hand and turns to Richie. She stares at him.

RICHIE
What?

Salima smiles.

A STAGE HAND slips the mic into Salima's hand and she walks
out onto the stage. Richie casually brushes away a tear.
Merci smiles at him.

RICHIE
Damn lasers.

MERCI

Right.

The opening chords to Cat Steven's "Wild World" begin. Richie looks up at the monitor.

ON TV - SALIMA

stands in center stage lit by the swirling disco ball light. She looks like a Pashtun Princess.

SALIMA

(singing)

"Now that I've given everything to
you/ You say you want to start
something new/ And it's breaking my
heart your leaving, baby I'm
grieving..."

ON STAGE - SALIMA

steps towards the lip of the stage.

SALIMA

(singing)

"Oh baby, baby it's a wild world/
It's hard to get by on just a
smile..."

The audience roars, clapping along with her song.

RICHIE turns to Merci and shrugs as if he knew it all along. Merci grabs him and plants a wet one on his mouth. Daoud rushes over, patting Richie on the back.

DAOUD

Yes! Yes!!

RICHIE

Big time, D, big time!

EXT. KABUL STREET - NIGHT

Tariq, Salima's father, walks past a brightly-lit ice cream parlor jammed with boys and men shouting, cheering along with Salima on TV. He looks lost in the big city. Tariq steps through the open sliding door and freezes. His Salima, without her burkha, sings "Wild World" on the TV. Tariq stares at her, his hand finding the dagger at his belt.

TARIQ'S POV - PUSH IN ON SALIMA

beautiful, chaste in her hijab. Salima's face glows with song.

SALIMA

(singing)

"But if you wanna leave, take good care/ Hope you make a lot of nice friends out there/ But remember there's a lot of bad and beware..."

TARIQ stares up at his daughter, his face full of a father's love. Tariq's eyes fill. His hand drops from the dagger in his belt. He cannot do what is demanded by the Pashtunwali code.

Tariq looks around at the happy shop, at the joyful people clapping, singing along with Salima's chorus. An OLD MAN puts a vanilla ice cream into Tariq's hand.

OLD MAN

Here, my friend! A Pashtun, like us. She will win! She is the one!

Tariq glances up at his daughter one last time. He turns and walks from the shop. Tariq tosses the ice cream as the cheers for Salima echo down the street.

EXT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER - LATE NIGHT

Richie sits on the stairs outside the trailer, smoking a cigarette. Merci comes out, sits down beside him.

MERCI

(taking a drag off his cigarette)

Big day.

RICHIE

She was something.

MERCI

That's what Salima said about you.

RICHIE

Just protecting my client.

Merci takes his hand in hers.

MERCI

Now don't go all Atticus Finch on me.

RICHIE

I am only about one thing. Closing.

Merci nods and throws her arm around Richie's shoulder.

MERCI

Just keep tellin' yourself that
Rich.

EXT. KABUL/ I.B.M. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Richie stands outside Jake and Nick's warehouse holding Tariq's bag of jewels. The thick metal security door is locked. Richie pounds on the door.

RICHIE turns from the warehouse. The door opens a crack.

JAKE (OS)

(hissing from inside)

Rich!

Richie turns. The door opens a little further as Jake waves Richie in.

INT. I.B.M. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Richie steps in. The metal door slams and is bolted behind him. A .38 Police Special is jammed into Richie's temple and Jake backs him against the wall.

JAKE

Who sent you?! Who the hell sent
you?!

RICHIE

Nobody.

(noticing Jake's bandaged
left hand)

What happened to you?

Nick sits across the vast warehouse smoking tar balls of opium off of tin-foil. He waves his bandaged left hand.

NICK

Dog-grooming accident. Apparently
the little bastards hate to have
their dick-hairs trimmed.

JAKE

Were you followed?!

NICK
Jesus Jake, lighten up.

RICHIE
Followed? By who?

Jake releases Richie, holsters the pistol.

NICK
You know what I miss most about
Miami?
(taking a long hit of
opium)
The Jews.
(exhaling a cloud)
I mean, yeah, they bitch and
sometimes sue but they so rarely
cut off fingers if a business deal
goes south.

Richie walks over to Nick's desk.

RICHIE
Someone cut off your fingers?

JAKE
Some one or thing.

NICK
Azam Ghol. The beast of the east.

JAKE
Our new boss.

Richie looks around the empty warehouse.

NICK
Yep. All gone. All that lovely
saran-wrapped cash.

RICHIE
He took all your money?!

NICK
(exhaling an opium cloud)
Hey! He took our pinkies!

RICHIE
(holding out the bag of
jewels)
I brought you this. The jewels from
that village. For the bullets. You
can buy tickets and--

NICK
Keep it. No good to us. He'll just
take it. Nope. We're here until
Azam Ghol says we're not.

JAKE
He's very strict.

RICHIE
And then what?

NICK
(exhales a cloud of opium)
And then we're gone.

JAKE
Think fast.

Jake tosses something into Richie's chest. It bounces off,
falling to the floor. Richie picks up his temporary U.S.
passport.

NICK
Rock heavily for us, babe.

RICHIE
Thanks fellas. Hey, you know the
pinky is a highly over-rated digit.

NICK
Gay almost.

JAKE
Totally.

Richie waves and leaves.

EXT. I.B.M. WAREHOUSE - DAY

Riza jumps out of his taxi, waving his cell phone at Richie.

RIZA
Show business emergency! Miss
Merci!

Richie grabs the phone and settles in the cab's back seat.

