

Sample Chapter

Lipstick Warriors

Four

Sergeant Rodriguez motioned for one of his men to circle around and cover the back of the Toyota pickup. With that man in place and the hostiles surrounded, he motioned for Leanna and the UN people to move out. Rodriguez had been watching in that direction when he felt the pickup truck lurch forward a few feet and whipped back around, his M-4 in the high ready position and his selector switch flipped from safe to fire. All the soldiers had brought their weapons up into the same heightened state of alert. The two privates in the gun turrets already had the .50 cal's pointed at them, just waiting for the green light to shoot.

The man driving stopped and glared through the windshield.

"Dundy!" Rodriguez called out. "Tell this son of a bitch to turn around and head back the way he came! And make it perfectly clear to him that this situation is going to go one of two ways! Either they are going to turn around as ordered and we all go our separate ways peacefully or they are all going to end up in body bags!"

Dundy, who spoke both Dari and Pashto, approached the driver side window and began to translate. As this was going on, the flatbed truck pulled up. Rodriguez motioned to another one of his men.

"Mason, cover that situation."

Rodriguez returned his attention to the driver of the truck, who was now in a heated back and forth with Dundy.

"Dundy, will you please tell him that this isn't up for discussion. Either he turns around and heads back to town or the shit's going to hit the fan."

As Dundy translated this, Aarshin and Bikram climbed out of the flatbed truck.

"Hey hey hey!" Rodriguez called out to Mason. "Tell those SOBs to get back in their truck!"

Aarshin and Bikram kept coming anyway.

With a quick look down the road the other way, Rodriguez cursed under his breath. A truck was coming up from the direction of Kabul and more vehicles were coming from the direction of town. Meanwhile, Aarshin and Bikram had walked up, unarmed but talking away a mile a minute. The whole situation was quickly getting fubar.

Knowing these men personally from Saarah's village, Rodriguez called out to Dundy again.

"Tell these dudes in the pickup to hang loose for a minute! And any movement deemed a threat to us, they will be shot! And Natalie, you make sure they obey my orders!"

Already bristling, when the men in the pickup truck saw a woman point her M-4 their way, they really looked pissed. Rodriguez grabbed Dundy and headed over to deal with Aarshin and Bikram.

"Find out what they want," he told Dundy.

The two villagers had gone on for a good thirty seconds when Rodriguez cut them off.

"All right, all right. What the hell are they saying?"

"They're saying that those UN folks ran off with one of their village girls and that we allowed it to happen."

"All right. You tell him that we don't know anything about a village girl. We saw these men in the pickup truck following the UN people in a hostile manner and intervened. And that I personally looked inside their SUV and there was no village girl in there. Okay? End of story. Go ahead. Translate."

Dundy did and Aarshin went off again.

"He says they saw her get into the vehicle," Dundy said.

"Well, you tell them, maybe they did, but she wasn't there when I looked so she must be back in town somewhere. Now they are to get back in their truck and turn around and go back the way they came."

Having heard Dundy's translation, Aarshin and Bikram just stared. Rodriguez gestured with his rifle and the two men slowly turned back towards their flatbed truck, with several more looks over their shoulders.

Rodriguez returned to the pickup truck with Dundy.

“Okay, you tell these assholes to turn around and head back to town. And not to get any wild notions about chasing those UN folks down the mountain because we’ll be sitting right here, waiting for them. And that includes going forward. They are not to harass the UN people anytime, anywhere, under any circumstances, period.”

Rodriguez signaled for the Dundy to translate.

He did and the driver started arguing back. Rodriguez cut him off again with an emphatic gesture and pointed back up the road.

“He has about five seconds to comply with my order. And if he doesn’t, I’ll take that as active resistance and dust them all right here.”

As Dundy was translating that, Rodriguez called out to Mason.

“Let’s start clearing this road! Get that flatbed truck turned around and headed for town!”

Rodriguez looked back at the driver of the pickup, waved with the tip of his rifle and watched as the man reluctantly backed up and turned around. And with both the flatbed and pickup truck headed on their way, the platoon got their two Humvees off to the side of the road and waved for traffic to move through in both directions.

With that done, Rodriguez climbed into his Humvee and called ahead to Leanna.

“Where are we, Becket?” he asked when she answered.

“Just cleared the checkpoint, Sarge, and headed down the mountain.”

“And is it your assessment that your package is safe now?”

“I would say so, yes sir.”

“Then have them pull over and get that UN agent on the phone with me.”

