



FREEDOM'S STAND

J. M. WINDLE



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Jeanette Windle's Web site at www.jeanettewindle.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Freedom's Stand

Copyright © 2011 by Jeanette Windle. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of women in street copyright © 2010 by Chuck Holton. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of man praying copyright © Shah Marai/Getty Images. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of sunset copyright © Artist 1704/Shutterstock. All rights reserved.

Designed by Beth Sparkman

Edited by Caleb Sjogren

Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,[®] *NIV*.[®] Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the author or the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Windle, Jeanette.

Freedom's stand / J. M. Windle.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-4143-1476-1 (sc)

1. Americans—Afghanistan—Fiction. 2. Afghanistan—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3573.I5172F74 2011

813'.54—dc22

2010051556

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12 11
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRAISE FOR FREEDOM'S STAND

“If you have ever wondered what life is like ‘behind the veil’ of Islam in Afghanistan, then *Freedom’s Stand* will touch your heart like nothing else. It brings a message of hope for those whose lives are a desperate search for the reality of God.”

CARL MOELLER, president and CEO of Open Doors USA

“Absolutely riveting. Move over, *Kite Runner*, because *Freedom’s Stand* captures the life and culture of Afghanistan as if you are standing in the middle of Kabul, smelling the fires of rubber tires, listening to the Islamic call to prayer, wrapped in a burqa, while still offering a gripping message of hope and salvation. The deftly drawn story captured me with every word.”

SUSAN MAY WARREN, RITA Award–winning author of *My Foolish Heart*

“I’ve read several books about the terror and tumult in contemporary Afghanistan, but not until reading Jeanette Windle’s *Freedom’s Stand* did I realize that Islam’s honored prophet Isa Masih holds the answer for this bloodstained country. You may know the prophet as Yeshua or Jesus the Christ, but *Freedom’s Stand* beautifully illustrates how he brings inner peace by whatever name he is known.”

ANGELA HUNT, author of *The Fine Art of Insincerity*

“I have previously only been to Afghanistan once. . . . I have just returned from another, much deeper encounter with that mysterious, complex country—went there with an author who took down the veil so I could see the Afghanistan that visitors don’t see. *Freedom’s Stand* leaves me richer and more aware of many hurts I have missed. It has made the people of Afghanistan and their struggles part of me.”

STEVE SAINT, author of *End of the Spear*

“Jeanette’s characters capture the despair of what Afghanistan is and the hope of what it could be. Within the lives of three vastly different souls, she weaves a wonderfully believable tale about the unlikeliest coalition imaginable. But in the end they all seek the answer to the universal question of ‘What am I supposed to do now, Lord?’”

JOE DECREE, retired Army Special Forces major and private security contractor

“It’s not easy to capture a war-torn, enigmatic country like Afghanistan, but Jeanette Windle expertly places you right there, wooing you to fall in love with people in dire circumstances. This story of redemption and sacrifice will stick to you like Afghanistan dust, not easily wiped away or forgotten.”

MARY DEMUTH, author of *The Muir House* and *Thin Places: A Memoir*

“*Freedom’s Stand* is a fascinating, in-depth plunge into the cultural and religious struggles of the Afghan people and those who are trying to make a difference there. Jeanette Windle gives us another breathtaking story of love, faith, intrigue, and sacrifice, proving again why she’s one of the best storytellers around.”

MARK MYNHEIR, homicide detective and author of *The Corruptible*

“My hope is that *Freedom’s Stand* will open readers’ eyes to the plight of Afghan women and open their hearts to the love of Isa.”

CHUCK HOLTON, former Army Ranger and war correspondent

“Windle writes with the power and authenticity of one who has lived on foreign soil and brought back truth we often do not see from our American living rooms. *Freedom’s Stand* is rich with the history, politics, and culture of Afghanistan, and [it] brings a people to life whom we are called to love. A rich and eye-opening tale.”

T. L. HIGLEY, author of *Pompeii: City on Fire*

“In a time when Afghanistan is in the news almost daily, it is both refreshing and challenging to read a story of courage and candor, adventure and romance among this ancient and passionate people. Only one with a love for the Afghans and an understanding of their culture could bring such a story to life, and author J. M. Windle has done it. This book . . . will challenge us at the deepest level of our commitment and encourage us to stand for freedom—regardless of the cost.”

KATHI MACIAS, award-winning author of *People of the Book*

FREEDOM'S STAND

To B. E., whose one desire since I first met her in Kabul was to serve the women of Afghanistan until the day her heavenly Father called her home. That prayer was granted in the spring of 2010. Her courage, sacrifice, and love remain an inspiration to those who come behind. May you dance, sweet sister, in the presence of your Creator until we meet again.

PROLOGUE

Pashtun Territory, Afghanistan

The girl was breathing hard as she climbed steep outdoor stairs, carrying the basin of dirty water in which she'd been scrubbing vegetables. Sliding the basin onto a flat rooftop, she scrambled after it. She was high enough here to see out over the compound's mud-brick perimeter wall. A narrow river gorge ran between two gently rising mountain ridges. The compound sat halfway up one flank, its crenellated exterior fortification curving out from the mountainside to enclose an area large enough for a *buzkashi* tournament, the Afghan free-for-all version of polo.

Above the girl on the highest parapet, a teenage sentry squatted, an ancient AK-47 across his thighs. Catching his eyes on her, the girl pulled her headscarf higher across her face. But she did not stoop immediately to complete her task, stepping forward instead to the edge of the roof.