RICHIE
Hello?

Riza peels off in head-snapping acceleration.

INT. DAOUD'S OFFICE - DAY

Daoud sits at his desk, smoke curling from his cigarette. Merci and Salima share a couch. Richie paces restlessly in front of the exhausted Daoud.

RICHIE

Did you ever see "Footloose"?

MERCI

Oh my God.

RICHIE

The man can't stop our music.

DAOUD

I'm afraid in Kabul, he can.

RICHIE

Okay, what exactly is this "Afghan Council of Scholars"?

DAOUD

(wearily)

An Afghan council of scholars. The Ulema Shura. The final voice.

RICHIE

Can they be bought?

DAOUD

Please Richie. They are religious men.

RICHIE

But she was great. Right? You said so.

DAOUD

The best.

RICHIE

The best. And that doesn't matter?

DAOUD

The Mullahs...

(sighing)

Richie. I have to pick my battles here. They object that Salima sings in English.

RICHIE
We'll change that.

DAOUD
That she was added on as a
contestant without the usual--

RICHIE
You made a waiver. No one minded--

DAOUD
She is a woman! Okay? A Pashtun
woman. From the south. If I insist,
if I take a stand, they will shut
us down. No one will perform. We
lose. You see? We all lose.

Salima stands.

SALIMA
Thank you. For allowing me to sing.
Even the once. It was... I thank
you.

DAOUD
I'm so sorry.

RICHIE
Salima. No. This -- as your
manager, this shall not --

MERCI
Hey. General McCarthur. Give up.
It's over.

Richie looks at Daoud.

DAOUD
It is over.

EXT. TOLO TV - DAY

Richie walks Salima towards Riza's taxi, parked inside the
razor-wired Tolo TV compound. Ghulam Kazimi, the Hazra Afghan
Star singer, walks by and smirks.

GHULAM
(in Dari)
Go back home and make a husband
happy.

RICHIE

What?!

(to Salima)

What'd he say?!

SALIMA

It doesn't matter.

They reach Riza's waiting taxi.

RICHIE

What will happen now? What'll they do to you?

SALIMA

It is in Allah's hands. I have done nothing wrong. This was not to be.

RICHIE

Look. Stay here. With us. We could line up some killer gigs in Dubai. They got some incredible hotel lounges...

(off Salima's look)

Right.

SALIMA

It is my home.

RICHIE

I have heard a lot of singers. The greatest, the best voices.... Last night, when you sang, you wore that room like a necklace.

SALIMA

Thank you.

RICHIE

I wish I...

SALIMA

You did so much.

Salima gives Merci a farewell hug and gets in Riza's taxi. The security gate swings open and they drive through.

RICHIE

So incredibly stupid and wrong.

MERCI

Welcome to Kabul.

EXT. TELEVISION HILL/KABUL - SUNSET

Richie follows Merci the final feet to the top of Television Hill -- the highest point in Kabul. Richie strays off the path, heading towards a crumbling concrete platform.

MERCI

I'd stay on the path hon, there's
more land mines up here than grass.

Richie hops back onto the well-worn, dirt path. Merci and Richie reach the summit, taking in the incredible view of Kabul at sunset. The entire city sprawls beneath them.

Richie takes out a handkerchief and sits on some rubble. Merci stands in front of him, hands on her hips, staring down at Kabul

RICHIE

Beautiful.

Merci turns and smiles at his compliment.

RICHIE

Could you move just a hair so I can
see the mountains?

MERCI

Asshole!

She runs at him. Richie pulls her onto his lap, holding her til she stops squirming. Merci stares at Richie.

MERCI

Here's something I've never done
for money.

RICHIE

Hey. Really. A lovely offer but I'm-
-

Merci leans forward and kisses Richie on the lips.

MERCI

That. That is never for sale.

They look at each other. Merci kisses Richie again.

MERCI

Never.

Merci tenderly smooths down Richie's hair.

MERCI

What time is your flight?

RICHIE

I was going to tell you. Really.

MERCI

When it comes to men, I am always two steps ahead.

RICHIE

Eight am to Dubai. Then on to LA.

Merci nods, turns in his lap facing Kabul. They take in the view of the city at sunset. Richie sighs.

RICHIE

It was not supposed to end this way.

MERCI

Look. We had a really good run but we never made any promises--

RICHIE

Not us. Salima.

(catching himself))

I mean, hey, us too, you know, obviously, that's just... tragic but Salima. That girl has a gift. The magic. I know it like I know my name.

Richie moves Merci off his lap and standing, faces the city.

RICHIE

If I can't break a talent like that what the hell good am I?

MERCI

It is a war zone here, Rich.

RICHIE

Exactly. Confusion means opportunity. The '60s? Riots, assassinations, impeachments and the major labels shipped millions of units.

MERCI

Even if everybody in Afghanistan voted for her. Even if Salima actually won the competition....

Richie's eyes widen.

RICHIE

Go on.

MERCI

Even if the entire country chose
her above all the other
contestants...

RICHIE

(wheeling around))

Then what?! The Council would tell
the whole nation they were
schmucks? They would tell forty
million Pashtuns their vote is
worthless? That they were wrong?

MERCI

They could.

RICHIE

No! No! They could not. Because it
would be too late! She would
already have won! That ship has
sailed. The horse is out of the
barn. That cake is baked. Salima
would have won!

Richie starts running down the mountain. Merci jumps up.

MERCI

On the path!

RICHIE (O.S.)

Shit!

