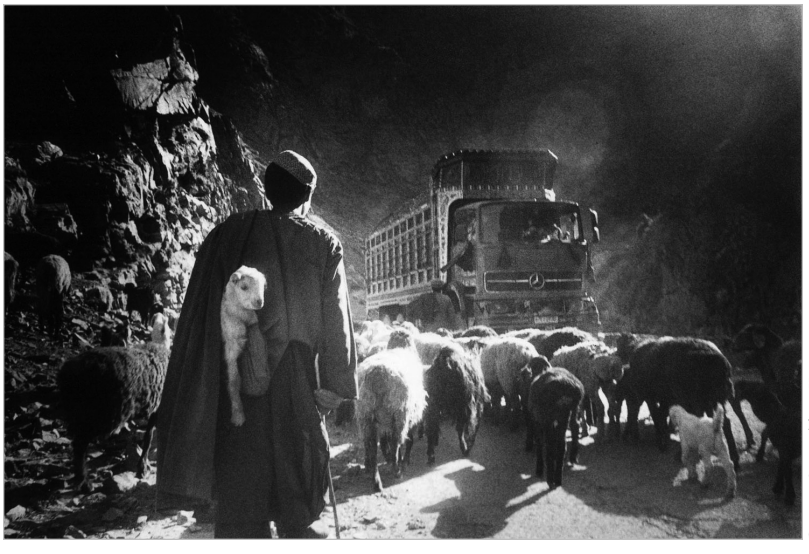
CHAPTER 1

The People at the End of the Road

I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know:
the only ones among you who will be really happy
are those who will have sought and found how to serve.

—Albert Schweitzer



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Grand Trunk Highway near Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

Whenever I head for the airport to catch a flight to Pakistan or Afghanistan, my luggage usually includes a small plastic briefcase emblazoned with a green and white bumper sticker that reads THE LAST BEST PLACE. Those words were first put together as the title to an anthology of Montana-based writings that William Kittredge and Annick Smith edited back in 1988. Since then, "The Last Best Place" has become the unofficial motto for the state in which I have spent the last fourteen years living with my wife, Tara, our two children, Amira and Khyber, and our Tibetan terrier, Tashi. The slogan neatly sums up the stirring landscapes and the vast sense of openness that draw so many Americans to Montana, and the words are now as synonymous with my adopted home's identity as the silhouette of the mountains on our license plates.

For me, though, Kittredge's catchphrase carries a radically different meaning.

If you look at the map of the schools that the Central Asia Institute has built since 1995, you will see that nearly every one

of our projects is in a location that lacks an educational infrastructure because of geographical isolation, severe poverty, religious extremism, or war. These are areas that few people from the outside world even know about, the regions where almost nobody else goes. They are the places where we begin.

This approach is markedly different from the way development normally works. Most NGOs, for all sorts of sound and well-justified reasons, prefer to establish a base of operations in a region that enjoys favorable access to resources and communications, and only then will these organizations gradually expand into the harder areas. It's a sensible way to proceed. The problem, however, is that if you work in a way that is incremental and controlled, it can sometimes take a lifetime to get to the people who need your help the most. What is far more difficult—and sometimes more dangerous—is to start at the *end* of the road and work your way back. And for better or worse, that's exactly what we do.

The other thing that distinguishes us from some other development groups is that our aim is not to saturate a region with our presence by launching hundreds of projects. We simply want to plant a handful of schools in the hardest places of all, empower the communities in these areas to sustain those projects, and then step back in the hope that the government and other NGOs will start moving toward these points from the areas that aren't quite so rough, until the gap is eventually bridged. Surprisingly often, that's exactly what happens.

In Baltistan, the rugged and beautiful corner of northeastern Pakistan that lies in the heart of the Karakoram, we spent the second half of the 1990s targeting the villages at the farthest ends of the most remote valleys, places at altitudes of up to eleven thousand feet that are perched along the outer limits of human habitation. We broke ground on more than three dozen sturdy, stone-walled schoolhouses, providing construction materials and

teachers on the condition that each village chip in free land and labor—and that they agree to increase female enrollment until the girls reached parity with the boys. The first school we established, in Korphe, is in the last human settlement in the Braldu Valley before you reach the Baltoro Glacier, which leads to K2. Our school in Hushe lies at the end of a valley that culminates at the base of Masherbrum, one of the most stunning of the world's great seven-thousand-meter peaks.

