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Saffron Dreams

A Novel

SHAILA ABDULLAH

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *BEYOND THE CAYENNE WALL*

PRAISE FOR SAFFRON DREAMS

“Set in post-9/11 America, *Saffron Dreams* tells the moving story of Arissa Illahi, a Muslim Pakistani-American, as she struggles to fulfill her different roles as daughter, wife and mother, confronting conflicting cultural expectations and Islamophobia. Eloquently written, a must-read for anyone interested in exploring the lived experiences of Muslim women in the United States.”

—ALI ASANI, PHD, PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF INDO-MUSLIM LANGUAGES AND CULTURES, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

“There are books that are beautiful simply because they are so positive and pleasant. And there are those that manage to be beautiful in spite of the pain and the suffering and the heartbreak contained within. Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams* is both. Her writing is mesmerizing. On one hand it feels like a classically cut diamond – precise, sparkling, blindingly beautiful, but also incredibly sharp. On the other hand her writing reminds me of a dish I’ve often had traveling in India—a *thali*....It was comforting, it was funny, it was spicy; and then heartbreaking, full of despair, filled with hope, amazingly fresh and vibrant and satisfying. Following Arissa’s story makes the reader realize how little most of us know and understand the world of Muslims, and how incredibly wrong so many of our perceptions are.”

—OLIVERA BAUMGARTNER-JACKSON, READER VIEWS

“A much-needed perspective in the void of the American Muslim experience, *Saffron Dreams* is an unflinching look at the societal pressures of widowhood, the role that art can play in the healing process, and the impact of media bias and stereotyping on the Muslim American community in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks.”

—SANDHYA NANKANI, LITERARY SAFARI

“Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams* is a fascinating look at how events can quickly change a life forever. One focus I found interesting was looking at the tragedy of 9/11 through the eyes of an American immigrant....The thread of Muslim beliefs in a modern world, and especially how women balance ancient and modern

traditions, is a fresh, different viewpoint. Finally, the self-affirmation that we can handle whatever life throws at us is valuable.”

—SANDIE KIRKLAND, REBECCASREADS

“A poignant story that affirms the redemptive power of storytelling. Abdullah gracefully maneuvers between sentiment and domesticity rewarding us with her insight.”

—SEFI ATTA, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *EVERYTHING GOOD WILL COME*

“Word artist Abdullah, through rich description and evocative detail, shares her characters’ love story, how it develops and endures through conflict, chaos, and terrorism. The extraordinary power of this book is not to be missed by the serious or casual reader, for it proves that we are all one in our most elemental human needs and emotions.”

—SHIRLEY M. HORD, PHD, SCHOLAR LAUREATE, NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

“*Saffron Dreams* is an intimate portrait of a young Pakistani widow in New York, coping with the transformation of her life and identity wrought by 9/11. Grief, memory, dreams, and relationships dance sensuously in her awareness alongside the rich flavors, aromas, and colors of her domestic reality, as Abdullah skillfully draws us in for a closer view.”

—STEPHANIE GUNNING, COAUTHOR OF *WILL POWER AND CREATING YOUR BIRTH PLAN*

“In this engrossing and beautifully written novel, the author shows how losses can actually strengthen and provide a sense of meaning and purpose. The birth of a child with severe disabilities, in contrast to the devastating loss of a spouse enable us to see the beauty in creation that is sometimes missed in the glow of perfection. This is not a story of happy but rather of hopeful endings. Our lives are uncertain, but with hope and courage bitterness can be replaced by an appreciation for what is present.”

—TIMOTHY S. HARTSHORNE, PHD, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY, CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY, PARENT OF A CHILD WITH CHARGE SYNDROME

“Exquisite. That best describes the book, *Saffron Dreams*. The story is from a woman’s perspective with true pain, ambition, desperation, duty, and love all mixed together....The care of the characters, complete with flaws exposed, makes this a reflective and insightful read for everyone.”

—TERI DAVIS, BESTSELLERSWORLD.COM

“*Saffron Dreams* captures the tone and emotions of the early twenty-first century, while leaving the reader much to think about in terms of what it means to be an American, what the future of America may be, and the hope that exists in future generations.

—TYLER TICHELAAR, PHD, AUTHOR OF *THE MARQUETTE TRILOGY*

“*Saffron Dreams* is a literary masterpiece that lifts the spirit and twists the heart.”

—BOB RICH, PHD, EDITOR FOR LOVING HEALING PRESS

“*Saffron Dreams*—besides being a powerful and compelling story of love and loss—captures that fine dance between cultural diversity and common humanity, the complicated steps of which we are all trying to learn.”