EXT. PUL-I KHESTI MOSQUE/KABUL - DAY

Richie stands in the vast square outside the beautiful mosque
Men pour from the evening prayer. Richie spots Daoud walking
from the mosque with a friend.

RICHIE

Daoud!

Daoud sees Richie and cuts through the crowd of worshippers.

DAOUD

Richie.

RICHIE
Has the Council's decision been
made public?

DAOUD
What?

RICHIE
Does everybody know that Salima's
out?

DAOUD
I know. My staff--

RICHIE
What if the people, what if your
country, voted her above the
others? Daoud, what if she won?

DAOUD
Richie, Salima is gone.

RICHIE
(gesturing to the crowd)
But they don't know it! If
Afghanistan chose her, how could
the Ulema still toss her out?

Daoud thinks, looking around at the mass of people.

DAOUD
The vote begins tomorrow.

RICHIE
For how long?

DAOUD
Forty-eight hours. Then we close
the text lines and count. They,
when the Ulema see her name...

RICHIE
Could you stall them? When they
notice, promise you'll pull her
name and just, you know, stall
until the votes are in?

Daoud stares at Richie, considering. Finally...

DAOUD
Go. Go away.

RICHIE
But Daoud--

DAOUD
I didn't see you. I didn't hear
you. This never happened.

Daoud turns and quickly disappears into the mass of people.
Richie beaks into a broad grin.

INT. MERCI'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Merci lies in Richie's arms in bed. A candle flickers at
their night table.

MERCI
So now what do we do?

Richie kisses Merci on the forehead, leans over and blows out
the candle.

RICHIE (O.S.)
(in darkness)
Now we win.

EXT. FLOWER STREET/INT. RIZA'S CAB - DAY

Riza drives down the bustling, shop-lined street. Richie
rides beside him, staring at the crowded sidewalk.

RICHIE
There! Stop!

Riza screeches to a stop. Richie hops out his side and Riza
follows. The little FLOUR-SMUGGLER GIRL (who looks like a
soiled, scruffy and hungry Dree) squats on the curb holding a
handful of crumpled, old Bollywood movie magazines for sale.

Richie and Riza step over to her.

RIZA
This one? You are sure?

Richie nods. The little girl sees them approaching and
instinctively starts to run. Riza catches her. She struggles
in his arms.

RICHIE
Tell her we won't hurt her. Tell
her we want to hire her. To pay her
money.

Riza translates. The little girl responds in Dari.

RICHIE

What?

RIZA

She thinks we want her for sex.

RICHIE

Jesus. Tell her I need her help for
Salima. Salima on Afghan Star.

The little girl hears the name and stops struggling. She
looks up at Richie.

FLOUR GIRL

Salima Khan?

Richie nods.

RICHIE

Ask her name.

Riza does. The girl looks straight at Richie.

FLOUR GIRL

Yasmin.

INT. MUSTAFA LOBBY - DAY

SIX KABUL STREET ORPHANS sit at tables in the hotel lobby
inhaling huge meals. Richie, Riza and little Yasmin sit at
another banquette. The little girl finishes her feast. Richie
holds a handful of cell phones and a box of SIM cards.

RICHIE

(to Yasmin)

Okay. So, it's simple. You dial 1-
7000-13. Okay? Then you put in a
new SIM card and dial it all over
again.

Riza translates and Yasmin nods, reaching for the phones.

RICHIE

Give each kid a phone and a bunch
of SIMs. Remember 13 is Salima's
code. That's how you vote for her.
New SIM card, dial and vote. Keep
voting til all the cards are gone.
Got it?

Riza translates.

YASMIN
(in English)
Okay boss.

She grabs the phones and box of SIM cards and rejoins her pals.

RICHIE
I swear, I'll be working for that
kid in a few years.

INT. MUSTAFA LOBBY - DAY

FOLLOW YASMIN as she scampers across the lobby into Nasim's manager's office.

The noisy office is crowded with about TWENTY STREET KID HELPERS all working cell phones, replacing SIM cards, voting over and over for Salima.

Yasmin hands Merci's camera to Nasim who begins downloading the shot of Salima in Afghan Star-dress into his lap-top.

PAN to his printer spitting out flyers for Salima: a photo of Salima with the words VOTE FOR SALIMA NUMBER 13 FOR AFGHAN STAR!!! (in Dari)

Another street kid hands Yasmin a stack of finished flyers. WE FOLLOW Yasmin back through the lobby -- past Salima and Richie, still arguing about her hijab -- and out the door, to Riza's waiting taxi.

Riza's taxi is covered in SALIMA FOR AFGHAN STAR posters, photos and stickers. Yasmin hands flyers to people on the busy sidewalk and hops into the cab. Riza wields a bullhorn, shouting out to the street.

RIZA
(on bullhorn in Dari and
Pashto)
Vote for Salima! The Pashtun Pride!
The best on Afghan Star. Number
13... SAL-I-I-I-I-MA!!!

Riza's taxi disappears into traffic.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. FLOWER STREET/KABUL

Little Yasmin tugs Richie down the busy sidewalk. Riza trails them.

RICHIE
Where are we going?

RIZA
(huffing behind)
I ask and she says, "Shut up old
man, it's a surprise."

Yasmin stops and turns.

YASMIN
Now. Close eyes!

Richie turns to Riza, who shrugs. ON RICHIE - He closes his eyes. Yasmin takes him by the hand a few steps, turning a corner into an alley. A huge kids' cheer!

Richie opens his eyes -- the entire alley, a block long, is crammed with TWO HUNDRED STREET KIDS waving Salima flyers and cheering wildly. Richie looks down at Yasmin. Yasmin smiles, hands him a Salima flyer.