In similar fashion, we have also spearheaded projects in areas that are plagued by armed conflict and religious extremism. In 1999, at the request of the Pakistani military, we launched two projects in the Gultori region, where the armies of India and Pakistan were locked in fierce fighting along the contested border of Kashmir. The schools we put in were tucked into the slopes of mountains and featured pitched metal roofs capable of deflecting fallout from the Indian army's artillery shells. More recently, in 2008, we have helped communities in eastern Afghanistan's Kunar Province in building two girls' schools in the center of the volatile border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan that shelters many members of the Taliban. The Pathan tribal leaders who asked for these schools approached us with their initial request for assistance through the commander of an American military base that is located in the same area.

This "last place first" philosophy of ours is unconventional, and it occasionally provokes criticism; but sometimes there is simply no other alternative. If an organization like the CAI doesn't leapfrog directly into such places, another generation or two of girls will have lost the opportunity to attain literacy. In addition to these practical considerations, however, there's another reason why we do things this way—one that has little to do with pragmatism.

The good people who inhabit the frontiers of civilization do not, as a rule, tend to be the world's most sophisticated or

cosmopolitan human beings. Often, they aren't especially well educated or refined, nor all that conversant with cutting-edge trends in areas like, say, fashion and current events. Sometimes, they're not even all that friendly. But the folks who live at the end of the road are among the most resilient and the most resourceful human beings you will ever meet. They possess a combination of courage, tenacity, hospitality, and grace that leaves me in awe.

What I have also discovered over the years is that with just a little bit of help, such people are capable of pulling off astonishing things—and in doing so, they sometimes establish a benchmark for the rest of us. When ordinary human beings perform extraordinary acts of generosity, endurance, or compassion, we are all made richer by their example. Like the rivers that flow out of the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush, the inspiration they generate washes down to the rest of us. It waters everyone's fields.

So for me, that THE LAST BEST PLACE sticker on my briefcase doesn't represent a slogan or a marketing campaign to promote the wonders of my home. Instead, those words affirm my belief that the people who live in the last places—the people who are most neglected and least valued by the larger world—often represent the best of who we are and the finest standard of what we are meant to become. This is the power that last places hold over me, and why I have found it impossible to resist their pull.

Back in 1993, when this whole school-building business first got started, the little village of Korphe struck me as the apogee of remoteness, the supreme expression of what it means to live in the very last place at the far end of the road. In the years that followed, it has been my privilege to work in some equally isolated and difficult places that thanks to the people who inhabit them are blessed by the same rough magic as Korphe. But until I met the Kirghiz horsemen who had ridden out of the Wakhan on that October afternoon in 1999, I had never encountered a group of people who came from a place so remote, so austere,

that it didn't seem like the end of the road as much as the end of the earth itself.

A place that made even Korphe feel like a suburb of Los Angeles.

The Pashtuns say that when Allah was finished creating the world, he cobbled together all the leftover bits and pieces, and it was from this pile of rubble that he fashioned Afghanistan. The impression of a landscape that has been pieced together from discarded debris is evident in every part of this country, but nowhere is this sense of brokenness more acute than inside the panhandle of northeastern Afghanistan that thrusts between Pakistan and Tajikistan for nearly 120 miles until it touches the border of the People's Republic of China. Some of the loftiest mountain ranges on earth—the Kunlun, the Tien Shan, the Pamirs, the Karakoram, and the Hindu Kush—converge inside or near this region. The highest of their summits soars more than twenty thousand feet, and the inhabitants of the forbidding, desolate, bitterly cold alpine plateaus that stretch beneath those peaks refer to this place as *Bam-I-Dunya,* the "Rooftop of the World."

For more than twenty centuries, the Wakhan Corridor has served as a thoroughfare for traders, diplomats, invading armies, pilgrims, explorers, missionaries, and holy wanderers making their way between central Asia and China. The Corridor not only defined the meeting point between Inner and Outer Tartary—the realms that the Greek geographer Ptolemy called "the Two Scythias"—but also formed one of the most arduous sections of the Silk Road, the four-thousand-mile route by which the civilizations of India, Europe, and the Near East traded and communicated with those of the Far East.

