

FEAR
OF BEAUTY

A Novel

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*For my brother Mark Froetschel and his love of agriculture,
and our grandfather John G. Froetschel and his love of education*

PROLOGUE

*And withhold yourself with those who call on their
Lord morning and evening, desiring His goodwill, and
let not your eyes pass from them, desiring the beauties
of this world's life....*

The Koran, 18:28

Those who claim to know the will of Allah can scold us—and change how we dress, talk or behave. But they cannot control our senses or prevent us from detecting truth as we try to live the one true way.

The women of our village endured seasons when the crops withered in the fields for want of rain. We come from villages where families sell their daughters for survival. We have seen younger brothers sent to the cities to plead for work or beg for food. We take turns holding the infants in our arms, exhausted from wailing and disease.

Our village is a lifelong home for men. The women arrive as strangers. But hard work and children, the arrival of new wives, obscure this betrayal. Strangers can be like the fierce winds that batter our crops or gentle rains that make them green.

Years ago, leaders of Afghanistan decided to forgo railroads and highways to prevent invasions of our land. Yet for three decades, combat was never far. Intruders have a way of finding us, asking us to change and bend to their will. There is no end to worrying about the brothers and fathers, husband and sons, who return from battle dazed, humiliated, and bitter. The men blame women and sins for problems that never go away.

We cannot tell others what we want. Revealing our preferences

only ensures that the opposite will occur. We work to control ourselves, and disguise efforts to impose our control over others. In the end, attempts to control others are futile.

We live in a land where extremes reign. I may join my sisters in their plan, destroying those who squeeze every joy out of us until everyday life stings like the desert sand whipped by unrelenting wind.

PART I

The most essential element of combat power is competent and confident leadership. Leadership provides purpose, direction, and motivation in combat. . . . A good leader will . . . motivate his men by setting the example and always maintaining a positive can-do attitude.

Ranger Handbook, 1-1

Every soul shall taste of death . . . and the life of this world is nothing but a provision of vanities.

The Koran, 3:185

CHAPTER 1

I remember the last day with my son, his smile bright and happy as he tugged my hand, urging me to join him on the mountainside. There was something I needed to see.

Our work in the fields never ended, especially during harvests, and we had much to do before dinner. The boy gently tugged on a pomegranate, showing how it stubbornly clung to the stem. *The fruit is not yet ready to pick.*

Laughing, I tried to put him off, explaining I wanted to make a special meal that evening, his favorite, a spicy lamb pie. But Ali had a stubborn charm. *I'd rather spend the day with you, even if we must eat raw turnips and potatoes tonight.* Mischievous, he insisted that I'd want to see what he had to show me.

Ali, my oldest, was small for his age, but wiry and tough of mind. It was why we were sending him to school early, to a maktab farther than the one attended by most boys in our village. Other villagers raised their eyebrows and whispered about us. Parsaa, my husband, calmly repeated a simple explanation. His son would attend the school that Parsaa had attended.

Only because the boy was leaving the next day, I accompanied him for the climb that day.

And so I headed out early for the field, but worked doubly hard, taking no breaks and giving the boy time to gather the goats and move them along the path to higher pastures. As the sun reached its highest point in the sky, I slipped into a stand of pines not far from the edge of our field to hide my tools and follow my son.

My husband's tribe descended from nomads who wandered along

the border between Afghanistan and Iran. Constant fighting pushed our leaders west to a remote area, and more fighting prompted another move to an isolated location where another language was spoken.

The upland valley is far from roads and other people, cornered by intimidating, rugged mountains. The entrance to the village, once a dirt road, was reduced to a treacherous footpath after villagers deliberately triggered an avalanche. Passage was impossible for motor vehicles.

Our nearby hills offer decent slopes for grazing goats and sheep. The tallest and nearest mountain, with views of the path leading to our village, was most frequented by the village men and boys for herding or scouting. Our family fields were at the base of a shorter mountain with the steepest slopes. Slightly to the west, this lopsided mountain exposed not the footpath but the village and river valley stretching beyond. Any climb required careful checks of foot and handholds.