YASMIN
The Salimaban.

EXT. MANDAYI MARKET - DAY

Salima's Kids race through the byzantine rabbit-warren of shops, tents and alleys. They tear through the bustling bazaar passing out Salima flyers, scotch-taping posters, chanting Salima's vote/phone number.

A bearded MULLAH steps over to the Salima poster. He reads it -- and tears it from the wall.

FOLLOW KIDS past Richie haggling with a merchant in a tented stall. Richie holds up a huge velvet elephant with mirrors sewn all over it.

RICHIE
...No. Right here. The tag says
"made in Taiwan".

MERCHANT
Hand sewn. Hand sewn.

RICHIE
Maybe. But by Chinese people.

MERCHANT
Okay. Okay. Ten dollar

INT. CHICKEN STREET SHOE STORE - DAY

A Salima STREET KID staples a flyer over another contestant, Ghulam Kazmi's, flyer. The shoe store owner, smiling, wags his finger at the boy. The boy runs from the store.

EXT. MINISTRY OF INFORMATION - DAY

The bearded Mullah from the market strides into the building, clutching the Salima - Afghan Star flyer.

EXT./INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL/LOBBY - DAY

A long LINE OF KIDS leads into the Mustafa lobby. FOLLOW it inside. Richie, Riza and Yasmin sit at a long table in the lobby (now basically "Salima" headquarters). Yasmin hands each kid a stack of flyers, a cell phone and a bunch of SIM cards. Riza gives them each box lunches. Richie doles out their cash salary.

Dozens of KIDS sit around the lobby eating, relentlessly dialing and re-dialing their Salima votes.

EXT. GHAZI STADIUM/KABUL - DAY

Buzkashi match: two teams of horseback riders, armed with whips, beat whoever controls the headless body of a goat (the ball) as they race up and down the field. To score a point you have to carry the headless goat around a flag and drop it in a circle. It is war on horseback.

WIDER - FANS cheer wildly as our STREET KIDS move through the stands, handing out Salima flyers.

OVERLAP FX a phone rings.

INT. TOLO TV/DAOUD'S OFFICE - DAY

Daoud sits with his staff, planning the next week's show. His phone rings.

DAOUD
 (into phone, in Dari)
 Hello? Who?...Ay. No! Minister of
 Information? Tell him, tell him I
 went home with a bad stomach. Okay?
 (hangs up, to his staff)
 It's true. Now I am nauseous.

They laugh nervously. Daoud glances up at the clock.

EXT. BABUR'S GARDEN - DAY

A bright, sunny day. Richie chases Yasmin up the stairs through the beautifully restored 16th century moghul garden to the hilltop pavilion. She hands Salima/Afghan Star xeroxes to the tourists she passes. At the top, Yasmin stops and turns, looking down at white marble mosque shining below, the Moghul Emperor's burial place, manicured lawns and emerald green pool. Richie stands beside the little girl. Yasmin looks up at him and taps her chest with her fist.

YASMIN
 My home.

Richie takes in the regal, formal gardens, the beauty that once was Kabul, the dream of this war-torn city.

RICHIE
 It is amazing.

YASMIN
 Amazing.

EXT. TOLO TV - DAY

A Toyota jammed with bearded clerics pulls up to the razor-wire security gate. An armed guard walks to the car, while a second guard works a car-bomb mirror beneath the chassis.

INT. TOLO TV/DAOUD'S OFFICE

Daoud and his director study a model of the new stage. The phone rings.

DAOUD
 (on phone in Dari)
 Hel-- They're here?!... Uhm....
 Check their trunk. And papers. Give
 me a moment!

Daoud flies out of the office. He scampers up the three flights of stairs.

EXT. TOLO TV GATE - DAY

The bearded Mullah driver berates the guard, who gestures into their open trunk.

EXT. TOLO TV ROOF - DAY

Daoud runs across to a small, beat-up two-man Tolo TV news helicopter. He grabs the sleeping pilot off a hammock and rushes, with him, into the chopper.

EXT. TOLO TV FRONT GATE - DAY

The Council of Scholars storms on foot through the Tolo gate.

POV - CHOPPER - FROM ABOVE

The black-robed Mullahs stride across the courtyard to the Tolo TV offices.

INT. TOLO TV NEWS HELICOPTER

Daoud stares down at the Mullahs as the chopper banks, heading towards the mountains.

INT. U.S. ARMY CH-47 CHINOOK HELICOPTER - DAY

Richie, tethered to a safety line, leans out of an open helicopter that hovers several hundred feet above downtown Kabul. Richie empties a box of Salima flyers out of the door. They blow from the chopper like snow.

Richie turns, sees Merci and Private Barnes sitting close together on the Chinook's bench seat. He shuffles over to them, and squeezes between them, separating the couple. Merci cracks up.

EXT. CHINOOK HELICOPTER - DAY

The flyers flutter through the air. FOLLOW ONE FLYER as it floats down.

EXT. SHERPUR/KABUL - DAY

CLOSE ON - A MAN'S HAND

catches the Salima photo-flyer as it wafts down.

WIDER - the mystery man's arm sticks out from a tinted Bentley window. It withdraws into the car.

INT. AZAM GHOL'S BENTLEY AZURE - DAY

NIZAR, Tariq's brother, looks down at the photo of his niece as an "Afghan Star" contestant. Nizar's face hardens. A hulking DRIVER and armed BODYGUARD sit up front, Azam Ghol Nizar ride in back. Afghan techno pop blares. Nizar crumples the Salima flyer in his fist.