Only a handful of westerners are known to have passed

through the Wakhan, starting with Marco Polo, who spent four years making his way through Persia and across central Asia to reach the court of the Chinese emperor, Kublai Khan. While traversing the length of the Wakhan in 1271, the legendary Venetian traveler wrote of ridgelines so high that birds found it impossible to fly over them and a cold so intense that it stifled the heat of his campfires while robbing the flames of their color. Nearly 350 years later, a Jesuit priest named Benedict de Goes was chosen by his order to follow in Polo's footsteps in search of Cathay. Disguised as an Armenian trader, he joined a caravan of merchants and made his way to the Chinese city of Suchow, where he was detained, became ill, and eventually perished. De Goes's death, in the year 1607, roughly coincided with the Silk Road's final eclipse, as the great terrestrial thoroughfare of trade was supplanted by the sea routes that were being pioneered between Europe and the Far East—although a small but persistent trickle of commerce continued to dribble across the Pamir from Chinese Turkistan to Tibet and Chitral, the northernmost outpost of India.

The Wakhan did not reemerge on the world stage until the later part of the nineteenth century, when Great Britain and Russia began tussling for control of central Asia in the imperial contest known as the Great Game. During this period, Russia was expanding its southern borders toward the ancient cities of the Silk Road, while Britain was seeking to explore and protect the passes through the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush that led to India, the richest gem in Britain's imperial crown. An eccentric collection of explorers and military officers played a cat-and-mouse game along the high country of the Hindu Kush and the Pamirs. In 1895, after the two sides were brought to the brink of war, politicians in London and Saint Petersburg established the Wakhan as a buffer zone to ensure that the underbelly of the czars' kingdom would at no point touch the northernmost crest of the Raj.

Twenty-two years later, the creation of the Soviet Union shut down the Wakhan's northern borders, severing most of the remaining north-south commerce. Then, in 1949, Mao Zedong completed the Communist takeover of China and the Corridor's door to the east was slammed shut, permanently halting almost all east-to-west movement. Within a single generation, a place that had once served as the linchpin of the greatest trade route in history and had later come to demarcate the farthest borders of the world's two foremost imperial powers was transformed into the poorest and the most obscure dead-end road on earth.

Today, the residents of the Corridor are consigned to a state of quarantine that is impossible to imagine for anyone who inhabits a world whose borders are defined by e-mail, Twitter, and satellite phones. Implacably isolated and breathtakingly remote, the Wakhan is central Asia's Ultima Thule: a place so distant and so far beyond the margins of the known world that it seems to delineate not only the outer limits of geography but the edge of civilization itself.

The Kirghiz horsemen who rode over the Irshad Pass in the autumn of 1999 were descendants of nomadic tribes from the Tuva region of Russia who had migrated into central Asia in the thirteenth century, during the rise of the Mongol empire—and for the better part of eight centuries, these tribes' lives revolved around seasonal migrations across the mountain ranges separating what are now eastern Afghanistan, western China, and southern Tajikistan. Each year the tribes would rove freely across the grasslands of the High Pamir with their felt yurts and their flocks of goats, yaks, and double-humped Bactrian camels, unmolested by government officials, tax collectors, or security agents. The winters would be spent in the lower valleys of Tajikistan or western China, where they could shelter from the

weather and protect their flocks from bears and wolves. In the summer, they would slowly move back into the alpine grasslands, where the only other inhabitants were Marco Polo sheep, ibex, and other wild animals.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet government devoted much of the 1930s to a policy of forcing the nomadic cultures who inhabited the USSR's central Asian republics to abandon their migratory traditions and settle on collective farms. A group of Kirghiz eventually rebelled against this effort and petitioned the king of Afghanistan for sanctuary in the Wakhan. This protected them from the Soviets, but it reduced their migrations to a series of short shifts between the eastern Wakhan and China's Xinjiang Province. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese Communists restricted these movements even further.

Then in 1978, just prior to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, roughly 1,300 Kirghiz led by an imam named Haji Rahman Qul decided to abandon the Pamirs and cross south over the Hindu Kush into Pakistan. They found life in this new home intolerable (the Kirghiz women were forced to follow the rules of purdah, and the heat caused many members of the group to fall ill). After trying unsuccessfully to acquire American visas and move his people to Alaska, Rahman Qul embarked on a new journey in 1982. Referred to as the Last Exodus, this odyssey eventually took his followers to eastern Anatolia, where they were given political asylum by the Turkish government and settled next to a group of resentful Kurds who had been forced out to make room for them. The community they established there continues flourishing to this day.

