

Andrea Busfield is a British journalist. While covering the fall of the Taliban for the *News of the World* she fell in love with Afghanistan and made it her home. This is her first novel.

BORN UNDER A MILLION SHADOWS

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For my mum, my dad and my sister

GLOSSARY

- af** – slang for afghani, the currency of Afghanistan
- bakhsheesh** – a gratuity, tip or bribe
- bolani** – flat-bread stuffed with spinach or potato
- bukhari** – a steel or aluminium stove
- buzkashi** – a team sport where the players on horseback attempt to place a goat carcass into a goal
- chaddar** – a headscarf worn by women
- ISAF** – the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force
- ISI** – Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence
- kafan** – sheets of clean, white cloth that wrap a body before burial
- kafir** – an unbeliever
- kuchi** – a nomad
- madrasah** – a school for teaching Islamic theology and religious law
- mantu** – steamed dumplings filled with minced meat and topped with white yoghurt
- pakoul** – a round-topped hat worn by Afghan men, typically made of wool
- patu** – a woollen shawl
- Ramazan** – the Muslim holy month of fasting more commonly known as Ramadan, but pronounced Ramazan in Afghanistan

Part One

1

My name is Fawad and my mother tells me I was born under the shadow of the Taliban.

Because she said no more, I imagined her stepping out of the sunshine and into the dark; crouching in a corner to protect the stomach that was hiding me, whilst a man with a stick watched over us, ready to beat me into the world.

But then I grew up and I realized I wasn't the only one born under this shadow. There was my cousin Jahid, for one, and the girl Jamilla – we all worked the foreigners on Chicken Street together – and there was also my best friend, Spandi. Before I knew him, Spandi's face was eaten by sand flies, giving him the one-year sore that left a mark as big as a fist on his cheek. He didn't care though, and neither did we, and while the rest of us were at school he sold spand to fat westerners which is why, even though his name was Abdullah, we called him Spandi.

Yes, all of us were born during the time of the

Taliban, but I only ever heard my mother talk of them as men making shadows so I guess if she'd ever learnt to write she might have been a poet. Instead, and as Allah willed it, she swept the floors of the rich for a handful of afs that she hid in her clothes and guarded through the night. 'There are thieves everywhere,' she would hiss, an angry whisper that tied the points of her eyebrows together.

And, of course, she was right. I was one of them.

At the time, none of us thought of it as stealing. As Jahid explained, because he knew about such things, 'It's the moral distribution of wealth.'

'Sharing money,' added Jamilla. 'We have nothing, they have everything, but they are too greedy to help poor people like us, as it is written in the Holy Quran, so we must help them be good. In a way, they are paying for our help. They just don't know that they're doing it.'

Of course, not all the foreigners paid for our 'help' with closed eyes. Some of them actually gave us money – sometimes happily, sometimes out of shame, sometimes just to make us go away, which doesn't really work because one group is quickly replaced by another when dollars are walking the street. But it was fun. Born under a shadow or not, me, Jahid, Jamilla and Spandi spent our days in the sun, distributing the wealth of those who'd come to help us.

'It's called reconstruction,' Jahid informed us one

day as we sat on the kerb waiting for a 4×4 to jump on. 'The foreigners are here because they bombed our country to kill the Taliban and now they have to build it again. The World Parliament made the order.'

'But why did they want to kill the Taliban?'

'Because they were friends with the Arabs and their king Osama bin Laden had a house in Kabul where he made hundreds of children with his forty wives. America hated bin Laden, and they knew he was fucking his wives so hard he would one day have an army of thousands, maybe millions, so they blew up a palace in their own country and blamed it on him. Then they came to Afghanistan to kill him, his wives, his children and all of his friends. It's called politics, Fawad.'