Today's sun had already dropped behind the opposite mountain ridge, leaving behind a spectacular display of reds and oranges and purples above the sharp geometry of rock formations. Overhead, a rare saker falcon wheeled lazily against the first pale stars. Perched on a boulder across the river, a shepherd boy played a wooden *toola* flute, the rush of water over stones offering harmony to his plaintive tune. Behind him, a herd of mountain sheep scrambled over terraces where crops would grow when spring runoff overflowed a streambed winding through the valley floor.

The girl saw little beauty in the scene. The narrow vista of this isolated mountain valley, varied only by white of winter snow and green of summer growth, was no less a prison than the compound walls. Just as the

bright red and pink of poppy blooms within the compound enclosure below meant only backbreaking hours of hand-irrigating and weeding.

But today that would be finished. Before nightfall was complete, the compound gates that had slammed her inside—how long had it been? five winters now?—would swing wide. Perhaps her new home would be a town with markets and people and the freedom to emerge onto the streets. Perhaps there would be womenfolk her own age who would welcome her as a sister.

Perhaps there would be books. Oh, to study again!

Will there be love?

Her searching gaze had finally spotted what she'd been seeking. A single track scratched the baked earth of the valley floor, paralleling the riverbed. A dust devil moving along it was too large and fast to be the wind. A party of horsemen?

Then a vehicle separated itself from the whirlwind. A single-cab pickup, its bed crowded with human shapes, though still too distant to make out whether they were male or female.

One would certainly be male.

Her liberator.

Or new prison warden.

Her bridegroom.

“Worthless daughter of a camel! Will you take your rest while others labor?”

A blow rocked the girl back on her heels. As her uncle's senior wife hurried down the steps, the girl scrambled for the basin. Water was too precious to just be discarded, and she carefully carried the basin over to a row of potted tomato vines. But as she tilted it above the first pot, the girl abruptly dropped the scarf from her face to bend over the water's murky surface.

Would her chosen mate find her attractive like the tales of ancient Persian princes and lovely slave girls her mother had whispered to her at night? If her bridegroom found her to his liking, he would be kinder. Perhaps even buy her gifts. So she'd observed from the younger women, wives of her uncle's sons and his brothers and their sons, who with their children made this compound a small village in itself. Her uncle's own

new bride too, a teenager not many winters older than herself, to whom he'd given gifts of clothing and jewelry that made his senior wife scream with rage when he was out of earshot.

Though her mirror was blurry, the girl could make out features thin and pale as moonlight. Food had been scarce this winter for such as she. Wisps of hair escaping her headscarf were only a shade darker than dried mud; long-lashed eyes somberly returning her gaze, the blue of a hot summer sky. At least the face in the water was unmarred by scar or cleft palate, her body under work-stained clothing whole and hardened to strenuous labor. This past winter she'd been touched by the monthly cycle of women.

Still, that wavering reflection was nothing like the smooth black tresses, golden oval features, and almond-shaped dark eyes of her *wali's* new wife, who was the embodiment of captive beauties in her mother's tales. What if her own bridegroom was dissatisfied? What if he beat her? She'd seen the bruises on less-favored household women. Heard their screams through thick walls of their sleeping quarters.

"Where is that girl? Can she do nothing as she is ordered?"

The girl hastily emptied the basin. But her footsteps slowed to reluctance as she started down the dirt stairs. She would miss this view more than the compound's human residents. Though they had not been cruel, neither had they been kind. The raised voices and blows if she did not work hard or fast enough. The constant reminder that her refuge here was only by the most tenuous of blood ties to her guardian or *wali*, master of this compound. Most of the time she was simply invisible behind handed-down tunic and enveloping scarf.

She'd been too young for a head covering when her mother first brought her to those tall, wooden gates. No more than eight winters, though birthdays or even birth years meant little here. Making this her thirteenth year of life, if she'd calculated right. To the girl's dismay, it was her mother who'd quickly insisted she cover herself. She'd not understood then the fear in her mother's face when male eyes followed her young, lithe form around the courtyard. The fury of household women directed at her and not the watchers. She just knew she'd become suddenly invisible, the quick tugging of her scarf over her face when any

male compound member approached now so automatic she no longer consciously registered the gesture.

Her mother had slipped away in the second winter of their refuge here. Of grief, the girl believed, though compound chatter said some sickness of the lungs. By then she'd come to feel that the individual living and breathing beneath her veil was forgotten, her existence no more than an extra pair of hands and feet and grudging portion of food.

That she wasn't completely forgotten, she'd learned only this morning when she'd been informed her marriage was arranged. If sudden, she'd known this day must come. Not only because her labor from sunrise to nightfall didn't compensate for another mouth to feed. Even her ignorance knew the value a nubile and healthy female represented. Her own initial terror and dismay had given way to rising anticipation. Whatever future awaited beyond those tall gates had to be an improvement. At the least, she would be wanted, her husband's valued possession, a member of his family.

Will there be love?

The girl knew what love was. Her mother's hand brushing fleetingly across her hair. The private smile that never banished sorrow when her mother slipped the girl extra food from her own portion. A soft voice murmuring stories into her ear when the day's work was done and mother and daughter could retire to their sleeping mat.

There were other memories, so distant the girl couldn't be sure they weren't imagined. A "before" time and place that held painted walls and smooth tile beneath her feet. A swirl of vividly colored silks and female laughter. Children darting like butterflies in their own bright tunics. A scent of sandalwood and taste of richly spiced food until one's stomach was satisfied. Bearded features and masculine voices that were loud, but not angry. Her father? Brothers? Above all, one smiling youthful face, still beardless, bending close above her as a patient hand guided small fingers in loops and swirls and dots that made up the name that was no longer hers.