Meanwhile, a second group of roughly two hundred Kirghiz who refused to participate in the Last Exodus broke away from Rahman Qul and returned to the Wakhan, where they resumed the migratory lifestyle of their forebears. Lost within the immensity of the High Pamirs the descendants of these Kirghiz now

struggle to uphold an ancestral lifestyle that represents one of the last great nomadic horse cultures on earth.

As romantic as that may sound, life has been exceptionally difficult for the Wakhan Kirghiz, and their capacity to survive seems to grow more marginal with each passing year. Unable to migrate to the warmer lowlands, they are exposed to the full fury of winters, which can last from September through June, with temperatures plummeting as low as negative twenty degrees. Despite the fact that the entire community often teeters on the threshold of starvation, especially during the early spring, they are cut off from even the most basic government services. As late as 1999, there was not a single school, hospital, dispensary, police station, bazaar, veterinary facility, post office, or doctor's clinic in the eastern sector of the Wakhan. Even by the extreme standards of Afghanistan, a country where 68 percent of the population has never known peace, the average life expectancy is forty-four years, and the maternal mortality rate is exceeded only by that of Liberia, the homeland of the Wakhan Kirghiz can be a desperate place.

The sole connection between the Kirghiz and the outside world is a single-lane dirt road that starts in the provincial city of Faizabad, in the Afghan province of Badakshan, and runs more than a hundred miles through the towns of Baharak, Ishkoshem, and Qala-e-Panj to the village of Sarhad, about halfway into the Corridor, where the road ends. Beyond Sarhad, all movement takes place on foot or on pack animals along narrow trails that hew closely to the Darya-i-Pamir and the Wakhan rivers and extend all the way to the easternmost end of the Corridor, where the frigid waters of a shallow, glassy blue lake lap at the edges of a grass-covered field known as Bozai Gumbaz. It was here, not far from the exact spot that Marco Polo spent the winter of 1272 recovering from malaria, that the Kirghiz leader who had dispatched his emissaries over the Irshad Pass to find me was hoping to build a school.

If any place met the definition of our last-place-first philosophy, surely this was it.

Needless to say, the logistics of even getting to such a location, much less constructing a place where teachers and students could gather to study and learn, were going to be daunting, especially for an organization as tiny as ours. Plus, there was enough work to keep us busy in Pakistan for the next fifty years. Prudence suggested that it might not be wise to spread our resources too thin by venturing into unknown territory at the far end of another country and attempting to work with communities we knew nothing about.

Then again, that's pretty much exactly what got us into this business in the first place. And besides, the team of people we've built up over the years tends to relish this kind of challenge.

As my wife often reminds me, I have a very unusual staff.

There are many unorthodox aspects to my style of operation, starting with my tendency to fly by the seat of my pants and extending through my willingness to fashion working alliances with unsavory characters who have included smugglers, corrupt government flunkies, and Taliban thugs. Even more unusual is my preference for employing inexperienced, often completely uneducated locals, whom I tend to hire solely on gut instinct—a practice, it turns out, that I learned from my father.

In the spring of 1958, when I was three months old, my parents moved our family from Minnesota to East Africa to teach in a girls' school and four years later helped establish Tanzania's first teaching hospital on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. My sisters Sonja and Kari and I attended a school where the children hailed from more than two dozen different countries. Meanwhile, my father, Dempsey, struggled to lay the foundations for the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Centre (KCMC).

His greatest challenge was to overcome the expat community's fear of empowering local people. He was told repeatedly that getting anything done in Africa required a *muzungo* (white man) wielding a *koboko* (a hippo-hide whip). Despite these prejudices, he never wavered in his conviction that the key to success was listening and building relationships. In lieu of tea drinking, he would head over to the nearby town of Mamba, where after Sunday church, male and female elders would sit in circles, passing around a communal gourd of *pombe* (banana beer) while they celebrated their friendship and resolved their problems.

