

War disrupted their wedding. Love is helping them start a new life in Indiana



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Love movements, Act I

Sulaman and Arzo Akbarzada fought February's piercing predawn chill and trudged through ankle-deep snow to take a Monday morning bus, then another bus and then an Uber, all to get to a warehouse bakery to make bagels.

Navigating still-yet-to-be-cleared sidewalks, Arzo leaned into Sulaman for support. They huddled coat to coat, guided by fluorescent street lamps and the glow of his phone's map.

It's only the third week of their new jobs, and they can't be late.

"Don't worry, we can make it," Sulaman assured Arzo.

Their journey is just beginning.

The couple was supposed to get married in Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan in August, in front of hundreds of family members and friends. Sulaman wore his suit and Arzo wore her dress, but hours before the wedding, the Taliban arrived in town. An auspicious date — hopes of married life and its promise — now tainted by the insurgent group they feared for most of their lives.

Sulaman and Arzo fled the country Aug. 31, just after U.S. troops left and effectively ended America's 20-year war in Afghanistan. Along with their families and a suitcase each, they

joined 85,000 other people who escaped Taliban rule to find homes in the U.S.

Seven months later, Sulaman and Arzo are settling in Indianapolis, figuring out life as a new couple in a new country.

Story continues below the gallery.

In their west-side neighborhood, they hold hands and steal glances while practicing English. He's learning that she likes dogs, and she's learning that he likes apple pie, all while navigating the Green Card application process. They hang family pictures in their first home together while mourning the homeland left behind.

This is love in the aftermath of tragedy. Strong because it survived. Pure because it's so fresh.

"I'm always trying to make her happy," Sulaman said. "I don't want her to be alone and travel somewhere alone and (I'm) trying to protect her. This is the new feeling (for me)."

Their love story was arranged with photographs five months before their proposed wedding date. Arzo saw a picture of Sulaman. Sulaman, though he was offered a picture of Arzo, said he didn't need to see it. He trusted his mother when she said, "I found a beautiful girl for you."

His mother's instincts were right.

"Oh my God," Sulaman's jaw dropped the first time he saw Arzo, the day of their engagement party.

She looked like a fairy, Sulaman said, angelic in a lavish pink dress that felt much too bold and big for the tiny beauty parlor.

"She says, 'Oh, please help me with the dress ... Would you please take my hand?'" Sulaman remembered. "I was not believing (it) ... 'I say, OK mom, thank you.'"

They got engaged, then began their courtship. Sulaman, a lifelong fan of American movies and music, introduced Arzo to pizza, burgers and wings on their dates. They were supposed to get married two years later, but that spring, the Taliban was making serious territorial gains across the country.

“I (was) really scared,” Sulaman said. “So I told her ... ‘I cannot wait.’”

They decided to get married immediately, but then came another wave of COVID-19 and a lockdown to go with it.

“We don’t have luck,” Sulaman remembered thinking back then. They set a date for mid-August.

The Taliban came to Mazar-i-Sharif that day, Sulaman found out through a phone call from the wedding venue. Come get your food, they said. He didn’t believe it. Arzo called him crying from the beauty parlor, “‘What should I do?’”

He rushed over to the beauty parlor to find her, running and crying, too, panicked when he didn't see her inside.

He screamed, “Arzo! Arzo!” He passed out for a moment, waking up, dizzy.

"Oh my God, where's Arzo?"

“I thought, ‘It was my fault. The Taliban maybe got her somehow,’” Sulaman said. “It was (a) really bad day. So I wish no one ever ... to be on this place and that situation.”

He finally found her hiding behind a shipping container. They took a taxi back home, with Arzo lying flat on the backseat. She’d changed out of her wedding dress, but she still had her makeup on, which they didn’t want Taliban fighters to see.

For more than a week, they hid at home “like prisoners,” Sulaman remembers.

“It’s no (way) to live,” Sulaman said.

Finally, an American connection and a crucial WhatsApp group chat helped them connect with flights out of the country. They were surrounded by the Taliban and terrified to go out in public, but Sulaman thought, “OK, if we stay, we die.”

He uprooted his life and hopped on a flight — the last one out of the country, he believes — to Qatar, then Bahrain, then Washington, D.C., then Indianapolis. He brought with him his parents, siblings and soon-to-be wife, Arzo.

Her name means “Hope” in Persian.

Love movements, Act II

On the bus to work at Harlan Bakeries, a baked goods warehouse in Avon, the couple sat huddled together, both looking at their phones. It was 6:40 a.m., still dark outside. Sulaman kept an eye on the map and bus route. Arzo watched videos on Facebook.

“She’s chilling, and I take care,” Sulaman said.

That’s how he wants it to be.

Months after their arrival in the U.S., the harsh realities of paying bills and taxes have settled in. Catholic Charities, the refugee organization sponsoring them, only supported them financially for three months, as is standard with all cases. Without a car, they’re spending almost two hours and about \$30, each way, sometimes more, to go to work. Their parole visas, which expire in two years, will cost thousands of dollars to renew, Sulaman said.