“You got it, sergeant.”

Rodriguez ended the call and climbed out to face his team.

“Well, that was fucked up.”

“Totally F’d up,” Mason said. “And I can pretty much guarantee you that it will be even more F’d up by the time the sun comes up tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah,” Rodriguez said with a look down the road. “The fact is, out of respect for local customs, we ought to be running our asses back up there to sort this out with Saarah’s family.”

“Yeah, well, that ain’t going to happen,” Mason said. “Not unless we’re taking the 1st Cavalry in with us. The Taliban are crawling all over that mountain now.”

"Yeah, roger that."

Rodriguez' eyes drifted over to Natalie.

"Sorry, sergeant," she said. "You can go ahead and start the packet for a court martial if you want, but I was not about to let those villagers enslave that poor girl."

Rodriguez stood there nodding his head and looking from face to face.

"Well, the bottom line is, we're in this thing together now. Meaning, we have one story to tell and we stick to it. Don't matter what those villagers saw, the girl wasn't in the UN vehicle when we pulled it over. End of story."

Rodriguez looked from face to face again.

"Anyone have a problem with that?"

"Hell, it's our word against theirs," Mason said. "I don't see a problem."

"Everybody?" Rodrigueuz said.

There were shrugs and nods all around. The phone in the Humvee rang while they were standing there. Rodrigueuz turned to Natalie before taking the call.

"And just for the record, Montero. You ever pull that shit again and I will court martial your ass."

"Duly noted, sergeant."

Rodrigueuz nodded and sat down to answer the call.

"Sergeant," Leanna said. "I have that UN agent Audrey here."

"Okay. Put her on."

After the introductions, Rodrigueuz explained what their cover story was for the girl.

"Meaning, the wrong people see that girl in your SUV and this thing could blow up in my face. Now I covered your ass and I need you to cover mine. Are we perfectly clear on this, Ms. Audrey?"

"I know exactly what to do, sergeant. There's a shelter in Kabul run by an Australian aid worker. She's a good friend of mine. Once I drop Saarah off there, it will sever any connection to our vehicle."

"Yeah, well, that all sounds real good but you just make sure the girl's up on our story too. I don't mind doing the valiant thing here but if this situation ever goes sideways on us, our whole company could end up in the stockade. Understood?"

"Understood, sergeant. I'll make sure that not a word is spoken of your involvement."

"Good. Now please put Specialist Becket back on the line."

"Well, thank you again for doing the gallant thing."

"Yeah, no problem."

Leanna was back on the phone a moment later.

"Go ahead, sarge."

"If you're all done, turn around and head back. You'll find us here at the same coordinates, making sure these village assholes don't go and try something else funny."

"We're on our way."

"We'll be waiting."

Leanna ended the call and climbed into the backseat with Saarah.

"Are you okay?"

Saarah nodded. Leanna looked up at Audrey.

"Okay, get my number into your phone."

With that done, Leanna looked back at Saarah.

"These folks are going to help you find shelter in Kabul. You already have Natalie's number and Audrey has mine. If anything comes up and you need help, just give one of us a call, okay?"

Saarah nodded.

"But remember. You can't tell anyone that we were involved in your escape. Do you understand?"

Saarah nodded again.

Leanna looked back at Audrey.

"And the same goes for you. If any of this goes sideways, you don't know us from Adam."

"Sgt. Rodriguez has already advised me of that...Thanks so much for all your help anyway. I know it's been a bloody mess for you folks but it's really, truly appreciated."

"Glad to help."

Leanna patted Saarah on her thigh.

"I know this is tough for you, kid, but sometimes we have to close one door before another one opens. You're a bright young lady. I'm sure you have a great life waiting up ahead of you. Just keep looking forward. And stay in touch, okay?"

Saarah nodded.

"Okay, let's move out," Leanna said.

She climbed out of the backseat and waited until the SUV had started down the mountain before climbing back behind the wheel of her Humvee.

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That afternoon, the minute that Aarshin and Bikram arrived back to the village, they went searching for Farzaad and found him at work in the fields. He took the news of his daughter's disappearance stoically. Perhaps there was a bit more flint in his green eyes than usual, but his weather-beaten face showed no other sign of emotion. Farzaad certainly wasn't about to tell these men his true feelings, that he had never wanted to marry his daughter off to this Taliban leader. To Farzaad, they were all scum. It was only out of concern for the entire village that he had considered this marriage. And now, thanks to Allah, the decision was out of his hands.