—JO VIRGIL, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE WRITERS' LEAGUE OF TEXAS AND A COMMUNITY RELATIONS MANAGER FOR BARNES & NOBLE

“A tender, erotic, and poignant novel. It weaves the clashes of self, family, culture, and country into a tapestry in which soul-searing loss is a recurring, multicolored thread.”

—LOREN WOODSON, AUTHOR OF *THE PASSION OF MARYAM*

“*Saffron Dreams* is a chiaroscuro study in which Arissa, a Muslim woman living in the U.S., struggles to fulfill her dreams regardless of how the world violently reshapes them through the September 11th tragedy. Most importantly, this story is about the healing power of love that arrives in surprising shapes and tones.

—DIANE J. HERNANDEZ, 2007 PRESIDENT, WRITERS' LEAGUE OF TEXAS

“Timely, poignant and heartrending, *Saffron Dreams* captures the essence of a Pakistani woman's life after the throes of 9/11 when her husband dies in the tower destruction. Racial tension and disturbing displacement prevail as Shaila Abdullah weaves a plot that is so real the reader will feel every sentiment and relate to the mixed emotions.”

—IRENE WATSON, AUTHOR OF *THE SITTING SWING: FINDING WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE*

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By Shaila Abdullah

MODERN HISTORY PRESS
BOOK #5 IN THE REFLECTIONS OF AMERICA SERIES

SAFFRON DREAMS

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They say that you no longer fly
Across the land in twilight's glow
That you no longer wander by
The lotus pools that dimly show
Below the whispering trees, and oh!
They say you never haunt the streams
And woodlands! But they do not know
The world is wrapped in saffron dreams.

David Russell

Ballade to Romance

ONE



November 2001

New York

I decided to carry out the first task on my list when fall was about to lose its hue.

All around me were walls of fog; it was just as well. This year the trees of the mid-Hudson Valley were reluctant to shed their leaves. A few fallen ones—the glowing golds, the bloodlike reds, the brazen browns, and the somber yellows—crackled under my feet, crisp and lifeless but not without a voice. There is an old saying that it will be a bad winter if the trees decide to hold on to their leaves.

I wanted to take this journey myself. Unseen. Unchallenged. The air outside was thick, buttressed by my decision, sparse in joy but swollen with complexities. It comforted me; tingled the soles of my feet. The feeling of heaviness that had been lingering for days was gone. I would have danced had I not been on a mission. I delighted in how clean my insides felt, like they had just been laundered and wrung dry, soapy smell suspended in the air. Invisible molecules tickled my nostrils and I sneezed at the thought.

I stopped by a toy store, its shutters down, occupants fast asleep. As I pressed my nose against the window, I marveled at the simple joys of

childhood. My breath came in short waves and misted the window, creating tiny smoky bubbles of all sizes and shapes. I imagined being a toy horse, galloping on bound legs, destination firmly defined, thrilled with providence in my naiveté.

The subway ride was a quiet time for reflection with very few early commuters. I got off as if floating on air, tightening my *hijab* or veil around the back of my head. It had to be hysteria, this feeling within me of floating on air. A sharp change in the jet stream will channel numerous storm systems into the Atlantic, the meteorologist had predicted. One was raging within me as I walked westward from Canal to West Street. I felt a restless quest to outrun my fate, grind it beneath my feet.

Pier 34 was abandoned when I reached its southern tip. I faced it with a welcoming smile.

It had the lure of a mother's breast for me, the air throbbing in suckling anticipation. I leaned my protruding belly against the barrier that divided me from the deep stillness below. Another step and my body could easily plummet into the murky depths. I was afraid to touch my abdomen; I wanted to leave its resident out of this. He should never feel responsible for what I was about to do. My mind was full of the possibilities of what life would have been if the towers hadn't crashed.

The wounded skyline in the distance had its edges softened by the early morning fog. Even the air approached the buildings carefully, with reverence. So much was lost. A cool breeze was blowing, providing a hint of the approaching winter. For a brief sickening moment, I debated on which should go—the veil or me.

I slid the hijab from around my neck. The wind felt chilly on my bare head. It was a new sensation. *You can do anything you set your mind to*, *Arissa Illahi*, a voice from the past whispered to me.

In a few hours, it would be another normal day. Was there such a thing anymore? I appreciated the predawn quietness and looked down at the river with meditated concentration. They said that a new layer of sediment composed of ash and dust had formed a permanent footprint on

the river bed after the towers had collapsed. Undisturbed, it had become a constant geological reminder of the tragedy, now etched in history.

The wind tore the veil from my hand, making my task easier. I grasped the cold railing with one hand and swatted at the fleeting piece of my life with the other as the wind picked up speed. It teasingly brought the veil closer to my face. I could have grabbed it. Instead, I let it sail down toward the depths, its grave.