But those images she did not like to relive. Not just because of the aching inaccessibility of such warmth and joy and laughter. But because with them came the blackness. Horrible images of torn, scarlet-stained bodies.

Screaming explosions. Running until her chest hurt. Hiding in dark places. Terror that choked her as much as her mother's hand tight over her mouth. Bitter cold, stomach-gnawing hunger and a mouth parched with thirst. So that when her mother had brought her at last to this compound, the girl had been grateful to leave outside that other world, a past life swallowed up by winter's night.

"There you are! Why have you lingered so long? The guests arrive at the gates. Go make yourself decent lest your husband consider we have cheated him."

Meeting the girl at the bottom of the stairs, the senior wife snatched away the basin. Behind her in the dirt courtyard, smoke rose from a cylindrical clay bread oven. Women stirred pots over an open fire. The girl's mouth watered at the aroma of a sheep roasting on a spit. Though this feast commemorated her nuptials, she'd be fortunate to suck the marrow of a discarded bone.

No one glanced up as the girl filled a pail with clean water at the well. Did anybody in this place care if she stayed or left? The girl hoisted the bucket and hurried toward her sleeping quarters, a small, windowless room she'd shared since her mother's death with an ancient female whose polio-twisted limbs explained her unmarried status. At least she'd leave with new clothing, she discovered when she ducked through the door. Not the red and green and gold traditional to weddings, trimmed with sequins, glass beads, bright embroidery. A tunic and drawstring pants lying on her sleeping mat, their matching headscarf, were the sober brown of daily wear, signal that today was less celebration than business transaction.

Stripping dirty clothing away, she dipped a rag in the cold water, shivering as she scrubbed herself clean. She tugged the tunic over her shoulders and tightened the drawstring around her waist. A plastic brush with broken bristles coaxed tangles from her hair. She twisted it up under the headscarf. If her mother were alive, she would not be doing this alone. There might even be festivities such as had accompanied her wali's recent wedding. A henna-decorating party with the compound's women. A ceremonial sauna and bath.

But then if her mother were alive, perhaps she would not be bartered this day to a stranger.

Will there be love?

The answer to that question became so urgent she could not breathe. Sinking to her sleeping mat, she shut her eyes, arms wrapped around her knees as she rocked back and forth in soundless anguish. It took gentle shaking, a worried murmur, to draw her back to her surroundings. She opened her eyes to her elderly roommate's anxious gaze. Some wordless sympathy she glimpsed there gave her strength to push to her feet.

The compound's largest room was the reception chamber. *Tushaks*, the padded mats used for sitting and sleeping, lined the room, handwoven rugs hiding the dirt floor. Whitewashed walls held photos of *mujahedeen* freedom fighters and a tattered poster of Herat's famed blue-domed mosque. The party taking their seats around a vinyl feasting cloth was a small one as befit the insignificance of this celebration. Half a dozen men in turbans, robes, and embroidered vests, their dark, curly beards and hooked noses similar enough to indicate a common gene pool. Her wali's new bride was leading away three female shapes draped in burqas.

None of the men were less than middle-aged, the oldest tall and heavy, his full beard streaked with white. Neither were they the strangers she'd expected. The girl choked down disappointment. She'd glimpsed these men when she'd accompanied the household to a compound at the far end of the gorge for her guardian's wedding festivities. Her new home would offer no escape from this valley. It only remained to see which of those hard-faced men had purchased her for their own. Two male cousins were now bringing in a huge copper tray holding the roasted sheep, stretched whole on a bed of yellow rice. Women scurried in with samovars and tea glasses. As she placed a platter of *mantu* dumplings among piles of naan bread, the girl slid a glance sideways to see which guest had been seated at the head of the feasting cloth.

It was well she'd set the platter down, because horror convulsed her grip. The guest of honor was not one of those middle-aged men, but the patriarch himself.

A once-powerful frame was now soft like uncooked dough, the white-streaked beard spilling over a well-rounded belly. But there was cruelty in his compressed lips, the deeply grooved frown lines. During those scant hours she'd spent among his household women, she'd seen their nervous

tension anytime the khan approached, as though bracing for a blow. She had seen the meager leftovers from the men's feasting even on such a day of celebration, the tattered clothing and rheumy-eyed malnutrition among the children.

At the clap of her wali's hands, she reluctantly straightened to move closer. As a twitch at her scarf left her face bare, she stood, eyes lowered, under the khan's leisured scrutiny. The whites of his eyes were bloodshot as well as yellowed with age. An opium smoker. Something hot and avid in that stare, the touch of his tongue—red, moist—to full lips, deepened the girl's nausea. Then the khan gave an approving grunt, and her uncle's sharp handclap released the girl to retreat into the courtyard.

The visiting burqas, now unveiled, were drinking tea with her guardian's young bride. The girl took one involuntary step in their direction, then froze as heads turned toward her. The animosity in their unified glare chilled her to the bone. No, there would be no welcome from the womenfolk of her new family.

She headed instead to where her guardian's own senior wife was supervising the final relay of serving dishes, emotion bursting out hot and choking. "Tell me if it is not true! Did my uncle trade me for his new wife? Is that why she is here, and I—I am to go to that place?"

As her voice cracked, the older woman raised disbelieving eyebrows. "But of course. How else do you think he could afford the bride-price of such a beautiful young virgin? And why do you complain? To be a khan's wife, senior to other women, is more than you could hope. You should be grateful. It was I who insisted your wedding day be delayed until you had become a woman."