"The Americans lied to us right there on the road," Bikram said.

"Lied to us!?" Aarshin said. "They betrayed us! I told you long ago they were useless infidels! They have no respect for our people and our customs!"

Farzaad listened while staring off towards the distant hills. The sound of gunfire kept growing closer, a reminder that a confrontation with the Taliban loomed ahead. Whenever they returned to claim the village, there would be trouble. Their leader Akmad Husseini was unlikely to believe that Saarah had escaped on her own. He would assume the family's complicity.

"Well?" Aarshin said. "What are you going to do?"

Farzaad looked back at him.

"What would you have me do? Rush down to Kabul and search the entire city for my daughter?"

"Well, we should do something. Confront these American dogs. Make *them* find her and bring her back. If she is not here when the Taliban return, they will drag our men out onto the road and shoot us one by one until they have what they want."

"Then let us concentrate on what to do about that."

"There is nothing to do! We must find your daughter!"

Farzaad stared at Aarshin, thinking the man a fool for believing that the Americans were worse than the Taliban. Nothing was sacred to those dogs, save for their own power and zealotry.

"Well?" Aarshin said again.

Farzaad threw his hoe down.

"Let us go talk with Salahuddeen and see what he says."

Farzaad joined the men in their flatbed truck and drove across the bridge to Salahuddeen's house. It was nestled against the opposite hills and Salahuddeen was sitting on his front porch when the truck pulled to a stop. The men climbed out and approached him.

"Praise be to Allah," Aarshin said.

"Praise be to Allah."

All three men bowed their heads before taking a seat. Salahuddeen acknowledged the men with a bow of his head but displayed no sign of emotion. He remained staring out across the land, to where the snowbound peaks of the Hindu Kush stabbed into the clear blue sky. Strands of white hair escaped from beneath his black turban and blended in with his short-cropped, salt and pepper beard.

Whatever you thought of the man, his expression never changed from minute to minute. He may as well have been chiseled from the surrounding sandstone. He had the vigilant eyes of a hawk but it was impossible not to sense wisdom and compassion in his stoic gaze.

Knowing the men had come with something on their minds, Salahuddeen waited until Aarshin broke the silence and continued staring off across the valley as the matter was explained to him.

"Well?" Aarshin said after some silence. "Don't you agree that Farzaad should go find his daughter before we're all killed?"

"And what do you think?" Salahuddeen asked Farzaad.

"What I think is unimportant. The girl is gone and I have no suitable daughter with which to replace her. Paksima is barely six years old."

"You see?" Aarshin said. "Farzaad will do nothing to save us!"

"Don't I remember you having a daughter?" Salahuddeen said.

"That is not the point. This Akmad has become obsessed with his Saarah."

"How do you know this?"

"One of his men told me."

"Ah. So you have spoken with them. Then perhaps you can reason with this Akmad."

"There is no reasoning with him."

Salahuddeen looked over at Aarshin.

"Then what is the point of this discussion?"

"With all due respect to you and Allah," Bikram said. "Farzaad must go find his daughter and bring her back to the village. There is no other solution to this problem."

Salahuddeen waved his hands out across the valley.

"Please show me where there is a problem. All I see is peace and quiet."

"Ugh!" Aarshin said. "With all due respect, this is nonsense!"

"You are right, Aarshin. It is nonsense. As I have already told you, you do not cut wheat until it is ready to harvest."

"You can speak these words of wisdom all you want but they will mean nothing when the Taliban come."

"And when they come, we will explain what has happened and offer them another bride...If it comes to that."

"If it comes to that," Aarshin said. "There is no question it will come to that!"

"In which case, you and your wife must discuss giving up your daughter to keep the peace. All the men in this village will have to consider doing the same."

"And in the meantime?" Aarshin said.

Farzaad stood up.

"In the meantime, I have crops to till."

It was getting on into late afternoon the next day when a caravan of trucks and SUVs rode into the valley, the truck beds spilling over with Taliban soldiers and the soldiers firing off their weapons in the air. There were flags waving from poles and a general sense of menace.

The caravan pulled to a stop in front of Salahuddeen's home first thing.

"Praise be to Allah," Akmad said as he walked up to his front porch.

"Praise be to Allah," Salahuddeen said.

Akmad sat down next to him. A dozen or so men had gotten out of their vehicles and stood facing the house, bristling with weapons.

"I have come here first to pay my respects to the village elder."

Salahuddeen nodded his head in response.

