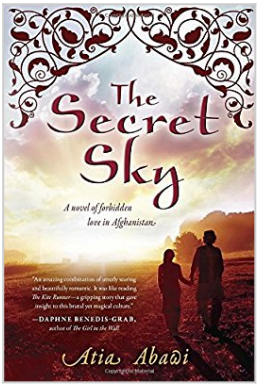

The Secret Sky: A Novel of Forbidden Love in Afghanistan

By Atia Abawi

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Perfect for fans of Patricia McCormick, Linda Sue Park, and Khaled Hosseini, this story will stay with readers for a long time to come.

*** "A suspenseful, enlightening, and hopeful love story." *Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

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Editorial Review

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“Abawi writes with a gentle hand as she tells a tale of tribal rituals that’s chilling to the bone….Abawi’s introduction, author’s note, and generous glossary supply welcome context for this heartbreaking rendering of forbidden love.” – *Booklist* review

"[*The Secret Sky* is] a tale of the indomitable Afghan spirit of hope and love. Among the many novels set in Afghanistan for young people or for adults, *The Secret Sky* stands alone. Unputdownable. Unforgettable." –Trent Reedy, author of *Words in the Dust*

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“A riveting tale written from the heart....This powerful love story will leave you angry at injustice, and awed by courage. It shocks and inspires.” –Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent, BBC

“*The Secret Sky* is an amazing combination of utterly searing and beautifully romantic. It was like reading *The Kite Runner*—a gripping story that gave insight to this brutal yet magical culture.” –Daphne Benedis-Grab, author of *The Girl in the Wall*

About the Author
Atia Abawi is a foreign news correspondent who was stationed for almost five years in Kabul, Afghanistan. She was born to Afghan parents in West Germany and was raised in the United States. She currently lives in Jerusalem with her husband, Conor Powell. You can follow her on Twitter @AtiaAbawi.

Chapter One
Fatima

I know this worn path better than I know myself. As I walk through the nut-colored haze, I can taste the salty bitterness of the parched ground meeting the air and then meeting my mouth. Since I was a child, I’ve always tried to walk in front of everyone, so the dirt wouldn’t hit my clothes. There’s nothing worse than the smell of earth on your clothing when you are lying on your mat and trying to sleep at night. It lingers, making its

way into your dreams.

But still, the path brings me comfort. It's something I am familiar with. I don't know the new curves on my body the way I know the bends on the footpath.

I look down and am glad that I can hide myself under an oversized payron. I'm jealous of my three-year-old sister, Afifa. She doesn't have to worry about becoming a woman. At least, not yet. I turn and see her behind me, jumping onto the footprints I've made, carefree like I used to be.

"What are you doing, crazy girl?" my best friend, Zohra, asks my little Afifa.

"I'm jumping so I don't drown!" she says with determination, sticking her tongue out to the side as she lands on another print.

"Drown in what? We're walking on dirt." Zohra shakes her head.

"No, it's a river!" Afifa responds. "And Fato's footprints are the rocks I need to jump on so I don't drown!"

"Okay, you dewanagak," Zohra says, laughing. "Fatima, your sister has a lot of imagination. I don't think we were that colorful when we were her age."

"I think we were," I say. "At least I was. You were always so scared of everything, including your own shadow." I can't help but laugh.

"What do you know?" Zohra pouts, just as I thought she would. The best part about teasing her is that she is horrible at pestering back. She's my best friend for many reasons, and that is definitely one of them.

I keep chuckling, and eventually Zohra starts to giggle too. She's never been able to stay mad at me, even when I deserve it.

We're nearly at the well when we both see the tree log. It's a log we pass almost daily, and every time, it brings back memories of what life used to be like, when all the kids from the village spent the days playing together. My mother says that it's no longer proper for a girl of my shape to go out and play, that it will be seen as indecent. But even if she did let me play outside, I don't have anyone left to run in the fields with. Most of the girls around my age aren't allowed to leave their homes, and the boys have begun helping their fathers in the fields and shops.

Zohra and I are still allowed to see each other, but even time with her isn't the same as it used to be. She doesn't want to run around anymore; she would rather sit and gossip about the village, sharing all the information she hears from her parents while braiding my hair.

For the first time in my life, I feel alone. Lonely. Even though my little brothers and sister are always around, it seems like I no longer belong in my family—at least not the new me—the bizarre, curvy, grown-up me. This feeling of nowhereness makes me empty inside in a way that I can't explain to anyone, not even Zohra. She seems to be embracing all the changes that I can't.

I wish I could be like that log. It's always been the same—able to fit the tiny backsides of a dozen or so children, squeezed tightly together. We'd sit there taking breaks from running around the village, sharing treats if we had them, munching the nuts and mulberries we'd picked from the nearby woods.

“What are you smiling at?” Zohra breaks my train of thought.

“Nothing. I was just remembering how we used to play around that log,” I say as my smile fades. “It looks so sad without us there.”