Her tone became less brusque as the girl swayed, blood draining from her face. "Now go, wash the fear from your face and eat something lest you faint. When the men have done feasting, they will call for you, and this will be finished."

Call for her as men called for their food! No wedding ceremony such as her guardian's new wife had enjoyed. No bridal canopy or vows taken upon a wrapped Quran. No veil thrown over her and her bridegroom, a mirror thrust beneath so the new couple might "see" each other for the first time in its bright surface.

But then she was no daughter of the household. Just an orphan woman-child tossed as a bonus into her guardian's own dowry bid, now to be handed over like a bundle of market goods.

The cooked food had all been carried inside now, but a stack of naan too charred and hard to serve at the feast was piled beside the bread oven. The girl grabbed a slab, then slipped up the dirt steps to the rooftop where she'd watered the potted tomatoes.

Sunset's flaming colors had faded to night, the stars bright above the far ridge. In the courtyard below, a soft glow of oil lanterns added their yellow light to the cookfires. A staccato of tabla drums and twang of *rubab* strings signaled the evening's entertainment. The teenage sentry had gone to join the feast. In his place crouched a younger sibling, close in age and size to the girl herself so that the AK-47's metallic length balanced awkwardly across his lap.

Retreating into a corner where roof overhang met the perimeter wall, the girl nibbled at the bread. But despite her stomach's hungry twisting, she couldn't eat. Was all of life no more than smashed dreams?

The girl's slight frame shivered, and not because of the icy breeze, as her eye fell on the nearest doorway. The master of the compound's apartment from which he could enjoy the view as well as his new bride. At least those captive slave girls in her mother's tales had in compensation the attentions of handsome, young princes. And always ultimately, in her mother's telling at any rate, their love. While tonight she would be sharing such quarters with—

Her mind reeled, refusing the image. *I can't! I can't!*

But she had no choice. No woman ever did. It was the penalty of being female. The recognition that even before Allah himself, creator of heaven and earth, she held little value in comparison to her male counterparts.

Or was she so completely without choice? The lovely heroines of her mother's tales had with resolute courage shaped adverse circumstances to their own advantage. Just such courage as had propelled a woman with girl child in tow through winter's icy breath with bombs crashing all around and enemies at their heels until they had reached the safety of this compound.

Did her mother's daughter possess less valor and determination?

Heading across the roof, the girl scrambled up a flight of steps.

Her cousin had made himself comfortable in his sentry assignment. A discarded soft drink bottle was refilled with water at his side. One *patu* covered his shoulders; another wrapped his waist against the cold. He was alleviating boredom by whittling a new slingshot base from a forked branch. In those early days before she'd vanished behind a woman's veil, the two had played together, and if not friendly, his glance was tolerant as the girl emerged onto the parapet.

"If you wish, I will watch for you so you may reach the feasting before it is all gone."

Even up here, one could smell the rich fragrance of roasted mutton, fried dumplings, fresh-baked naan. The boy rose with an alacrity that said just such a worry had been on his own mind. Shedding the blanket draped around his waist, he dropped the machine gun and whittling kit onto its folds, then bounded down the dirt stairs.

The girl briefly settled the weapon across her own thighs. It was dark enough now that a casual glance would not note the exchange. She waited only until she saw the boy duck into the reception chamber. She knew her cousin too well to worry he'd hurry back. Unless the older sibling who'd ordered him to sentry duty noted his dereliction.

Suddenly panicked, the girl pushed to her feet. The rooftop where she stood placed her at chest level below the top of the crenellated perimeter wall. She wrapped the abandoned *patu* around her own shoulders and picked up the water bottle, then shook the whittling knife free of branch and shavings, tucking both along with the naan bread into a blanket fold. The gun she left abandoned on the parapet. Mud brick crumbled under her hands as she braced to pull herself up onto the wall. She hesitated. Was it courage or insanity to commit herself to that barren landscape? to a future no more promising and far less certain than the one awaiting below?

Bloodshot, avid eyes rose sharply to her mind. A cruel mouth with moist tongue flickering out in anticipation. Squat, round-bellied frame. The images were enough to propel the girl onto the top of the wall.

The drop to the other side was farther than anticipated, knocking the air from her with the landing. Using hands and feet like a mountain goat,

she scrambled up the mountain flank behind the compound until she could no longer glimpse the light of cookfires and lanterns. Feeling her way along the top of the ridge, she blinked back tears as bare feet caught repeatedly on protruding stones. But she did not slow. She was under no delusion her wali and bridegroom would do nothing to retrieve their property, and once the sun was up, her stumbling trail would be easy to follow.

Only when a rising moon returned some light to her path did she stop briefly. Sheltering behind a stone outcropping, she fumbled for the whittling knife. It sliced neatly through the thick, curly length of her hair. She dug a shallow hole, burying the telltale strands under a mound of earth and pebbles.

The girl was now exhausted and limping badly. But instead of resting, she drank half her water, ate half the naan, then pushed herself again to her feet. If she followed the gorge downstream, she would be retracing the route by which she and her mother had arrived at those gates far behind her now. Which should bring her sooner or later to a real road and town.

Where she would go then, she had no idea. Nor how she would survive. All that counted was what she was leaving behind.

The thought should have been cause for terror. Instead, the smallest flame of anticipation gave the girl fresh strength.

Like my mother's tales, I go in search of a new world and a new life.

But not love.

Love is an illusion.

Kabul, Afghanistan

“Why did you permit him to walk out alive?” Fury vibrated the cell phone’s speaker unit.