"It will fall upon you to make sure that the rest of the villagers respect our authority."

"I will do my best of course."

"You will do more than your best. As of this moment, we are imposing Sharia Law and you must make sure that your people respect our edicts."

"I will do my best of course."



Akmad stared

"Is this an attitude of disrespect I hear from you?"

"It is not a matter of respect or disrespect. It is only a matter of observing the will of Allah."

"I am the will of Allah in this village now! Do you understand?!"

"The will of Allah abides in righteousness. That I understand."

Akmad pounded the butt of his AK on the ground and fumed.

"I have killed for less insolence."

Akmad stood up.

"And I would kill you this very instant if not for your role in this village. Think well on what I have said here. If you and the villagers faithfully obey my orders, there will be peace. And if not? If the rest of the villagers treat us with such disrespect?"

Akmad let that thought linger for a moment.

"Then there will be bloodshed before the sun goes down today."

"I am certain that everyone will fully cooperate with you."

Akmad glared for another moment before storming off.

Salahuddeen watched as Akmad climbed back into his SUV and the caravan drove off in a cloud of dust. The sound of gunfire and men shouting echoed across the valley. The snowcapped peaks stood there above the world, unmoving.

The will of Allah truly does abide in righteousness, Salahuddeen thought. And the devil has just driven into our contented existence.

A few minutes later, Akmad and his horde were braking to a stop in front of Farzaad's home. Farzaad stood outside, having already been warned of the Taliban's arrival by their gunfire. Zeeana was inside, relieved that her daughter had escaped but grieving over her absence and fearing these men outside.

Akmad got out of his SUV and approached Farzaad, surrounded by a dozen of his men.

"Praise be to Allah," he said.

"Praise be to Allah."

"I have come to discuss my marriage to your daughter."

"Unfortunately, she has run away."

Akmad stood there smoldering.

"What do you mean, she has run away?"

"Just what I said. She went off to school yesterday morning as usual and apparently made her way down to the next valley."

“What do you mean, made her way down to the next valley? How do you know this?”

“Two men from our village informed me that they saw her there that afternoon.”

“And what!? These men did not drag her back home!?”

Farzaad explained what he had been told in more detail.

“And what!? You just stand there doing nothing!?”

“What am I to do? If their story is true, she is now in Kabul. How am I to find her amongst four million people?”

Furious, Akmad hit Farzaad across the face with the butt of his rifle. Farzaad took the blow and wiped the blood from his mouth before looking back again.

“Only a fool would believe this fantastical story of yours. You and your wife helped your daughter to escape and I will give you two days to remedy this situation. And if not, we will start executing villagers one by one until your daughter is back.”

Akmad spit on the ground before turning to leave. Farzaad watched the caravan turn around and race off, he assumed to find Aarshin and Bikram.

## Author Question & Answer

Q: You mention being born to Irish/Italian parents and transplanted from New England to Southern California in your youth. Tell us about your life growing up and how those experiences helped shape you.

A: My father was Irish, my mother Italian. I was raised on great Italian cuisine and Irish sarcasm. The move out west was a diaspora of sorts. My father had been fairly wealthy and went belly up. I was too young to understand what was happening, but looking back, I could see how we had been cut off from a rich family tradition. Plus my father was now something of a broken man, prone to drinking and

bouts of rage. My own rebelliousness naturally followed. My father and I went on to become great friends later in life, but as a boy, I'm somewhat surprised I didn't shoot him. The upside was, our personal battles got me out of the house at an early age and learning to fend for myself. As they say of the gallows at dawn, nothing quite focuses the mind like being out on the streets, penniless and with no place to go.

Q: You mention resisting the draft and being a man without a country. Tell us more about that.

A: It certainly wasn't the way I had planned my life. My dream had been to become a foreign correspondent so I took typing, journalism and French in high school, among my other studies. Then the Vietnam War intruded. I will admit to being rash about the whole thing, but my draft number came up low in the lottery, I received a notice of induction two weeks after my nineteenth birthday and that was that. Most people went to Canada. I went to Hawaii, a lovely, yearlong sojourn that led to an acquaintance with a fellow rebel, a return to Tucson, where he grew up, and our smuggling misadventures. In my defense, the allure of great fortunes to a man on the run cannot be overstated. My partner and I had plans to start a restaurant and bar down on the Pacific coast of Mexico and live like kings. Instead we ended up in a Mexican prison. When I returned to the States, the 'Vietnamization' of the war had begun, along with a lowering of the associated paranoia, but it wasn't until President Carter issued his blanket pardon that I finally felt like I could walk down the streets of America without looking over my shoulder. Suffice it to say, it altered the course of my life.