I did not feel a sense of betrayal as I walked away from the pier, letting the wind dance with my hair for the first time. I pulled a few strands out of my eyes and looked back. The sun had just started to peek at the horizon, bleeding its crimson hue. It was a matter of perspective—to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart.

“*Khuda Hafiz*,” I breathed.

Who was I bidding farewell to? I wondered: the age-old tradition or the husband I had kept alive in my heart?

TWO



October 2006

Houston

A housekeeper's nightmare.

An artist's haven.

There was no other way to describe my turpentine-reeking workroom.

For the longest time, I thought my life was like the canvas of a barmy artist who knew when to begin a project but not when to stop.

I looked at the tubes of color around me. They spoke volumes about my house management skills. They were all over the floor, squished, twisted, folded back, some oozing paint, others with rainbow-colored thumb imprints. I plastered the colors all over the canvas with no subject matter in mind, and gradually frenzy overpowered me. The brush in my hand took on a life of its own, and I bent to its whim. The frantic slish-slosh on canvas was deafening in the quiet room; the errant brush had its own mood. I looked at the hopeful blues on the canvas that with repeated strokes had turned the brilliant orange to sad murky brown. In the end, the hodgepodge of colors that dripped off the canvas all bled into one: scorching black, the only color I wanted to forget.

In all fairness, colors define me. Red reminds me of my marriage, the color of the heady, fragrant *mehndi* or henna, intricately tattooed on my

palms in the ways of tradition; the crimson shimmering wedding dress called *sharara* I wore the day I married Faizan; yellow, the color of *ubtan*, a paste I applied religiously to my face twenty days before my wedding in the hopes of getting the coveted bridal glow; and orange, the color of saffron, dusty powder that with the right touch added flair to any dish. It was also the color that Faizan dreamed of having on the cover of his unfinished book, a project he thought would make him a famous writer one day.

But black reminds me of all that is sad and wrong in my life. Ironically, in this country, it validates my state of being a widow. It is also the color of my hijab—the dividing line between my life with Faizan and the one without him. How different lives are from continent to continent. White, the bridal color in the West, is the color a widow is expected to wear in the East, the color the body is shrouded in before being buried in the earth.

The brush fell from my guilty hands, landing on the floor with a tired thud. I stepped back as if struck and looked at the picture in mad fixation. Staring back at me from the canvas, behind the dull last strokes that failed to hide the subject, were entwined towers engulfed in reddish blue smoke. And in the midst of the smoldering slivers was the face of a forlorn and lost child.

My journey spans half a decade, from the biggest loss of my life to where I am now. It is a tale of grief and happiness, of control and losing control, of barriers and openings, of prejudices and acceptance, of holding on and letting go. It is about turning my heart inside out, mending it, and putting it right back in as it is about looking at life from the perspective of someone trapped in time. Finally, it's about filling shoes bigger than mine—and filling two with only one leg to stand on. This is the leg that over and over again will weaken with the weight it's expected to carry, falter, but eventually mend and march over the terrains of time.



I got home and put the groceries on the counter. I always have a list of tasks mapped out in perfect order for the evening. *Start a Soup*. I put a pot of water on the stove to start a vegetable soup for Raian. *Change*. I rescued a turnip that had rolled off the counter, and then slipped off my shoes, not bothering to untie them. The wide boots had grown used to being put on and taken off that way, their contours neatly shaped for a comfortable fit. I decided to change later. *Fix Tea*. I threw a teabag in a cup and put it in the microwave. Raian disappeared into the living room, and the different-colored lights emitting from the room confirmed that he had turned on the TV. He didn't turn up the volume; sound was useless to him. He coughed, and with an easy maternal instinct, I made a mental note to give him some medicine before bed.

There were three messages on the answering machine and I intuitively knew who they were from. I deleted all three in quick succession without hearing them—Ami, Zaki, Ami.

The kitchen felt a little cold as I walked back in to dice some shallots, turnips, and zucchini. I scooped them up and added them to the boiling pot. A crushed clove of garlic went in next, and I took slow sips of my tea as I studied the vegetables squirming inside the pot. *Start your dinner*. That one didn't matter much. Since Ma and Baba—my parents-in-law—had left, even Rice-A-Roni worked. I decided on some Chicken Helper. The freezer door pulled open with a sigh, and in the humming of the interior, I forgot why I had opened it in the first place. The rumbling in my stomach alerted me to the basic needs of survival as a small Ziploc bag at the far end of the shelf caught my eye. It contained shish kabobs that Ma had frozen before leaving. *Would they still be edible after six months?* I decided to take my chances. I tossed the kabobs in the microwave, watching the turntable swirl the plate. I missed my mother-in-law's elaborate home-cooked meals. In the five years that she and Baba had lived with us, there was a soothing discipline to dinner. Plenty of thought and planning went into what was presented on the table. A full meal consisted of a curry or stew, rice, and

piping hot flour *chappatis*. Sometimes Ma had the fresh yogurt drink, *lassi*, on the side, or round fritters dipped in a yogurt and chili dip that transported me back home. Onion and cucumber salad garnished with cilantro was a must. Ma's pickled mangoes were a feast for the senses, and although her stuffed flour chilies with cumin powder burned your mouth, they were a great combination with the lentil curry. And her saffron-flavored rice pudding could shame even the old cook back home.

