

ROCK THE KASBAH

by

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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 burkhamesh. 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 (CONT'D)

(jabbing his finger at her)

You... irritate... me.

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

RICHIE (CONT'D)

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.

INT. 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 - DAY

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 (CONT'D)  
Wa-Hooooo!!!!

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

Dree leans her little forehead against the screen.

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)

What?

Ronnie doesn't answer, continues shaking her head.

RICHIE (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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!

(MORE)

RICHIE (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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.

(MORE)

RICHIE (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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.

(to Ronnie)

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.

(MORE)

PRIVATE BARNES (CONT'D)

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 a lot 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
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 a lot 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 (CONT'D)  
(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 nondescript 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 (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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)

(MORE)

PRIVATE BARNES (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)  
 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 windblown, 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 nondescript, 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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.

Merci stands. She leans against Richie, her bare legs, wet  
and tan, press the side of Richie's face. Merci 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.

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

MERCI (CONT'D)  
It's Miss Merci's 401K retirement  
tour. One week only. You do not  
wanna miss it.

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

RICHIE  
(holding up his wrist)  
I got a Swatch!

Merci 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.

Merci 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. D own 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 (O.S.)

(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 (CONT'D)  
A little help?

PRIVATE BARNES  
Sure. Sure.

RICHIE  
Appreciate it.

Barnes comes over and unties Richie's hands.

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
(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 decoupage 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 (CONT'D)  
 (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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
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.  
 (MORE)

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)  
 (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 (CONT'D)  
 Hey!

Brian stops the Mamba. The convoy stops behind him.

BOMBAY BRIAN (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
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! 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.  
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)  
(MORE)

BOMBAY BRIAN (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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 puttters 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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
 (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 (CONT'D)  
 (singing)  
 "We all came out to Montreux, on  
 the Lake Geneva shoreline..."

The ring of men begin to clap along.

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
 "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 (CONT'D)  
 "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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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, rocks 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.

(MORE)

WOMAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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. Heartbreakingly, 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 (CONT'D)

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. 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 (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

I know she will win. I am asking  
that you allow me take...  
(MORE)

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)  
 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)  
 (MORE)

RIZA (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(stumbling back )  
Jesus! A ninja!

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

RICHIE (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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. 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". 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 (CONT'D)  
 (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 club  
house)

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 saran  
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!



AZAM (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
(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 onetime 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 L.A., 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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 (CONT'D)

(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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

(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.

MERCY  
(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 (O.S.)  
(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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

Never.

Merci tenderly smooths down Richie's hair.

MERCI (CONT'D)

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 a.m. 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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.

MERCIE  
 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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!

(MORE)

RIZA (CONT'D)  
 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 (CONT'D)  
 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 razorwire 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... 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 doublewide 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 nonbeliever. 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 discoballs; 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 (CONT'D)

(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 (CONT'D)

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, skintight 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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

Kiss me.

Richie does. A long, real kiss.

MERCI (CONT'D)

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 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  
narcopalace 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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
What the hell.

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

RICHIE (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
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 (CONT'D)

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 (CONT'D)  
(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.) (CONT'D)

"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.) (CONT'D)

"Yes peace train holy roller/  
Everyone jump on the peace  
train..."

"Peace Train" thunders on as we....

FADE TO BLACK

THE END