Jahid was probably the most educated boy I'd ever known. He always read the newspapers we found thrown away in the street and he was older than the rest of us, although how much older nobody knows. We don't celebrate birthdays in Afghanistan; we only remember victories and death. Jahid was also the best thief I'd ever known. Some days he would come away with handfuls of dollars, taken from the pocket of some foreigner as us smaller kids annoyed them to the point of tears. But if I was born under a shadow, Jahid was surely born under the full gaze of the devil himself because the truth was he was incredibly ugly. His teeth were stumpy smudges of brown and one of his

eyes danced to its own tune, rolling in its socket like a marble in a box. He also had a leg so lazy that he had to force it into line with the other.

‘He’s a dirty little thief,’ my mother would say. But she rarely had a kind word to say about anyone in her sister’s family. ‘You keep away from him . . . filling your head with such nonsense.’

How my mother actually thought I could keep away from Jahid was anyone’s guess. But this is a common problem with adults: they ask for the impossible and then make your life a misery when you can’t obey them. The fact is I lived under the same roof as Jahid, along with his fat cow of a mother, his donkey of a father and two more of their dirty-faced children, Wahid and Obaidullah.

‘All boys,’ my uncle would declare proudly.

‘And all ugly,’ my mother would mutter under her chaddar, giving me a wink as she did so because it was us against them and although we had nothing at least our eyes looked in the same direction.

Together, all seven of us shared four small rooms and a hole in the yard. Not easy, then, to keep away from cousin Jahid as my mother demanded. It was an order President Karzai would have had problems fulfilling. However, my mother was never one for explaining so she never told me how I should keep my distance. In fact, for a while my mother was never one for talking full stop.

On very rare occasions she would look up from her sewing to talk about the house we had once owned in Paghman. I was born there but we fled before the pictures had time to plant themselves in my head. So I found my memories with the words of my mother, watching her eyes grow wide with pride as she described painted rooms lined with thick cushions of the deepest red; curtains covering glass windows; a kitchen so clean you could eat your food from the floor; and a garden full of yellow roses.

‘We weren’t rich like those in Wazir Akbar Khan, Fawad, but we were happy,’ she would tell me. ‘Of course that was long before the Taliban came. Now look at us! We don’t even own a tree from which we can hang ourselves.’

I was no expert, but it was pretty clear my mother was depressed.

She never talked about the family we had lost, only the building that had once hidden us – and not very effectively as it turned out. However, sometimes at night I would hear her whisper my sister’s name. She would then reach for me, pulling me closer to her body. And that’s how I knew she loved me.

On those occasions, lying almost as one on the cushions we sat on during the day, I’d be burning to talk. I’d feel the words crowding in my head, waiting to spill from my mouth. I wanted to know everything; about my father, about my brothers, about Mina. I was

desperate to know them, to have them come alive in the words of my mother. But she only ever whispered my sister's name, and like a coward I kept quiet because I was afraid that if I spoke I would break the spell and she would roll away from me.

By daylight, my mother would be gone from my side, already awake and pulling on her burqa. As she left the house she would bark a list of orders that always started with 'go to school' and ended with 'keep away from Jahid'.

In the main these were orders I tried to follow out of respect for my mother – in Afghanistan our mothers are worth more than all the gold that hides in the basement of the President's palace – but it wasn't easy. And though I knew she wouldn't beat me if I disobeyed her, unlike Jahid's father who seemed to think he had a God-given right to hit me in the face on any day the sun came up, she would have that look in her eyes, a disappointed stare I suspected had been there from the day I crept out of the shadow.

I am only a boy, but I recognized our life was difficult. Of course, it had always been the same for me, I knew no different. But my mother, with her memories of deep-red cushions and yellow roses, was trapped by a past I had little knowledge of so I spent most of my days on the outside of her prison, looking in. It had been like this for as long as I could clearly remember, yet I like to think she was happy once; laughing with

my father by the clear waters of Qagha Lake, her green eyes – the eyes I have inherited – smiling with love, her small hands, soft and clean, playing with the hem of a golden veil.