“I told you of the recording.” Afghan Deputy Minister of Interior Ismail swept the smashed DVD player into a waste receptacle beside the police chief’s desk he’d commandeered. “Perhaps such ammunition would not damage you. But it would destroy me!”

“And you are a tool I cannot afford to lose at this time. So perhaps you made the wise decision.”

Ismail didn’t find the other man’s chuckle so amusing. “It has not worked out so ill in any case. We have still advanced our objectives. And he is aware the price of his life is silence. He will not speak further of what he knows.”

“Which is little enough. Can he have guessed that wreaking vengeance on Khalid Sayef was not, after all, the end purpose of his mission? Could this be why he turned from his path?”

“There is no way he could know. No, it was the girl. To lie was a mistake.” Such admission was another mistake. Ismail hurried to fill cold silence. “In any case, he has made it clear his heart is no longer committed to jihad.”

“With the right leverage, he may yet change his mind. If only this had arrived in time, we would not have failed today.”

The same image filled both speakers' cell phone screens.

"Who could have known it was under our noses all this time?" Ismail said.

"And his. You should have investigated earlier this American tenant and her doings."

"Only chance brought the trail to my door."

"Or Allah's gift."

The photo was not one a decent woman would exhibit outside her own family. But even in Afghanistan, mug shots required that more than a burqa be visible. Escaping, brown curls under a headscarf framed pale, oval features, an expression of combined despair and defiance incongruous in so youthful a face. But it was the eyes glaring at an unseen camera through a fringe of long and curling lashes that drew a murmur of satisfaction from both speakers. Scornful, a sheen of tears discernible even in JPEG, they glimmered the deep lapis lazuli of a Band-e Amir mountain lake.



Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

When Jamil had saved that burned child's life, he hadn't expected to find himself running for his own.

Jamil glanced back over his shoulder. He was pulling away from the mob. No, the mob had chosen to drop back. Though another hail of rocks hissed through the air, the throwing was halfhearted. But then the men weren't trying to kill him. Only to drive Jamil—and his words—from their village.

All had begun so well too. The village was like any other in southern Afghanistan, dirt cubes behind dirt walls on a parched plain. A riverbed that ran full during wet season was now only dry boulders, but a communal well permitted survival year-round. Jamil had been refilling his water bottle when a villager invited him to share the evening meal. The hospitality of the Pashtun tribes was as legendary as their ferocity.

And their poverty. Mud walls of his host's reception chamber bore no whitewash. Threadbare carpet and tushaks covered a dirt floor. A platter set before Jamil and male household members held only rice with a scant topping of lentils. Thin faces and eager eyes of children peeking around a doorway to watch the men eat restrained Jamil's own hunger. An injustice, Ameera would protest.

A reminder that Ameera was gone now from Jamil's world. The woman who'd first introduced him to Isa. He'd heard her voice only once since being expelled from Kabul. When he again reached a place where his cell phone functioned, her own phone was out of service. He'd called Rasheed instead, only to be told that Ameera had returned to her own country and he was never to call again.

A burqa was pouring tea when Jamil heard the scream. Its anguished pain was too great to consider propriety. His host's own distress was such he hadn't objected to Jamil following into the family quarters. The screams came from a boy no more than two years old. Water boiling for tea had been removed from a cookfire onto a nearby stone block. The toddler had pulled the entire pot over himself. Panicked women were yanking off wet clothing, blistered skin sloughing away with it.

Jamil reacted with pausing for thought. Grabbing a pottery jar of water, he elbowed through the shrieking circle to pour its contents over the child. A chill winter breeze made the wetting as effective as an ice pack.

"For such burns, you must cool the victim immediately so the fire does not burn deeper. And you must not disturb the skin." Jamil indicated raw, red flesh where scalded skin had been peeled away. "It will protect the boy while new skin grows."

The boy was moved to a tushak in the reception chamber, and Jamil urged to stay on as guest. Jamil showed the family how to rinse burns with mildly salted water against infection, how to spread petroleum jelly so healing fingers and joints didn't become fused together.

In return, his grateful host not only allowed Jamil to read Isa's words, but summoned the rest of the village to his compound. As news spread of the visiting healer, they arrived with their own aches and pains. An abscessed boil. A poorly set broken arm. An infant with diarrhea. An infected eye. Nothing Jamil couldn't handle. One advantage of these

people's harsh lives was that if they survived to adulthood, they were as tough and enduring as cured goatskin.

And they stayed to listen when Jamil spread his patu to read from his Pashto New Testament. After all, did not everyone know that Islam's most prominent prophet beyond Muhammad himself had been a great healer? If not usual, there could be no harm in hearing words purported to come from Isa Masih. Especially when spoken by one gifted with healing hands.

Yes, whether or not Jamil had actually saved the boy's life, he'd certainly saved him from serious infection and scarring. Though not from pain. Which was why Jamil now fled for his own life into the darkening twilight.

By the time Jamil had settled his primary patient that first evening, his host had ended the toddler's moans with a pinch of opium paste. Jamil hadn't been happy, but his own supply of painkillers was long gone. Opium was the only medicine available to poorer Afghans. So Jamil held his peace and kept a sharp eye on his young patient. Though useful, opium paste was harder to regulate than its processed cousin, morphine. An overdose slowed breathing. Every winter across Afghanistan, hundreds died of respiratory failure after taking opium to calm flu or pneumonia symptoms. Within days, Jamil had coaxed his host into curtailing the opium to a single nightly dose. By now he was no longer a stranger but a favored community member. So much so that his host had invited Jamil to tour the commercial venture that fed the village during harsh winters.