Men posed more danger for me than any path, and the most desolate mountain was the only one that I as a woman could safely manage alone. I couldn't wander away often, or other villagers would suspect my intentions.

Our family kept secrets along one slope—a deep fold, strewn with huge boulders that were barriers against the wind or prying eyes. Old leaves, twigs, and grass caught among the crevices turned into rich soil over time, and dark reedy strands had gradually spread into these pockets. To avoid jealousies and questions, we climbed this part of the mountain only when others in our village were busy.

Ali was the only one of our children that knew.

Before that day and since, I often pondered my special feelings for Ali. Of course, he was the oldest, but his character most resembled mine, and the sense that I was running out of time with this child had nagged at me. That afternoon, I thought about how I'd miss our routines and conversations while he attended school, but didn't share these feelings aloud.

Mothers must teach their children to keep secrets, and we practice by spending time alone with them, showing our trust.

Without glancing at the mountain's biggest secret, my hidden

garden, I followed Ali, trudging uphill. My shoes are too large, the soles brittle with age, but two pairs of thick knitted socks also protected my feet. Rather than use a path that wiggled around the mountain, we headed straight uphill through luxurious waves of grass, in gray, gold, lavender, and green. The long strands pulled against my tambaan, and rather than push through, we stepped high, toes pointed, to move more quickly.

It didn't take long before I spotted the peaceful scene of our goats ambling along the slope, selecting sprigs here and there. Before heading upward, I scanned the path between the village and our fields below and saw no sign of followers. In case we met other villagers, I carried bread, yogurt, and fruit in my pack and would explain that Ali had forgotten his meal. Some would still scold me for making the boy soft, but it was an easy excuse for abandoning work and climbing the sharp hillside overlooking Laashekoh.

I glanced up to see Ali happily waving for me to hurry. That memory of his fearless joy is always with me.

Running, I took long strides, barely keeping up, but there was no rest as Ali turned, aiming higher uphill. Once past the grassy area and goats, we had to scramble over crumbling gray rocks to reach the mountaintop. Hurrying, without words, we moved deliberately, guarding against falling with hundreds of crumbling rocks. As we closed in for the top, each breath felt sharp. My feet were sore from curling and gripping around rocks and dirt, trying to keep balance, and I was grateful to step on cushions of lichen.

The boy darted without any signs of weariness, and I smiled at the serious tilt of his mouth and curls that could not be tamed by a pakool. I felt so close to him because he was curious, observant, quick at laughing off problems. Not because he was my firstborn. Others weren't shy about favoring firstborn children, but it had never felt right for me.

But I kept these thoughts to myself. I couldn't explain, not even to Parsaa, how clever Ali was, more like a friend than a son. He was thoughtful, maybe because he spent so much time in the hills alone with only the goats. Unlike other village children, he did not complain

about working alone to herd the animals. He found adventure in every day.

Others would have found our relationship odd, so Ali and I had to plan and snatch time together. *You can't leave the goats for long, and I can't leave the pomegranates. Others will ask questions.*

You're a woman. You did not feel well. He responded in a matter-of-fact way. *Tell them they don't want to know the details.*

The boy was the oldest of five brothers and adept at getting his way. No matter what happened, his face was calm and sweet. He could cast his gaze at others, staring into their eyes, intently studying the shape of their thoughts. His gray eyes could smile without a twitch of the mouth. A mother should not boast about her children, but he was too observant and intelligent, that one, often disconcerting for men twice his age or more.

Not far from the top, Ali paused and slowly crouched to the ground, gesturing for me to wait. He slowly inched forward along the ground toward the crest of the hill. Once there, he leaned against a huge boulder.