Over a decade, my father slowly put together a team that resembled a miniature United Nations. The construction firm that built the hospital were Zionists from Haifa. The engineering consultants were Egyptian Sunnis. The architect was a Roman Jew, many of the senior masons were Arab Muslims from the Indian Ocean coast, the accountants were Hindus, and the project's inner circle of advisers and managers were all native Africans. Communication was a challenge during the early years, and there were several times when the whole thing almost fell apart. Nevertheless, my dad persisted, and by 1971 the KCMC was finally up and running—at which point he did something really interesting.

To celebrate the opening of the hospital, he built a giant cement barbecue in our backyard and held a daylong party, in the middle of which he stood up and gave a speech. After apologizing for all the hard work he had put everyone though, he thanked every single person who had been involved, from the top administrators down to the lowliest laborers, and praised them for a job well done. Then he said that he had a prediction to make. "In ten years," he declared, "the head of every department in the hospital will be a native from Tanzania."

There was an awkward moment of silence, and from the audience of expat aristocrats came a collective gasp of disbelief. *Who*

do you think you are? they demanded. *How dare you boost these people's hopes with such unrealistic expectations and set them up for failure?* The explicit assumption was that it was naive and inappropriate to hold the Tanzanians to the same standards that westerners might expect of themselves. The implicit—and more insidious—assumption was that these Africans lacked ambition, competence, and a sense of responsibility.

Our family returned home to Minnesota in 1972, and in 1981 my father died of cancer. A year later, when the hospital's annual report for 1981 arrived in the mail, my mom showed it to me with tears in her eyes. Every single department head was from Tanzania, just as he had predicted—a fact that remains true today, twenty-eight years later.

One of my great regrets is that my father didn't live long enough to see that his instincts not only were vindicated, but also inspired some copycats. Because in my own way, I've adopted the very same approach in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Altogether, the Central Asia Institute field staff totals about a dozen men, almost all of whom have appointed themselves to their positions. Even though I'm not the sort of person who normally travels with a security team, a hulking tribesman from the Charpurson Valley who once worked as a high-altitude porter on K2 (until his shoulder was torn to pieces in a car accident) insists on serving as my bodyguard. His name is Faisal Baig, and he embraces his duties with unapologetic fanaticism. In Skardu in the summer of 1997, Faisal caught a man leering through the window of the CAI Land Cruiser at my wife, Tara, as she was nursing our daughter, dragged him into an alley, and beat the poor man senseless.

Until a few years ago when he retired, the driver of that Land Cruiser was Mohammed Hussein. A gaunt-faced chain-smoker who could be moody and mercurial, Hussein took chauffeuring so seriously that he insisted on stashing a box of dynamite

under the passenger seat—where I usually sit—so he could blast through the landslides and avalanches that often block the roads through the Karakoram. Our work was too important, Hussein believed, to waste time waiting around for government road crews.

Then there is Apo Abdul Razak, a tiny, bow-legged seventy-five-year-old cook who spent more than four decades boiling rice and chopping vegetables for some of the most famous mountaineering expeditions ever to climb in the Karakoram. Apo, who has fathered eighteen children and never learned to read or write, is so fond of tobacco that he smokes Tander cigarettes and uses chewing tobacco at the same time. (His few remaining teeth are the color of turpentine.) Apo's gift is his decency, which is infused with a sincerity so bottomless and so transparent that it endears him to everyone from Pervez Musharraf, the former president of Pakistan (who has taken tea with Apo on three different occasions), to the glowering security guards who are endlessly confronting us at airports, hotels, and highway checkpoints—and who often receive a hug from Apo after they are through patting him down for weapons. Also known as Chacha (uncle), Apo serves as the Central Asia Institute's senior statesman and diplomatic emissary, smoothing over disputes with recalcitrant mullahs, greedy bureaucrats, and bad-tempered gunmen.

It's true, I suppose, that our payroll includes one or two people whose qualifications might meet the definition of "vaguely normal." Haji Ghulam Parvi, for example, is a devout Muslim from Skardu who quit his job as an accountant with Radio Pakistan to become our chief operations manager in Baltistan. Mohammed Nazir, twenty-nine, an earnest young man with hooded eyes and a wispy goatee who manages several of our projects in Baltistan, is the son of a respected Skardu businessman who supplies food to the Pakistani troops bivouacked

on the twenty-three-thousand-foot ridgelines looming above the Siachen Glacier, the highest theater of combat in the history of warfare. Most of our employees, however, are men whose résumés would never receive a second glance at a conventional NGO. The remainder of our payroll features a mountaineering porter, an illiterate farmer who is the son of a Balti poet, a fellow who used to smuggle silk and plastic Chinese toys along the Karakoram Highway, a man who spent twenty-three years in a refugee camp, an ex-goatherd, and two former members of the Taliban.