Q: So there was never any college or higher education?

A: Oh, sure. Throughout my twenties, I took classes at this and that junior college, probably enough to have earned an associate's degree, but I was simply too restless a soul back then to sit in a classroom for long. As to education in general, I have come to conclude over the years that my extensive reading and life experiences are at minimum

equivalent to a master's degree. I base that on the people I meet with college degrees. Most of them with bachelor's degrees, you wouldn't know they had been to college, whereas, with a master's degree, you begin to see how a clear worldview has taken shape. That to me is the whole point of learning. To get grounded in both this universe and your particular place in it.

Q: And what do you see as your place in it?

A: Ever the rebel and iconoclast at heart. I say that with all due seriousness. I forever find myself outside the herd and looking in. Which is a healthy place to be, at least for this writer. If you remain in lockstep with prevailing views, you really have nothing to offer the rest of the herd. It's the mythic journey. If no one ever goes off to have the 'other' experiences, the communal wisdom is just on loop.

Q: Tell us a bit about your literary influences.

A: From a very early age I was attracted to adventure stories. Stevenson. Kipling. Jack London. One thing London said stuck with me. Read history and science. Learn about the world and it will enrich your writing. Sage advice. In the sixties, I fell into a lot of the pop culture stuff of my generation. Tolkien, Vonnegut. Themes meant more to me than the actual craft. Then I went back to read some of it again after I began to write seriously and it did not hold up well. Tom Robbins in particular really seemed to stink with age. It was great on drugs, not so much without them. Somewhere in my youth, I got turned on to Raymond Chandler and spent a year reading everything he and Hammett and Ross McDonald had written. I did a search once for the 100 greatest novels of all time and found most of it bored me. Things like Stendhal's *The Black And The Red*. It's just not my cup of tea. I'm here to tell stories, not offer dissertations. Ultimately, I read Hemingway, which I had not done beyond *The Old Man And The Sea* for a book report in high school. I found absorbing his work very useful, before the booze took over. And that led me to reading the Russians. You can follow a thread from there right up through

Hemingway and the rest. You throw too many words at the reader and you get in the way of the imagination. A map should not be mistaken for the terrain, and words should not be mistaken for reality. They are there to suggest and stir up the imagination. I would be remiss if I failed to mention Bukowski. You can say he was a horrid man in many ways, but I've never known a more honest writer. Early on in my own efforts as an author, I read *Ham On Rye* and the man became my touchstone to honesty forever after. It is a great long struggle for anyone to become a good wordsmith, but if you don't arrive at some point where you realize, writing is just a truth serum, then I think you have missed the point.

Q: Getting back to your life's journey, there appears to be fifteen years or so between the end of your Vietnam War saga and when you began to write seriously. Tell us what was going on in your life during that time.

A: Well, going back to those early years, bumming around Europe, living in Hawaii and crisscrossing the States, I had earned my way as a cook and chef's helper. When I got back from that sojourn in the Mexican prison, I fell into a cottage business with an old friend from high school, making hippie leather goods. Then I was back on the road for several years, during which time I fell into another business, that of taking down old barns and selling the wood to homeowners and businesses. And that led me to learning the craft of carpentry. Which I truly enjoyed for a number of years. The working outside, the rough and tumble camaraderie amongst men, the sense of pride that came from building up something from scratch. All that together had led me to buying a home up in the Pacific Northwest, and it was while driving back down to California one year that I had a burning bush moment. 'What would I be doing, if I was doing what I really, really wanted to do?' And there was never a moment's hesitation as to the answer. Why, I'd be writing, of course. And so the journey began.

Q: Tell us more about that.

A: Well, I'd like to say that it was a straight line from there, but there don't appear to be any straight lines in my life, including my journey as a writer. My first impulse was to write a screenplay so I started blocking out the story scene by scene on 3X5 cards and pinning them in a line around my office walls. You could spin around in your chair in the center of the room and see the whole movie. It was an historical saga that I ultimately dragged around with me in manuscript form for two years, and that went absolutely nowhere. It was three years from that original burning bush moment to when I finally settled down to write my first novel. The important thing was, the passion for writing had gotten its claws into me and I've never lost that passion since.

Q: I understand *The Trip Into Milky Way* was your first novel and draws upon your experiences in the Mexican prison. Apart from the obvious, that it was a great story to tell, why did you start there?