Waiting for his signal, I lifted my head to take in deep breaths and enjoy the clouds hovering so close. My body was good for steady work, walking, bending with a hoe, and stooping to select vegetables, but not for such an intense climb. Leaning my head against the nearest rock, I studied the world below. Surrounding the village compound, home for almost twenty families, were gleaming fields of gold and green in the late morning light. As families grew, new blocks and passageways were added to homes, and walls of clay, smoothed to creamy perfection, twisted like a maze to provide privacy and protection.

Ali tried to tuck his hair under the pakool once again, before slowly lowering his head and crawling out from behind the boulder. No shouts or shots responded.

In the stillness, I suddenly detected a soft rumbling sound from afar.

Ali backed away. *Move slowly,* he cautioned in a whisper. *We don't know who might wait on the other side.*

I hurried to look, but he grabbed my arm and removed his gray pakool, handing it over. *It blends with the boulder*, he whispered. Letting the headscarf fall to my neck, I placed the pakool on my head and tucked my unruly hair inside. Crouching low, following Ali's example, I moved toward the crest to check out the source of the rumbling.

Beyond the river, as far as the eye could see, a series of unfolding beige hills shoved our river this way and that, the rocky crests softening in the distance. All the snowmelt and streams wound their way down the mountains and eventually met with that river.

Most days, the only interruption in the scene of these dusty hills was the glistening river or a lonely bird gliding with the wind. Sometimes bedraggled groups of refugees passed through, fleeing the fighting and invariably stopping by the river to drink or camp for the night. Most passersby did not realize a village was nestled amidst the craggy mountains and that they were under watch. The few parties who knew about our village sent scouts ahead, met with our men, and sometimes bought food. I expected to watch another caravan moving like tiny insects, taking all day to crawl along the river until they were no longer in our view.

But the group was not refugees. Powerful motorized vehicles, the color of the sand and rocks, moved back and forth along the river's desert side. The huge, ugly trucks towed equipment that I had never seen before, kicking up clouds of dust around a set of structures that had suddenly emerged not far from our river. I squinted to focus in the bright sun. Two flying machines, blades whirling in a circle, moved over the site, like growling birds courting in the sky. I had heard about such machines. One slowly dropped to the ground as another lifted, glinting in the sunlight and quickly moving out of sight over nearby mountains. In the distance, another approached, and I pointed.

Ali pulled my arm down and leaned to whisper in my ear. *They're called helicopters. The foreign soldiers are here. The Americans.* Hatred seared through me, but he showed no hint of worry or fear. I remember thinking at the time how children were better at sensing immediate rather than distant danger.

I simply repeated the strange word, *Americans*, the ones who attacked after the drought in 2001, when our region was at its weakest. Since then, increasing numbers of foreign soldiers brought new troubles, new divisions among our tribes.

Many families found it easier to relocate than work with foreign troops. The same had happened when I was young, after heavy bombing and fighting with another group of foreigners, the Russians. Parsaa's family, my parents had joined families who walked away from productive fields and moved south. We didn't mind starting over if we were far from the fighting and the cities. We learned to do with less water, less food, less contact with the outside world, less of everything. The fighting didn't stop, but at least our parents removed our families from the angry clashes over territory. Then the Americans invaded, and villages had to decide whether to relocate again.

Some criticize our leaders for not standing ground and confronting the intruders. But there were many demands and factions, and too many men fight for reasons that carry little meaning in the years that follow.

We had a saying that peace and poverty were better than fighting. But now the enemy was near. I had worked hard in the fields of our village, and anger ripped through me at the thought that we might abandon a place that had given us so much.

For now, the men were far away, mere dots. But moving quickly and changing the landscape with their machines, they were different from others who had passed through. The camp was too dusty and far to see weapons or faces, but the activity suggested a long stay. I tried to convince myself the encampment was an annoyance, like ants, not an invasion that would force us to flee our village.

My son was keen to incite a reaction. I didn't oblige, though I'm sure Ali could not miss the hard look in my eyes. *How many days have they been here?*

Ali explained how he had climbed the hill four days earlier and had not seen any sign of them. He was excited, more curious than afraid, and that bothered me.