The carpet-weaving workshop was a dark, dank place, its air thick with dust and the acridity of fresh dye so that Jamil had to smother a cough as he followed his host among the looms. Once created by Afghan peasant women to adorn their own homes, the beautiful patterns were now far too valuable to be wasted on the poorest caste who toiled over them. As long as light slanted through the small windows, these weavers would not stir from their crouched positions. But neither women nor children working as steadily as the adults displayed any objection to the tiresome squatting and repeated motion.

Then Jamil took in pinpoint pupils. Quickly, he searched faces around him. Yes, that slow, easy breathing. The slumped relaxation even while fingers never stopped knotting those endless threads. All these workers

were under influence of opium, even the children. Along the walls lay babies wrapped in patus. Not just small ones, but well up into walking age. Every one so limply asleep, Jamil had to lean close to assure himself they breathed. Here was a face of Afghanistan Jamil had never known in his own earlier, privileged life. Now in each dreaming, vacant face, Jamil saw his own mother and sister. If they still lived, could it be they might find themselves in just such horrific circumstances?

To Jamil's concern, his host shrugged. "It is difficult labor. They cannot work well and long without the opium. The women cannot work either if their babies demand attention."

"But these women and children are now addicts. These infants as well. Perhaps they will not die from it, but they will not grow as strong nor as intelligent. And they will always need the opium even when they are not weaving."

"They do not need intelligence to weave. Nor to bear children. And they will always be weaving. Tell me, do your words from Isa speak of carpets?"

"Not specifically," Jamil admitted. "But Isa was a healer. He taught kindness to women and children as well as men. If the work is too tiring without opium, there are ways to make it less so. Better air and light so their eyes and breathing are not troubled. To take turns with the small ones so they are cared for and the women too have a rest."

"Those things do not produce as many carpets," Jamil's host answered flatly. "We will not hear more."

And that was that. There'd been a hasty conference of village leaders. His host had at least sent for Jamil's pack while the men gathered around the well with stones in hand. Now, as the mob headed back to the village, Jamil slackened his steps further. He hadn't felt so disheartened since beginning his new quest. Arriving at this village, finding welcome at the well, these past days of healing and reading, Jamil had felt he was truly following Isa Masih's footsteps.

Now here too it seemed Jamil's path emulated the prophet. Hadn't Isa's own neighbors driven him out of town? Hadn't he instructed his own disciples about those who rejected his words? They were not to resist or

plead, but to shake the dust from their feet as witness against that town's unbelief.

But Jamil did not want to shake this village's dust from his feet. Despite those hurled stones, he couldn't forget their earlier kindness and hospitality. If they could only come to see Isa Masih as Jamil had. To understand how following his ways could transform their lives and community.

Jamil found himself wanting this as fervently as he'd once wanted revenge and retribution. Had Isa's heart wept over those who'd refused him as Jamil's heart wept now?

The noise of an engine approaching rapidly from behind whirled Jamil around. A small motorcycle was racing up the mountain trail. Jamil ducked behind a boulder, but he was too late. As the motorcycle drew abreast, it stopped. Jamil heard footsteps as the rider dismounted. "*Salaam aleykum*. I come in peace."

The boulder offered no further retreat, so Jamil stepped warily into the open. "*Wa aleykum u salaam*. And upon you also be peace."

The rider dwarfed his motorcycle, strongly built under his patu, standing head and shoulders above Jamil's slim medium build. Like most in these parts, his speech and coloring were Pashtun. He was also no older than Jamil's own twenty-seven years. "You are the healer named Jamil who has been staying in the village back there? They told me he had come this way."

Jamil's wariness hadn't dissipated, but the stranger displayed no evidence of hostility, so Jamil acknowledged, "I am a healer, and I have been staying in the village."

"And is it true that, like the prophet Isa, you will heal any in need, rich or poor, male or female?"

Was this a trap? an ambush of some kind? Jamil's blood was throbbing in his ears, his heart suddenly racing as he admitted cautiously, "If such need is within my ability, yes."

Stepping forward, the man embraced Jamil with a hearty kiss on both cheeks. "I am Omed. And you are a miracle. When a guest at the *chai-khana* told of such a healer in a village over the ridge, I knew the Almighty had heard my prayers."

His new acquaintance seemed to take for granted Jamil would follow

as he headed back to the motorcycle. Gingerly, Jamil squeezed on behind Omed. Twilight had now faded to full night, and the motorcycle had no headlight. But Omed gunned the engine unhesitatingly up ridges and down into ravines until Jamil could not have turned back had he wished, because he'd never have found his way. Then their zigzag trail dropped onto the smoothness of a road, and Jamil spotted a twinkle of lights ahead.

As the motorcycle sped between cubic shapes, Jamil could see this town was much larger than the village where he'd last lodged. Shopfronts and the minaret of a small mosque fringed a dirt commons along with the town chaikhana, a combination tea shop and inn for passing travelers. Lighting came from kerosene lanterns, not electricity. Omed was speaking now over his shoulder, but Jamil could make out only an occasional word above the engine. The motorcycle pulled up in front of a long, single-storied concrete building.

"If you will wait here, I will return immediately." As Omed strode toward the chaikhana next door, Jamil walked along the length of the concrete building. A red crescent above one door, the Muslim adaptation of a Red Cross symbol, identified a health clinic. So the town had its own healer. Then why was Jamil here?