AZAM

...No. It's even simpler than that my young friend. Look. How much do you earn growing wheat?

NIZAR

For each hectare? Two hundred and sixty-six dollars U.S.

AZAM

I will pay you five thousand dollars. See? Simple.

NIZAR

For each hectare?!

AZAM

To start. Five thousand to grow the poppy. And who is harmed? The Americans. They buy all the drugs. They use all the drugs. We keep all the money. They grow weaker. We get stronger... And richer.

NIZAR

What about the government? The police?

AZAM

Every minister in Kabul knows this voice. I own the border patrols. I could smuggle human heads into Peshwar and they would look the other way...

(MORE)

AZAM(cont'd)

Nizar, you will save your people.
You will be a hero to your people.

DRIVER

We are here Azam.

Azam peers out the Bentley's tinted windows at Merci's double-wide trailer.

AZAM

Oh my friend, you will love this
whore. Skin like milk. A mouth...
(to Bodyguard)
Jawid. Go. We'll wait here.

NIZAR

I'm sorry. I am a married man.

AZAM

As am I. This whore is a non-
believer. She is outside the vows.

JAWID, the bodyguard driver, leaves the Bentley.

EXT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER - DAY

Jawid bangs on the door. No answer. He takes an envelope from his pocket, leans it against the door and heads back to the Bentley.

INT. AZAM GHOL'S BENTLEY AZURE - DAY

Azam smiles at Merci's home through the tinted window.

AZAM

What is it the Americans say, "You
get what you pay for"?

Jawid steps into the car. The Bentley pulls away, cruising down the block.

INT. MUSTAFA HOTEL BAR - NIGHT

Richie, Riza, Merci, Yasmin (teetering on a phone book) sit at the bar watching the dangling TV. The bar is jammed with Salima rooters.

YASMIN
(to bartender)
Coca-cola.

RICHIE
(eyes on TV)
Give her a mint tea.

YASMIN
Coke.

RICHIE
Riza?

YASMIN
Tea.

ON TV the "Afghan Star" logo and pulsating show's theme music comes up. Quick cutting TV shots of the screaming, young Afghan STUDIO AUDIENCE hit by strobes, green lasers and disco-balls; the FOUR older, thoughtful JUDGES. Fans wave signs with contestants names on them. Daoud skips on stage to wild applause.

DAOUD
(on TV, in Dari)
Thank you audience. Thank you
Afghanistan. Welcome to semi-final
decision night on Afghan Star!

The audience goes nuts.

MERCI
(to Richie)
You okay?

Richie nods, eyes on the screen. Daoud gestures to a huge screen behind him with photos of the "Afghan Star" contestants... Including Salima.

MATCH CUT TO:

BLACK AND WHITE TV IMAGE

of Daoud on the Afghan Star stage.

WIDER - SALIMA kneels before her battery-powered set watching the show from her hidden, rock-walled cave. A PAIR OF HANDS suddenly grabs the TV set, ripping it free. Salima wheels. Her father hoists the set over his head and smashes it against the granite wall. A shower of glass.

Tariq looks down at his daughter huddled in fear below him. He turns and leaves her. Salima buries her face in her hands.

MATCH CUT TO:

RICHIE

sits at the bar, his face buried in his hands.

MERCI

Oh don't be such a puss. Watch!

RICHIE

Bad luck.

Little Yasmin tries to pry Richie's fingers from his face.

DAOUD

(in Dari, on TV)

And the final contestant to move into the championship round. Our number one with the judges and your number one in votes with the largest vote total in Afghan Star history....

Suspenseful synth music and drums. Richie, eyes closed, fingers in his ears, hums "Stairway To Heaven" loudly.

DAOUD

(on TV)

Salima Khan! Salima Khan!

The studio audience leaps their feet. The Mustafa Bar goes nuts. Merci hugs a stunned Richie.

MERCI

She did it! You did it! We're in!!

Riza and Yasmin dance and scream. Richie stares up at the TV screen, smiling. A burst of automatic gunfire -- everyone ducks -- peeking up at the Russian Mercenary happily waving his Glock.

EXT. MERCI'S DOUBLE-WIDE TRAILER - NIGHT

Richie and Merci walk up to the front door.

RICHIE

...Okay. Yes. Technically the man did threaten to kill me on sight BUT that was before his daughter made the final round.

MERCI

He will put your head on a spike.

RICHIE

Honey. If I can pitch a hung-over Clive Davis the morning after his legendary pre-Grammy party, I can close Tariq Khan.

Merci unlocks the door. Richie bends down and picks up Azam Ghol's letter.

RICHIE

From a secret admirer?

Merci opens and reads it, quickly stuffing it into her pocket.

MERCI

(grimly)

Yes.

She steps into the trailer. Richie behind her.

RICHIE

Everything okay?

Merci heads to the bedroom.

MERCI

(over her shoulder)

I have to go to work.

RICHIE

As what?

INT. MERCI'S BEDROOM

Merci sits on her bed strapping on her 4 inch high hooker heels. Richie sits forlornly beside her.

RICHIE

But you said you retired.

MERCI

You said you discovered Madonna.

Merci takes off her skirt and slides into a thigh-cut, skin-tight black dress.

RICHIE
Hey. That's the truth!

MERCI
I don't have a choice. Okay? None.
You're just gonna have to trust me
on this. Or not.

Merci stands, looking blazing hot.

MERCI
So?