My mother was once very beautiful – that’s what my aunt told me in a surprising burst of talking. But then the shadow fell, and although she never said so, I guessed my mother blamed me. I was a reminder of a past that had dragged her into the flowerless hell that was her sister’s house, and from what I could tell, my mother hated her sister even more than she hated the Taliban.

‘She’s just jealous!’ my mother once screamed, loud enough for my aunt to hear in the next room. ‘She’s always been jealous – jealous of my ways, of the fact that I married an educated man, of our once happy life . . . and I long got over apologizing for it. If Allah blessed her with the face of a burst watermelon and a body to match it is not my fault!’

‘They’re women, they’re born that way,’ Jahid told me one afternoon as we escaped once again from the screams and insults flying around the house to steal from the foreigners in the centre of town. ‘They are never happier than when they are fighting with each other. When you are older you will understand more. Women are complicated, that’s what my father says.’

And maybe Jahid was right. But the argument that had just taken place had more to do with money than

being women. My aunt wanted us to pay rent, but we could barely afford the clothes on our backs and the food in our bellies. The few afs mother earned from cleaning houses along with the dollars I picked up in the street were all we had.

‘Maybe if you gave a little more of your dollars to your mother she wouldn’t be so angry with my mother,’ I suggested, which was obviously the wrong thing to suggest because Jahid punched me hard in the head.

‘Look, you little bastard, my mother gave your mother a roof when you had no place to stay. Coming to our home begging like gypsy filth, forcing us to give up our room and put food in your idle fucking bellies. How do you think we felt? If we weren’t good Muslims your mother would be pimping your ass to every fucking homo who passed by. In fact, you want to help? Go pimp your own fucking ass! Pretty boy like you should make enough afs to keep the women happy.’

‘Yeah?’ I spat back. ‘And maybe they’d pay just as much money to keep the donkey’s ass that’s your face away from them!’

And with that I ran off, leaving my cousin shouting curses about camels and cocks in my direction while dragging his dead leg in fury behind him.

That day I ran from Jahid until I thought my legs would die. By the time I reached Cinema Park I could

barely breathe, and I realized I was crying – for my mother and for my cousin. I had been cruel. I knew that. I understood why he was saving his money, why he buried it under the wall when he thought no one was looking. He wanted a wife. ‘One day I will be married to the most beautiful woman in Afghanistan,’ he always bragged. ‘You wait. You’ll see.’ And that’s why he needed the money, because with a face like his he’d have to come up with a hell of a dowry to make that dream come true. It’s not even as if he could rely on the force of his personality to win over a wife. He had the foulest mouth I had ever heard, even more so than the National Police who cluttered the city’s roundabouts, barking curses and demanding bribes, even from crippled beggars. In fact, the only other thing that could have saved Jahid was school, where he’d shown an unlikely talent. He threw himself into his learning as only a boy with no friends can do. But then the torment and the beatings he took day after day finally drove him away and he became increasingly hard.

My country can be a tough place to live in if you’re poor, but it’s even tougher if you’re poor and ugly. And now Jahid was like stone; a stone that knows he will never find a woman who will willingly marry him, but whose father might agree for the right price.

‘Come on, Fawad, let’s go to Chicken Street.’

Through my tears I saw Jamilla standing before me,

the sun throwing an angel's light around her body. She was small, like me. And she was pretty.

Jamilla reached for my hand and I dragged myself up from the ground to stand by her side, wiping my face dry on the sleeves of my clothes.

'Jahid,' I said by way of explanation.

Jamilla nodded. She didn't talk much, but I guessed she would grow into that if Jahid was right about the ways of women.

Jamilla was my main rival on Chicken Street. She cleaned up with the foreign men who melted under the gaze of her big brown eyes while I cleaned up with the women who fell in love with my big green eyes. We were a good team whose pickings pretty much depended on who was passing by, so if we found ourselves working on the same day we would split our money.