A: Because it was a great story to tell. By this point, I had divested myself of virtually all my earthly belongings and was living in a 3rd story flat in an old historical building in Bellingham, Washington. Lovely place to write. A view of Mt. Baker and the San Juan Islands, with a commercial harbor in the near distance and a train switching station right across the street. The engineers would start banging box cars around about four in the afternoon, and literally shake the walls in doing so. Then, as night settled in, the train would head south and you'd hear that lonesome whistle blow far off in the distance as the train made its way over Chuckanut Mountain. It was there in Bellingham that I met an older gentleman and fellow writer who told me to write what I was enthusiastic about. And of course that story about my incarceration came to mind. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that I had the Mexican version of *The Midnight Express* on my hands. Mind you, I was learning to write prose, learning to write a novel and figuring out how to write that particular book. But the natural storyteller in me soon came out and the story evolved into an epic, coming of age saga set in the sixties, with the prison experience as a crucible through which the protagonist passes from youth into

manhood. I should mention. There was a moment, maybe two, three weeks into writing that novel, when I felt a spectral light in the room around me, and it came with a profound sense of realization. I'm finally doing what I'm supposed to be doing in this world.

Q: I noticed that there were two versions of that book for sale on Amazon, one published in 2007 and one in 2016. Can you explain?

A: Oh, that's another saga, but an illuminating one. I had received an offer of publication in 2004 for *Milky Way*, and of course it came with the commensurate shout heard across the world. I had enough rejection letters on hand by this point to cover a wall, so when someone calls you out of the blue and says they'd like to publish your novel, you're walking on air. Then I began to see what happens when someone else takes control of your intellectual property. From the end of 2004, when I received that offer, to when the novel was finally published in January, 2007 two, long excruciating years of frustration passed by, in which someone else now had editorial discretion over my work. Plus, it was a small imprint without the wherewithal to really promote the book properly. No book tours. No book signings and virtually no promotion. I spent more on publicity than the owner did. So lesson learned. Unless someone is ready to hit you with a six figure advance, you may as well publish it yourself. Or so I feel.

Q: Tell us a bit about the rest of your books.

A: Okay, in order, *The Last Love Of Eleanor Sands* was based on a love affair I had with one of my college professors. It is set in the early '70s and is a bittersweet tale of love undone by the vagaries of time. *South On Pacific Coast Highway* is my loving ode to the hardboiled detective writers of my youth, like Raymond Chandler, and a romp through the Southern California landscape, with a haunting love story and a handful of dead bodies thrown in for good measure. *The Tribe* was my answer to the unending barrage of requests I had been receiving at the time, wanting to know if I could write a 'billionaire' love story like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I thought, really? Someone hands

you a billion dollars and that's all you can make of it? *The Tribe* became my perhaps misguided imagining of a man's perhaps misguided effort to save the world with the billions of dollars he has inherited from his father. *It's Always Christmastime In Cratchitville* is a fairytale about life's illusions. *Postmark: Paris — Destination: Unknown* was based on my adventures vagabonding about Europe as a young man. *Love In A Dying World* is my sequel to *South On Pacific Coast Highway*, with more dead bodies and another romp across the Southern California landscape. *The Twelve Commandment* is the story of retired special forces op who becomes obsessed with exacting revenge on an ISIS warlord for beheading someone dear to him. And my most recent title, *Afghan's Lipstick Warriors: First Chronicle*, tells the story of a band of women who decide to take up arms against the Taliban, rather than submit to their tyranny. It is told in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person and incorporates several points of view, from these women warriors to the US forces to CIA and State and the Afghan government.

Q: And what are you working on now?

A: After finishing *Lipstick Warriors*, I went back to read through the fifteen or so novels I had started over the years and settled on finishing one I will call *The Death Of A Ghostwriter*. Per the title, it's a thriller based on my many experiences in that field. I was confronted with everything from the hilarious to the absurd to clients actually warning me that my life would be in danger if I got involved in their project. I already had over 50,000 words in the manuscript and had quickly added another 10,000 or so when another thought struck me. What I really need to do right now is write a sequel to *Lipstick Warriors*. The fate of the Afghan women truly has its claws in me. And with events evolving so quickly over there, all you have to do is let the daily news write the story for you. With the collapse of the Afghan government seemingly imminent, the current working title is *Afghan's Lipstick Warriors: Darkness Falls*. Anyway, I'm hard at it and shooting for a December, 2021 publication date.