Richie can only stare and shake his head in awe.

RICHIE
What on earth is a beauty like you
doing with a loser like me?

MERCI
You never heard the phrase, "a
Merci screw"?

Merci throws on her black raincoat. She leans over and takes
Richie's face in her hands.

MERCI
Kiss me.

Richie does. A long, real kiss.

MERCI
You come back to me from that
village in one piece or I'll kill
you.

Richie nods.

EXT. MERCI'S TRAILER - NIGHT

Ghol's sinister, tinted window Bentley purrs at the curb.

MERCI
Go inside. I won't be able to do
this if you're watching.

RICHIE
Can I ask you one favor?

MERCI

Okay.

RICHIE

Don't do the thing with the Marilyn wig and the scarves--

MERCI

See you tomorrow.

RICHIE

'Cause I'm pretty sure that's our special deal.

They reach the front door. Merci stops him.

MERCI

Richie...?

RICHIE

I know. Me too.

Richie turns enters the trailer. Merci walks to the Bentley.

INT. MERCI'S TRAILER/ LIVING ROOM

Richie, at the window, watches the hulking Jawid open Merci's door. She takes a final look back at the trailer and gets in. The Bentley drives off.

EXT. ROAD TO GARDEZ - DAY

A Blackwater Mambo armored fighting vehicle rumbles south towards Shatowri. Lynyrd Skynyrd "You Got That Right" blasts.

INT. BLACKWATER MAMBO - DAY

Bombay Brian drives. Richie rides shotgun. Riza winces at the Brian's music in the back seat.

BOMBAY BRIAN

So the guy knows you're coming?

RICHIE

Absolutely.

BOMBAY BRIAN

We just pick the girl up and turn around.

RICHIE
 Yep. Safe as milk.

EXT. AZAM GHOL'S SHERPUR MANSION - DAY

Merci (still in last night's dress) appears at Ghol's narco-palace second-floor balcony. She climbs over, hangs and drops the five feet to the dirt. Merci runs barefoot from the mansion.

INT. BLACKWATER MAMBA - DUSK

Bombay Brian drives. Bad Company blares "Can't Get Enough of Your Love". Riza waves a cd from the back seat.

BOMBAY BRIAN
 I'm not putting on that gay-ass
 crap.

RIZA
 Oh. So now Miss Gloria Gaynor is
 gay?

Richie's cell phone rings.

RICHIE
 (answering the phone)
 House of pain.

INTERCUT TO:

MERCI

huddles nervously in a Kabul alley.

MERCI
 This warlord Azam Ghol?! The party
 I was at? He is going with Salima's
 Uncle Nizar to destroy their
 village. Tonight.

RICHIE
 What?

MERCI
 Me and this Pashtun girl. We were
 in the hot tub with them.

RICHIE
Oh God. Not the hot tub.

Bombay Brian glances over.

MERCI
With Azam Ghol and this Nizar. I
heard Salima's name. They were
talking. Listen to me! The bullets
you sold Salima's father are bad.
They're old and won't fire. Get it?
Her father and his people will be
slaughtered. You have to do
something.

RICHIE
Right. Brian, turn around. We're
going back.

MERCI
NO! Richie! Those people will die.
You have to--

RICHIE
(into phone)
Okay. Thanks for the tip, honey.
See you soon.

Richie clicks off.

RICHIE
Slight change of plan. Back to
Kabul.

Bombay Brian turns the truck around, heading north.

BOMBAY BRIAN
What happened in the hot tub?

Richie stares straight ahead, lost in thought.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Rich?

RICHIE
Shit. Stop. Stop the truck.

Bombay Brian pulls off the road. They are in the middle of
nowhere -- the wastes of southern Afghanistan. Richie hops
out of the truck and starts pacing in the desert. Bombay
Brian looks back at Riza, who shrugs.

Richie stops. He shakes his head.

RICHIE
What the hell.

Richie climbs back in the Mambo and sits, sweating in his seat. Finally.

RICHIE
I never discovered Madonna.

RIZA
What?!

RICHIE
I never handled a real headliner. Yes, I had Eddie Money but before "Two Tickets To Paradise" broke. I made a few bucks in my life. Nailed a few quasi-hot publicists... I had a beautiful daughter that I gave up. Let's face it, I never really did anything great, you know, never really tasted greatness... Until right now.

(turning to face the
guys))

Gentlemen there are four sacred bonds in the world: husband-wife, parent-child, Priest-confessor and... talent manager-act.

BOMBAY BRIAN
What about doctor-patient?

RIZA
Or lawyer-client?

RICHIE
Not sacred. The point is -- Salima is my act. I am her manager. My act needs me. Now.

Bombay Brian and Riza stare at him.

RICHIE
Let's go to Shatowri.

RIZA
What is happening Richie?

RICHIE
I am representing my client.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Everything is cool, right?

RICHIE
Mr. Bombay, we have nothing to
worry. Know why?

Bombay Brian shakes his head.

RICHIE
Allah helps the innocent.

Bombay Brian u-turns back and continues towards the village.

EXT. SHATOWRI PASHTUN VILLAGE - DUSK

Bombay Brian's armored vehicle pulls past the mud walls into the village. They are immediately surrounded by dozens of fierce warriors bristling with AK-47s and Kalishnikovs. Salima, back in her red burkha, rushes from her home.

Tariq charges up to the Mambo, yanks Richie from the truck and whips his dagger at Richie's throat. Bombay Brian leaps into fire-ready posture. A dozen Pashtun guns aim at Brian. Everything stops.