Another symbol marked a schoolroom. But Jamil's attention was drawn immediately through a door that stood open. Inside was a familiar village scene. A carpet-weaving cooperative such as Jamil had encountered in the last village. But here a single large room was airy and dry. Kerosene lamps reflected brightly from concrete walls painted a cheerful sunshine yellow. Windows paneled with translucent plastic would provide ample light during day hours. More strikingly, the looms were not backbreaking floor models but vertical wall units, adjustable so that the section being woven was within easy reach of weavers. Benches permitted sitting instead of crouching on the floor.

Just inside the door was a stall where shoppers sorted through finished rugs. The nearest was not a local Pashtun with his light brown hair and round, sunburned features. Rather than *shalwar kameez*, the tunic and pantaloons of local dress, he wore jeans and a T-shirt, an olive green Army parka instead of a patu. He was also bareheaded and clean-shaven, a fashion becoming popular among Afghanistan's younger urban residents.

In this rural community, he stood out like a jungle parrot among Kabuli homing pigeons.

“Jamil, forgive me for tarrying so long.” Omed had returned.

Jamil swung around, exclaiming, “But this is truly wonderful! You would not need opium to work such looms as these. Where did all this come from?”

“Foreign soldiers built the community center. And an aid organization supplies such looms. I—knew some of their people.” There was hesitation in Omed’s answer. “It was I who convinced the elders to make this change. Though the looms cost the village nothing, they did not at first wish to agree because there are conditions. The women do not weave on Fridays. No opium is permitted. Children may work if their families need them, but only after they attend classes, both boys and girls. Women with small children do not work unless there is someone to watch their child.

“Still with all that, these new looms permit weaving of more carpets than before. The elders have come to see how much better it is for children to be in school and their wives free of the opium. So you see what a terrible thing it is that the accident should happen at this time.”

Accident? Just how much had Jamil missed earlier? But the jerk of Omed’s head indicated a group of men wandering leisurely over from the chaikhana.

“The mullah and some elders are saying it is a sign we should not have changed to the new looms, that they are too dangerous. The healer has refused to touch her because she is a woman. I begged Haroon to take her to the city, where there are hospitals for women. But he says there is no money. I prayed the healer would change his mind and show mercy. When word came instead to me of you, I knew it was the answer to my prayers.”

If Jamil was straining to fill in gaps, the gist became clear as the approaching men swirled around him. A man in lab coat over shalwar kameez pushed open the door under the red crescent. The health clinic was a single room lit by a kerosene lantern hanging from a ceiling hook. Metal shelving and a glass-fronted cabinet held few supplies. On a wooden table a burqa and blanket draped a female shape curled up in fetal position. The woman looked curiously deformed, her shoulder thrusting oddly under the burqa as though a hunchback.

A second burqa was watching over the patient. She retreated into a corner as the men crowded into the clinic. Omed murmured an aside to Jamil. "My wife. The injured woman is her sister."

Then he addressed his wife gently. "Did I not promise you, Najia, that I would find another healer? This is Jamil, the one of whom we were told. He has agreed to make an examination."

Jamil had now caught enough babbled conversation to piece together what had happened. The accident to which Omed had referred was the collapse of a new vertical loom early that morning, wrenching this woman's shoulder from its socket. At question was whether the shoulder was simply dislocated or more seriously broken. For that Jamil would need to examine the injury.

As Jamil reached to fold back pale blue polyester, his hand was struck away. "You would dishonor our women? Omed, what kind of healer have you brought us?"

Jamil's assailant was the man in a lab coat. Jamil paused to look at him. "You are the health worker in charge of this clinic? Then you can tell me. What is the extent of the woman's injury? Are there bones broken? What have you done to treat her?"

The health worker nodded to a small, thin man. "Haroon, the woman's husband, examined her. He said no bones are broken. Only the shoulder has popped from its socket."

Jamil turned to Haroon. "How did you determine whether bones were broken?"

Haroon shrugged. "I raise sheep and goats. I know how to tell when a bone is broken. Besides, I have seen such an injury before. Nabi's shoulder was so hurt when a stone falling down the mountain struck him last winter." The patient's husband nodded toward a bystander. "I helped the healer put it back into its place."

Jamil turned back to the health worker. "If you know how to treat such injuries, why is this woman lying here unattended? To heal well, such an injury must be restored to place as soon as possible."

"But I cannot touch her." The health worker visibly recoiled. "She is a woman. I explained to her husband how it must be done. When Haroon was not successful, I had him give her opium so that she should not

injure it further until we see whether it will heal or not. Sometimes if left alone, such injuries will restore themselves to their rightful place. Or so our instructors taught us.” The health worker drew himself up proudly. “I studied for three full months to become *dokter* here.”

“A dislocation this bad will not restore itself.” No wonder Omed had been so frantic for Jamil to come. If Jamil was no true doctor either, he wasn’t just a villager who’d taken a few first aid courses in order to man the local medical outpost.

Omed looked anxiously at Jamil. “You can repair her shoulder?”

Jamil didn’t answer immediately. He knew the mechanics of fixing a dislocated shoulder, not only from those long-ago studies, but because he’d helped the American medic tend just such an injury after the New Hope bombing in Kabul. But that patient had been a child, the injury fresh. After a full day, this woman’s torn ligaments and tendons would be hardened into place, the dislocated shoulder well set into its new position.

“I cannot determine for sure without X-rays. It would be best to take her into a hospital for a proper examination.”