“You’re the one who looks sad over a piece of wood,” Zohra says. “Besides, I don’t think we could all fit on that thing anymore. If you haven’t noticed, our backsides have grown a bit.” She smirks. “I remember when Rashid found that thing in the woods while we were picking berries and we all had to roll it up here. I think my back still hasn’t forgiven me!” Zohra dramatically puts one arm on her back and slouches like an old bibi, and in fact, she looks a lot like her own grandmother when she does it.

I remember that day so clearly, even though it was a lifetime ago. Rolling that chunk of timber, all of us together as a team. It was a grueling task, and we didn’t think we could make it, but Samiullah, whose family owns the well and the fields beyond it, he knew we could. Every few feet of progress, one of us would want to stop. But Samiullah wouldn’t let us. He kept encouraging us to keep pushing.

He was always the leader out of our little gang of village kids. Some families didn’t allow their children to play with us because we were a mixed group—Pashtun children playing with Hazara children—but our parents didn’t mind. We were connected through the land and through our fathers—Samiullah’s Pashtun father is the landowner, and our Hazara fathers are the farmers.

After we moved the log to its current spot, we all sat on it, picking out on another’s splinters. We couldn’t believe we’d done it, just like Samiullah said we would.
“Did you hear that Sami’s back?” Zohra cuts off my thoughts of the past.

“What?” I don’t think I heard the words correctly. Samiullah had left for religious studies—he was supposed to be gone for years. There was no way he was back.
“Yeah, I heard he’s back from the madrassa, at least that’s what my father told my mother and grandmother last night. He heard it from Kaka Ismail,” she adds, throwing her empty plastic jug up in the air before catching it again, sending Afifa into a fit of giggles.

“Sami’s father told your father?” I ask, still confused.

“Yeah, didn’t your father tell you? Apparently he spoke to them when he came by to check on the fields.” This time she misses the jug after her toss. “He didn’t last long did he?” She picks it up and slaps the dirt off the plastic.

“What do you mean?” I can’t seem to process anything Zohra is saying right now. How is Samiullah back? Why haven’t I seen him yet? Why didn’t I know he’d returned? We used to be best friends, Sami and I. Could he be around here? We are near his house right now. He could be anywhere on these grounds.

“Most boys don’t come back until they’re adults with their scraggly beards, telling us all what bad Muslims we are,” Zohra says rolling her eyes. “Thank God he left early. Apparently Rashid is still there. Kaka Ismail said he’s coming home soon, too, but just to visit. Knowing Rashid, once he finishes at the madrassa, he’ll want to hang all of us for being infidels just because he can.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What? We both know he’s always been a little dewana.” Zohra shrugs her shoulders before crossing her

eyes.

I cluck my tongue at her in disapproval while grabbing her jug. Samiullah's cousin has always been a bit rougher than the rest of their family, but he's not crazy. He was a part of our childhood. He was a part of what made us us.

As I walk down the path, My heads spins with Zohra's news. Is Samiullah really home? When he left three years ago, I thought I'd lost my friend forever. Could he really be back?

I look through the trees that guard their house from the well, and a stampede of questions race through my brain: Is he there? Can he see me right now? Is my dress clean? Why didn't I let Zohra braid my hair today? Why does it matter if I let Zohra braid my hair today?

But I know the answer to that last question. I know why it matters.

I always thought that by the time Samiullah came back, I wouldn't be allowed to see him anymore—that we would be at the age where a man and woman can't visit each other unless they're related. I figured they would find him a wife and marry him as soon as he arrived home. And I'd probably be married by then too. To someone else. My stomach stings at the thought.

Sami was always different from the rest of the boys. He saw me for who I was, not just as Ali's little sister. And he took care of me . . . but I guess he took care of everyone.

As we fetch the water from the well, I realize I'm conscious of my every movement, wondering if he's watching. It's so stupid. I know he hasn't missed me the way I've missed him. But I can't resist stealing glances past the foliage at his family's home.

I drop the bucket back into the water. When I feel the weight filling the plastic tub, I begin pulling the rope. I follow one tug with another. When the bucket makes it to the edge of the well, I pull it up and pour it into our containers, only to drop the bucket down again, repeating the tedious process.

Afifa eventually gets bored of our silence, and her little arms can't help pull the water from the well, so she runs back home. Zohra and I continue to work quietly, which makes us more efficient. The sun is starting to set over the mountains, painting the sky a bright maroon color, like my favorite tangerines. Before long it will be nighttime, and Zohra still needs to make her way home. I pour the last bucketful of water into the second container, watching some splash over the edges of the plastic mouth, making its way to my dress and turning the red fabric into a blood-burgundy.

"You think he can see us?" Zohra asks the same question that I've been wondering. She's staring at the Ismailzai property like an owl as she chews on the mulberries she keeps pulling out of the pocket she sewed into her dress for that very purpose.

"What? Don't be ridiculous!" I say to her, twisting the lid on the last jug. "Why would he want to look our way? He's probably busy with family." I sneak another glance through the thin trees, though.