I refused to speak about my hate. Some parents want their children to share their feelings and talk too much about the targets of their hate. I prefer that my children practice forming their own conclusions. Yesterday's enemy can be tomorrow's ally, and a neutral stance is the best approach. Fighting does not keep change at bay.

Uncle goes down there at night to meet with those who guide the refugees. Ali shook his head. *He won't be happy.*

The comment took me by surprise, and I was annoyed that my child knew more about the business of our village than I did. But males of any age can move about as they please. Only when no one is paying attention, during chores, can women snatch time alone. Women gather to make soap, wash clothes, or work in the fields, but such occasions rarely make us privy to village business or politics.

I wish I had been more curious that day. But even with our sons, women don't let on how much we know or don't know, and I could expect questioning glances if I stayed away from my work too long.

We should return, I whispered.

So you can make our dinner, Ali said. *And I will help.*

Sitting up, I laughed, and we backed away from the precipice, hurrying downward and ducking behind boulders scattered about in odd piles, as if strewn by some giant's hand. Ali was swift and sure, again taking the lead, dodging back and forth off the trail, scampering along the rocks. Leaping and stretching his arms out, in his father's old payraan, Ali resembled a giant bird

Nearing the meadow, he leaped onto a huge boulder and called out to me.

We must hurry—others will ask questions, I scolded. Instead of following me downhill, he swayed back and forth along the ledge, teasing me.

Ali! I gasped. Stop!

Then climb up! He called out, taking another jump.

Hurrying away from the path to join him, I searched for handholds and climbed toward the circle of rocks overlooking our village in miniature and the winding river valley below. My throat was tight.

I wanted to shake him for recklessly ignoring the sheer cliff below, but the scene was beautiful, and I said as much. Ali didn't answer. Frowning, he bent close to the ground.

The ground was worn around the base of a large rock, flat and low to the ground, with the curves of an expensive sofa seen only in the wealthiest homes of Afghanistan. Mixed with scabble on the one side of the rock was the dusty stub of a cigarette. I poked at the stray with a stick and saw tiny marks etched on its side. I could not guess the source. Few men in our village wanted or could afford foreign tobacco.

I didn't like the idea of a stranger loitering on the hillside so close to my secrets. With my shoe, I tucked the dirty thing back into its hiding spot, before circling the clearing. The sudden drop-off made me dizzy, and I backed away to sit next to Ali on the sofa-rock. He pointed toward two large rocks—a frame to the scene of thirty odd structures that made up our village.

Someone is watching us, Ali commented. I just nodded, but he pressed, *Should we tell the others?*

Not yet, I whispered. *It could be someone from our village*. I held his stare and didn't have to explain that prying on fellow villagers could be more dangerous than observing foreign soldiers. *This shelter looks temporary*, I tried to reassure him.

Placing my hand on his shoulder, I suggested that he walk ahead and whistle if he spotted any disturbance. Waiting for the sound of his footsteps to fade away, I returned to the rocky ledge—and knelt, reaching for an opening that I had detected while climbing. A rock partially covered the opening, and I pushed it aside before feeling cool metal.

Looking about, I checked that Ali was well on his way before extracting the small flat box. Inside was a pile of documents, all similar, with lines and characters that I could not read. There was also a stack of strange money, with images of a stern man, no hair on the top of his head. It wasn't Afghan currency, and again, I couldn't read the few notations.

Such documents and foreign currency were useless for people

in Laashekoh, but I had my own reasons for coveting paper. Surely whoever had left the documents on our remote hillside wouldn't miss one.

So I took one, folded it several times, and tucked it into my clothing. Resisting the temptation to take more, I returned the box to its hiding place and moved the rock back for cover. I could return later, I promised myself. With any luck, the intruder was merely passing through and wasn't curious about my own activities along this mountainside.