Saffron. It reminded me of an unfinished project that was much closer to completion than it was a year ago. I left my culinary project bubbling and walked into the den to turn on the computer. I lost the minutes and then the hours as I swam in a sea of words, oblivious to the world around me. The squeal of the smoke detector jolted me into action. I raced past my son, who had neither the sensory cues of smell nor sound to be alarmed by the commotion. He had missed his dinnertime but had not felt the pangs of hunger.

In that moment, I felt terrified for him and for the rest of his life.

The water in the soup had disappeared and the pot was burning with the shriveled turnips and zucchini stuck to its bottom. The shish kabobs in the microwave were hard as rocks. I poured the contents of the pot into the sink and slid the kabobs in the trash can. When I put a fresh pot of water on the stove, I decided to set an egg timer. It was time to check on Raian.

He was sprawled across the floor, the eye patch covering his left eye making him look like a pirate, one of the many gifts of his syndrome. Every day for a few hours, we put a patch over his good eye to exercise his lazy eye. Oblivious to the TV running in the background, he was studying an arc of rainbow colors draped across his arm—a direct result of sunlight filtering through the window. He swatted at it with his other hand and then crawled around in a circle trying to escape from it. I watched his captivating dance in fascination; he immersed himself in the light one instant and tore away from it the next—the dance that life played with him on a daily basis that he had by now orchestrated to perfection.

The light was his to tango, not his to hold; illumination, he had learned, wasn't the victory.

I looked at him with love-stricken eyes. How flawed he was to the rest of the world, but how very perfect to me.

Saffron, crocus veil, the flower with the three red stigmas.

It was 1 a.m., and I had been unsuccessful in shutting my brain off to get some sleep. Some images refused to let me be. They wanted to be released and live on paper. I approached the canvas in that state of mind.

I folded back the sleeve of my olive shirt kameez and laid some strands of saffron on the back of my left hand. Like eager devotees, they molded to its contour. For three thousand years, the purple saffron or *zafaran* flower, had sprouted in the dry summer across the Himalayan valley, the monsoons nourishing the crop. The plant is said to be named after the mythological Crocus, who after being rebuffed by his beloved was transformed into this flower, weeping blood red tears for ages to come. It was said that Cleopatra used saffron in her baths so that lovemaking would be more pleasurable. I imagined the strands to be a lover's fingers, and my hand shook a little. I dipped a long brush in some water and sprinkled it on the unruly strands with my free hand. Slowly they started to bleed orange tears that dripped off both sides of my hand. They say if rain arrives after it has flowered, the saffron flower dies suddenly. I watched the colors on my hand and with renewed determination turned to the canvas and started painting. I mixed a few tubes—red, yellow, and a touch of black—and referenced the orange on the back of my hand a few times as I tried to match the color. I painted in layers following the traditional rule of oil painting. Starting lean, I applied fatter coats by adding more medium as I went. The paint is less likely to crack as it dries with that method. I couldn't let a dream crack, not an important one anyway. I worked diligently and furiously as the hours ticked away. Around four in the morning, I stepped back in satisfaction and studied the orange sky on the canvas—the color of saffron, just how Faizan had wanted it.

Saffron Dreams

I went to the bureau and kissed a folded veil that lay on top, a reminder of my past and a symbol of what I had given up. Faizan had harbored a reverence for the veil—to him it defined a woman. I always felt a twinge of guilt when I looked at that piece of cloth. Shaking that thought, I crashed on the bed, surprisingly exhausted from the night's work. Dreams are never easy to create; they take a lot out of you. Tomorrow I will paint in the two boys, the stigmas of saffron, I decided. That would be the cover of *Soul Searcher*.

I felt lightheaded in a fulfilled kind of way, tracing a shape on the other side of the bed. I still slept on one side of it, a curious habit that never left me, considering that I had been the only occupant for the past five years.

Sweet dreams, I whispered to the night air.

The curtains on the window rustled in response. I rolled over onto my side and hugged my pillow. The gentle hands of predawn passed over me, pressing my eyelids shut. I obeyed and let myself be led into the world of dreams.