"How am I being ridiculous?" She picks up the first jug as we prepare for the short trek back, this time slower and more grueling with the filled containers weighing us down. "That boy has been in love with you since we were sitting on pots! You don't think he wants to see how your breasts have grown?" she says, laughing.

I feel like I've been kicked in the gut and stripped of my clothes at the same time. In an instant, she has made me feel unclean. I suddenly hate Zohra for her words. Her openness about our changing bodies is embarrassing and disgusting. It doesn't seem to bother her that we are morphing into monsters. She even seems to like it.

"You are very uncivilized, you know. You have no manners at all!" I start walking faster. Sometimes I wonder if she's the same shy Zohra I grew up with, or if the girl I used to know has been replaced by the devil. I listen to her laughter. Definitely replaced by the devil. I slouch even more, trying to hide any indication of the swellings forming on my chest—the ones that are ruining my life by letting the world know that I am becoming a woman.

"I'm just joking, Fato!" Zohra is still laughing like the cow that she is. "I'm sorry! Besides, you should be happy. I wish I had them myself. I'm still as flat as the chalkboard we use during our lessons with Bibi!"

I can hear her feet scrambling behind me, and then she stumbles. "Aaaakh!" she yells in pain. I turn and see her on the ground covered in the dirt. The jug is on the ground too, lying on its side and pouring out water. I quickly run and set the jug upright before tending to Zohra. For a split second, I contemplate leaving her there, but I know I would never do that.

"Are you okay?" I ask, looking for the spot she injured.

"I'm fine," she says holding her ankle. "I think I just twisted it. Maybe God was punishing me for talking about your breasts." She grins.

"I hope you learned your lesson." I can't help smiling back at her. I know she didn't mean to hurt me with her words. And I don't want to stay mad at her. She's my only friend left. "Can you get up?"

"If you help me," she says. I grab her elbow and pull her up. She takes a limping step. "It hurts a little, but I'll be fine. Do we have to get more water?"

"No, I got the jug upright before too much could spill out," I answer, looking for the lid. I spot the blue plastic covering and start to screw it back on, this time very tightly. "It's okay, my mother will send us back tomorrow anyway. As long as she isn't the one who has to go to the well, she'll use up any amount we bring her just so she can have us get her more. Over and over and over again! I sometimes think she only had children because she couldn't afford servants." I grunt, expecting Zohra to snicker too, but she doesn't. Whatever. I blow the hair out of my face and pick up her jug. "I'll carry both. I don't want you injuring yourself again."

I turn toward Zohra and suddenly notice a man standing nearby. He's hovering in silence, staring at the both of us. My heart stops for a second, and I take a step back, unable to think clearly but trying to focus. I've never seen this man before, which panics me. I immediately feel an icy chill racing through my body. We know everyone in this village—we're not used to visitors, let alone strangers.

But there is something about his ice-green eyes, they feel familiar, even comforting. The chill begins to melt. There is only one pair of eyes that gives me this feeling of warmth. And that's when I realize this isn't a strange man. It's Samiullah. My breath catches in my throat.

I look at Zohra and realize she's figured it out before I have, as she goes back to slapping the dirt off her clothes. "Welcome back, Sami!"

“Salaam, Zohra Jaan,” he says. “Thank you.” His voice rumbles. The sound is deeper than I recall. But it’s not just his voice that has changed. He is almost as tall as his father now, and his skin on his face looks tighter and prickly, without the smooth, round cheeks I remember.

For the first time, I see the line of a jaw, chiseled like the men around the village. Except Samiullah’s is different; it’s not worn out and tired-looking like the others, his bone structure is . . . beautiful. His perfectly arched eyebrows look darker and thicker, making his emerald eyes stand out even more. They hold the same sparkle I remember from years ago. But today it forces me to look away. I can feel my heart racing and my breath becoming heavier, and I don’t know why. All I know is it gets worse when I try to look at him.

“When did you get back?” Zohra asks.

“On Saturday,” Samiullah responds. “How are you both doing?” I know he’s directing that question to me as well, but I’m afraid to speak. I feel nervous and out of breath, and I don’t want them to know.

“We’re fine, thank you for asking,” Zohra finally answers him. “We were just getting some water, and I tripped and fell while I was chasing Fatima back to her house. It’s getting dark, and we were scared to make my father wait too long to take me back home with him.”

“Of course, I don’t want to keep you. I just wanted to say salaam and see how you both were.” I can hear his voice as I continue to focus on the yellow container holding the water.

“Thank you,” Zohra says. “It’s good to see you back home. I’m sure you have brightened your family’s eyes, especially your mother’s.”

He nods. “Please send my regards to your fathers for me.”

“We will. Fatima?” Zohra picks up one of the jugs and seems to be walking fine now. I follow her lead and carry the other jug with my head down. I use my head scarf to shield me from Samiullah and focus on not tripping as I walk toward my house.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. This is Sami, our Sami, my Sami. Why can’t I look at him?

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