“It will make our life so, so hard,” Sulaman said. “I’m trying to fix it all.”

“A lot of problems, but we’re good,” he added. There’s more in Afghanistan.

Before settling in Indianapolis, they stayed for months at Camp Atterbury, an Indiana National Guard training site in Johnson County. After the Taliban takeover, it was one of several U.S. military bases transformed to temporarily host Afghan evacuees. Sulaman, Arzo and their families were among 7,200 people who stayed there.

Story continues below the gallery.

All those families are settled in homes across the U.S. now, but moving here is not enough to move on.

There’s still many more people left behind back home in danger. They’re watching the Taliban impose harsh rule and alter Afghan society as they knew it: More than 100 people,

former members of government and those who previously worked with the U.S. government, have been killed, according to a recent United Nations report.

Some women stuck at home, unable to return to work. Restrictions on local media and protests. Widespread hunger and poverty.

'They are looking for us to kill us': In hiding from Taliban, Afghans who helped U.S. struggle to escape

At Camp Atterbury, Sulaman and Arzo's romance brought joy during a time of pain. You could tell the couple was in love, said Larry Cassagne, a state employee who was assigned to work at the base.

“Everywhere they went, they were holding hands,” Cassagne said. “His arm around her, or you know, they whisper back and forth and then they have a giggle ... you could tell that there was a lot of emotion involved in their relationship and a lot of trust.”

Not the honeymoon they dreamed of, surrounded by Army soldiers on a military base, but a honeymoon nonetheless. They wouldn't get these days back, Sulaman remembered Arzo saying to him.

When they came to Camp Atterbury in early September, they didn't know how long they would stay there or where in the U.S. they would finally settle. They just knew they wanted to get married as soon as possible — that's what Sulaman had promised Arzo.

“You talk about, you know, people calling a wedding off,” Cassagne said. “I'd never heard one called off before or postponed because of military action and losing the city. It just made everybody want to do more or do something to help them.”

Staff and volunteers at the military base, Cassagne included, pulled off a wedding, complete with a white dress and tuxedo, rings and flowers. An imam performed a traditional Afghan ceremony. Dozens of guests enjoyed an Afghan meal, donated by community members, and a DJ played Afghan music at the reception.

'The world is too small': An Afghan translator and U.S. soldier reunited at Camp Atterbury

When asked what surprised him the most about the U.S., Sulaman laughs and points to a wedding memory with Cassagne: the "chicken dance" performed by "Larry sir."

"He's (a) good man," Sulaman said. "I hope he (gets) everything he wants. God bless him. He is just like an angel."

Today, the Akbarzada and Cassagne families remain friends. They've spent Thanksgiving and Christmas together, and in their new home, Sulaman and Arzo have put up photos of their wedding day at Camp Atterbury, grinning alongside Cassagne and his wife, Karen.

Sulaman and Arzo call them "Ma" and "Pa."

Love movements, Act III

After two bus rides, Sulaman and Arzo headed toward a dimly lit bus stop on U.S. Route 40 to wait for an Uber. It was 7:20 a.m. and the morning sky was friendlier, going from black darkness to a soft baby blue with streaks of light orange. Light for the last leg of their journey.

"Sulaman!" Arzo slipped. She called out to her husband walking ahead.

"Oh, Arzo, sorry," Sulaman turned and reached out his hand to help her walk over the ice. She grabbed it and slapped him playfully on the shoulder.

Under the canopy of the bus stop, she rested her head on his shoulder and let out a yawn. All was forgiven. Sulaman messaged the Uber driver to please hurry.

They were cold.

They enjoy working together, even if it means a complicated commute and early morning hours. When Sulaman worked a different job previously, he didn't like leaving Arzo home alone all day.

At Harlan Bakeries, they found jobs for them both. Sulaman works on the pre-mix assembly line, mixing the ingredients for the bagels, while Arzo works on the packing line, placing packages of bagels into boxes. He's at the start of the process. She's at the end.

They're not afraid to work hard, Sulaman said, but he wants her to enjoy life. He wishes she wouldn't have to work, but they can't buy a car or pay the bills with just one salary. Arzo, too, is eager to work.

"I want to (treat) my wife like queen," Sulaman said. "(But) she says, 'I will not let you work alone.' And that's why she's always going with me ... I just want (her to) be relaxed, comfortable."

Their list of dreams is long.

"We are just trying to be American," Sulaman said.

He wants to get his master's degree in engineering, and Arzo wants to go to dentistry school. Buying a car "would be like a small gift for us," Sulaman said. He wants to take Arzo to Niagara Falls for a real honeymoon.

"I don't think everything will happen," Sulaman said, "but I will try to make it happen."

With the sun rising above them, Sulaman and Arzo walked into work hand in hand.

Editor's note: *This is the first in an occasional series of stories about the Akbarzadas and their journey in life and in love in the U.S.*