The room erupted into speech, some in agreement with Jamil, others in angry denial. Omed’s disappointment showed clearly on his face. It was the husband who spoke up. “That is not possible. I do not have money for such a trip nor a hospital. Naveed—” Haroon gestured toward the health worker—“says in time the shoulder will heal enough to work again. If not—” he glanced slyly at Omed—“she can return to her own family. A new bride-price will be cheaper than hospitals.”

As chuckles rippled across the clinic, a man standing behind Haroon added, “Besides, who are we to interfere? Does not the Quran state that Allah fastens every person’s fate upon their neck at birth?”

The man speaking was not the oldest here, his full, long beard still untarnished black. But he carried himself with authority, and he wore the black turban that the Taliban had made infamous as a sign of Islamic piety.

The village mullah.

Fury swept Jamil. Would the mullah speak out so against interference if one of these men suffered a dislocated shoulder? Were mullah, health

worker, even husband, really so willing to condemn a woman to a lifetime deformed and crippled rather than reach for a remedy so easily at hand?

Lowering his bundle onto the table, Jamil undid its knots. There'd been nothing he could do for those women and children working in drugged stupor so their male family members could squeeze out a few more weavings. Here was not the case. Jamil didn't look at Omed as he drew out his Pashto New Testament. If he was about to offend the man who'd brought him here, he'd make his apologies later.

"Does not Allah also send healers to the children of men? And was not Isa Masih the greatest healer of all? Muhammad himself taught that Isa's words and actions are to be commended and imitated." Jamil flipped through the holy book. "I have here the very words of Isa Masih. He was teaching on the holy day when a woman crippled for eighteen years came before him. Having compassion, Isa placed his own hands on the woman, and she was healed. But the mullahs of that village grew angry and demanded to know why he had healed a woman and on a holy day above all.

"I will read what Isa Masih answered. 'You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the holy day untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the holy day from what bound her?'"

The mullah had crowded close to scrutinize the graceful loops and swirls of Pashto script, his black beard quivering with fury. But among other listeners, Jamil's reading drew a murmur of surprise and agreement. Raising his eyes from the page, Jamil saw that his audience had grown, villagers squeezing into the clinic to watch, those who couldn't, jostling each other in the doorway. An olive green arm raised above the sea of heads caught Jamil's eye. It belonged to the outsider from the carpet stall, and Jamil could see in that upraised hand a camera or cell phone angling toward the table.

Jamil's aversion was instinctive, and he turned his back even as he pressed his advantage. "So as you have heard, to touch this woman in order to save her from being crippled is to follow Isa's righteous example. Omed, you are a family member. You and her husband will help me."

Omed had said Jamil was an answer to his prayers. If so, then Jamil had not been brought here to fail. His fingertips probed through the burqa's polyester material. Husband and healer were right. The shoulder was not broken, just badly twisted out of location. But the next procedure would still be painful, and Jamil could be thankful the woman had been dosed with enough opium to render her unconscious.

"Ease her on her back and hold firmly. Don't let her move."

The woman's husband helped without protest. It seemed Haroon had no objection to getting a whole wife back so long as he didn't have to pay for it! Wrapping his hand in toweling, Jamil thrust it through the burqa material into the woman's armpit. Then he gripped the affected arm by the wrist, pulling hard even as he pushed against the armpit. The pale blue polyester was slippery, making it difficult to maintain a steady grasp. Sweat had broken out on Jamil's forehead when a moan signaled returning consciousness. *I cannot fail! I must not fail!*

"Almighty Creator of the universe, have compassion on this woman in the name of Isa Masih. Give me strength to heal as Isa Masih healed those in pain!"

Jamil didn't realize he was praying aloud until he felt a sudden pop. A deep sigh indicated the woman's immediate relief. Folding her arm across the burqa, Jamil probed the shoulder cautiously. "It is done."

Show over, Jamil's audience had drifted away by the time he'd rummaged up a sling among the clinic supplies. Only the health worker Naveed and the black-turbaned mullah remained as Haroon and Omed helped the patient down from the table. Omed's wife followed them out the door. Jamil was tying up his own bundle when he heard the motorcycle start.

Naveed and the mullah stepped forward the moment they were alone with Jamil, fury they'd masked from the approving crowd darkening both faces.

"The words you read did not come from the Quran nor any of the prophet's hadiths," the mullah said coldly. "How dare you bring the *kristjen* holy book here. All know the infidels have twisted and changed the truth about Isa. You will take such false teachings from this town before I summon the police."

“Yes, we do not need another healer here,” Naveed added even more coldly. “You have made me look a fool. I do not wish to see you near my clinic again.”

Jamil made no attempt to argue. His pack shouldered, he exited the clinic into the night. Where to go now? He'd expected at least a night's lodging from the patient's grateful family. He'd no money for the *chai-khana*, and though he might in other circumstances have negotiated food and lodging in return for treating inevitable injuries and ailments, the mullah's threat discouraged that option. Well, it would not be his first night sleeping in the open with an empty belly.

“My friend, where are you going?” The hand that clapped down on Jamil's shoulder belonged to Omed. He waved a hand toward the noise of the motorcycle receding in the darkness. “I have sent my brother-in-law to take the women home. We will have to walk.”

Jamil shook his head. “No, your mullah has ordered me to leave immediately. I do not wish to cause trouble for your family.”

“Do you think I care for that? The words you spoke back there . . . I had dared to hope when the visitor brought word. But now I know it is true. You are no spy for the religious police.”

Glancing over his shoulder to where the yellow kerosene glow outlined the open clinic door, Omed lowered his voice so it could not be heard even an arm's length away. “You are my brother, for I too am a follower of Isa Masih.”