RICHIE
Your brother and Azam Ghol are on
the way here to kill you.

Riza translates.

BOMBAY BRIAN
WHAT?!

RICHIE
The bullets you bought are bad.
They are old. They won't fire and
you will all die. We are your only
chance.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Those scamming South Beach
assholes!

Tariq presses the razor-sharp blade, leaving a line of blood at Richie's throat. Salima steps closer, hand to her mouth.

TARIQ
You stole my daughter.

Riza translates.

RICHIE
You raised her.

Riza translates.

RICHIE
You raised her to celebrate and
honor her family, her people and
Allah. She does that every time she
sings. And if you didn't really
believe that, she would be dead by
now.

Riza translates. Tariq very slowly lowers the blade. He looks
back at his daughter. Richie rubs his throat.

A PASHTUN RIDER gallops through the village gate, pulling up
before Tariq. He shouts something in Pashto to Tariq.

RIZA
(to Richie)
Azam Ghol's army is on the Gardez
Road. They will be here by
nightfall.

Bombay Brian jumps from the Mambo.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Girls, if we're all through with
the soap opera. I got one simple
question.

Riza translates into Pashto. Bombay Brian tosses an AK-47 up
to the new horseman who catches it in mid-air.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Who wants to kill some bad guys? I
got some real ammo in the back.
Should make a dent.

The Pashtun fighters jump to the Mambo and begin off-loading
weapons and ammunition.

Tariq slides his dagger into his belt and glares at Richie.

EXT. AFGHAN DESERT - NIGHT

Azam's army, fifty strong, rides on Toyota Hiluxes, Land
Cruisers, Suburbans and horseback through the night desert.
Azam and Nizar ride in the lead Humvee.

EXT. SHATOWRI PASHTUN VILLAGE - NIGHT

Pashtun warriors and Bombay Brian, Riza, Tariq and Richie wait, side-by-side, guns poised behind the village's mud wall barricades. All eyes search the desert.

BOMBAY BRIAN

(to Richie)

Azam Ghol kills, deals and steals from the highest bidder. He murders our soldiers for Taliban cash. Sells out the Taliban for CIA opium. Murders the muhajideen if they get in his way... Smart dude.

RICHIE

He owns Jake and Nick.

BOMBAY BRIAN

I wouldn't cry for those two. They paid me to take your chick to the airport and send her to Dubai.

RICHIE

What?! Ronnie?

BOMBAY BRIAN

Now I get it. The second they saw you coming into the Mustafa, they wanted you to sell their beat ammo to Tariq. Anything goes wrong, you take the heat. You're the only face the Pashtun know.

RICHIE

Son of a bitch.

BOMBAY BRIAN

Never know who the good guys are do ya?

Bombay Brian throws the safety off his weapon. Richie looks over at Tariq standing beside him. Richie takes something out of his pocket and hands it to Tariq. Tariq looks down at the leather pouch filled with his village's jewels. Tariq looks up at Richie.

RICHIE

For not killing me.

Riza translates. Tariq nods, pockets the pouch.

TARIQ
(in halting English)
The night is young.

Richie and Tariq share a smile.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

Azam and Nizar charge through the night desert in the lead Humvee, their army throwing up a huge dust cloud behind them.

Nizar stands in the open Humvee, points to a darker shadow on the horizon.

NIZAR
(shouting over the noise)
Shatowri!

EXT. SHATOWRI VILLAGE - NIGHT

PAN THE RAMPARTS -- the Afghan Alamo. Richie, Tariq, Riza, Bombay Brian watch the massive enemy, now barely a mile away, churn across the desert. Richie looks at the AK-47 in his hand. He sets the gun atop the mud wall.

RICHIE
This is nuts. I'm not a fighter...
I'm a deal maker. I make deals.

Richie climbs the low wall. Riza grabs his leg. Richie yanks free, leaping into the desert.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Hey! Where are you going?

RICHIE
I'm gonna close this baby!

Riza jumps over, following Richie. Tariq looks over at Brian.

BOMBAY BRIAN
I love this guy!

They both climb the wall, following Richie and Riza into the desert.

The four men, small in the huge desert, walk towards the charging enemy army.

AZAM AND NIZAR

in the lead Humvee, see the four men. Azam barks into his headset. Nizar holds up his hand. They slow, crawling to a stop ten feet from the four men. Azam and Nizar stand in the roofless Humvee.

RICHIE
Let me do the talking.

BOMBAY BRIAN
Knock yourself out, kid.

Nizar aims his AK-47 at Richie.

NIZAR
What are you doing?!

RICHIE
(nervously)
I... Me? Well. I'm... negotiating?
I represent--

NIZAR
I have come to kill my brother and
my whore of a niece. To finally
bring honor to my family!

Riza translates.

RICHIE
Okay. Fine. But, "I have come to
kill my brother"? -- not
technically a negotiation. That's
pretty much a deal-breaker.

Richie, finding his "manager-voice", approaches Ghol's Humvee and the army behind them. Riza follows at his heels.

RICHIE
Now come on, fellas, really, what's
it gonna take to make this all go
away?

AZAM
(in Pashto)
Kill him! Kill this fool now!

Riza translates.

RICHIE
Okay.
(pointing to Azam)
(MORE)

RICHIE(cont'd)

I know exactly what this guy gets
if you kill your own brother,
slaughter your own family. How
about everything!

Riza translates.