Fridays were the best, though. It was a holiday, there was no school, no work, and the foreigners would come, stepping out of their Land Cruisers to trawl Kabul's tourist area for souvenirs of 'war-torn' Afghanistan: jewellery boxes made of lapis lazuli; silver imported from Pakistan; guns and knives apparently dating back to the Anglo-Afghan wars; pakouls; patus, blankets, carpets, wall hangings, bright-coloured scarves and blue burqas. Of course, if they walked twenty minutes into the heaving mess of Kabul's river bazaar they would find all these items for

half the price, but the foreigners were either too scared or too lazy to make the journey – and too rich to care about the extra dollars that would feed most of our families for a week. Still, as Jahid noted, their laziness was good for business, and Chicken Street was their Mecca.

Along with the aid workers, now and again we would see white-faced soldiers hunched over the counters of stores selling silver, looking at rings and bracelets for the wives they'd left behind in their own countries. They were mainly tall men with big guns, metal jackets and bowl-shaped helmets strapped to their heads. They came in groups of four or five and one would always stand guard in the street as the others did their shopping, watching out for suicide bombers. 'America good!' we would shout – a trick that always earned us a couple of dollars. Money in hand, we would then move away, further down the street, just in case there were actually suicide bombers around.

Most of the other foreigners, though, were less interested in America so we used different tactics to win their dollars, following them as they weaved their way from shop to shop yelling out all the English we could remember. 'Hello, mister! Hello, missus! How are you? I am your bodyguard! No, come this way, I find you good price.' And we would take their hands and drag them to a store where we could earn a few afs' commission. Most of us were on the payroll of

four or more shopkeepers, but only if we brought in customers. Therefore, if the foreigners didn't bend to our thinking, we would follow them into stores, tutting and shaking our heads in pretend concern, but carefully out of sight of the owners. 'No, missus, he is thief, very bad price. Come, I show you good price.' We would then lead them to the shops that paid us, telling the owners of the figure given by one of their rivals so that he could begin his bargaining at a lower but still profitable price.

Meanwhile, as the foreigners argued a few extra dollars away, the old women who also worked the street but knew no English would descend, hovering in shop doorways to reach out with their dirty hands, grab at elbows and cry into their burqas. They all come from the same family, but the foreigners don't know this and as woman after woman would come to break down in tears pleading for money for her sick, dying baby, this would usually be the point when it became too much for the westerners and they would climb back into their cars, trying to avoid our eyes as their drivers sped them away from our poverty and back to their privileged lives.

However, as the Land Cruisers screeched out of Chicken Street and into the gridlocked traffic of Shahr-e Naw, Spandi would appear to tap his black fingers on their windows and hold out the bitter, smoking tin of herbs that we call 'spand', the smell of

which was so unbelievably foul it was said to chase away evil spirits. Without doubt this was the worst of all our jobs because the smoke gets in your hair and your eyes and your chest and you end up looking like death. But the money is pretty OK because even if the tourists aren't superstitious it's hard to ignore a boy at a car window whose scarred face is the colour of ash.

However, on a good day in Chicken Street we didn't need to hustle. The foreign women would happily hand over their bags as they struggled with headscarves they had yet to grow used to, and I would carry their shopping until they called it a day, sometimes earning five dollars for my trouble. Jamilla would smile prettily and get the same for carrying nothing.

'And what is your name?' the women would ask slowly. Pretty white faces with smiling red lips.

'Fawad,' I would tell them.

'Your English is very good. Do you go to school?'

'Yes. School. Every day. I like very much.'

And it was true, we all went to school – even the girls if their fathers let them – but the days were short and the holidays long with months off in the winter and summer when it became too cold or too hot to study. However, the English we learnt came only from the street. It was easy to pick up and the foreigners liked to teach us.

And even if Jahid was correct and they did come to

bomb our country and rebuild it again, I quite liked the foreigners with their sweaty white faces and fat pockets – which was just as well really, because that day I returned to my aunt's house to be told we were going to live with three of them.