A third of these men cannot read or write. Two of them have more than one wife. And crucially, they are evenly divided between Islam's three rival sects: Sunni, Shia, and Ismaili (a liberal offshoot of the Shia whose spiritual imam, the Aga Khan, lives in Paris). I have often been told that under normal circumstances in Pakistan, it would be unusual to find men of such diverse ethnic backgrounds in the same room sharing a cup of tea. That may well be true. Yet with little pay and almost no supervision, they have somehow found a way to work together—and like the people at the end of the road whom they serve, they have accomplished some amazing things.

From the moment I set foot in Pakistan, I travel in the company of at least one or two of these men at all times. We spend weeks along the tortuous roads of Baltistan, Kashmir, and the Hindu Kush. Despite the long hours and the hard travel, they tend to exhibit the sort of behavior that makes me suspect they may actually belong to a roving Islamic fraternity. They often roar with laughter as they tease one another without mercy. Much of the humor is supplied by Suleman Minhas, a sharp-tongued, slickly mustached Sunni taxi driver who picked me up at the Islamabad airport one afternoon in 1997 and upon learning what I was up to, promptly quit his job and declared that he was now our chief fixer. Among the rest of the staff, Suleman is renowned

for his symphonic snores, the gaseous emissions produced by his "other engine," and the mysterious splashing sounds that emerge whenever he's in the bathroom—a source of endless speculation and amusement among his colleagues.

Another popular source of diversion involves booting up our solar-powered laptop with SatLink capability and watching YouTube videos of firefights between the U.S. military and the Taliban. The hands-down favorite features a militant crying *Allah Akbhar*! (God is great!) while loading a mortar shell in backward and accidentally blowing himself to pieces. Apo, a pious Sunni who detests religious extremism, is capable of watching this video ten or fifteen times in a row, cackling with glee each time the explosion takes place.

The other big pastime revolves around teasing Shaukat Ali Chaudry, an earnest schoolteacher with a shy smile, gold-rimmed glasses, and an enormous black beard who fought with the Taliban before becoming one of our part-time freelance advisers in Kashmir. Having recently turned thirty in a country where most men are married by their late teens or early twenties, Shaukat Ali is behind schedule on the important business of finding himself a wife and starting a family. By way of addressing the problem, he recently sent out marriage proposals to no fewer than four different women—and, sadly, was turned down by all of them. Among the staff, these rejections are explained by Shaukat Ali's fondness for launching into long-winded and rather tedious religious monologues that often last up to forty-five minutes. The fastest way to resolve the marriage situation, his colleagues solemnly advise Shaukat Ali, would be for him to start courting deaf women.

If there were a Muslim version of *Entourage*, it would probably be modeled on my staff.

I often refer to this group as the Dirty Dozen because so many of them are renegades and misfits—men of unrecognized

talents who struggled for years to find their place and whose former employers greeted much of their energy and enthusiasm with indifference or condescension. But inside the loose and seemingly disorganized structure of the CAI, they have found a way to harness their untapped resourcefulness and make a difference in their communities. As a result, these men are performing a job that it would take half a dozen organizations to match, all of it fueled by their ferocious passion for women's education. To the members of the Dirty Dozen, schools are everything. Despite all the joking, they would lay down their lives to educate girls.

Even for a crew like this, however, the idea of setting up shop inside Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor seemed, to put it mildly, somewhat insane. Pulling off such a feat would require a point man who possessed an unusual combination of physical courage and stamina, a mastery of at least five languages, and a willingness to travel on horseback for weeks at a time without taking a bath. A man who wouldn't mind crossing the passes of the Hindu Kush, unarmed and without fear, while carrying up to forty thousand dollars in cash in his saddlebags. Someone who could negotiate with warlords, heroin dealers, gunrunners, corrupt government officials, and some very shady tribal leaders—and when necessary, charm the hell out of these people.

Fortunately, we were just about to hire someone who fit the bill—a man whom I refer to as our Indiana Jones.