RICHIE

He gets all the opium. He gets all
the money. The Power. He gets both
the CIA and the Taliban paying him
to sell out your country. What part
of "War Lord" don't you--

BLAM! Azam blasts Richie in the shoulder, spinning him to his
knees. Azam turns to fire on Tariq.

NIZAR

NOOOO!

Nizar leaps on Azam. Azam pistol-whips Nizar off of him,
aiming his .357 at Nizar's bleeding face. Several bullets rip
through Azam's chest hurling him from the SUV. Nizar turns.
His brother, Tariq, waves his still-smoking AK-47. Nizar
jumps from the Humvee, now fighting at Tariq's side.

RICHIE grabs his shoulder, falling back onto the desert sand.
A blur of battle whirls around him.

Richie lies on his back, staring up at the moonless night...

ALL SOUND DROPS OUT

CLOSE ON RICHIE - grimaces, grabbing his arm. His face
relaxes as the pain subsides, his shoulder going numb. The
occasional hyper-real sound of a bullet whizzing, a silent
muzzle flash. Richie stares into the starry night, lost in
thought, lost in the strangeness and size of the moment. His
brow furrows, images of Afghanistan, Kabul memories flit
across his face. Richie stares inward at his mind's-eye's
playback -- Salima, Merci, Little Yasmin, Riza, Tariq....
and finally, amazingly, a slow smile begins to spread across
his face. His smile grows. Richie Vance, lying on his back,
wounded, in the middle of a fire-fight in the Afghanistan
desert, breaks into an ear-to-ear grin. A winner's smile.

PULL UP - above Richie's smiling face. Sporadic, silent
gunfire as Azam's forces, their leader dead, quit, holding up
their hands in surrender.

PULL BACK HIGHER above the dark battlefield. WE FLY north
over the night desert.

The sound of the desert wind becomes something else, another sound, almost a white noise, maybe the sound of a splashing river....

FLYING over the snow-capped Hindu Kush and dipping down to the Kabul River, swooping feet above the Kabul valley and into the proud, battered city itself.

WE RECOGNIZE THE SOUND -- it is applause...

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. AFGHAN STAR BALLROOM - NIGHT

Applause continues as WE float over the milling Afghan Star fans shoving to enter the ballroom.

The sound of a thousand hands clapping and cheering...

INT. AFGHAN STAR BALLROOM SHOW - NIGHT

FLYING over the audience, now wildly on their feet, lost in the lasers and spinning lights. OFF STAGE -- WE FIND Richie (bandaged arm in a sling) and Salima standing in the wings. Salima is about to go on. The ballroom rocks with shrieking fans.

Afghan Star host, Daoud, stands on the strobe-lit stage, hands in the air, trying to quiet the insanity.

Salima starts to walk to the stage, turns and throws her arms around Richie, hugging him. They hold each other for a moment.

SALIMA

Thank you.

RICHIE

No. You. Salima. It is all you.

Salima wipes the tears from her cheeks.

SALIMA

Really?

RICHIE

Really.

SALIMA

Well. Then. Let us make it ten percent not twenty.

RICHIE
What?! What?! Ten percent?!

SALIMA
Fair is fair.

Salima giggles. Richie drops his mouth in mock-outrage.

RICHIE
Salima Khan artist!

DAOUD
(from stage)
Salima Khan!!!

Salima, beaming, turns from Richie and strides out into the lights and applause.

Richie watches Daoud, standing on the light-streaked stage, hold up Salima's hand. The audience goes berserk. Salima's beautiful, shining face fills the huge TV monitors. Daoud leaves the stage to her.

Salima, quietly at first, begins to sing. [Cat Steven's "Peace Train" lyrics roll in Dari and Pashto on the ballroom's monitors and at the bottom of every TV screen in the nation.]

SALIMA
(singing)
"Now I've been happy lately,
thinking about the good things to
come/ And I believe it could be,
something good has begun..."

The crowd quiets, listening. Salima's intensity builds.

SALIMA
(singing)
"Oh I've been smiling lately,
dreaming about the world as one/
And I believe it could be, some day
it's going to come..."

Merci joins Richie in the wings, throwing her arms around his waist, and together, they watch Salima's triumph.

INT. TARIQ'S FORTRESS-HOME - SAME TIME

Salima's family huddles around a borrowed black and white TV hooked up to a sparking truck battery.

The family directs Tariq to move the TV's rabbit ears for a better reception. Tariq leans over the set, watching his daughter on TV.

SALIMA (V.O.)
(singing)
"Cause out on the edge of darkness,
there rides a peace train/ Oh peace
train take this country, come take
me home again..."

EXT./INT. RIZA'S CAB - SAME TIME

Riza's taxi zooms through Kabul. Little Yasmin sits beside him. They watch Salima on a small battery-powered TV taped to his dashboard. Riza nudges Yasmin with his elbow and winks. The little girl grins.

SALIMA
(singing)
"Now I've been smiling lately,
dreaming about the good things to
come/ And I believe it could be
something good has begun..."

Riza glances up from his tiny TV.

RIZA'S POV - TV sets glow with Salima's image in every window: every shop, cafe, hotel and restaurant. TVs play in every single apartment and home -- all of Kabul watches and hears Salima's song.

SALIMA (V.O.)
"Oh peace train sounding louder,
glide on the peace train/ Come on
now peace train..."

PULL UP from the streets of Kabul. FROM ABOVE -- The entire city seems to ring with hope.

SALIMA (V.O.)
"Yes peace train holy roller/
Everyone jump on the peace
train..."

"Peace Train" thunders on as we....

FADE TO BLACK

The End

A. BOISSIER